

HISTORICAL TIMELINE of the WILLAMETTE FALLS CANAL & LOCKS



- ◆ **1850** Construction of the first horse drawn portage around the Falls in Oregon City as the Willamette Valley began to shift from subsistence farming to an export agriculture industry.
- ◆ **1862** Construction of a short railroad portage by the “People’s Transportation Company” around the Falls in Oregon City.
- ◆ **1868** The Willamette Transportation and Locks Company was created to build a canal and locks to connect the upper and lower Willamette River. The goals of the company were to aid and cheapen navigation by allowing ships loaded with wheat in Eugene to travel all the way to Portland or Astoria, thereby reducing shipping times, expanding competition and reducing freight costs.
- ◆ **1870** The Oregon Legislature allotted \$200,000 to the Willamette Falls Canal and Locks Company for construction of the Locks, making an approximate one-third contribution. Bernard Goldsmith, Portland Mayor, businessman, and partner in the Willamette Falls Canal and Locks Company, privately invested an additional \$200,000, the final third, to see the Locks completed.
- ◆ **1871** The People’s Transportation Company, seeing the end to their monopoly of providing overland portage, was sold to the investor building the Oregon Steam Navigation Company.
- ◆ **1872** Blocks of basalt from the quarry at Stone (now Carver) were rafted down the Clackamas River and towed back up to the Falls by steam-tugs. Contracted East Coast engineers and blacksmiths designed and forged the hardware and tie-off rings and European stonemasons hand-fitted the rock for the walls of the canal excavated from bedrock by Chinese, Native American and white laborers.
- ◆ **1873** Construction of the locks completed. The little steamboat Maria Wilkins, loaded with Governors and other VIPs, locked through the Canal just before the deadline on January 1, marking the first significant navigational improvement on the Columbia-Snake river system and immediately cutting freight rates by 50%.
 - Steam-powered sternwheelers tailored to fit the Lock chambers and navigate the mud and shallows were built at shipyards above and below the falls. People transport was also an important service.
- ◆ **1871-81** Opening the locks in 1873 pulled 25,000 tons of freight off the portage railroad in the first year of operations, but the arrival of the first railroad to serve the Valley in 1871 caused freight to begin a shift from the river to rail. By 1904, agricultural river traffic was reduced dramatically, leaving the transport of logs, pulp and paper as the predominant remaining products. Giant Oregon log rafts made their way to Asia.
- ◆ **1892** Portland Railway Light and Power (PRL&P) --the predecessor of Portland General Electric (PGE)-- sent power from Station A on the east side of Willamette Falls to Portland and lit up Oregon City and West Linn. PGE purchased the Canal and Locks from the Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company in recognition of the value of the Willamette Falls for electric generation at Station B, on the canal.
- ◆ **1899** The Army began negotiations with PRL&P to buy the locks. Major Fisk felt that by obtaining the locks and offering toll-free passage, trade monopolies would be broken, opening resources from the fertile Willamette Valley to the rest of the world. The Corps was willing to pay \$456,000 while the PGE’s price was \$1.2 million.
- ◆ **1912** The USACE drew up designs for a competing Canal and Locks on the Oregon City side of Willamette Falls that would have destroyed most of the buildings and industry on the current Blue Heron site.

