

POLK COUNTY, OREGON
AN HISTORIC CONTEXT

1811 - 1941

AUGUST 1991

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**POLK COUNTY, OREGON
HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT**

Prepared for Polk County, Oregon

by

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INTRODUCTION

This document represents a major step by Polk County toward development of a comprehensive Cultural Resource Protection Plan. The document is modeled after the Resource Protection Planning Process (RP3) developed by the United States Department of the Interior and modified by the Oregon State Office of Historic Preservation (SHPO). The purpose of the report is to provide a framework for consistent decisionmaking in the management of cultural resources.

The project is also a major step by the SHPO toward compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA), which requires the State Historic Preservation Officer to survey and inventory cultural resources throughout the state; and, with state land use law, which requires local jurisdictions to identify and protect significant resources.

The project was conducted from September 1991 through August 1991 by Koler/Morrison Planning Consultants of Oregon City under contract with Polk County. The study area encompasses all the unincorporated area in the county, exclusive of federally owned land. The project consisted of four major phases: literature search and preparation of an overview of Polk County history; research on individual properties; preliminary evaluation of resources; and, preparation of final inventory forms and the final document.

There are six major sections in the following report. This section is followed by section one which provides an overview of Polk County history. The overview focuses on major events and themes of county history and provides a framework for analysis of resources. The chronological parameters are approximately 1811 to 1940, with some discussion of Native American pre-history. This section is followed by a list of individuals who played a prominent role in local history, which in turn is followed by a comprehensive bibliography of sources consulted.

The Identification section contains a predictive model for use in identification and evaluation of historic resources in future survey efforts. Section six, Treatment, identifies strategies for protecting the County's significant cultural resources. This section is followed by Appendix A which includes a list of the properties which were documented and evaluated in this project.

The *Polk County Historic Context* is an evolving document. It will require regular updating and review. Resources that were not identified in this phase of the project may be included at a future date and others should be removed if they no longer meet eligibility requirements. All materials generated in the course of this project are the property of Polk County.

HISTORIC OVERVIEW

POLK COUNTY, OREGON 1811-1941

The Polk County Historical Overview is a geographically oriented study of significant events and patterns in Polk County history. It is organized according to the historic periods outlined in the Handbook to Historic Preservation Planning in Oregon prepared by the State Historic Preservation Office. This permits the comparison of locally significant historic themes with themes of statewide importance which define the specific periods.

TEMPORAL BOUNDARIES: 1811-1941

The temporal boundaries of the Polk County Overview cover the years from 1811 to 1941. The year 1811 marks the initial exploration of the upper Willamette River Valley by members of the Pacific Fur Company, and the opening of the Polk County region to commercial fur interests. The year 1941 corresponds with the 50-year criterion for determining eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places.

SPATIAL BOUNDARIES

The study area conforms with the current political boundaries of Polk County which encompasses 745 square miles in the central Willamette Valley of northwest Oregon.

Originally formed from part of the Yamhill District on December 22, 1845, Polk District was the first subdivision of the original five districts--later counties--established by the Provisional Government in the Oregon Country. Between 1845 and 1847 Polk County included all of Oregon west of Marion County to the Pacific Ocean, and south of Yamhill County to the Spanish territory of California.

In December 1847 the southern boundary of Polk County was delimited and its land area substantially reduced by the creation of Benton County to the south. Between 1847 and 1893 Polk County encompassed all land west of Marion County to the Pacific Ocean. With the creation of Lincoln County in 1893, Polk County's current western boundary was fixed. With the exception of minor changes caused by river channeling on its eastern boundary, the political demarcation of Polk County has remained essentially unaltered since 1893.

TOPOGRAPHY/HISTORIC LANDSCAPE

Polk County's topography played an important role in defining early settlement patterns and influencing historic development. Settlers seeking agricultural land were restricted to the eastern half of the county and northwest river valleys because of the rough terrain and high elevations of the Coast Range.

Broken only by small valleys in the southwest and the Yamhill River valley in the northwest, the Coast Range covers an area of approximately 324 square miles west of Falls City, with elevations in excess of 3700 feet. Ten miles west of Falls City, within a five-mile radius of Valsetz, the headwaters of the western-flowing Siletz River, Boulder and Rock Creeks, and the eastern-flowing Luckiamute River and Rickreall Creek are in close proximity. This area is subject to

rainfall averaging over 100 inches a year, as compared to 80 inches at Falls City, and approximately 40 inches in the eastern half of the County.

