Canemah

Canemah, once the bustling terminus of navigation on the upper Willamette River, is located on the river's east bank just above Willamette Falls. The name is Chinookan for "the canoe place," descriptive of the sandy beach and natural harbor that attracted thousands of Native Americans, over many millennia, during annual salmon runs.

The site caught the eye of Absalom F. Hedges, who arrived by covered wagon in 1844. A carpenter and former steamboat captain on the Ohio River, he staked his donation land claim there.

Hedges recognized that the area was a natural townsite and shipbuilding center. In 1849, he platted Falls City and headed to New York to purchase steamboat machinery. Within a few years, the name of the town reverted to Canemah through popular usage.

Hedges and his partners launched the *Canemah*, a 135-foot side-wheeler, in September 1851, three months after the *Hoosier*, a converted longboat, became the first steam-powered vessel on the upper river. More than thirty steamboats would be built at Canemah.

Canemah prospered until 1861, when a flood swept most of the town over the falls. Wharves and warehouses were rebuilt, but the town had lost its vitality. Its importance to river commerce ended in 1873 with completion of the Willamette Falls Locks. Ships no longer docked and unloaded goods and passengers for portage around the falls to Oregon City.

In the 1880s, Canemah became home to retired merchants and river captains, many of whose houses still stand. In 1929, the town was annexed to Oregon City.

Written by David Hedges

Further Reading:

Corning, Howard McKinley. *Willamette Landings: Ghost Towns of the River*. Portland, Ore.: Binfords & Mort for the Oregon Historical Society, 1947.

Hedges, David. "The Battle for Canemah Bluff." In Matt Love, ed. *Citadel of the Spirit: Oregon's Sesquicentennial Anthology*. South Beach, Ore.: Nestucca Spit Press, 2009.

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