

Van Asselt



Van Asselt, 1960 SPSA 275-3

Henry Van Asselt settled in the Duwamish River valley in 1851 near the Mapel family farm (see Mapel and Holgate), shortly before the town of Duwamish was established in early 1852. Native Americans burned Van Asselt's buildings to the ground during the Battle of Seattle, which took place in 1856.

Children in the Duwamish community first attended the Duwamish School, housed in Fort Duwamish, the old blockhouse that had been constructed in 1855 in anticipation of an attack (see Georgetown).

In the early 1860s, Van Asselt donated a piece of land for a new school to replace the Duwamish School. Because of that gift, the Duwamish School was also referred to as the Van Asselt School. Constructed in 1862 by Van Asselt, Luther Collins, and Jacob Mapel, the building was the first structure in King County to be erected for use as a school. Outhouses were located to the rear of the building. This school had space for only four benches and a small desk for the teacher.

In 1865, children from the Duwamish School transferred to a new Maple School constructed on the Mapel land claim. In April 1907, just after Maple School was annexed into the Seattle School District, representatives of the Oregon and Washington Railway approached the school board about acquiring the Maple property as part of a proposed right of way. The school was torn down in 1907-08. As

Details:

Name: **Duwamish School a.k.a. Van Asselt School**

Location: Van Asselt

Building: Wood

1862: Opened

1865: Closed

1944: Torn down to make way for buildings needed in the war effort

Details:

Name: **Van Asselt School**

Location: Beacon Avenue and Myrtle Street

Building: 1 portable

Site: 2.48 acres

1907: School opened

1908: 3 portables were added; Became annex to Columbia City School



Van Asselt, 1965 SPSA 275-2

a replacement site, in September, the district purchased part of the former 320-acre Van Asselt land claim on south Beacon Hill. The Van Asselt property comprised land on Beacon Hill east of what is Airport Way today and part of what is now Boeing Field.

The Van Asselt School opened in 1907 in a portable on 2.48 acres at Beacon Avenue and Myrtle Street. In July 1908, the board decided to add two portables that had been at Hillman. The following September, another portable was added, and Van Asselt became an annex to Columbia City School. Because of overcrowding in September 1909, Van Asselt 8th graders were given “schoolcar” tickets to attend other schools. This practice continued for several years.

A new Van Asselt School was constructed and opened during the 1909-10 school year. The new building, similar to the four-room school at Brighton, had capacity for 192 students and served only grades 1-6.

A 1940 addition added two classrooms and an office. It also eliminated outdoor plumbing and the use of two portables. In 1942, the Holly Park Housing Project was established nearby on the southern end of Beacon Hill to accommodate 900 families coming into Seattle for war-related work. Enrollment was expected to increase as a result.

In September 1942, Van Asselt parents were up in arms when a popular teacher, Etta Minnig, was unexpectedly transferred to another school. Minnig had been head teacher since 1923 during a period when enrollment exceeded 200 only once, in the 1925-26 school year. “Mrs. Minnig was described as an inspiration to the community whose gentle discipline and human understanding had transformed wayward boys to shining examples of decorum.” The board responded that the expansion of the school “warrants the employment of a man as principal ... We sent to the Van Asselt School one of the best-qualified men in our employ. When you consider that the attendance will increase from 120 to more than 600, you must agree that the situation called for something more than sentiment.” As late as 1950, Etta Minnig was still considered to be “the most beloved name in the history of Van Asselt School.”

Between April 1942 and April 1943, when all the units at Holly Park were filled, enrollment shot up from 212 to 606. The district then filed for federal aid to add three rooms at Van Asselt. As a result, a three-room portable frame addition was completed in March 1944.

By October 1944, there were, “675 children crowd[ed] into six portables, a three-room annex, and the main building, which originally was designed to accommodate 140 pupils....Probably one of the busiest men in the city is Glenn Poirier, the attendant at the school. It’s his daily job to split kindling and start coal fires in 16 coal heaters and one furnace and light two oil burners in two auxiliary washroom buildings.” That November, in an attempt to urge voters to the polls for a school levy, *The Seattle Times* decried, “Typical of shocking and deplorably obsolete facilities of Seattle public schools is the Van Asselt School lunchroom where luncheon shifts squeeze into one of the ‘temporary’ portables cluttering the grounds of the ancient structure which is vainly trying to house six times as many pupils as it was built for ... teachers are asking parents to have their children come home for noon meals.” The levy passed in November 1944, but construction was delayed.

A new concrete and brick Van Asselt School building was constructed on the expanded site in 1950. However, it did not replace the original 1909 building, which was maintained and actively used as part of the school for the next 59 years. By spring 1945, enrollment exceeded 750 and 19 portables were in use. Attendance peaked at 1,271 students in October 1957, and, for several months, Van Asselt was the largest elementary school in Western Washington. In September 1962, the Van Asselt Annex opened 1.5 miles south of the school for grades K-3. It evolved into the Wing Luke School (see Luke).

Beacon Hill was one of the few areas where people of racial and ethnic minority groups were allowed to purchase property, due to racially restrictive covenants and the practice of redlining in the city. However, only part of the Van Asselt neighborhood consisted of private homes, as “the bulk of the students lived in the Holly Park Housing Project, the Greenwood Apartments or Martha Major Apartments.” At that time, 53 percent of those enrolled were African American.

In the mid-1980s, Van Asselt was one of two schools participating in a pilot Child Development Program that provided “specialized, intensive counseling for emotionally troubled children,” *The Seattle Times* reported. As a magnet school for the Humanities Through Technology program in the mid-1990s, Van Asselt acquired computers, music keyboards, and teaching staff to help students explore world music and language.

