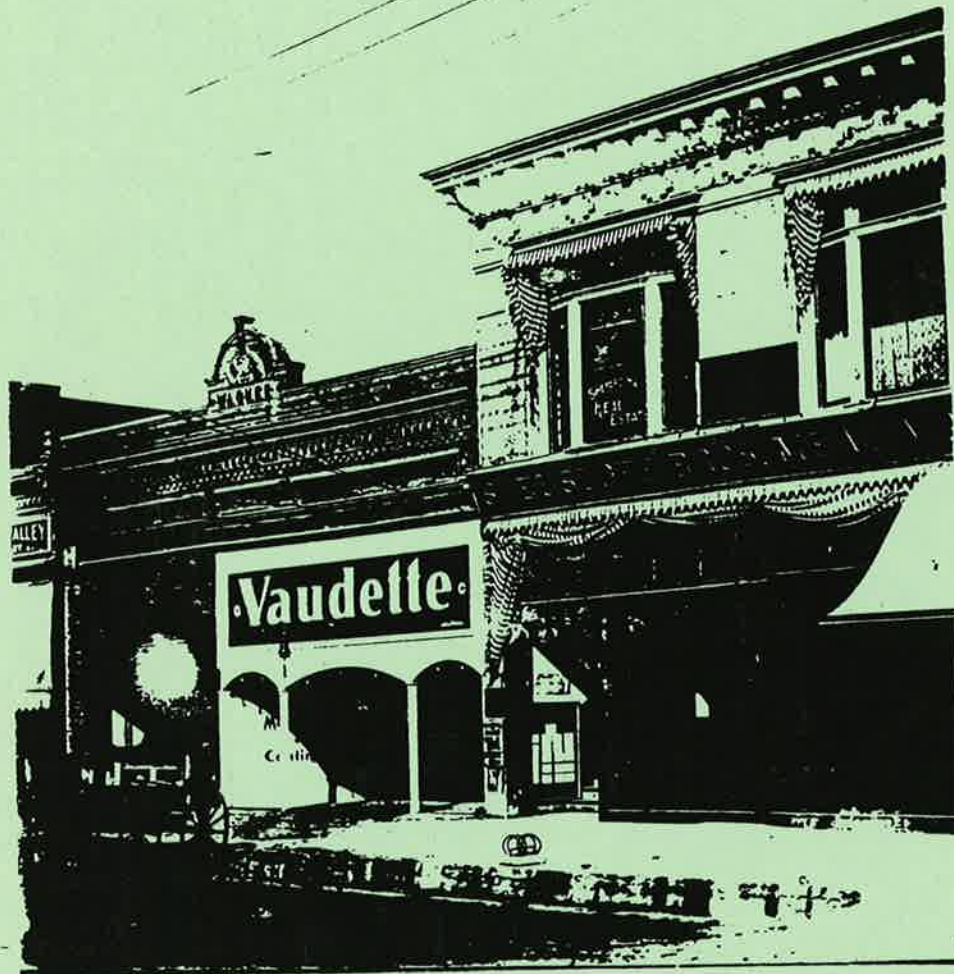


HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT



for

The City of Salem  
Salem, Oregon

August 1992

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HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT

SALEM, OREGON

Prepared for  
The City of Salem, Oregon

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August, 1992

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HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT

CITY OF SALEM, OREGON

Mayor R. G. Andersen-Wyckoff

Ann Gavin Sample, Ward I

Bill Riegel, Ward II

Dave Moss, Ward III

Bill Burgess, Ward IV

Armando Garcia, Jr., Ward V

Harry Thorp, Ward VI

Warren Thompson, Ward VII

Jeanne Lassey Arana, Ward VIII

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION I: HISTORIC OVERVIEW	
Theme . . . . .	1
Temporal Boundaries . . . . .	1
Spatial Boundaries . . . . .	1
Historical Background	
Physical Setting . . . . .	3
Mission to the Indians - 1826-1846 . . . . .	6
Settlement, Statehood & Steampower - 1847-1865 . . . . .	14
Railroads & Industrial Growth - 1866-1883 . . . . .	21
Progressive Era . . . . .	31
The Motor Age . . . . .	39
SECTION II: IDENTIFICATION	
Methodology . . . . .	46
Previous Surveys . . . . .	46
Resource Types . . . . .	47
Distribution of Resource Types . . . . .	54
SECTION III: EVALUATION	
Evaluation . . . . .	56
SECTION IV: TREATMENT	
Survey and Research Needs . . . . .	58
Treatment Strategies . . . . .	58
APPENDICES	
A. Prominent Individuals . . . . .	59
B. Oregon's Governors . . . . .	67
C. Willamette University . . . . .	68
D. Chemawa Indian School . . . . .	70
E. West Salem . . . . .	72
F. Oregon State Fair . . . . .	73
G. Salem Parks . . . . .	75
H. Bibliography . . . . .	77

Cover Photo: Vaudette Theater, c.1906. Ben Maxwell.

**HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT**  
for the  
City of Salem, Oregon

**SECTION I: HISTORIC OVERVIEW**

Theme:

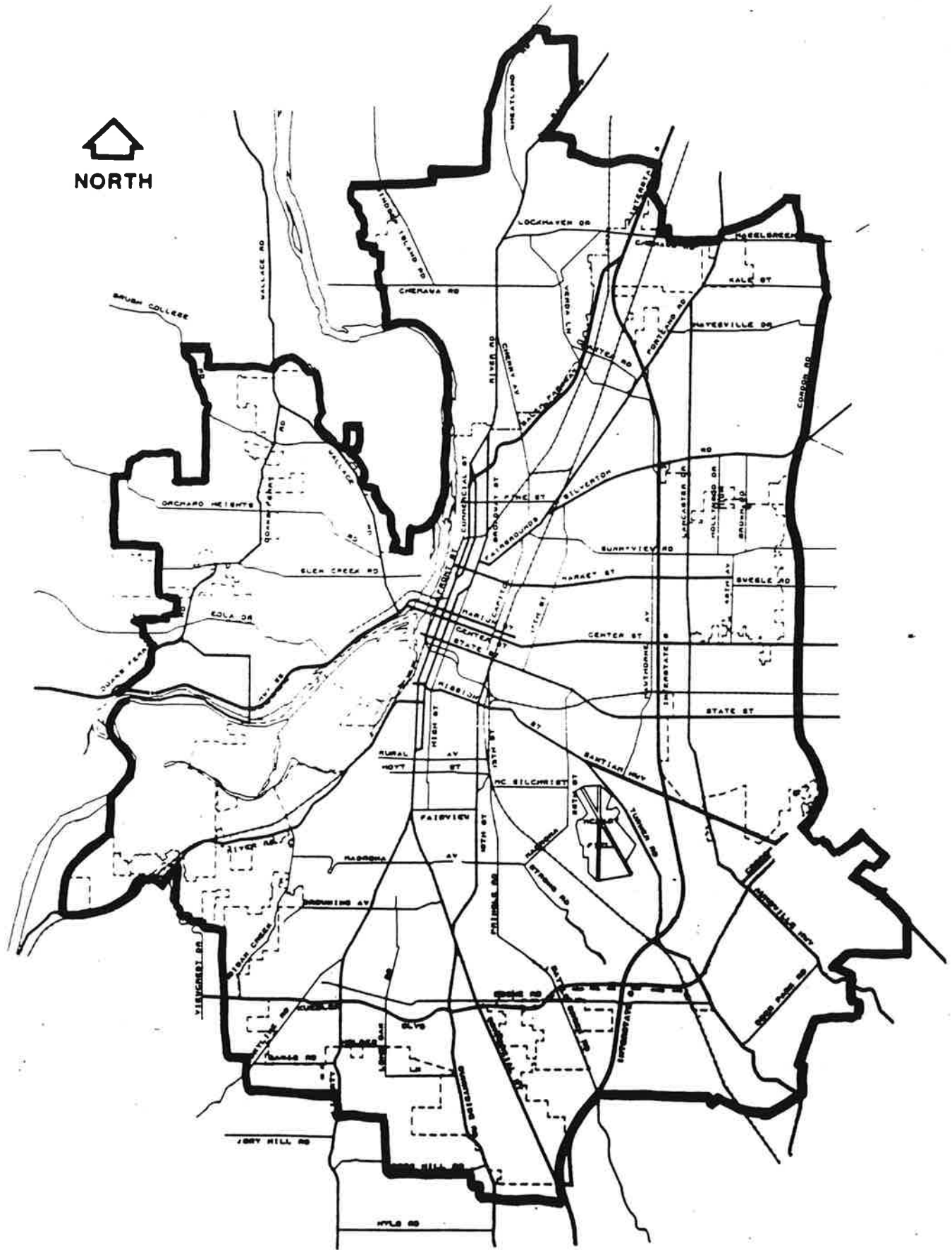
The historic context statement of Salem, Oregon is a geographically oriented study organized in chronological periods outlined by the State Historic Preservation Office in the Handbook to Historic Preservation Planning in Oregon. For each period, significant activities, events, and people are discussed within the context of the Broad Theme categories established by the National Park Service: Prehistory, Exploration and Fur Trade, Native American and Euro-American Relations, Settlement, Agriculture, Transportation and Communication, Commerce and Urban Development, Industry and Manufacturing, Government, and Culture. Sub-themes relating to Oregon history provide more detailed discussion. Some themes are not relative to every chronological time period.

