

## WASHINGTON MY HOME

### VANCOUVER AND CLARK COUNTY - 2014

Local history buffs call Clark County the "Cradle of Pacific Northwest History," reflecting the importance of the 628-square-mile southwestern Washington county as the scene of key historical developments. Here the Lewis and Clark expedition arrived in 1805, the British Hudson's Bay Company established Fort Vancouver in 1825, and the town of Vancouver was incorporated in 1857. The county's location first made it an entrepôt (trading center), then an agricultural area. The region developed in agriculture, lumber, and fishing, and later in shipbuilding and aluminum. In recent times, energy from hydroelectric projects on the Lewis and Columbia rivers has fueled development as a manufacturing center.

**Land of the Chinook:** When the area's written history began, sloping riverbanks provided accessibility to alternating lightly forested and grass-covered benches in the immediate area. Beyond, denser forests covered foothills and their valleys leading to Cascade peaks such as Mt. Adams and Mt. St. Helens. Rivers have been extraordinarily important in county history, not only as boundaries but also as opportunities. Just beyond the county boundaries, the Cowlitz River to the west and the Willamette River to the east provided access to what are now Western Washington and Western Oregon. The Columbia opened the way east and north to fur-rich Rocky Mountain areas and west to the Pacific Ocean and the world.

Long before the first Euro-Americans arrived in what is now Clark County, Chinook Indians used its waterways as travel routes and took fish from them as a diet mainstay. The Cathlapottle resided just above the Lewis River in the villages of Galakanasisi and "Shoto" -- as Lewis and Clark identified them -- near Lake Vancouver.

When the Lewis and Clark Expedition camped at Salmon Creek in eastern Clark County on their way upriver in 1806, several Chinook visited their camp. The explorers estimated the Indian population from The Dalles to the coast at several thousand. The Hudson's Bay Company, with more detailed information, reduced this estimate to about 2,500 around 1825. Then, beginning around 1830, a mysterious illness, characterized in historical accounts as "intermittent fever," swept through the Indian and white populations along the river. It may have been malaria or influenza. All suffered, but the disease killed almost all of the Indians along the lower Columbia, leaving only 30 to 40 Chinook survivors.

**The Hudson's Bay Company:** Fort Vancouver, at the location of today's county seat, the City of Vancouver, took shape on the north bank of the Columbia River in 1825, 20 years before Clark County became a reality. The British Hudson's Bay Company established its post when American expansion endangered Fort George, at the mouth of the Columbia River. They named it for British naval captain and explorer George Vancouver (1758-1798). The choice of location, called *Jolie Prairie* by the company's French Canadian voyageurs and *Skatcutxat* (Mud Turtles) by the Chinooks, proved fortunate.

At Fort Vancouver, sloping banks provided easy access to the Columbia River. Trade goods manufactured in Europe and the Orient could be brought in by river, and agricultural products from fields adjacent to the fort and from the fertile Willamette Valley could be transported by river to trading sites far inland. In what is now Clark County, Hudson's Bay Company agricultural enterprises, including the Northwest's first orchards, stretched for 30 miles along the Columbia. Plentiful timber provided materials for all sorts of construction. Fort Vancouver became the headquarters of the company's Columbia Department. It controlled an area of 700,000-square-miles from Russian Alaska to Mexican California and from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. It would do so until 1849.

In 1846, Britain and the United States settled on the 49th parallel -- except for Vancouver Island which remained British -- as the line dividing British and American possessions in the Pacific Northwest. Once again threatened by American expansion, Hudson's Bay Company relocated its Columbia Department headquarters to Fort Victoria at the southern tip of Vancouver Island in what is now British Columbia.

**American Settlement:** As Fort Vancouver's importance declined, so too did British influence. In 1849, the United States Army established Columbia (later Vancouver) Barracks adjacent to Fort Vancouver. American settlers grew to outnumber

## Vancouver and Clark County – page 2

British inhabitants and the United States Congress created the Territory of Oregon, a political jurisdiction encompassing the present-day states of Washington and Oregon, extending along the Pacific Coast from the northern edge of Spanish California on the 42nd parallel to the southern edge of "Russian America" (now Alaska). An 1850 census reported 11,873 people living south of the Columbia River and only 220 living north of the river.

The City of Vancouver incorporated in 1857 as a municipality of Washington Territory. Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Vancouver, now much less important, remained open on the banks of the Columbia until 1860. In 1866, fire destroyed the old Hudson's Bay Company post.

**Clark County:** Clark County had its forerunner in the District of Vancouver, established by the Oregon Provisional Government on June 27, 1844. The district encompassed all of what is now the state of Washington. In 1845, the provisional government changed "district" to "county," and in 1849 changed "Vancouver" to "Clarke" in honor of explorer William Clark of the 1804-1806 Lewis and Clark Expedition.

