

Lafayette

By Sheri King

The town of Lafayette, situated in the Willamette Valley between McMinnville and Newberg, is the oldest city in Yamhill County. Early white settlers referred to the area as the Yam Hill Falls (and other variations of that name) because of its location next to a heavily used crossing on the Yamhill River at a modestly sized waterfall. The crossing was shallow enough for people and animals to easily manage and was regularly used by Native people and fur traders. It later became part of the California-to-Oregon Trail. In 1846, overlander Joel Perkins founded the town along the river and named it after his home, Lafayette, Indiana.

In the fall of 1839, a group of young men known as the Peoria Party arrived in Oregon, one of the first EuroAmerican groups to migrate for the sole purpose of settlement. Two of the group's members, Amos Cook and Frances Fletcher, were the first Americans to settle near Yam Hill Falls. Following Cook's death, his wife reported that Amos was often visited by members of a Kalapuya band known as the Yamhella, whose homelands included much of what is now Yamhill County. The bands were included in the Kalapuya Treaty of 1855, and the Yamhill were removed to reservations. Their descendants are members of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.

Joel Perkins traveled the Oregon Trail in 1844 and made a land claim in the Willamette Valley, which he would use to establish Lafayette. Oregon's Provisional Government named the settlement the seat of Yamhill District. Settlers built the county's first known schoolhouse a mile and a half northwest of Lafayette in 1844. During those early years, the town served as a supply stop for miners headed to the California gold mines, and the small settlement became a busy boomtown. When Perkins returned from the mines in 1849, he commissioned a town survey and donated a block for a public square, known today as Joel Perkins Park. It is the oldest park in Yamhill County. Under the Provisional Government in 1846, the town became the seat of Yamhill County. The town of Lafayette was incorporated in 1878.

As early as 1850, farmers used the Yamhill River to transport goods, mostly wheat, to the Willamette River and down the valley. In order to improve navigation, locals formed the Yamhill Locks and Transportation Co. in 1869. A dam and locks were completed in 1900, with the help of funds provided by the state legislature. The locks were rarely used by commercial vessels after 1902 and were inhibiting spawning fish, so the locks and dam were removed in 1960. A park was designated on the banks, and the locks were added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1991.

The first territorial district court session west of the Rocky Mountains was held in a hotel in Lafayette in 1849. Before courthouses could be built, judges relied on local businesses to accommodate sessions, and the prominent Lafayette House (locally known as Hawn's Tavern) suited the purpose. The hotel also housed the county's first post office in 1850, with Jacob Hawn as postmaster. Around that time, the town was acknowledged as the "principal trading center of the western Willamette Valley," exceeding Portland. Lafayette citizens purchased the town's first courthouse, a building originally meant to be used as a store or warehouse. Residents met there in 1853 to organize the state's first agricultural society and, a year later, plan Oregon's first agricultural fair. When the courthouse was destroyed by fire in 1857, it was replaced two years later with a larger structure that one historian praised as "the pride of All Oregon."

Lafayette attracted prominent residents who were known for their skill in oration and debate, inspiring the town nickname: Athens of Oregon. Lawyers Matthew Deady and David Logan lived there, as did Anson G. Henry, doctor and friend to Abraham Lincoln. Abigail Scott Duniway, known as Oregon's Mother of Woman Suffrage, had roots in Lafayette. Her father and siblings arrived in 1852 and managed one of Amos Cook's hotels. Duniway wrote her first book while she was living on a nearby farm, and she opened a private school in Lafayette in 1862. Visitors came by steamboat and stagecoach to hear speeches from well-known orators of the time, including future U.S. Senator Edward D. Baker, who campaigned for Abraham Lincoln in Lafayette in 1860 and introduced him at his presidential inauguration. National woman suffrage leader Susan B. Anthony traveled through Lafayette on a speaking tour in 1871.

When the railroads arrived in Yamhill County in the 1870s, McMinnville and other cities received the first connections. Lafayette receded into the background, and in 1889, the county moved its seat to McMinnville. The courthouse was repurposed for a seminary until 1900. By 1922, the building had been razed.

Lafayette remained a small agricultural and residential town with under 1,000 residents for much of the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1970s, however, the town benefitted from the growing wine industry in the Willamette Valley. As of 2023, Yamhill County supports over 80 wineries, most within a few miles of each other. Lafayette's location on Highway 99 puts it in the path of the thousands of visitors who tour the region each year, and the town's population has more than tripled (4,530 in 2023).

Tourism and healthcare anchor Lafayette's economy in the twenty-first century. One of the state's largest antique stores is housed in a former schoolhouse built in 1912, one of the few remaining historic buildings in town. While few buildings from the nineteenth century remain in Lafayette, many historic sites are memorialized, including the steamboat landing, Oregon's earliest court sessions, the first post office, and one of the first public squares in Oregon. Abigail Scott Duniway Park, on Highway 99 (Third Street), was dedicated in 2020.

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