Of the three major provinces--Forest, Shrub-Steppe, and Alpine--in Oregon, only the Forest province is found in Polk County, and only two of the 13 vegetation zones defined within the larger Forest province are represented. The Western Hemlock zone covers the mountainous western division of the county and the higher elevations of the central foothills. Before Euro-American settlement, the terrain was blanketed by ancient stands of western hemlock, Douglas fir and western red cedar.

Historically this densely forested, mountainous terrain, with its heavy rainfall and shorter growing season, was avoided by the early emigrants seeking land for agrarian settlement. It was the last to be settled in the county. However, expanding population and the burgeoning timber market of the 1880s and 1890s brought the area under increasing commercial pressure, altering the historic landscape:

Although named for the shade-tolerant western hemlock which would dominate in the complete absence of fire and logging, the Douglas fir predominates under present conditions. (Loy 1976:58)

East of a line drawn north and south through Falls City, the topography of Polk County becomes more varied as elevations descend toward the valley floor. The low-lying foothills reach to Buena Vista in the southeast, to Dallas in east-central and to the Eola Hills in the northeast; the Eola Hills bisect the county north and south from Eola to the Yamhill County line. Expanses of prairie land open south of Rickreall Creek and in the southeast and north-central county. Areas of benchlands and alluvial terraces, stream bottoms and small prairie openings are scattered through the eastern county and along the Willamette River watercourse.

The eastern half of Polk County lies within the Willamette Forest-Prairie zone:

Forest, woodland, prairie, and riparian deciduous forest occupy the alluvial bottomlands of the Willamette Valley and the lowest surrounding foot hills. The most persistent zone include the Douglas fir with admixtures of grand fir and big leaf maple. On drier sites and often representing successional vegetation is a woodland of Oregon white oak. This species also occupies isolated positions [oak openings] in prairies which are maintained by burning. Southerly facing ridges with thin soil also support grassland. A deciduous forest of Oregon ash, black cottonwood and willow flanks the river. (Loy 1976:58)

The two most characteristic features of eastern Polk County's historic landscape were the woodland openings of Oregon white oak on the rolling hills and benchlands, together with the prairie lands on the valley floor south of Rickreall Creek and scattered among the foothills of the north and southeast county.

Early settlers, seeking farmland free from the diseases endemic to the bottomlands of the Mississippi, Missouri and Ohio river valleys, found these low-lying hills and prairies ideal. The hillsides with scattered oak woodlands and openings provided good soil above the rivers, creeks and many intermittent streams. The abundant water supply in turn supported a rich riparian forest of native ash, cottonwood and willow in many of the lower areas, and big-leaf maple on slightly higher elevations.

Farming the eastern lands was also enhanced by the lack of secondary growth and underbrush on many of the larger prairies and hillsides. This open terrain resulted from periodic field burnings by

former Native American inhabitants in order to capture game and encourage the growth of various seeds for forage. The prairie fires would run through the native grasses and spread to surrounding hills, retarding the establishment of deciduous trees and underbrush. The white oak, due to the nature of its hard corky bark, remained unharmed by these quick-spreading prairie fires.

Carbon tests have indicated dates as early as the 1690s for the earliest field burnings. Although not as common on the Polk County prairies as on the larger prairies of the southern valley, field burning by the 1840s had left many relatively open prairies and hillsides south of Rickreall Creek and scattered areas in north-central Polk County. The open land proved vital to those settlers who had just endured the hazards of overland migration and urgently needed to clear land for plantings for food and barter.

Although the commercial lumber industry served to open the western half of Polk County between 1880 and 1941, the lower-lying eastern county with its rolling hills, open prairies and longer growing period remained the primary population, agricultural and commercial center through the historic period.

PREHISTORY AND NATIVE AMERICAN/EURO-AMERICAN RELATIONS

Prior to Euro-American settlement of the Willamette Valley the region was inhabited by a linguistically distinct Native American population known as the Kalapuyan Indians. Ethnographic studies have identified no less than nine separate tribal units, two of which inhabited the Polk County region.

The Yamhills, or Yamel Indians, were composed of as many as five autonomous bands speaking the Tualatin-Yamhill dialect. Their geographic range extended from the Willamette River west to the Coast Range, and from Rickreall Creek north to the McMinnville- Dayton area in Yamhill County. Of the five identified bands, the Champile and Chinchal lived along the Rickreall, while the Andshankualth, Andshimmampak and Chamiwi inhabited the Yamhill River area.

The second tribal unit in the Polk County region was the Luckiamutes who spoke the Central Kalapuyan dialect. From three to as many as six bands resided west of the Willamette River along the Luckiamute and Little Luckiamute Rivers, north to Rickreall Creek and south into Benton County.

