

# History of the North Slope Historic District being listed on the NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

*A personal account by Jay Turner  
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Early in 2002, I was reading the North Slope Plan, a City of Tacoma document undertaken in 1981 for the neighborhoods, and I ran across the term, “National Register of Historic Places.” Valerie Sivinski had mentioned it early as we became members of the City of Tacoma Register of Historic Places but at that time North Slopers didn’t pick up on the idea. Perhaps now was the time. I started thinking and questioning – Would our neighborhood qualify? Are we good enough? How do we stack up to other historic districts? We live here, are close to the historic homes, and sometimes overlook the obvious. I decided to answer these questions.

My desire was to show that our historic homes were not getting the recognition they deserve and being on the National Register of Historic Places would prove, once and for all, that our homes were historic and deserved saving. My goal was to move the North Slope Historic District into the next level of public awareness.

First, I went to the Internet to read about the register. I discovered that there is a Washington State Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation in Olympia that had the task of handling the national register for our state. An email was sent asking for information about residential historic districts in general and specifically all districts with more than 100 houses. Not many large, residential districts, it turns out and they are scattered over the entire state. From that list it seemed that Bellingham had something in common with us so Julie and I visited its two historic districts.

Is it funny that Bellingham’s historic districts have the same problem we have, improper zoning, or is it universal? A common theme seems to be that historic districts have trouble obtaining the zoning necessary to protect and preserve their history. **Honor but not protection!** Why is it that cities ignore historic homes and historic districts instead of giving them the value and protection they deserve?



Next, the experts were called in: Jennifer Schreck, Tacoma’s Historic Preservation Officer, and Michael Houser, Architectural Historian from Olympia, visited our neighborhood and gave me their opinions. Yes, our district would qualify. We wandered around the neighborhood and I asked questions about various houses. From the two of them, I received three opinions about each house! Based on their expert knowledge, I decided to continue.

The next set of questions involved cost. Just what would it cost? Where would we get the money? How would the North Slope Historic District do it? I wrote and visited many in the city asking for money to hire a consultant, someone to help with the national register task. Without naming names, the answers were:

- no answer/no reply
- we don't have money for you, or anyone else either
- not "NO," but "hell no!"

I received a quick quote from a consultant of \$15,000 to do the research. This left us, the North Slope Historic District, \$15,000 short and no money in sight. Not to be put off, I made the decision to go as far as I could without monetary help. That way, the task would be better defined and cost would be easier to determine. It proved to be a good decision as one step led to another and another and after a lot of hard work, the task was completed.

One day when I was in Olympia discussing my progress with Michael Houser, he said something that I bet he doesn't even remember. He said, "Keep your eye on the task, Jay. You need to complete the NPS 10-900 Form. Nothing else matters." Somehow his statement made an impression.

Next with great insight and ability was our neighbor, Jillian Bates. We knew Jill from years ago and it was fate when she moved in next door as we were instant friends. Jill, as a consultant, works on database applications. She knows database design and how to do it right. "Just exactly what do you need, Jay?" she said. Jokingly, I remembered Michael's words and said, "**All I want is a computer program to print out the 10-900 Form for the National Park Service**". "Piece of cake," Jill said. "What you want is known as a "report" in database language." It took her 40 to 45 minutes to develop a database to accept the data and the software necessary to print the 10-900 nomination thus becoming a key piece in completing the task.

Tony DePaul, a GIS Specialist, really defined the scope of this project. I was telling him my needs of addresses, parcel numbers, home owners, etc, and he said, "You can't count 1, 2, 3 . . . up to 950 houses. You don't have enough fingers. Instead, let's count all the addresses as one, all the parcel numbers, as two, all the owners as three. That way we can get all this information in minutes, not months." And he was right. In seconds, he supplied all of the above and more. This data was the backbone of the project as it defined exactly the properties we needed to consider.



Next I asked Jennifer Schreck for copies of the data generated when the North Slope Historic District was formed. She told me that she was unable to find any data in electronic format. What a setback. However, we were able to get the city's field notes, the hand-written data that had been collected way back when. About 80% of our data input came from this source. Still, all the hand-written field notes had to be converted into an electronic format that could be used by Jill's

database. It was a hard task interoperating strange forms and abbreviations into something a computer could use. A number of neighbors pitched in to help, and their help saved me a lot of time.

