

Oswego Iron Furnace

By Susanna Kuo

The Oswego Iron Furnace, built in 1866 at the confluence of Oswego Creek and the Willamette River, was the first iron furnace on the Pacific Coast. Between 1867 and 1885, it produced 42,000 tons of pig iron, sold as "Oregon Iron" to foundries in Portland and San Francisco. Before 1867, all iron on the Pacific Coast was brought by ship around Cape Horn.

The founders of the Oregon Iron Company—led by William S. Ladd, John Green, and Henry Green—sought to capitalize on iron deposits in the hills around Sucker Lake (now Oswego Lake). Controlling the means of iron production was part of their vision for a commercial empire in the Pacific Northwest. Most of Portland's cast-iron architecture and the pipe for its water system were made of Oswego iron.

The Oswego Furnace was Oregon's largest manufacturing enterprise in the nineteenth century. It consumed ore from two mines and charcoal from 22,000 acres of timber. Over the course of its operation, three companies owned the works: Oregon Iron Company, Oswego Iron Company, and Oregon Iron & Steel Company.

The furnace, which resembles a medieval tower, was modeled on the furnaces of the Barnum and Richardson Company in Lime Rock, Connecticut. The thirty-two-foot-high stack, as stone furnaces are called, stands on a twelve-foot underground foundation with massive walls built to withstand temperatures of 2,800 degrees Fahrenheit. Charcoal, ore, and limestone were fed into the top of the shaft, and air was injected into the bottom through three Gothic arches that gave access to ports in the smelting chamber. Molten iron was tapped through a fourth arch and channeled to molds in the sand floor of the casting house. In 1878, the second owners increased the height of the stack to forty-four feet.

The furnace closed in 1885 when the company built a larger furnace half a mile north. The firebrick lining of the shaft was removed and probably reused in the new furnace. An attempt to dynamite the stack in the early twentieth century failed but left gaping holes in the interior.

In 1974, the furnace, an example of the craftsmanship of nineteenth-century furnace builders, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The City of Lake Oswego completed a major preservation and stabilization effort in 2010, and the furnace is now an imposing presence in George Rogers Park. It is the only remaining iron furnace west of the Rocky Mountains.

Sources

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