Originally, Holly Park was one of the major ‘garden communities’ in Seattle, developments created in the 1940s to house defense department workers. Other developments included Yesler Terrace, Rainier Vista, and High Point. Holly Park covered over 100 acres and close to 900 units. In 1954, once the development was no longer needed to house defense department workers, the neighborhood was converted to subsidized housing. The Seattle Housing Association (SHA) managed the property. In 1997, it evolved into a mixed-income development known as New Holly.

In the early 2000s, the New Holly neighborhood continued to be the home of many Van Asselt students. The composition of the student body had shifted by that time to 55 percent Asian American and 58 percent of students were bilingual. Half of Van Asselt’s classrooms mixed students of different ages, which gave students two years with the same teacher. Beginning in 1996-97, students wore navy blue and white uniforms. Monday morning all-school assemblies honored achievements and focused on a positive start to the week.

Details:

Name:	Van Asselt School
Location:	Beacon Avenue & Othello Street
Building:	4-room wood
Architect:	Edgar Blair
Site:	2.55 acres

1909-10:	Opened
1910-19:	Operated as annex to Emerson
1919:	Became independent school in March
1940:	Addition (A. M. Allen)
1944:	3-room portable frame addition (Naramore & Brady)
1950:	Second school building opened
2002:	Elevator addition
2009:	Van Asselt program relocated to African American Academy; Building closed
2019:	1909 building designated a City of Seattle landmark
2022:	Construction began
2023:	Modernization and addition (Bassetti Architects; BEX V)
2023-[25]:	Interim site for Mercer

Details:

Name: **Van Asselt School**
Location: 7201 Beacon Avenue S
Building: 20-room, 1-store
concrete and brick
Architect: Jones & Bindon
Site: 9.5 acres

1950: Opened
2001: Synthetic sports field
installed (Waldron Akira
/ DA Hogan; BTA I)
2009: Van Asselt program relocated
to African American
Academy; School closed
2011-18: Building reopened to
various programs
2018-21: Interim site for Wing Luke
2021-23: Interim site for Kimball
2023-[25]: Interim site for Mercer

As part of BTA I in 2001, the large playfield behind the Van Asselt school was redeveloped into a synthetic multi-purpose sports field. It became the home practice field for Cleveland High School. The field at Cleveland is owned by the Seattle Parks Department, and at that time, there was no agreement between the school district and the parks department to redevelop Cleveland Playfield. Therefore, to provide a somewhat comparable facility for Cleveland athletes to practice, the Van Asselt Sports field was developed. The field is part of the citywide SPS/SPR joint-use agreement and hosts multiple tournaments including cricket, for the schools and community-wide use.

In 2001 Van Asselt was put on a federal list of failing schools. By 2003, the school was awarded the second annual John D. Warner Excellence in Education Award, an unrestricted grant award of \$25,000 from The Boeing Company.

By 2007, Van Asselt's enrollment was 460 students. A study the year before had determined that 86 percent of Van Asselt students came from homes where English was not the first language.

In 2006 the school was again being heralded as a success story, with standardized test scores placing Van Asselt in the top 20 of 67 elementary and K-8 schools in the district. The success was attributed

to the school maintaining its recess, art, gym, and music programs, rather than shunting nearly all resources toward testable subject matter. At the same time, instruction was aimed at the most talented students, an approach called "Teach to the Highest."

In June 2009 a centennial celebration was held for Van Asselt school, which included an "open house, tours, performances, a reception, and displays of historical costumes and the school's history." That fall, the Van Asselt Elementary school building closed, and the Van Asselt program was relocated to the former African American Academy at 8311 Beacon Ave S, the site of the former Van Asselt annex. For the next 10 years, the program was called Van Asselt at African American Academy (see African American Academy).

The original Van Asselt School building came to be called OVA, for old or original Van Asselt. In 2011, the 1950 OVA school building reopened and became home to a special education preschool, an Interagency program, and other programs as assigned. When Wing Luke Elementary closed for construction in 2018, students were relocated to OVA as their interim site. Using OVA as an interim location for another school really highlighted the issue with having a separate program and building with the same name. Internet searches confused the two and people consistently went to the wrong Van Asselt location.

Key staff members at Van Asselt Elementary School at African American Academy initiated an effort to rename their school. In 2019, the School Board approved the Board Action Report to change the name of the Van Asselt program to Rising Star at African American Academy and the OVA nickname for Van Asselt was no longer necessary. In May of the same year, the site, interior, and exterior of the 1909 Van Asselt building were made a City of Seattle Landmark, excluding the 1940 and 2002 rear additions.

In 2021, the 1950 Van Asselt School building was used as an interim location by Kimball Elementary when its school was under construction. Beginning in spring 2022, while Kimball students were in residence, Seattle Public Schools started a construction and modernization project at the Van Asselt 1909 building, a project that entailed demolition of the 1940 addition and 2002 elevator additions.



Van Asselt, ca.1965 SPSA 275-6

A two-story school addition to the 1909 building was constructed, which created 26 new classrooms, a new gymnasium, and collaboration spaces for academic success. The addition was carefully designed to honor the original 1909 building and connect seamlessly with the four existing classrooms. The school now has capacity for up to 1,000 students, which will allow this site to be an interim location for either one middle school or two elementary schools. Based on the Seattle School Board Green Energy Resolution, the addition at Van Asselt also plans to use no fossil fuels and will rely on electricity for heating.

Mercer International Middle School relocated to Van Asselt in fall 2023, while a new replacement school was built on the Mercer site.