While eighty percent of the information came from Jennifer, I had to generate the last 20 percent. I walked the streets, made notes, looked and asked questions, and looked again. I became the expert! Jill's program had the ability to say what was missing as well as what was there. So I started in filling in the missing peaces.

All was going well with most of the data collected, when Michael Houser asked, "What are you doing about the accessory structures?" "I am ignoring them," I said. Wrong answer. The NPS wants full documentation; everything larger than a doghouse. So, the second setback. The NPS says "accessory structures," we call them garages. My tromping took me to the alleys this time. We have 357 accessory structures, **more resources in accessory structures than most historic districts have in contributing properties.** More walking, more digging and more and more and more time at the computer. Julie thought the project would never end, and I had my doubts. Still, as long as I was still able to proceed, to contribute to the project, I kept working.



The nomination asked for many things, like UTM's. My new toy, a GPS, was able to find these numbers. There are 15 sets of UTM's required for a complete description of the district. Michael said this was way too many for the NPS so the document lists only the 4 major corners. The total area was needed. Once again, by pushing the buttons on the GPS, I was able to measure and found we have 228 acres of houses.

The form required the period of significance. In the end, it took 16 words to complete the section on the period of significance. In the beginning, it started with Michael Houser, when he said it was necessary to document exactly how the significance was determined. "No guess work Jay, do it right," Michael said. The process, I think, is interesting. I decided the period of significance began with the oldest, still-standing house in the district. Our district is about historic homes and that seemed most appropriate as a start. What about the end date? That took a lot of time and effort to find the end date.

Starting with all the houses properties built after 1950, I made a list. If a property looked like it belonged, like it was historic, then it got a green mark, other wise a red one. A very quick green/red decision. All the houses from 1950 on were color-coded this way. Next, the color was entered into the computer and then listed in "date-built" order. Like turning off a light, when presented that way, the green ended in 1953 and the red took over. With few exceptions, properties built after 1953 time were red, meaning that no "historic-looking" homes were built after that date. I did not expect to see such a clear cut-off. Thus, the period of significance was very well defined - - 1881 to 1953.

I paused to reflect and look for a reason for such a sharp cut-off date. **Then I remembered that the city zoning started in the 1950's and it encouraged the building of multi-family apartment houses in our neighborhood.** It was zoning that caused the change in our historic district. People started tearing down historic houses then, not creating more.

Months and months after the start, after all the data was collected, I watched Jill push a button on her computer and saw the 550 pages, the actual completed Form 10-900 nomination form roll off her printer. What a thrill. And the form was all done and all ready to submit! Piece of cake indeed! BUT, Julie took one look at it and informed me that this was the first time a printed document was available and it needed editing, lots of editing. I bet that Julie, in her editing, is the only one who has read the entire NPS Form 10-900 from cover to cover!

While the final editing changes were being made to the document, Roger Johnson took the photographs and slides that were required to accompany the nomination. We submitted 57 photographs representing the good, bad and ugly houses in our district. "With so many top-quality historic homes in the district, it was hard," Roger, said, "to take pictures of the ugly ones. We don't have many."

The nomination was delivered to Olympia in November of 2002. From that time on, the process to National Register status was up to others. Roger Johnson, in an article in our Trolley Times, describes taking the nomination through the Tacoma Landmarks Commission and the of State of Washington review. Our letter of acceptance, from Olympia, was received in April 2003. The largest residential historic district in the State of Washington, and all done by volunteers.

Say thanks to the team: Elizabeth Anderson, Jillian Bates, Dana Bridge, Tony DePaul, Jane Easley, Michael Houser, Roger Johnson, Kathryn Longwell, Velda McDonald, Jennifer Schreck, Ralph Tomberg, Marilyn Torgerson, and Julie Turner. A big thanks, too, to the North Slope Historic District steering committee which came up with over \$600 to pay for the out-of-pocket expenses of this project.

