A Brief Historic Context for Oregon Sidewalks

Sidewalks are often a character-defining feature in urban and suburban historic landscapes, as well as potentially integral elements of the setting for a historic building. American cities experimented with a wide variety of paving materials throughout the nineteenth century. These included bricks, wood, cobblestones, granite, concrete, and even oyster shells or metal. These varied materials were also stylized with the addition of textures, inset designs, paver shapes, and a variety of ephemera from builder’s stamps to horse rings. The preservation of these features provides tangible examples of historic development and lends to a sense of place and identity in Oregon communities.

This limited study, prepared by the Oregon Department of Transportation Geo-Environmental Section — Cultural Resources, intends to provide a brief overview of the history of sidewalk development, paving materials, and place in social history, using international and national inventions and events to establish a foundation. Emphasis is placed on a narrow geographic focus on the state of Oregon and chronological focus circa 1790, the establishment of the fur trade in Oregon Country, to 1990, the establishment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Additionally, it seeks to categorize vital features of Oregon’s sidewalks in order to better and more rapidly identify and preserve these objects and characteristics in the case of ADA ramp sidewalk improvement projects.

Methodical analysis of ODOT regulations and documentation, local community resources, and an in-depth literature review lent itself to a thorough approach for the research and development of this historic context. The method of research included identification of primary source collections; a bibliography composed of secondary sources written by recognized experts in ADA adaptions to historic resource, the history of sidewalk design, and place of sidewalks in American social history; and consideration of limitations placed on the research by budget and time constraints. Identified repositories for relevant primary and secondary sources include: JSTOR, local historic resource inventory and survey data, newspaper articles, ODOT Library and History Center, Oregon Encyclopedia, Oregon Historical Society, Oregon State Archives, programmatic agreements and Section 106 review of sidewalk improvement projects at other states’ departments of transportation, the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) Historic Sites Database, and other general online research.

Historic Context

Development of Sidewalks and Paving Materials

There is indication of sidewalks being used in Europe and the Mediterranean to separate pedestrian traffic from vehicles as early as 2000 BCE. Well-documented use of paved roads is evidenced in the Roman Empire from the second century BCE. Pathways designated for foot traffic on those roads developed by the third century CE in Rome and from at least the fourth century.

---

2 Williams.
century CE in Greece. Existence of pedestrian-only paths decreased over time, and between the fifth and fifteenth centuries, sidewalks disappeared from existence and foot-travelers once again shared road with wheeled vehicles and mounted traffic. Separation of pedestrians and construction of sidewalks was intermittent in the seventeenth century, but spacious footpaths were commonplace in Europe by the late nineteenth century. In the United States, sidewalks became a common fixture, albeit a less luxurious one than European footpaths, in urban areas in the late nineteenth century. The construction and maintenance of sidewalks was incentivized for aesthetic purposes as well as pedestrian safety in both urban and rural communities, which was recognized by the 1930s through comparisons of accident statistics. Unlike public funding for sidewalk maintenance across the Atlantic, the American legal tradition requires adjacent property owners to finance at least part of the cost for sidewalk construction and maintenance. This precedent was set in the Supreme Court of Louisiana case of Town of Minden v. Stewart et al in 1917, which established that property owners must finance sidewalks adjacent to their property regardless of whether or not they would prefer a sidewalk to be there.

As sidewalks became an established feature of urban, and later suburban, landscapes, a variety of materials were used for paving. The oldest footpaths in London, from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, preceded street paving altogether. Early sidewalks in the United States were generally composed of wood planking or gravel. Wooden sidewalks were commonly an early improvement on frontier settlements streets. The oldest portions of New York City sidewalks that are still intact today, dating to the early or mid-nineteenth century, are paved in cobblestones, granite, and brownstone. Curbs and sidewalks were well-established on at least the larger city streets throughout America during this time, some paved using natural

---

7 Town of Minden v. Stewart et al, 77 Southern Reporter 118 (La.1917).
8 American Association of State Highway Officials, 11.
9 American Association of State Highway Officials, 11.
cement deposits. In the 1870s and 1880s, sidewalks were primarily gravel-surfaced. Portland cement concrete, developed in 1824, was used as a base to support other paving materials in London beginning 1872 and in New York in 1888, indicating widespread use. This material was initially deemed unsuitable as a road surface due to cost, inability to withstand wear of non-pedestrian use, and concerns over slipperiness for regular foot traffic. Cement concrete became a more common sidewalk material in the 1890s, although usually adjacent to gravel roadbeds, as the first Portland cement concrete street was not paved until 1893. By the 1920s, raised and curbed concrete sidewalks were commonplace alongside macadam paving and asphalt roadways for new construction in American cities.

