The Denny Regrade

Though not many Seattlites have heard of the early 20th century Denny Regrade, those who have heard of it likely have an incomplete understanding of the events. A summary of the events from easily-accessed sources like the online tertiary documents “Top Projects of the Century in Washington State” from the Daily Journal of Commerce website, “Guide to the Seattle Engineering Department Denny Hill Regrade Photograph Album” from the Northwest Digital Archives, and “Seattle Neighborhoods: Belltown-Denny Regrade” from HistoryLink.org may seem complete, but in fact is not. A look into primary sources such as “The Seattle Star” and “The Seattle Republican”—both newspapers of the time—as well as secondary analytical sources—mainly Matthew Klingle’s “Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle”—reveals challenges of the Denny Regrade typically not mentioned in summaries of the event.

Though it seems that for the purpose of a brief historical overview, there is not much consequence to overlooking complicated challenges that were eventually sorted out—especially in this case, as the Denny Regrade ended up happening mostly as planned—overlooking facts about the Denny Regrade is misunderstanding history. Learning for example, about the public hostility toward the city engineer, Reginal Herber Thomson, is learning an important part of Seattle’s history in regards to who the city’s people were, what they thought, and what they did. These overlooked challenges to the project shine a different and perhaps more truthful light on the Denny Regrade plans and on those involved, especially Thomson.

The story as it is commonly known and a rebuttal of that version follows:
The story told starts out in the early 1900’s when the city’s engineer, Reginal Herber Thomson, designed and implemented the Denny Hill Regrade project.\(^1\) At the time the hill—mostly a residential area—rose up to 245 feet,\(^2\) with 190 feet of that elevation gained over a span of twelve blocks.\(^3\) The area was difficult to navigate with horse-drawn transportation\(^4\) and Thomson believed that flattening the hill would create more space to develop the downtown and business area of the city. Regrading was expected to significantly increase real estate values with Thomson estimating that land values in business areas would inflate by 400 percent and in residential areas by 1000 percent.\(^5\) The proposition garnered the public’s and the city’s approval.\(^6\)

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Map of Denny Regrade area
Plans for regrading began around 1898 with the actual regrading starting in 1908. Thomson employed a sluicing technique to pump water from Lake Union onto the land, eroding the dirt, debris, and houses away with streams of high-pressure water. About 200 gallons of water were used every day and at the end of the project about five million cubic yards of dirt had moved into Elliott Bay. Another five million cubic yards of dirt was kept for fill to be used in other areas of the city. A few obstinate homeowners who did not want the regrade ended up with houses on “spite mounds” or tall islands of dirt formed by sluicing away the land around them. The regrading finished in 1911.

With the success of the first regrade in increasing land values and the other half of Denny Hill still standing eighty feet above the regraded area, property owners in the area were eager to

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10 Klingle, Emerald City, 111-116.
16 Klingle, Emerald City, 182.
take down the rest of the Hill.\textsuperscript{17} The city’s method of financing city development put the cost of improvement on individual property owners—this idea had come from cities on the East coast\textsuperscript{18}—and was estimated to be one million dollars, which the property owners paid.\textsuperscript{19} Another purpose of the second regrade was for the development of Dexter Avenue, a north-south arterial street that allowed easy access to the city’s retail core.\textsuperscript{20} After the second regrading was approved in 1928, work began in 1929 using power shovels instead of sluicing techniques.\textsuperscript{21} It ended in 1930.\textsuperscript{22}

Despite the successful regrading of the physical landscape, Thomson’s social and economic visions of expanding the business district were not fulfilled. After the first regrade people were reluctant to invest in the remaining Hill area, not knowing if a second regrade would occur or not.\textsuperscript{23} The cheap rent in the area was beneficial to marginal businesses and populations—or Thomson’s non-target demographic—and as a result the area became an “undesirable” place;\textsuperscript{24} this association was perpetuated by the poverty of the Great Depression which limited the regrade’s development.\textsuperscript{25} Today however the area has developed into a densely populated\textsuperscript{26} locale that attracts musicians, artists, and entrepreneurs.

\textsuperscript{17} “Top Projects in Washington State,” 1999.
\textsuperscript{18} Klingle, \textit{Emerald City}, 99.
\textsuperscript{22} Raymond, “Denny Regrade, 1893–2008.”
\textsuperscript{23} Tarbill, “Mountain-Moving in Seattle,” 486.
\textsuperscript{24} Klingle, \textit{Emerald City}, 182.
In this story, Thomson and others involved in the propagation of the project seem to have encountered few challenges that prevented the completion of the regrade; there is no mention of questionable business tactics or, specifically for Thomson, of faults in the engineer’s character and plans. Contrary to this abridged version of history, clear evidence of opposition toward the regrade existed as early as 1907 and ranged from criticism of how it was handled to whether it should happen or not.