Hunters and gatherers, the Kalapuyans depended largely on the native camas root that grew in the wet prairies and bottomlands of the valley. They augmented this staple with a collection of seeds, nuts, berries and insects. Field burning encouraged the growth of several of their primary food sources and forced small game into traps and hunting circles. Excellent bowmen, they hunted deer and bear and augmented their diet with fish from below the falls. While the various Kalapuyan bands had identifiable territorial ranges, their tribal movements in seasonal hunting, fishing and gathering created a system of trails extending throughout the valley.

Living quarters were of impermanent nature. During the summer the natives lived outdoors beneath tree canopies, occasionally in grass houses or shelters of fir boughs overlaid with grass. Winter homes were usually shallow earth pits with walls of standing forked sticks secured in the ground with cross-pieces supporting grass mats; the shelters were roofed with both bark and grass. Lean-to's made of grass mats and planks were also used. Sweat houses were usually constructed over a shallow pit by bending poles overlain with grass or bark and covered with successive layers of dirt. The impermanence of these structures precluded their survival beyond the early historic period.

Population estimates of the Kalapuyans before the arrival of Euro-Americans range from 5,000 to 10,000. Estimates of the Yamhill and Luckimute vary from 500 to 2,000. By the mid-1830s diseases introduced into the native population by traders and fur trappers had reduced their numbers by as much as 90 %. Rampant disease coupled with the increasing immigration of the 1840s continued to reduce the dwindling native population:

Surrounded as many of the tribes and bands now are by whites, whose arts of civilization, by destroying the resources of the Indians, doom them to poverty, want and crime, the extinguishment of their title by purchase, and locating them in a district removed from the settlements is a measure of the most vital importance to them. (Gov. Lane 1849)

On January 4, 1855, a treaty between the various bands of Kalapuyans and Oregon Superintendent of Indian Affairs Joel Palmer was effected, calling for the various bands to remove to a reservation to be established by the government. For this purpose the Grand Ronde Indian Reservation was opened on June 30, 1857, covering 60,000 acres in northwest Polk and southwest Yamhill counties. A census conducted in 1870 reported only 47 Yamels and 36 Luckiamutes on the reservation; in 1910 the Yamels numbered five, the Luckiamutes, eight. By the end of the historic period the Kalapuyan people no longer existed as a distinct cultural-racial entity.

(1811)-1846: FUR TRADE AND MISSION TO THE INDIANS

This period opens with the establishment of the first permanent settlement in the Oregon Country at Fort Astor (Astoria), and the exploration and opening of the upper Willamette River valley and the Polk County region by members of the American-owned Pacific Fur Company. In 1813, with the threat of armed hostility between Britain and America, the isolated outpost was sold to the Canadian North West Company. While the sale effectively ended direct American influence in the area for some 21 years, the question of Oregon territorial sovereignty would remain a vital issue until the end of the period.

In the 1830s American interests again asserted themselves in the region, culminating in the 1840s with the American settlement of the Willamette Valley. This included the settlement of Polk County and its creation as a political unit in December of 1845. The period ends in 1846 with resolution of the boundary dispute between Britain and the United States. The treaty was presented to the senate by President Polk--for whom the county is named--and ratified on June 15, 1846, establishing the sovereignty of the United States over all the Oregon country south of the 49th parallel.

Between 1811 and the re-establishment of American interests in the 1830s, the recorded history of the Polk County area is largely dependent on the records and journals of the early commercial fur companies. Since few of these sources specifically refer to the Polk County area before the 1830s, its early history must be considered in the light of available records, references and descriptions dealing with the upper Willamette River valley as a whole.

The first Euro-American exploration of the upper Willamette Valley is believed to have been conducted by Robert Stuart, a partner in Astor's Pacific Fur Company. On December 5, 1811, Stuart with Francis Pillet and Donald McGillis led a party from the Fort Astor into the upper Willamette River basin in order to "determine the advisability of establishing a trading post on its banks" (Hussey 1967:23). Journals indicate that Stuart's party returned to Fort Astor prior to March 1812, although there is no record of the extent of their exploration.

In the spring of 1812 Donald McKenzie led a second expedition into the upper valley. McKenzie is believed to have traveled as far as present-day Lane County and up the river that bears his name.

Traveling by canoe, this expedition by course would have passed the Polk County region, if not actually entering and exploring one of its numerous waterways. On his return, McKenzie described the valley above the Willamette Falls as "bounding in beaver, teeming with elk and deer, with rich prairies and delightful beyond expression" (Hussey 1967:24).