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), established 1914 as the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO), published policies on highway and road design, including guidelines on sidewalk construction. A 1950 publication by AASHO remarked that rural areas, which included much of Oregon at the time, had mostly disregarded sidewalk construction in their development and roadway improvements. Pedestrians continued to share the road with vehicles in rural America. The AASHO guidelines of 1950 recommend a dividing strip, preferably with vegetation, between the street and pedestrian pathways.

Sidewalks as Social Spaces in the United States

Public spaces have historically been a gathering place for social activity and political activism. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sidewalks were one of these public spaces utilized for social, political, and commercial activity. Cities generally chose to focus on pedestrian circulation as the main use of sidewalks in urban planning and legislative efforts. This was in part an effort to maintain both convenience and safety for foot and vehicular traffic. Municipalities built sidewalks for pedestrian use, but these public space were then claimed for a variety of activities that have been more narrowly permissible over time. By the end of the nineteenth century, governments maintained strict control over permissible street activity. Sidewalk construction and associated infrastructure has historically been concentrated in wealthier areas with low density of minority populations, due to disinvestment and a range of more pressing political and livability priorities in these communities.

---

11 Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 16-18.
12 “Pavement History.”
15 Ehrenfeucht and Loukaitou-Sideris.
16 Ehrenfeucht and Loukaitou-Sideris.
17 Ehrenfeucht and Loukaitou-Sideris.
Despite regulations limiting street activity, sidewalks were socially established as a space for strikes, protests, and political activity. They simultaneously reflected ongoing human rights issues such as classism and racial segregation. A common example of legally-mandated segregation was the existence of pre-Civil War laws in many Southern states requiring African Americans to cede sidewalk space to white pedestrians, even if it meant stepping into the street. Resultant refusal to follow these laws in the antebellum period was a powerful protest for their own rights as citizens and human beings. A similar refusal on the part of the working class when faced with yielding to middle and upper class walkers resisted enforcement of an economically-based social hierarchy. Chinese-American vegetable peddlers in Los Angeles successfully went on strike in the 1870s to protest regulation of street vending that directly targeted Chinese communities in response to the Chinese Exclusion Act and anti-Chinese sentiment among white residents. The Socialist Party of America did its part in the early twentieth century to secure access to free speech in public spaces such as sidewalks through joint efforts with the IWW, other leftist organizations, and even tentative partnerships with Christian organizations such as the Salvation Army.

After asphalt street paving became standard, sidewalks were raised and separated from the roadway by high, sharp curbs. Consequently, people with limited mobility, vision impairment, and other disabilities had difficulty using pedestrian pathways designed without consideration for their needs. In the 1960s, the relatively large population of disabled students at UC Berkeley organized protests and other forms of activism to demand improved accessibility throughout the campus. Ed Roberts, a student paralyzed below the neck due to contracting polio as a child, was a leader in this movement demanding greater independence of mobility. He and the “Rolling Quads,” as they came to be known, protested, made demands to Berkeley administration, and installed their own ramps on sidewalk corners in the middle of the night with the help of their attendants. Berkeley responded by designing accessible sidewalks between 1969 and 1974, beginning with an initial design of diagonal ramps on corners and rounded curbs. The final renovations, in which Berkeley’s disabled community had an active role in designing, were curb cuts separate from chief pedestrian crossings and sharp curbs, allowing low vision and blind pedestrians to remain safely on the sidewalk and limited mobility and wheelchair users to travel independently. The disability rights movement in America was more far-reaching than a single university campus, and the 1970s and 1980s saw activists advocating for a wide range of accessibility demands—including curb cuts—that led to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. The ADA mandates accommodation for disabilities in all places open to the

---

19 Ehrenfeucht and Loukaitou-Sideris.
21 Ehrenfeucht and Loukaitou-Sideris 100-102.
public, which has had lasting impact on the construction of sidewalks through mandatory design guidelines.  

