

Revealing Spirit of Place: A Cultural Landscape Report for Willamette Falls

LAURIE MATTHEWS, DIRECTOR OF PRESERVATION PLANNING + DESIGN, MIG, INC.

Willamette Falls, near Oregon City, Oregon embodies that state's spirit of place. Popularized by English poet and philosopher Alexander Pope, *genius loci*, as it's also known, recognizes that some places have a spirit which can't be ignored. That they emanate a palpable energy attracting people to these places generation after generation.

Willamette Falls has that spirit, holding multiple layers of history for the region and the State of Oregon. The layers stem from *the people and their stories*: the American Indians; early explorers, immigrants and industrialists; workers and their families. It stems from the *natural resources*: Columbia basalt flows that poured over the region on their way to the Pacific Ocean, and the Missoula Flood that gave the region its rivers and valleys. The layers are tied to the *sustenance* this place provides: fishing for Chinook, harvesting lamprey, providing hydropower and electricity, and having jobs with sustaining wages. And finally, it relates to this as a place of *gathering*: coming together as members of an Indian nation, as a community of immigrants to the Oregon territory, as a place for visitors to understand the Oregon legacy, and what has drawn people to the Willamette Falls since time immemorial.

The tragedy is that much of the physical fabric of Willamette Falls history has been lost over time. So how as historians do we conduct our research and disseminate information about place, especially one that is obscured, in a way that inspires designers, communities and public officials to incorporate history into the public realm?

This paper presents the non-traditional methodology and process used to develop a cultural landscape report for Willamette Falls focusing on the *research process, outreach efforts, intersections with the design team, and tribal consultation process* that were created to achieve that goal.

GROUNDING THE RESEARCH

The research process for the Willamette Falls Cultural Landscape Report likely follows the process many use. Where it may differ and where that difference is critical for a project of this nature is the act of grounding the research in place, linking what we know from the historic record to the landscape. We do this through a process of developing historic era plans that depict what we know about a landscape at a particular moment in time.

For this project, we developed a series of six historic era plans starting in 1851 and going through 1970: c. 1851, c. 1884, c. 1900, c. 1925, c. 1950 and c. 1970. The temporal focus for each of these plans is based on a triangulation of considerations. One, that we have a good graphic base of information - a survey, a map or aerial photograph. Two, the information portrayed in that graphic source or sources can be supplemented and corroborated by narrative source information and other graphic sources, such as sketches and photographs. Finally, the circa date is chosen to correspond to a date that either exhibits the end of a growth period or depicts the landscape after a major event.

For example, there was a desire to develop a historic era plan for a date earlier than 1851, but not enough information that could reliably be grounded in space was available. There are a few descriptions by early explorers and some regional maps of the area, but these were not geographically focused enough or specific enough to develop a historic era plan for the early 19th century.

For the 1851 historic era plan we used a series of maps, surveys, sketches and narrative descriptions of the site to create a plan depicting what we know. This historic era plan used an 1846 survey of the site developed by British lieutenants Henry J. Warre and M. Vavasour, an 1851-1852 plat map by Surveyor General of Oregon John B. Preston, and historic sketches dated between 1846-1852. There is some conjecture, but it is kept to a minimum. That means that some areas depicted on the map as blank were not necessarily devoid of buildings or managed landscapes, but not enough evidence exists to depict any built elements in those locations.

One of the most reliable sources of base material for the subsequent historic era plans were a series of Sanborn Fire Insurance maps. There were three for years between 1884-1891 and a decision was made to focus on 1884 since that map showed Oregon City prior to a major flood that wiped out much of the built environment. Creating a historic era plan for 1884 allowed the cultural landscape report to show what Oregon City looked like before a major period of change. This plan was also created from a variety of sources, both narrative and graphic, including an April 1884 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, and historic photographs dating from 1879-1889. Grounding the research in place contributed to a better understanding of the site's transformative history, both for the design team and the community.

COMMUNICATING WHAT WE KNOW AND GATHERING FEEDBACK THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS

For a place like Willamette Falls, which possesses complex layers of historic development that touch many different historic threads, it's important to keep a communication loop active throughout the research and writing process. In this case the Oregon City community is incredibly engaged and knowledgeable about the history of their town and this site. However, most have limited the focus of their interest to a particular theme, event or location. It's easy to understand why given the amount of material that is available on the history of this site. It can be overwhelming when you look at all the facets of this place's history. For example, some are passionate about the woolen industry, others about this site being tied to the end of the Oregon Trail, and others about the racial strife that occurred here. However, a key aspect of this project was to highlight as many different historic events and changes that occurred to provide a more holistic view of its transformation and those influences.