- ◆ **1915** The USACE bought the Canal and Locks for \$375,000 from PRL&P, thereby providing free passage around the Falls. Thousands gather in a parade to witness the transfer of the locks from private to public ownership. In 1912-13, the Oregon Legislature and the US government each appropriated \$300,000 for additional improvements to the Locks.
- ◆ **1930s** Locks became a bottleneck on the Willamette clogged with giant old-growth log rafts that had to disassemble to get through the 210 x 40' chambers, so the USACE proposed replacing the four-tandem lock system with a huge, 47'-lift, single-chamber lock. The work authorized by the 1938 Flood Control Act, but funding never appropriated. Design issues couldn't be solved and WWII was on the horizon.
- ◆ **1941** The original wooden lock gates were replaced with steel miter gates and hydraulic machinery replaced the original hand-cranked to operate the locks.
- ◆ **1943** More than 2.2 million tons of commerce passed through the locks.
- ◆ **1964** Average annual number of lockages was 8,100 and average annual commercial tonnage locked around the Falls was 1,100,000. Low-priority recreational and passenger-carrying boats locked through last.
- ◆ **1974** At 100 years old, Willamette Falls Canal and Locks listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- ◆ **1985** Willamette River Greenway and Willamette River Trail created by Oregon State Parks.
- ◆ **1989** 1.4 million tons of commerce passed through the locks. US Forest Service put a third of NW timber sales on hold. Four forests in Oregon halted timber sales.
- ◆ **1990** The US Fish and Wildlife Service listed the Northern Spotted Owl and National Marine Fisheries listed the winter Chinook salmon as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.
- ◆ **1991** Locks designated as State Historic Civil Landmark by the History and Heritage Committee of the American Society of Civil Engineers.
- ◆ **1992** Forest Service stopped planning timber sales.
- ◆ **1994** 200,000 tons of commerce passed through the locks (85% drop from 1989 levels).
- ◆ **1997** West Linn Paper Company analyzed their transportation needs, concluding that moving material by truck would provide substantial cost savings and ceased using barges.
- ◆ **1999** 893 recorded tons of commerce passed through the locks (over 99.9% drop from 1989 levels); Willamette designated as American Heritage River.
- ◆ **2000** Total vessels counted locking through: 1,478 (230 of them commercial vessels)
- ◆ **2002** Annual appropriation curtailed from \$1.3 million to \$175K; started seasonal operations (May thru October) due to reduced usage and economic benefits.
- ◆ **2004** Lawmakers at first did not authorize the Corps to operate the locks; Caretaker status discussed. Congress at the last minute earmarked \$420,000 for seasonal operations.
- ◆ **2005** "\$0" in President's Budget. Congress added back \$210K; seasonal operations were maintained. Willamette designated as Willamette River Water Trail.

- ◆ **2006-08** First year Locks received “Caretaker” funding: \$65K. Seasonal operations resulted from partnership with federal ISTEA grant for historic transportation facilities and funds from ODOT and Clackamas County. Total vessels locking through in 2006 were 537 (144 commercial); 2007 was 667 (118 commercial); and 2008 was 6 (Five commercial).
- ◆ **2008** Locks closed for Hydraulic Structural Steel Inspection of the gates.
- ◆ **2009** Gates inspected and repaired with \$511,000 from USACE and \$118,000 from ODOT plus \$2.37 million through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (stimulus money).
- ◆ **2010** Last year for congressional earmarks, which helped fund seasonal operations. Total vessels locked through: 492 (107 commercial). USACE initiated Facility Evaluation Report and National Register listing was updated by WFHF-funded consultant.
- ◆ **2011** Facility Evaluation Report identified three significant issues: seepage, seismic, and safety issues around Gudgeon Anchor assemblies. Locks closed in December under emergency authority to protect life and property. Total vessels locking through: 64 (58 commercial). Locks moved to “non-operational” status. Grounds and museum also closed to the public.
- ◆ **2012** Willamette River National Water Trail designated by US Dept. of Interior Sec Salazar. Closed Locks prevent passage between upper river communities and Portland. The trail stretches from Creswell to the Columbia River.
- ◆ **2013** USACE allowed two unmanned lockages to move the Canby Ferry to a downstream dry-dock (Jan. 2013) for inspection, retrofitting, and back to its location upstream (July 2013).
- ◆ **2014** USACE initiated a stakeholder consultation process under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) with the State Historic Preservation Office and the National Advisory Council on Historic Preservation to address adverse effects on this property listed on the National Register of Historic Places. First stakeholder meeting took place in February.
- ◆ **2015** Present status:
 - Corps continues to receive Caretaker funding while locks remain in “non-operational” status.
 - Corps requested federal funding for a pilot divestiture study.
 - NHPA Section 106 process concluded that there are adverse effects and drafted a mitigation Memorandum of Agreement defining the steps necessary to repair and reopen the Locks, including possible transfer to a non-Corps entity.

◆ **2016 and the Future**

Multiple efforts are underway to recognize and honor the historic and cultural significance of the area. In addition to repair and reopening of the Locks to commercial and recreational travel, the Willamette Falls Legacy Project (former Blue Heron Paper Mill) is undergoing redevelopment with the restoration of public access to the Falls for the first time in over a century. To effectively implement an historic and cultural marketing strategy while preserving and promoting significant historic resources, the Oregon Heritage Commission designated the area as a State Heritage Area in 2015, and the US Department of Interior’s National Park Service is considering the designation of a National Heritage Area.