Oregon Sidewalks

Oregon was inhabited by Paleo-Indians between 12,000 and 15,000 years ago; European and Euromericans settled in the region in the early nineteenth century. Among the first non-native people to explore Oregon were the Lewis and Clark Expedition and British and French Canadian fur traders. Fur traders established Fort Astoria (also known as Fort George) and Fort Vancouver in 1811 and 1824 respectively. These early settlements had limited developed transportation infrastructure, but otherwise expanded and developed quickly, to the point that white people were the majority population of the region and Oregon City was a well-established town by 1845. Oregon gained statehood in 1859. Railroads were built across the state to improve trade routes in the 1880s, and modern industrial expansion began with the construction of the Bonneville Dam in the 1930s.


26 “Native Cultures and the Coming of Other People,” This Land, Oregon, The Oregon History Project, https://oregonhistoryproject.org/narratives/this-land-oregon/the-first-peoples/the-first-peoples/#.W0eMRuJKjcs.


Figure 1 — Historic photo of paved road without sidewalk, Bandon, OR, facing west (ODOT, 1938).

Figure 2 — Historic photo of paved road without sidewalk, Bandon, OR (ODOT, 1938).

There is a common pattern of the roadway and sidewalk development in Oregon. Immigrants followed the Oregon Trail for the promise of donation land claims or lumber industry profits; they settled sites that eventually became incorporated towns; and those towns and cities built up infrastructure and amenities as technology advanced. Documentation of the development of roadways can be seen in photo evidence or other records in many cities.

Generally speaking, roadways in Oregon began as unpaved dirt paths shared by pedestrians, horses, and wheeled vehicles indiscriminately. Bicyclists successfully lobbied for a separate system of bicycle paths that ran along the side of the main road in 1901, which permitted both bicycles and pedestrian to travel separately from vehicles and animals. Early sidewalks designating separation of pedestrian space from others were made of wooden planks or gravel.

Figure 3 — Historic photo of gravel road with no sidewalks on Roosevelt Coast, Gold Beach, OR, facing north (ODOT, 1932). Pedestrians share road spaces with vehicles. In the 1920s, the Oregon State Highway Commission began a statewide program to expand the highway system and pave existing roads, leading to construction of over four thousand miles of roadway in that decade. The majority of Oregon’s roads remained unimproved by 1926, while others were surfaced with gravel or oiled macadam or fully paved with asphalt.

Along with these paved roads, Portland cement concrete sidewalks were intermittently constructed throughout the state, although many roads remain unaccompanied by separate pedestrian pathways to this day. A 1939 Oregon State Highway Department publication of highway bridge specifications defines standard sidewalk finishes for future construction as tamped concrete with a granular texture to prevent slipping when wet and a right-angled curb of at least nine inches in height.

The 1971 “Oregon Bicycle Bill” allotted state highway funds to the development of sidewalks, pedestrian and bicycle paths, and bicycle lanes throughout the

---

state. Today, more densely-populated areas are more likely to have concrete sidewalks, but unincorporated county and rural areas may have dirt or gravel paths intended for foot and bicycle traffic adjacent to roadways or no separate pedestrian footpaths at all. Some examples of this development in towns and cities around the state are elaborated upon below. These examples were chosen in order to show a variety of population density and region, limited by availability of photographic evidence and other records of road prism development.

Beaverton, located to the southwest of Portland in Washington County, began as a settlement for agriculture and logging. The first record land claim of the area was in 1847, and the city was incorporated in 1893. While most roadways were dirt with wood plank or cement sidewalks, Canyon Road was constructed as a plank road between 1855 and 1860. By the 1950s, many roads were paved, but only had dirt or gravel along the sides of the road for pedestrians and vehicle parking.

