

St. Paul

By Timothy Bergquist

St. Paul was one of the first white settlements in Oregon, established in about 1829 by French Canadian trappers who were former employees of the Hudson's Bay Company. The town was named after the local Roman Catholic church, which was dedicated in 1839 and reconstructed in 1846 with bricks made on-site. The church is the oldest brick building in Oregon. St. Paul was on the main market road through the Willamette Valley and provided agricultural products to towns downriver and shipping to California ports on steamboats that would stop at St. Paul Landing, also called Mission Landing, west of the town on the Willamette River.

The town is at the center of French Prairie in the Willamette Valley, the homeland of the Kalapuya people, who had routinely burned the area to keep it free of timber. The practice of burning created excellent land for agriculture, and Kalapuyas grew and harvested camas roots on the cleared land, which provided a major part of their diet.

French Canadians in the area built St. Paul church in 1836. Two years later, they requested the Catholic Bishop of Quebec to send priests to minister to the new settlement's religious needs. Father Francois Norbert Blanchet and Father Modeste Demers soon arrived, and Blanchet celebrated the first Catholic Mass on January 6, 1839. From 1844 to 1850, St. Francis Xavier Mission was established on land about a mile west of St. Paul, the first mission of the archdiocese in the Pacific Northwest. The location was remote, however, and before long the priests moved to northern California.

The population of the farming community that grew around St. Paul gradually shifted from the early resettlers to Oregon Trail emigrants and, later, people who arrived in the valley by train. In 1843, St. Paul residents joined others in nearby Champoeg to establish Oregon's Provisional Government. The first school, which admitted only girls, was established in 1844 by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. From 1861 to the 1980s, the Sisters of the Holy Name of Jesus and Mary operated the grade school, which is now a public educational institution.

The fertile bottomland along the Willamette River was prone to flooding but also provided some of the best farmland in the region. Local crops included wheat and oats, hops, and a variety of vegetables and fruits such as corn, broccoli, and cherries. For many years, several hop-processing plants operated in the area. Beginning in 1851, steamboats stopped at St. Paul to transport crops and people downriver to Portland from Mission Landing and Ray's Landing. In 1871, a railroad was built through Woodburn, about ten miles to the east of St. Paul, lessening the market road traffic in the valley.

The first U.S. post office in St. Paul was established in 1874, and the town was incorporated in 1901. Around 434 people lived in the town in 2020. The demographic composition of St. Paul has changed over the years, with Latinos now making up about 15 percent of the population. While agriculture is still a major industry (16 percent), manufacturing makes up about 19 percent of companies. Crops include grapes, hazelnuts, grass seed, peppermint, nursery stock, and hops. The median household income in 2013 was almost \$61,000.

The St. Paul Rodeo, first held on July 4, 1936, is the main attraction in town, bringing in a thousand competitors and over fifty thousand visitors. The rodeo, which is a Gold Tour Stop in the Wrangler Million Dollar Tour Rodeo Series, provides a major economic boost to the town each July.

The St. Paul Historic District, in the central part of town, was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1982; the St. Paul Roman Catholic Church was added to the Register in 1979.

Sources

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