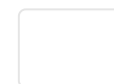


CASCADIA DAILY NEWS



Newsletters | E-Edition | Contests

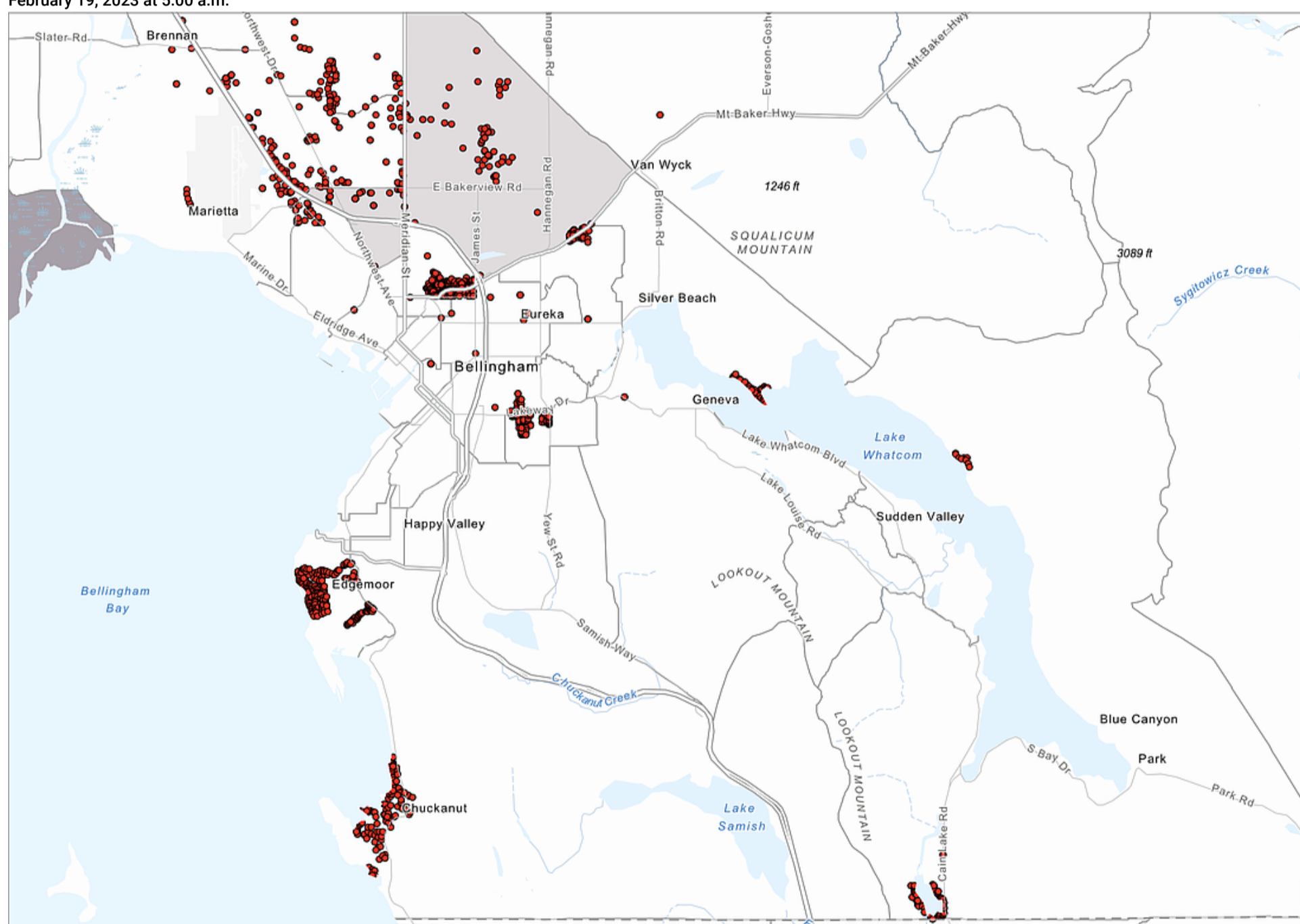
LOG IN | SUBSCRIBE

NEWS Housing

Study finds 1,500 racial covenants on Whatcom properties

Author sees connection between historic restrictions, current home ownership

February 19, 2023 at 5:00 a.m.



This section of a preliminary map shows the properties in and near Bellingham that were restricted by racial covenants. A University of Washington study has found more than 1,500 racial covenants on property deeds in Whatcom County. (Map courtesy of Racial Restrictive Covenants Project)

By **RALPH SCHWARTZ**
Staff Reporter



A University of Washington study found more than 1,500 racial covenants on property deeds in Whatcom County — an unfortunate aspect of local history that may still be reflected in the demographics of some

neighborhoods today.