When Congress established Washington Territory in 1853, Clarke County became a political subdivision of the new territory. Many years later, in 1925, the Washington state legislature corrected the county's name to Clark (removing the extraneous "e"). On the north and west, lower reaches of the 93-mile-long Lewis River delineate the county boundary. A section of the 1,200-mile-long Columbia River marks the south and the boundary between Washington and Oregon. A more pedestrian, human-conceived meridian at about 122°12' West marks the county's eastern border. This makes the county roughly triangular. One side runs directly from south to north. The other two sides follow river courses.

After the departure of the Hudson's Bay Company, Clarke County developed as a mostly agricultural area. The 1890 census reported 907 farms and only 38 manufacturing establishments in the county, which had a population of just over 11,000 out of a total state population of 18,000. A Klondike gold rush-inspired spike in Puget Sound-area population quickly changed this ratio. (Towns like Seattle became ports of departure for Alaska and Canada's Klondike River goldfields.) Ten years later, Clark County's population rose to 13,419, but Washington's total population ballooned to more than 500,000. County farms more than doubled from 907 to 1,873 and manufacturing establishments also more than doubled, from 38 to 87. These proportions would continue for decades.

**Economic Development:** As the number of farms in Clark County grew, small settlements sprang up to service them and to process timber products harvested in the foothills leading to the Cascades. La Center, first settled in 1852 at the head of navigation on the East Fork of the Lewis River, was one of them. By 1875, La Center had Washington's oldest Grange chapter, a post office, a lumber mill, and a steamboat landing.

Small riverboats such as the *Mascot*, *Swallow*, and *Walker* brought groceries and other supplies upriver and took farm and lumber products downriver. Camas, east of Vancouver, began in 1846 with a sawmill, and by 1884 had a paper mill. Washougal boasted a woolen mill. Woodland, at the confluence of the Lewis and Columbia rivers, traced its roots to pioneer farms started in the area in 1845, but was not named until a store opened there in 1881.

Vancouver itself acquired lumber and paper mills, docks, grain elevators, and canneries. Gold seekers traveling on the Columbia to Idaho and Eastern Washington in the 1860s spurred community growth. In 1870, the Northern Pacific Railway connected Vancouver to Puget Sound. In the 1880s, initiation of railroad ferry service across the Columbia linked Vancouver with Oregon and California by rail. Clark County even had, and still has, its own railroad, today operated as an excursion route under the name Chelatchie Prairie Railroad. The 33-mile-long route originated in 1886 to provide service from Vancouver to Yakima via Klickitat Pass. It became known as the Clark County, or Lewis and Clark Railroad and eventually reached Chelatchie Prairie in northern Clark County, but never went farther north.

Significant rail lines and highways also intersected in the county. Roads leading east and west along the Columbia and north and south to interior Washington and Oregon were completed.

Shifting crop patterns in the county have been reflected by the changing names of geographical features. Strawberry Knoll 10 to 12 miles east of Vancouver became Prune Hill when M. A. Boyle set out 350 plum trees there in 1883. Fruit Valley, west of Vancouver, received its name because of all the orchards there.

In 1908, *The Columbian* became Clark County's first daily newspaper. That year a rail bridge replaced the railroad ferries. In 1917, a highway bridge linked Vancouver to the Oregon side of the Columbia.

World War I (1917-1919) and World War II (1941-1945) brought additional industries and expanded population. The world's largest spruce mill came with World War I as Northwest forests supplied lumber for thousands of warplanes. The U.S. government built the mill on the grounds of Vancouver Barracks and soldiers provided labor. A privately owned shipyard, Standifer Shipyard, constructed some of the vessels needed for "The War to End All Wars," but closed in 1921.

The West's first aluminum manufacturing plant, Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) and a significant shipyard, Vancouver Kaiser Shipyard, came with World War II. Beginning in 1943, Clark County yards built 50 escort carriers, 90 other ships, and two dry docks for the war effort. Vancouver Barracks troop strength increased during both wars.

**Tourist Destination - American History:** Tourism became an important economic asset for the county after World War I. Paving of the Pacific Highway, US 99, in the 1920s brought automobile travelers. After World War II, in 1948, Congress designated the Fort Vancouver site a National Historic Monument. In 1961, Congress upgraded the designation to National Historic Site expanded boundaries. In the 1970s, federal dollars funded a National Park Service reconstruction of the old Hudson's Bay Company post. By 2000, reserve visitation, at 376,000, exceeded that for five out of eight federal parks in Washington.

These trends of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries left Clark County at the beginning of the twenty-first century with about 1,250 farms employing just over 1,000 workers. This compared to 1,631 firms and 13,561 workers in construction and 443 firms and 26,813 workers in manufacturing. The county's top three employers were construction at 20 percent, services at 22 percent, and government at 20 percent.

Clark County, known as the "Prune Capital of the World" in the 1920s, had moved on to a diversified economy. Its relationship to rivers -- so significant in the early days -- remained important. Port-related activities employed more than 5,000 people, directly affected the jobs of 49,000 more, and moved more than \$1.5-billion-dollars annually in waterborne trade.

Sources: HistoryLink.org

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