Temporal Boundaries:

The dates chosen for the study are 1834 to 1942, the beginning date marks the arrival of the Jason Lee Methodist Missionary party in the Oregon Territory. Even though the Methodists originally settled ten miles north of present-day Salem, the date is significant in Salem's history. The end date is near the end of "The Motor Age" era and coincides with the 50-year criterion established by the National Park Service for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

Spatial Boundaries:

The City of Salem is located in the north-central part of the Willamette Valley basin. The boundaries of this project are the current Urban Growth Boundaries as defined by the City of Salem. The area lies within Townships 6, 7, and 8 south, Ranges 2 and 3 West of the Willamette Meridian, and encompasses an area of approximately 50 square miles.



City of Salem Urban Growth Boundary

### PHYSICAL SETTING

Present-day Salem is located on the east and west banks of the Willamette River upriver 47 meandering miles above "The Falls" at Oregon City and 62 miles above the confluence of the Willamette and Columbia Rivers. In its river location on the main early transportation route through the Willamette Valley, early Salem on the east bank was the second site chosen for the Methodist Mission and the officially-designated Capitol of the Oregon Territory. West Salem, a separate city incorporated in 1913, was annexed to Salem in 1949.

The rich soils of the Willamette Valley which attracted settlers were the result of massive floods forming in glacial Lake Missoula near present-day Missoula, Montana. Ice dams formed which, when breached, sent thousands of gallons of water pouring through the Columbia Plateau and down the Columbia Gorge. An ice dam or other barrier at Portland where the Columbia turns north forced the water into the Willamette Valley basin up to 400 feet deep, laying down deposits of fine silt that are the farmland of today. (Alt & Hyndman 1991:67)

Situated at an elevation of approximately 150' above sea level, the Salem area has soils ranging from "first rate clay loam to first rate sand or alluvial, stony and gravelly." according to the 1851 Surveyor General's survey. The land is described as "rolling" or "gently rolling" with some undulating bottoms overflowing 6 to 15' deep. White oak and broad-leaf maple were the predominant trees with some scattering of Douglas fir. Grass and short ferns covered the ground in October when the survey was made. Several streams emptied into the Willamette River; La Creole Creek is mentioned by the surveyors. (Surveyor General's Records: 1851)

Salem rests in a natural basin that is formed by the westward Eola Hills rising between 900 and 1,000 feet, the Waldo Hills to the east between 500 and 600 feet, and to the south the volcanic Salem Hills rising between 600 and 700 feet. The Willamette River at the early ferry site is approximately 400 feet wide, flowing in a northerly direction. Both north and south of Salem the river channels diverge creating islands and changing channels in time of high water or flood. Mill Creek, a good-sized stream, and Pringle Creek, a smaller stream to the south of Mill Creek, flow into the Willamette River from the southeast.

"The bottoms" in the Salem vicinity, Ankeny, American, and Keizer, attracted settlers who, in spite of the flood hazards, liked bottom land. (Dicken and Dicken 1979:82) To the north lay French Prairie, some of the earliest cultivated land in the state, settled by former Hudson's Bay trappers and their families, and to the south the more level Albany area. Swampy Lake LaBish lay approximately ten miles to the northeast. To the west, north of Mary's Peak the Coast Range dipped forming a low travel route to



the coast, and to the east the Santiam River drainage afforded a fairly accessible route over the Cascades.

