Butteville

By Benjamin Williams

In its heyday, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the town of Butteville, Oregon, was a major sternwheeler port on the lower Willamette River and a center of agriculture and commerce. Today it is a quiet, unincorporated residential community in northern Marion County with only two structures from the original town site remaining: the Historic Butteville Store and the Butteville Community Church.

Butteville sits on the homelands of the Pudding River or Ahantchuyuk bands of the Kalapuyan people, who likely used the natural landing at what became Butteville for access to the Willamette River. The non-Native settlement in the French Prairie Region by French-Canadian trappers from the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) came on the heels of a deadly epidemic of malaria during the 1830s, making the Kalapuyans particularly vulnerable to displacement. When the U.S. Congress ratified the Willamette Valley Treaty in 1855, those who remained were forced onto reservations. Today, the Kalapuyans are part of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.

HBC had built a receiving warehouse at Champoeg in the 1840s, and employees often stopped on their way downriver to Fort Vancouver in the shadow of a basalt escarpment they named "La Butte." It was there that HBC employees Alexis Aubichon and Joseph LaFerte (or LaForte) built a dock in 1840. American missionaries George Abernethy and Alanson Beers followed in 1845 and built a warehouse for wheat storage. Francis X. Matthieu, another HBC French-Canadian, purchased property in 1846 and operated a grain warehouse and trading post with partner George LaRoque. It is unclear who platted the town in 1851—it has been variously attributed to Abernethy and Beers, Matthieu, and settler John McCadden, who dubbed the settlement "Oxford." The town eventually was named Butteville.

Butteville straddles the boundaries of Aubichon's and LaFerte's claims, which appear on the earliest Donation Land Claim maps. Aubichon built a house and trading post at the top of the landing, shown in an 1851 drawing of the *Canemah*, one of the first sternwheelers on the Willamette. American overlanders began to settle in the area during the sternwheeler era (the 1850s through the first decade of the twentieth century), which raised Butteville's population to 200 and helped establish it as an important shipping port and ferry service. The first school and church opened in 1848, and Matthieu built a hotel in 1856. Butteville and Champoeg competed for ship commerce until 1861, when the Great Flood washed away Champoeg. Butteville was damaged but survived.

In 1865, Gustavus Cone purchased three lots and erected a two-story building that housed a mercantile store on the ground floor and the International Order of Odd Fellows above. In 1876, George Fleckenstein turned a house on an adjoining lot into a small store, and in 1881 he sold that property to Joseph J. Ryan. J.J. Ryan's store remained in the Ryan family through 1943, when it became the Butteville Store. Beginning in the 1880s, brewer Henry Weinhard contracted with Ryan to buy hops, which grew well in the Willamette Valley. Hops became a staple crop in the region, passing through Butteville's ship landing before heading north down the Willamette.

The arrival of the electric railway in 1912 from Portland to Eugene marked the decline of the sternwheeler era and the end of Butteville's prominence as a steamship landing. The local economy was further impacted by the diminishment of the hop industry during Prohibition. Butteville became a bedroom community, and over time the town's historic structures were demolished. The Butteville Hotel burned in 1955, The Odd Fellows Hall was damaged in the 1962 Columbus Day storm and torn down, and the Masonic chapter moved to Canby. The public school operated until 1959, when it merged with North Marion School District.

The Congregational Church of Butteville, organized in 1891, dedicated its second building in 1948, after a fire burned the first. It stands today as the Butteville Community Church. The Butteville Store also still stands, now part of Champoeg State Park, and serves as a general store and cafe that provides local history information for visitors. The population of Butteville was 244 in 2023.

Sources

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