Industry on the Rise

Along the banks of the Willamette River, clusters of eroding concrete and moss-covered walls are all that remain of a once-definitive structure for the city of Eugene: the millrace. By definition a millrace is a channel engineered to concentrate gravity-fed current to drive water wheels. The Eugene Millrace was built in 1851 to power a single sawmill. Over the following 30 years, more than a dozen additional mills and factories sprang up along the millrace, harnessing hydropower for their operations.

By the 1870s and 1880s, the millrace had become the industrial heart of the city and boasted many thriving businesses, including a furniture factory, a tannery and a brewery. In the image below, you can see the inside of the Midgley Sash and Door Factory (c.1910), whose machinery was driven by the millrace.

A Thriving Millrace

During the 1890s and 1900s, the importance of the millrace continued to increase as an industrial power source, as well as a recreational destination. Pictured above are water wheels common to millrace structures (left) and ice skaters enjoying the channel (right).

Hilyard Shaw: The man behind the millrace

After a failed gold mining effort in California, Hilyard Shaw moved to Eugene in 1859. In 1861, Shaw made the most of his riverfront, 640-acre donation land claim by constructing a millrace that ran through what is now downtown Eugene. Seventy years before Eugene received electricity, the powerful force of the millrace drove large water wheels, which in turn helped power industrial machinery.

By 1885, Shaw had a sawmill operating off the millrace and a gristmill by 1891. Thanks to the quality of his product, Shaw’s general miglior Oregon became recognized for having some of the finest flour in the nation at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia.

Decline of an Era

With the arrival of electric power during the 1920s, the industrial importance of the millrace began to diminish. The 1948 raising of the Barr Bros. Factory is pictured above.