The Willamette Valley inspired many observers to put pen to paper; Joel Palmer, settler, mill owner and early Indian agent, in his Journal of Travels over the Rocky Mountains, 1845-46, makes this observation:

The Willamette valley, including the first plateaus of the Cascade and Coast ranges, may be said to average a width of about sixty, and a length of about two hundred miles. It is beautifully diversified with timber and prairie. (Corning 1947:10)

Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, writing of his Oregon expedition in 1841 in Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition:

The prairies are at least one-third greater in extent than the forest; they were again seen carpeted with the most luxuriant growth of flowers, of the richest tints of red, yellow and blue, extending in places a distance of fifteen to twenty miles. (Corning 1947:10)

Pre-History: Early inhabitants of the Willamette Valley were members of a Native American group called the Kalapuyas, meaning "people of the elderberry." This large group, consisting of at least a dozen and perhaps as many as twenty sub-groups or bands, covered the area from the Willamette River Falls on the north to the Umpqua Valleys on the south. Each band had its own territory with river or other natural boundaries dividing the land; hunting, fishing, food gathering, and building of camps and villages were carried on within the boundaries of these bands. Rather than a strict tribal hierarchy, these bands lived in villages made up of several families. Each village had a headman whose position was determined by wealth. (Beckham 1977:42)

These Indians have been described as semi-nomadic because of their mobility required by food-gathering. Their diet consisted of roots, vegetables, nuts, and insects with the camas and wapato roots a staple. Fish and game supplemented the diet. The system of burning the prairies to facilitate food gathering was highly developed; game was flushed out by the fires and prairies kept cleared of brush. In summer when they were moving to gather food, i.e. berries in the mountains or fish near streams, they constructed small brush shelters providing some protection from the weather and wild animals. (Beckham 1977:45) During the rainy winter months they settled in the more protected forest borders in houses of brush, bark, and cedar planks. (O'Donnell 1991:41)

The first treaty with the Willamette Valley Indians was made in 1851 by Anson Dart, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, but it was not ratified by Congress because they favored removal of the

Indians to Eastern Oregon, a condition not written in the treaty. The Palmer treaty, removing the Indians to the Siletz Reservation, was ratified in 1855. However, some individual treaties were not ratified resulting in no money being paid to the affected Indians even though they had already left their homelands. (Zucker, Hummell, & Hogfoss 1983:87)

Exploration & Fur Trade: The Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804-06 strengthened the American claim on the northwest territory and opened the area to American fur traders. Their successful journey proved that an overland route was possible, if extremely difficult.

The first recorded exploration trip by a Euro-American was under the guidance of Donald McKenzie, an employee of the Astor-owned Pacific Fur Company. In March of 1812 McKenzie and his companions left Astoria by canoe and traveled up the Columbia and the Willamette at least to the river bearing his name near present-day Eugene. McKenzie was lavish in his praise of the valley having seen rich prairies and extensive wildlife. (Hussey 1967: 23) In the fall of the same year, 1812, two Pacific Fur Company clerks, William Wallace and J. C. Halsey with fourteen men set off to the Willamette Valley in search of food. While on this mission, they built "a dwelling and trading house" now thought to be near present-day Salem. (Hussey 1967:25)

The American-owned Pacific Fur Company was purchased by the British North West Company in 1813. As a result of the War of 1812, the Oregon Territory came under joint British-American occupation, a condition renewed in 1827. Thus for about fifteen years from 1815-1830, the giant Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company held sway in the northwest. (Dodds 1977:45)

Fur trader Jedediah Smith may have passed through the Willamette Valley in 1828 after most of his company of 19 men had been killed by Indians near the mouth of the Umpqua and he was making his way to Fort Vancouver. Other early explorers were Captain Benjamin L. E. Bonneville and Captain Nathaniel Wyeth. (Winther 1952:98-101)



## MISSION TO THE INDIANS 1828-1846

Native American & Euro-American Relations: Events leading to the establishment of the Methodist Mission in the Oregon Country began in 1832 with the long journey of four Flathead Indians to St. Louis, Missouri in search of "the Great Spirit" and "the Great Book". (Bailey, intro.1854:1) They were referred to Captain William Clark and later their story was retold by William Walker in the "Christian Advocate and Journal" published in New York City in 1833.(Brosnan :8-12) Two of the Indians died in St. Louis, and another on the return journey, but their story stirred the hearts of Methodism and a mission was formed with Jason Lee, a Methodist from Canada, as the head of the expedition.(Carey 1935:284)

In 1833 \$3,000 was commissioned by the Methodist Mission Board for the outfitting of the mission. Arrangements were made to bring the mission's principal goods by sea on Captain Nathaniel Wyeth's brig the "May Dacre", while the mission party, made up of Jason Lee, his nephew Rev. Daniel Lee, and a teacher, Cyrus Shepard, were to travel overland with Captain Wyeth.(Winther 1952:103)