The next recorded exploration of the valley occurred in November 1812, when William Wallace and John C. Halsey led a party into the upper valley to establish a hunting and trading outpost. Sometime between December 1812 and March 1813, the Wallace House was built on Wallace Prairie, north of the original plat of Salem and immediately east of Polk County. This outpost was the first building constructed in the Willamette Valley. A second structure was built approximately two miles west of the original town site of Champoeg (Marion County) sometime in mid-to-late 1813; however, it is unclear whether this post, referred to historically as Willamette Post, was built by the Astorians or the arriving North West Company employees.

With the sale of Fort Astor to the North West Company in October 1813, direct American influence in the region was supplanted by British-Canadian domination. Between 1813 and 1821, the year the Hudson Bay Company absorbed the North West Company, the Willamette River watershed was extensively trapped by fur company employees and freemen trappers (men not under contract with the company). During this period the Willamette Post functioned as the primary trading center in the upper valley:

The establishment consisted of one dwelling house for North West employees and two "huts" for freemen and for the Nipissing Indians employed as hunters. Since there was no trading house, the traffic with the natives was carried on out of doors. The staff consisted of two clerks and thirty men in addition to the free trappers and Indian hunters from east of the Rockies. A swarm of Kalpooian tribesmen were clustered about the post, living without shelter on the open prairie during fine weather moving under nearby trees during foul. (Hussey 1967:28)

Although there were several episodes between trappers and Native American inhabitants that led to short retreats by the trappers from the upper valley, for the most part the fur interests kept substantial pressure on the native game and fur resources of the region. By the time John McLoughlin was appointed chief factor for the Columbia Department of the Hudson Bay Company in 1824, the upper valley was no longer considered of immediate economic importance in relation to the furs it could produce.

A free French trapper named George Montour was reportedly the first settler in the upper valley, between 1812 and 1815. Although no evidence supports this claim, it is likely that a freeman may have been the earliest settler. Many of these men, with Indian wives and children to support, found it necessary to seek other means of subsistence. Etienne Lucier, a freeman who had come into the region with the Astor party, began raising horses "as a sideline" as early as 1826, in order to mitigate the uncertainties of hunting and trapping" (Hussey 1967:47). Although the upper valley was no longer considered of any direct economic advantage, McLoughlin felt that settlement, inevitable as it was, must be put off until the question of sovereignty was resolved.

The joint occupancy treaty of 1818 signed between Great Britain and the United States left the question of sovereignty unresolved. Renewed in 1827, "it was by itself another mere confession of the inability to agree on a basis of division of the disputed territory" (Carey 1922:468).

Among the early freemen of the upper valley was the American John Turner, who is believed to have been the first settler within the current boundaries of Polk County. McLoughlin considered both the French-Canadians and the few American freemen a "troublesome and unruly lot," beyond

the direct control of the Hudson Bay Company. In an effort to forestall settlement of the region, and bring these men under the control of the company,

[McLoughlin] began to scheme as early as 1827 to "get the Willamette freemen out of that place;" and during 1828 one of his chief purposes in forming a trapping expedition to the Umpqua and beyond was "the hope that we would find a place where we could Employ our Willamette freemen so as to remove them from a place where they were Anxious to begin to farm."(Hussey 1967:45)

For transportation of both horses and supplies, the early southern expeditions blazed a trail through the hills immediately south of Scappoose, crossed the Tualatin plains east of Hillsboro, dropping down through the Chehalem Hills west of Newberg and coming out on the Willamette near the old Willamette Post; from there it crossed over to "Campment du Sable," in the general vicinity of Champoeg, rendezvousing there with many of the free trappers and their families who joined the brigades for the southerly trek. The primary trail led south down the west side of the valley, entering northeast Polk County in the Spring Valley area and continuing south-southwest through the county.

McLoughlin's southern brigades opened up the Umpqua watershed, but could not delay the settlement of the fertile upper prairies of the Willamette Valley. Sometime between 1829 and 1832, the first French-Canadian free trappers settled on French Prairie (Marion County), becoming the first farmers in the Willamette Valley. While there is disagreement as to whether Etienne Lucier, Joseph Gervais or Jean Baptiste Desportes McKay was the first to actually till, plant and harvest a crop while residing on his own claim, Hussey writes:

By the end of 1831 or early in 1832 there were atleast three farms on the upper Willamette--those of Gervais, Lucier, and J.B. McKay. At least one other French-Canadian, Louis Labonte, was living as a farmer the four Canadians who were described by the British Army officers, Lieutenants Warre and Vabasour, in 1845,as having been the first persons to settle above the falls. (Hussey 1967:55)

Early settlement in the upper valley remained confined to French Prairie until 1835, when Ewing Young, an American trapper who had arrived in the region in October 1834, became the first American settler on the west shore of the Willamette. Young took out a claim at the foot of the Chehalem Hills in present-day Yamhill County.