Keizer, located north of Salem in Marion County, was first settled by farmers in the 1840s but was not incorporated until 1982. Its major street, River Road, was not paved until the

![Figure 5 — Historic photo of SW Broadway St, Beaverton, OR (ODOT 1952).](image)

---

1950s, when dams were built to control the regular flooding of the town by the Willamette River. 36

Jacksonville was founded in the 1850s after discovery of gold deposits in the area and incorporated in 1860. The town’s main street, California Street, had raised cement sidewalks with decorative scoring patterns installed in 1890, while the road itself was still just packed earth. 37

Pendleton, a city in eastern Oregon, developed as a commercial center in 1851 and was incorporated in 1880. 38 Many of its roads were still dirt or gravel, with either no separated sidewalks or plank sidewalks, into the 1930s. By the 1960s, roads were generally paved with asphalt and had raised concrete sidewalks. 39

Portland, located on the Columbia and Willamette rivers near the border with Washington State, was laid out in 1845 and incorporated in 1851. It grew through several gold rushes, Oregon Trail immigration, and farm and forest produce commercial shipment. Early roads were initially dirt, and eventually some were finished as plank roads directly over dirt. 40 Early sidewalks were composed of wood planks through at least the 1890s, depending on the affluence of the area; this was a cost-effective material and had the advantage of being raisable in the case of regular flooding. 41 Many portions of Portland’s roadways were asphalt-paved with high concrete sidewalks between 1909 and the 1930s, as can be seen clearly in photos of the city’s central library and A.E. Doyle’s buildings in that time period. 42 Several revitalization programs throughout the city in the 1970s and 1980s transformed portions of the cityscape, altering sections of the historic built environment, including roadways. 43

Salem was a major hub for river-based trade, and later railroad as well. It became the territorial capital in 1851 and the permanent state capital in 1864. 44 In Salem, sidewalks were constructed on all city streets starting in 1851, initially of wood but switching to concrete as the

38 Oregon Legislature, “Special Laws,” The State of Oregon General and Special Laws and Joint Resolutions and Memorials Enacted and Adopted by the Twentieth Regular session of the Legislative Assembly (Salem, OR, 1899), 747.
standard in 1912. In 1979, many major thoroughfares such as Mission Street had no sidewalks, curbs, or gutters.

Seaside, initially remarkable as a settlement farmed for its salt cairn on the Lewis and Clark Expedition, was incorporated in 1899. This town on the northwest coast of the state, primarily known as a coastal resort area, has historically been economically driven by leisure and culture activities attracting tourists from the Portland area. Its dirt roads were flanked by wooden plank sidewalks with sharp curbs. By 1921, thoroughfares including the Turnaround were paved for automobile traffic and sidewalks were improved to concrete with cornered curbs; street-adjacent sidewalks were unornamented, but the Promenade along the beach featured a decorative rectangular scoring pattern.

Figure 6 — Historic photo of Liberty St, Salem, OR (ODOT, 1914).
Figure 7 — Historic photo of sidewalk construction, Salem, OR (ODOT, 1951).

Seaside History

45 Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 18.
46 City of Salem, A Mission Street Retrospective (Salem, OR, 2013), https://www.cityofsalem.net/salem-river-crossing
47 “Special Laws” 959.
Bibliography


“Chinatown, 1890s.” *The Oregon History Project.*
https://oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/historical-records/chinatown-1890s/.


https://www.cityofsalem.net/salem-river-crossing


“First Concrete Pavement.” *About Civil Engineering.* American Society of Civil Engineers.
http://www.asce.org/project/first-concrete-pavement/.

https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/astoria_and_columbia_river_railroad/.

https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/corvallis_eastern_railroad/.


The Oregon History Project. “Native Cultures and the Coming of Other People.” This Land, Oregon. https://oregonhistoryproject.org/narratives/this-land-oregon/the-first-peoples/the-first-peoples/#.W0eMRtJKjcs.


https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/pendleton/.


Town of Minden v. Stewart et al, 77 Southern Reporter 118 (La.1917).


Willingham, William F. “Bonneville Dam.” *The Oregon Encyclopedia.*
https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/bonneville_dam.

