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The University of Washington

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Introduction

The University of Washington—known affectionately to students, alumni, and Seattleites as “U-Dub”—has stood at the heart of the Pacific Northwest for over 160 years. Established in 1861, before Washington was even a state, the university’s story is deeply intertwined with the growth and transformation of Seattle itself. From its humble beginnings on a ten-acre plot near downtown, the University of Washington has evolved into one of America’s premier public research universities, an institution whose impact resonates far beyond the Evergreen State.

The university’s journey began as an ambitious experiment in public education at the edge of the American frontier. Visionary founders, civic leaders, and determined educators, navigating the challenges of territorial governance and economic uncertainty, believed higher learning could anchor a flourishing city amidst the vast, untamed landscapes of the Pacific Northwest. Through cycles of adversity, closures, and financial hardship, the institution endured—shaped by the resilience of those who refused to let the dream die.

As the 20th and 21st centuries unfolded, the University of Washington experienced extraordinary growth. It expanded across the hillsides above Lake Washington, adding iconic buildings, renowned libraries, and lush green quads. It welcomed students from all walks of life and launched groundbreaking research programs that would earn global recognition. The university’s reach spread across new campuses in Bothell and Tacoma and touched communities far beyond Seattle through medical education, technological innovation, and collaborations serving the common good.

But the story of the University of Washington is not just a tale of buildings and budgets; it is the narrative of the people—students, faculty, staff, and alumni—who have shaped, challenged, and redefined its mission. Husky traditions bind generations together, whether in the roar of Husky Stadium on autumn Saturdays, the annual spectacle of cherry blossoms, or the ceremonial passing of coins and cheers across the Quad. The university’s pursuit of equity, community, and innovation stands as a model for public institutions across the nation.

Today, the University of Washington is recognized as a global research leader and a dynamic force in economic and social life. It educates tens of thousands, advances entire fields of knowledge, and partners with the region to create opportunities and address shared challenges. This enduring public mission, paired with a relentless drive for excellence, has written the UW story on the world stage.

This book traces the remarkable history of the University of Washington: its founding,

trials, and triumphs; its academic achievements and social contributions; its enduring traditions and visionary future. More than an institutional chronicle, it is the story of an idea—of how one public university helped imagine and build the future of a city, a region, and a nation.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Origins: Seattle's Dream and the Territorial University

The story of the University of Washington begins not with grand endowments or sweeping legislative acts, but with the grit and foresight of early pioneers carving out a future on the rugged edge of the American frontier. Long before Washington achieved statehood, the vision for a public university took root, nurtured by a handful of determined individuals who understood that education was the bedrock of civilization, even in a nascent settlement battling for its very existence.

In 1854, just three years after the first white settlers arrived at Alki Point, Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens, a man of considerable ambition and a former military engineer, recommended the establishment of a university within the Washington Territory. Stevens, who also served as the Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the territory, recognized the need for institutions that would solidify the region's development. His proposal, however, was merely a spark, requiring tireless advocates to fan it into a flame.

Among the most instrumental figures in this early period was Daniel Bagley, a Methodist preacher who had arrived in Seattle in 1860. Bagley, a Pennsylvanian by birth, had a keen understanding of the power of education, having traveled through Illinois and Oregon as a circuit preacher before settling in the Puget Sound. He saw the potential for a university to elevate Seattle, transforming it from a remote outpost into a center of learning and economic vitality.

Bagley discovered a crucial piece of federal legislation that allowed U.S. territories to sell public lands to generate funds for educational institutions. This provision offered a tangible path forward for a university that would otherwise struggle for financial support in a fledgling territory. It was a clever mechanism, turning wilderness into opportunity for the sake of future generations.

Meanwhile, Arthur A. Denny, a foundational figure in Seattle's history, was pursuing his own civic ambitions. Denny, who had led the first party of white settlers to Alki Point in 1851, was a prominent territorial legislator and a driving force behind Seattle's early development. His initial aim was to secure the territorial capital for Seattle, a goal that would undoubtedly bring prestige and resources to the nascent city.

However, Daniel Bagley, with his persuasive nature and unwavering commitment to education, managed to shift Denny's focus. Bagley convinced Denny that a university,

rather than just the capital, would ultimately prove more beneficial for Seattle's long-term economic prosperity and growth. It was a pivotal conversation, effectively redirecting significant influence and resources toward the cause of higher education.

With Denny's conversion to the university cause, the pieces began to fall into place. In 1860, after considerable debate and lobbying, Seattle was officially selected as the site for the new Territorial University. This decision came after an earlier attempt to establish two universities was repealed, and a plan for a single university in Lewis County failed to materialize due to the lack of locally donated land. Seattle, with its enthusiastic proponents and a growing sense of destiny, stepped up to the challenge.

The next crucial step was securing the land for the university. Arthur and Mary Denny, demonstrating their deep commitment to Seattle's future, generously donated eight acres of land on what became known as Denny's Knoll, a forested plot just outside the then-small village of Seattle. This wasn't just any parcel of land; it was a strategic location that would, in time, prove immensely valuable.

Their generous contribution was augmented by fellow pioneers Edward Lander, and Charlie and Mary Terry, who together deeded an additional two acres, completing the required ten-acre site. These individuals, whose names are still recognized in Seattle's street names (Denny Way, Terry Avenue, Bagley Avenue, Lander Street), laid the physical foundation for what would become a cornerstone of the Pacific Northwest.

With the land secured, the work of construction began. John Pike, the university's architect and builder, oversaw the project. Pike, for whom Seattle's Pike Street is named, brought the vision of the founders to life. The cornerstone of the main university building was laid on May 21, 1861. Just a few months later, on November 4, 1861, the Territorial University of Washington officially opened its doors.

The university's initial location was at what is now the intersection of 4th Avenue and University Street in downtown Seattle, a site currently occupied by the Fairmont Olympic Hotel. At the time, Seattle was a fledgling village with a population of only about 250 people, and King County counted a mere 302 residents according to the 1860 census. The Territorial University building, a stately two-story structure with a grand entrance featuring four Ionic columns, stood on the outskirts of this tiny settlement.

The first "Professor and Teacher" was Asa Shinn Mercer, and the university opened with a modest 30 students. Interestingly, the curriculum at this nascent institution was far from what one would expect of a modern university, effectively serving as a glorified high school, offering "everything from ABC's to the classics." It would be many years, in fact until 1902, before the university would abolish preparatory subjects and focus exclusively on higher learning.

Among those first students was Clarence B. Bagley, Daniel Bagley's son, marking an immediate and personal connection between the founders and the very first cohort of learners. The opening of the Territorial University, amidst the backdrop of a burgeoning frontier town and the early months of the American Civil War, was a testament to the audacious dream of a few individuals who believed in the transformative power of education, even when the immediate need for a university might have seemed a luxury.

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