In company with Captain Wyeth's group of 70 were a fur trading caravan and the mission group. The assembly left Independence on April 28, 1834, and proceeded westward. Stops of approximately two weeks each were made at a rendezvous site at Harms fork on the Colorado River of the West and later at the site of Fort Hall on the Snake River where Captain Wyeth remained. Reaching Fort Walla Walla, they were met by Hudson's Bay Company men who traveled with them down the Columbia taking ten days to Fort Vancouver, reaching there after a journey of almost six months.(Carey 1935:288)

The Mission party stayed at Fort Vancouver for a few days conferring with Dr. McLoughlin as to the suitability of a site for their mission. After journeys up Willamette River and discussion with Dr. McLoughlin, the decision was made to establish a mission on the Willamette. The site chosen was at the southern end of French Prairie, an area settled by former members of the Hudson's Bay Company, on land settled by Joseph Gervais. This was the first permanent American settlement west of the Mississippi. (Fadeley 1976:6)

Setting about immediately to build a shelter for the oncoming winter, the group erected a log cabin 18' by 32' to serve the purpose of house, school, and church. The school did not prosper; the mortality rate among the Indians was high and hostility increased as Indian children coming to the mission died. So much time was given over to survival necessities that Lee asked for more help and in 1836 the first reinforcements arrived from Boston, a group including the first white women to settle in the Willamette Valley. (Carey 1935:291)

In 1838 Jason Lee decided to make the overland journey east to ask for more help for the mission. He also carried with him a "settler's petition" asking government officials in Washington D.C. for the "protection of the United States." The petition was presented to Senator Linn of Missouri. (Fadeley 1976:8) This petition, or memorial, signed by 27 English-speaking settlers and nine French Canadian settlers, marked the beginning of the broader role the mission would play in the political life of the Oregon Territory.

Lee's journey to the east bore fruit and he returned to Oregon around the Horn, with 51 people, including children, on the ship "Lausanne" in what was called "The Great Reinforcement". This group included, as well as ministers, teachers, mechanics, (carpenters), and farmers; they also brought machinery for a saw mill and grist mill. (Carey 1935:294) In 1840 a decision was made to move the mission buildings south about ten miles to an Indian site on the Willamette called Chemeketa, a spot H. K. Hines refers to as "more eligible." (Hines 1899:120) That same year Rev. Alvan F. Waller began the construction of a mill on the new site; both lumber and wheat were to be processed at the mill. (Hines 1899:218) In 1841 the Lee house and a parsonage were constructed in conjunction with the mission. These buildings were the first to use milled lumber in the Salem area. (Walton, 1963:183) The Lee house was originally occupied by the Jason Lee family and other families and was sited at what later became 960 Broadway. It served as headquarters for the mission and was also used for meetings which lead to the formation of a provincial government. (MCHS 1964:9-10)

A new school called the Indian Manual Labor School was established at Chemeketa in 1842. This was a major investment for the Mission with an expenditure of \$10,000 for a large, two-story structure. containing a manual training department, recreation rooms, and dormitories for young men and young women. (Bashford 1918:196) However, the number of Indians attending continued to decline with 30 pupils in attendance reported in 1844. In that year the Trustees of the Oregon Institute bought the Indian Manual Labor School and began a policy of accepting any student fulfilling these requirements: "persons of color if of good character and can read, write, and speak the English language intelligibly." (Loewenberg 1976:184) The Institute eventually became Willamette University.

As the Methodist Mission became more involved in mills, farms, stock, and stores, a sentiment arose that, because of the time involved in caring for these matters, they should be separated from the religious activities. Mission questions in 1843 were very different from those posed in 1834 and Jason Lee decided on another trip to the east to confer with the Mission Board. (Hines 1899:286) In the meantime, the Mission Board had appointed a new head of the Oregon Mission, Rev. George Gary. Rev. Gary, arriving in Salem in 1843, under directions from the Mission Board, proceeded to

dismantle the mission to the Indians. Workers who were no longer needed were given either their passage to the States or the equivalent in mission property. The support of the remaining ministers was left to the white settlers who were settling in the area; in fact in the fall of 1843 the first sizeable group of American citizens, about 900 people, arrived in the Willamette Valley. (Bailey, intro.1854:5) Jason Lee never returned to Oregon; he became ill and died on the east coast in 1845. (Fadeley 1976:22)

