The Washington Landings area has been home to humans for thousands of years. The ancestors of the Duwamish, Muckleshoot, and Suquamish lived in a winter village, Sdzidzilalitch, which was located near today's 1st Ave. and Washington St. The shoreline would have been similar to the forest and beach seen at right.

After 1852, a city grew up along the shore and over the tidelands on pilings. Emigrants from the Midwest and East Coast built Seattle's economy on lumber, coal, and fish exports. European and Asian immigrants soon began arriving, too, and the city grew steadily.

Seattle's shoreline has been filled, dredged, and regraded to create solid, level land alongside the deep water of Elliott Bay. Over 1,000 acres of tidelands were filled between the mouth of the Duwamish River and downtown.

Trains carried freight to and from vessels that connected Seattle with local and distant markets. Millions of tons of cargo – coal, lumber, flour, livestock feed, canned fish, and more – crossed the piers.

Containerized shipping and construction of the Alaskan Way Viaduct radically transformed the central waterfront after World War II.