The university's Racial Restrictive Covenants Project, funded by the state Legislature in 2021, has so far uncovered more than 40,000 properties in Western Washington with language that sought to keep homes whites-only, or exclude individuals based on their national origin.

While the language still exists, it no longer carries any legal weight. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1948 that restrictive covenants could not be enforced, but it wasn't until the 1968 federal Fair Housing Act that racial covenants became illegal. A 1969 state law voided racial covenants, officially stripping them of any legal weight in Washington.

Whatcom County provides instructions on the auditor's website on how to find any racial restrictions on a property deed and how to modify them. The county doesn't physically erase but rather "legally strikes" the already voided language from the document.

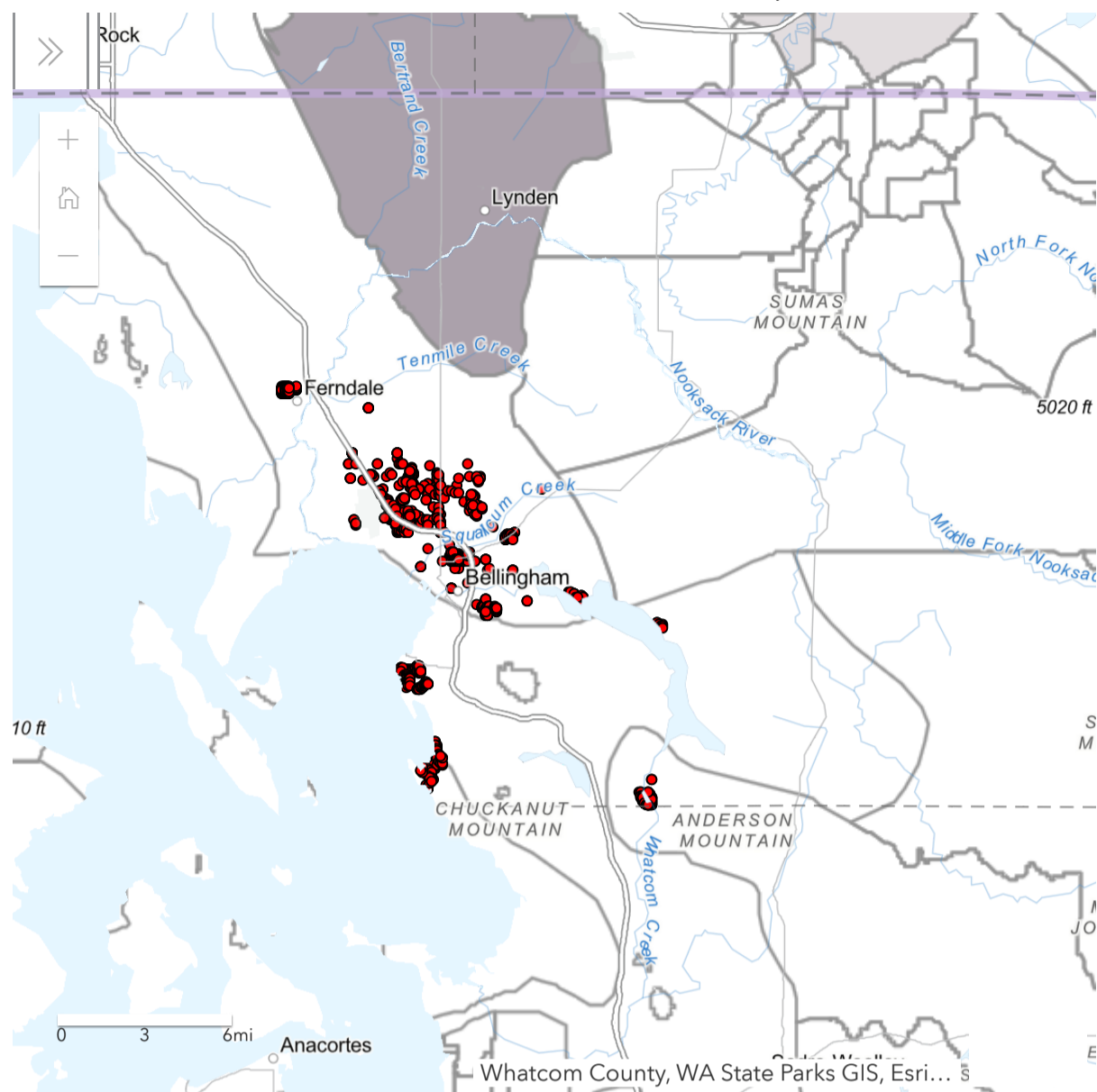
Property deeds in Whatcom County have been digitized, so the search for racial covenants there went relatively quickly, said project coordinator Sophia Dowling, a 2022 University of Washington graduate in history. Skagit County will be more arduous; Dowling and her team recently checked about six years of property records in that county by scrolling through 20 rolls of microfilm, at 1,200 to 1,600 pages per roll.