John Turner is believed to have taken the first claim in the Polk County region, between 1837 and 1838. Turner, a member of the Jedediah Smith trapping party of 1828, the first American-based fur company to penetrate the Oregon Country since 1813, was associated with at least two of the Hudson Bay Umpqua brigades between 1829 and 1833. It is unclear whether Turner remained for any length of time in the valley before 1835, but that year he returned from California leading a party that included George Gay, an early Polk-Yamhill County pioneer, and Dr. William Bailey.

In 1837, Turner, with Ewing Young and other early Willamette Valley settlers, participated in driving the first herd of cattle--700 to 800 head--into the Willamette Valley from California, thus freeing the settlers from having to purchase or lease cattle from the Hudson Bay Company. Following this, Turner "took the job of wrangler for the Methodist mission and handled their herd of horses and cattle on the land just across the river to the west of the Mission in what is now Polk and Yamhill counties" (Holmes 1976:53). During 1837-1838, Turner is thought to have built the first building in Polk County. Lieutenant Henry Eld, Jr., describing a visit to Turner in September of 1841, wrote:

Everything being ready at a later hour we succeeded in packing our animals, and made a short stage of 6 miles, taking a rout about SW by compass thru the Mission, and on the Yam Hills, which brought us to the farm of Mr Turner, who acts as butcher to the Mission...It might be supposed from the term farm I have used, that it was cultivated portion of the country. This however does not always follow in Oregon, as in this case a mere log hut indicates the habitation of this man and his Indian woman, without a single article of furniture to sit or lay on; & but one or two of the more useful cooking utensils. (Eld 1841)

Turner's claim were purchased by John Phillips in 1847. The Willamette Meridian Survey of 1852 shows this claim to have been located on the old Indian and trapping trail that became the Spring Valley Road in Township 6, Range 4, Sections 24 and 25. Prior to 1840, George Gay, a member of Turner's party of 1835, settled on a claim approximately three miles northeast of the Turner-Phillips claim, in Township 6, Range 3, Sections 5 and 6.

Although Gay may have settled his Yamhill-Polk County claim as early as 1835-1836, he is more precisely connected with the early settlers of Yamhill County. In 1842 Gay built the first brick house west of the Rocky Mountains on his claim; the south wall of this structure became the north-south boundary line dividing Yamhill and Polk counties in 1845. Although the residence was in Yamhill County, the majority of the claim was in Polk. What is now the Spring Valley Road is believed to be the oldest "roadway" in Polk County; it was originally the trail leading from the west bank opposite the Methodist mission southwest, connecting the Gay and Turner claims.

Established by Jason Lee in 1834, the Methodist mission was located in Marion County approximately ten miles north of present-day Salem. First established to promote Christianity among the native population, the mission was far more successful as a cornerstone for American settlement in the upper valley. In 1836 and 1837, the staff of five who had arrived in 1834 was augmented by reinforcements sent by the mission board. In 1838, Jason Lee went East to extol the benefits of the Oregon country, seeking reinforcements for his mission, and more American settlers to offset the larger French-Canadian population in the valley. He carried with him "a memorial drawn up in Oregon, asking for the protection of the United States Government." (Carey 1922:338)

In 1840, Lee returned from his two-year sabbatical in the East where he recruited settlers and misionaries for the Oregon country. Arriving with Lee aboard the ship "Lausanne," in what has been termed the "great reinforcement of 1840," were 14 families and four single women. Before the reinforcement, the population of the upper valley consisted of approximately 47 men, nine of whom were American. The American reinforcement, coupled with the arrival of the Peoria Party in 1839 and 1840, began to shift the population in favor of the Americans.

From 1840 until the end of the period American immigration grew steadily. Before 1842, immigrants were either formerly connected to the fur trade, or had been associated in some way with the Methodist mission. The year 1842 "marked a turning point in the overland migration to Oregon" as Elijah White led the "first typical wagon train to the Pacific Northwest" (Bowen 1978:12), bringing the first families into the Willamette Valley for the express purpose of agrarian colonization.

The tide of overland immigration preceded by four years the settlement of the international boundary dispute. A primary force behind the pre-territorial colonization of the valley was a bill introduced by United States Senator Lewis Field Linn of Missouri, providing liberal land grant policies to settlers. Even though the United States Senate had no legal jurisdiction over the land policies of the jointly occupied Oregon country, Linn's bill managed to pass the Senate in February