Due to the intense interest and knowledge about this site, we scheduled two public lectures in the region during the cultural landscape report development process to talk about what we had learned to date. Not only did this keep people engaged in the overall research and design process, which the cultural landscape report was one piece of, but it also drew out incredible leads and nuanced information about particularly detailed events and subjects that are now more adequately addressed in the cultural landscape report. Both lectures occurred in public houses where food and drinks were flowing which contributed to the informal community feel of sharing information about complex and sometimes sensitive subjects. Keeping communication flowing through the research process was a critical component to the success of the cultural landscape report.

BEING EMBEDDED IN THE DESIGN TEAM

While the cultural landscape report is contracted separately from the Willamette Falls Riverwalk, a design project for the site's public open space, the scopes for both ensured that the cultural landscape research team would have a working relationship with the design team and vice versa through parallel processes. What this meant was that the cultural landscape research team was available for questions from the design team, and provided targeted input on various iterations of the design concepts and interpretive framework. Questions from the design team were as broad as what kinds of materials have been used on site or what evidence of recreation has been gathered to what was the physical transformation of a specific building or landscape area. The cultural landscape team also developed the preliminary interpretive themes that the design team fleshed out in terms of how they would be realized in the landscape through the development of an interpretive framework plan. That plan and the cultural landscape report will work in tandem to inform the physical manifestation of interpretation on the site of the Willamette Falls Riverwalk and future urban planning and design projects for the remainder of the site.

ADAPTABLE CONSULTATIONS

The people with the longest continual presence at Willamette Falls are the American Indians. Members of five tribes in Oregon and Washington can trace their ancestors' interaction to this landscape since time immemorial. It was a major center for fishing, trading and gathering like Cellilo Falls on the Columbia River which, unlike Willamette Falls, was submerged when Bonneville Dam was constructed. While the formal Section 106 consultation process had not begun when the cultural landscape report was initiated, the client took the opportunity to engage with each of the tribes early on through the development of the cultural landscape report. These meetings included members of the cultural landscape research team so that an exchange of information could begin early in the process.

Each tribe's engagement in the process varied, but all were consulted on the development of the cultural landscape report. For example, two of the five tribes provided comments on the first draft of the cultural landscape report before it was made public. One contributed an additional origin story about the creation of Willamette Falls, and another tribe contributed a narrative that provides their perspective on a particularly painful part of their history which intersects with Willamette Falls. That incident, the 1851 hanging of five members of the Cayuse tribe in Oregon City in retribution for the slaying of 11 people at the Whitman Mission in 1847, has also led to an exchange of information between the cultural landscape research team and the descendants of that tribe so they can learn more about events that relate to their ancestors. Through this adaptable consultation process the goal is for the cultural landscape report to provide multiple perspectives on the events, meaning and spirit of this place.

CONCLUSION

From the beginning the goal for this project was to deepen and expand the understanding of this place so that those who are guiding it now, designing its future and caring for it in the years to come will understand its genius loci, how it has transformed, and what it can teach us about what it wants to be. Placemaking, which is at the heart of the discussions about the future of Willamette Falls, can only be successful if we listen to what the history of the place has to tell us.

Fortunately, the consortium of the City of Oregon City, Metro, Clackamas County and the State of Oregon; who are leading the development of the public aspects of this project, understand this as well.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Laurie Matthews is Director of Preservation Planning + Design at MIG, Inc. and specializes in research, analysis and developing collaborative design solutions for cultural landscapes across the United States including projects at Point Reyes National Seashore, Yosemite National Park, Denali National Park, Hearst Castle, and Dorris Ranch. Prior to joining MIG, Ms. Matthews worked for the National Park Service's Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation. She has an M.L.A and B.L.A from the University of Oregon, and a B.A. from Lewis & Clark College. Her work has garnered national and regional awards, and she currently serves as Oregon's representative for the Historic American Landscape Survey and is Past-President of Oregon ASLA.