"I've reviewed over 100,000 pages of deeds," Dowling said. "I can very quickly identify if there's going to be [a restriction] on the page."

Researchers aren't ready to present data on Skagit County yet, but early results suggest they will find more covenants there than in Whatcom. Dowling's team already found racial restrictions on plat maps representing more than 900 properties. The project team did not find racial restrictions written on these subdivision maps in Whatcom County, Dowling said.

Edgemoor and Chuckanut

Many of Whatcom County's covenants are concentrated in certain pockets in and near Bellingham.



This preliminary map shows the more than 1,500 properties that were restricted in Whatcom County. Zoom and pan for a closer look. Click on any parcel to see the restriction. The gray scale coloring reflects the current racial demography of census tracts and block areas as reported in the 2020 census. The color white means the population is more than 65% non-Hispanic white. (Embed courtesy [Bellingham and Whatcom County racial restrictive covenants](#))

The Bellingham Bay Improvement Company in 1941 developed a subdivision south of what is now PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center with racial covenants on 148 homes. The covenant said only “persons of ... the White or Caucasian race” may occupy the property, with an allowance made for “domestic servants of a different race.”

An estimated 120 properties on the north shore of Lake Whatcom have racial covenants from the 1930s and 1940s, most of them excluding “any person of African, Chinese or Japanese descent.”

The UW team also found 216 covenants in Bellingham’s Edgemoor neighborhood. All the Edgemoor covenants were added to home deeds in the 1940s by the Larrabee Real Estate Company, named after early Fairhaven magnate Charles Larrabee.

“The Larrabee name is the largest name we see in these restrictions in Whatcom County,” Dowling said.

Of the 1,580 covenants recorded in Whatcom by the project team, 935 trace back to Larrabee, through either the real estate company that bears his name or other businesses: Larrabee, Gates & MacKay Inc. or Pacific Realty

Company. The latter business, which appears to be unrelated to current real estate companies with similar names, started as Fairhaven Land Company, co-founded by Larrabee in 1888.

Arguably, the impact of Bellingham’s mid-century racial covenants has lingered. Data from the 2020 census shows Edgemoor’s population to be 86% white and non-Hispanic, according to a project webpage. Whatcom County overall is 75% white and non-Hispanic, according to the 2020 census.

Farther south, on Chuckanut Bay, the population is 84% white. Larrabee Real Estate and Pacific Realty placed covenants on 144 homes in those developments, just north of the state park that bears Larrabee’s name.

‘Not just history’

Racial Restrictive Covenants Project Director James Gregory, a history professor at the University of Washington, hesitated to draw firm conclusions about the connection between bygone covenants and current population patterns.

“We’re not to the point where we can try to answer those questions systematically,” he said. “In general, the likelihood is that these restrictions mattered long after the law itself had changed.”

Gregory was more confident on another point, however: The impact of racial covenants can be seen in current data on home ownership.

“This is not just history,” he said. “This is history that shapes the look of cities today.”

In Whatcom County, non-Hispanic white households have the highest home-ownership rate, at 65%, according to the Census Bureau’s 2017-21 American Community Survey. By contrast, 37% of Black households in the county are homeowners, as are 42% of Hispanic residents, 56% of Indigenous households and 59% of residents of Asian origin.

In Skagit County, 74% of white households are homeowners, compared to 50% of Hispanic households.

Racial covenants provided a foundation for redlining, Gregory said — restrictions on mortgage lending placed on people of color.

“A Black family or a Chinese-American family in the 1940s often couldn’t participate in the housing market in that time, when it became a national project to get people into home ownership,” Gregory said, referring to programs such as the GI Bill after World War II.

“It’s not really until the 1980s that these patterns of exclusion and segregation begin to break down, but by then it’s too late for people with modest incomes to begin to buy homes,” Gregory said.

About

Who we are
Contact
CDN Jobs
Newsroom staff

Community

The A-List
Civic Agenda
Obituaries
Events calendar

Advertise

Careermatch
Media Kit
Classifieds

Subscriptions

Customer Service
My Account
E-Edition
Print paper locations

Connect

Email newsletters
Facebook
Twitter
Instagram

[FAQ](#)
[News Mission Statement](#)

[Sports calendar](#)
[Photo galleries](#)

[Subscribe](#)
[Donate](#)

[Contests](#)

[Copyright © 2023 Cascadia Daily News](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Ad Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)