In May of 1907, “The Seattle Star” reported on the results of protests against the improperly-commissioned real estate assessment of the Denny Regrade. The commissioners who had been hired for the assessment were local politicians chosen because of their political affiliations. Having no qualifications for doing such an assessment, they turned to experts for advice. But even then they performed poorly—so poorly that it was court-ordered for one particular section to be assessed again. Despite this, the commissioners were paid $18.50 per hour with each individual earning $1,500 in all. Unfortunately for Denny Hill property owners, a law was to be effected the following month limiting the maximum commission of such a job to five dollars per day. This in effect, “The Seattle Star” snarkily remarked “fleeced [the property owners] of $4,350 by the generosity of the court.” Though the article contained no direct accusations of any particular person of having arranged this setup, the case serves as an example of the existence of hidden politics and agendas early on in the regrade. At the time people may

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
have interpreted such reportings as encouragement for Thomson to participate in unethical business, or even as signs of his encouragement of others to do unethical business.

In August of 1910, “The Seattle Star” published a three-chapter article called “Making the Dirt Pay Both Ways” which accused Denny Regrade contractors of deceitfully arranging the contracts to make higher monetary gains. The original company hired for the job—Grant, Smith, Stilwell & Co.—had subletted the contract to a different company called Holt & Jeffery and gave it all the regrade work. Of concern was that “although Grant [sic] Smith, Stilwell & Co. [did] not turn a shovel of dirt...” the company was still paid five cents per yard of dirt, a scheme that led to profits of $269,850. Holt & Jeffery earned 22 cents per yard. Holt & Jeffery, however, was not transparent either having been previously known as Holt & McGuire. The name changed when Jeffery, who had been assistant to Engineer Thomson, resigned from the office position and quickly appeared in the contract business with Holt, replacing McGuire. It was thought that Jeffery’s inside knowledge of “the order and sequence of the letting of public contracts” was used for the company’s financial gains which summed up to $1,187,340 for the entire project. Along with these tricks, it was also revealed that the contractors had managed to charge the city twice for the regrade—once for taking away the dirt (cuts) and once for filling in areas of the city with that same dirt (fills).

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
About a year later, “The Seattle Star” reported public demands of removing Thomson from his position, calling his actions “steals.” Thomson was accused of making large profits of up to $193,800 through his partnership with Jeffery which seemed to have been established when Jeffery left for Holt & Jeffery. He was also accused of allowing the public to pay an extra one million dollars due to cuts and fills being improperly carried out and charged. The mayor was requested to remove Thomson from his position, but it seems that Thomson himself may have complied, as city records note that he retired due to poor health.

Many articles from the Seattle Star noted the challenges of the regrade, giving the impression that opposition and even corruption was not uncommon. Challenges included protests against extra taxation burdens to individual property owners on the Hill; plans for the regrade continuing despite their invalidation by the state supreme court; and incorrect or unfair assessments of property. Over forty regrade cases were brought to the supreme court, mostly pertaining to personal injury or property damage, unfair assessments, and contracts breached.

47 Ibid.
because of property changes.53 Other complicated cases arose from everyday issues, a summary of which follows:

Angry at the mounds of debris blocking street traffic, the city sued its contractor; the contractor, hoping to recoup losses, sued the subcontractors responsible for grading, dumping, and street paving. Local residents, besieged by noise and rubbed, used the complaints against the contractor to sue the city in turn.54

Along with these immediate problems were other issues such as failing water pumps due to salt water corrosion, landslides, road blockages, and city water usage limits.55 The way the contracts had been set up caused the installation of utilities like sewers, water-mains, and street lines to be poorly organized.56 This disorganization and sloppiness was exacerbated by the rush Thomson felt to finish the projects; if the regrade did not finish soon, people would lose their homes and be overtaxed.57

While it may be hard to clearly answer the question of whether Thomson was corrupt, it was true that he was stubborn and set in his vision of making Seattle into a major city by engineering nature in places where it could be bettered.58 Having such a drastic vision and influence on the city, it seems only natural that he encountered resistance at some point. His method of countering this resistance however, was questionable. Klingle calls him a bully with political shrewdness, especially in regards to residents reluctant to regrading59 which frequently occurred before the official plans had passed.60 The spite mounds created rose up to sixty feet in

54 Klingle, Emerald City, 183.
55 Ibid. 100.
57 Ibid. 114.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid. 99.
60 Ibid.
elevation, leaving homeowners no choice but to leave; the mounds remained in place even up until the early 1920s.

After hurriedly finishing the projects and leaving the land vulnerable to erosion from rain and people vulnerable to the financial and social consequences of the regrades, Thomson retired in 1911. As visionary as his ideas were, Thomson did not leave the mark he intended to leave. His actions left Seattle with flat land that was underutilized and with a large amount of land in Elliott Bay that still today has the potential to create a tsunami in the occurrence of an earthquake. Ultimately, though Thomsons’ conceptualizations were not successful, the city has adapted to the changes he implemented.

Ibid.
Office of the City Clerk, “City Engineer,” 2007
Bibliography