The Catholic Church was present in Oregon territory just north of Salem in the area of French Prairie as early as 1838 when Father Francis N. Blanchet and Father Modeste Demers arrived from Canada. While centered in the Willamette Valley, their mission activities extended as far east as the Cayuse Indian country in present-day eastern Oregon and Washington and north to Vancouver Island. Frontier rivalry existed between the Protestant and Catholic churches, but merely by their presence, organized religious groups encouraged the settlement of the area. (Winther 1952:119)

Settlement: The earliest family groups crossing overland for the express purpose of settling took place in 1840; this was also the first use of wagons to haul goods, in this case the wagon was used as far as Fort Hall, Idaho. By 1842 the wagon train concept with a leader had solidified and 1843 is known as the year of "the Great Migration" with approximately 800 people crossing the plains. The fact that the Methodists had an established site drew newly-arriving settlers to the area. After the Whitman Massacre in 1847 and the California Gold Rush in 1848-49, overland travel to Oregon decreased as more settlers went to California. (Bowen, 1978:11-16)

Upon the dismantling of the Mission in 1844, the remaining missionaries acquired land claims around the mission site; included in this group were William H. Willson, David Leslie, A. F. Waller, H. H. Judson, and J. L. Parrish. In 1846 in an effort to raise money to support the Oregon Institute, a large section of the now-downtown portion of Salem was platted and made available to buyers. Willson was authorized to sell lots with a portion of the selling price going to the support of the Oregon Institute, later Willamette University. An early map shows a plat 13 blocks long and 5 blocks wide running parallel to the Willamette River in a north-east to south-west axis. Another section was added when the plat was filed in 1850. Portions of the William H. Willson and J. B. McClane Donation Land Claims were included in this original "Salem" plat. The generously-laid-out blocks were 300 by 350 feet with an alley dividing the long axis; streets were 99 feet (a chain and one-half) wide. The first lot in the newly-platted town of Salem was sold on July 10, 1847 to Nancy M. Thornton, wife of later Supreme Court Justice John Quinn Thornton. This lot was located directly north of and facing the "Public Square." At that time

there were about one-half dozen families in the Salem area. (Clark 1927:546)

The Indian name for this locality was Chemeketa, an Indian word meaning resting place or meeting place or possibly both. It may also have been the name of one of the bands of Kalapuya Indians in the vicinity. Origin of the name "Salem" is disputed; some scholars believe David Leslie, a missionary originally from Salem, Massachusetts, named the town in honor of his home; others believe it was named by another early Methodist, William Willson. When the original Salem plat was filed in 1850, it was called Salem, the Anglicized version of the Hebrew word meaning peace. (McArthur 1981:641))

Agriculture: Hudson's Bay Company pioneered wheat growing in the Oregon Territory; the type of wheat grown at the Methodist Mission was called "spring red" and was a bearded variety. (Bowen 1976:88) Wheat was recognized as legal tender, one bushel equaling one dollar. In these early days, farming was usually confined to wheat or small scale gardens.

Sheep were introduced into the Willamette Valley in 1842 when Jacob Leese brought a flock of 900 from Mexico. The first sheep to cross the plains arrived in 1844. (Gaston 1912:327) Cattle had been in the vicinity since the mission had started in 1834 when Dr. McLoughlin "loaned" several head to Jason Lee when he arrived. The mission negotiated with Ewing Young to bring 600 head of cattle from California in 1836; this was a successful venture in all ways. (Hines 1899: 108) According to Bowen, by the early 1840s, the Methodist herd of cattle had grown to over a thousand head and grazed along Mill Creek and on the hills south of Salem. With the dismantling of the Mission, Hamilton "Cow" Campbell took over the mission herds which were then moved to the north bank of the lower Santiam River. (Bowen 1976:80)

Transportation & Communication: During this period of territorial settlement travel was usually by boat, at least if possible. Indian canoes were used, sometimes with Indians hired to row. Jason Lee tells of a journey from Salem to The Dalles in January of 1843 taking nine days by canoe. (Hines 1899:262) Commercial river transport on the upper Willamette by flatboat began in 1846 with the "Mogul" and the "Ben Franklin." These were Indian-powered, paddle-driven craft. (Corning, 1947:25)

In 1844 the Provisional Government appointed Thomas McKay, Allen Davie and D. McKay to "view and mark out" a road between the Methodist Mission mills and Oregon City. (Marion County Context Statement 1990:12)

Government: Encouraged by government agent, William Slacum, the Willamette Valley settlers sent a petition to Congress in 1836 encouraging the United States to provide a territorial form of