

FEATURE

Retelling Seattle's story from an Asian and Indigenous perspective

By [Megan Asaka](#)

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I WAS BORN AND raised in Seattle, with family roots that stretch back four generations in the city. Yet I always felt disconnected from the version of Seattle history I had learned growing up. This history, which appeared in books, museum exhibits and local news articles, taught me that Seattle was a progressive city, especially when it came to race. And, though it had its share of problems, Seattle was more racially tolerant than other cities, a place where everyone was welcome. But this never quite made sense to me, even as a child.

I am Japanese American. My grandmother and great-grandfather were forcibly removed from Seattle after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and were incarcerated in a camp during World War II. The Seattle public largely supported the mass removal of Japanese Americans, many eager to take over the businesses, properties and possessions left behind.

Was the expulsion of Japanese Americans in 1942 just a mistake or aberration in an otherwise racially tolerant and open-minded Seattle? Or did it gesture toward a different kind of Seattle history, one that had yet to be written?

Though I had no intention of becoming a historian, I found myself returning to these questions again and again. I wanted to know more about Seattle as lived and experienced by my great-grandfather and others like him, the workers and migrants, the marginalized

communities who rarely appeared in the story I had so often heard of Seattle.

I discovered that Japanese Americans weren't the only ones written out of the dominant account of Seattle history. I began to see connections between Asian and Indigenous histories in the Puget Sound region. Though rarely studied together, these two groups were central to the early workforce, and they helped to build Seattle. They also were subjected to various forms of segregation, policing and displacement within the city.

The more I learned and researched, the more I understood my family's experiences during the war as connected to a much larger story that went back to the city's very origins. My book, "Seattle from the Margins," retells this early history from the perspective of those pushed to the margins of urban society. It focuses on Asian and Indigenous workers and other multiracial creators who made Seattle possible, but whose lives, labors and shared experiences have been all but forgotten. It's my hope that the book can open new understandings of Seattle's past, and how that past continues to reverberate in the present.

***Megan Asaka** is an assistant professor of history at the University of California, Riverside. She specializes in Asian American history, urban history and public humanities. Her new book is titled "Seattle from the Margins: Exclusion, Erasure, and the Making of a Pacific Coast City." She is a Seattle native. Her website is meganasaka.com.*