

# City of Salem (essay)

By David Lewis

Salem, the capital of Oregon, is located at a crossroads of trade and travel on former prairie lands along the Willamette River. The city was designated the seat of Marion County in 1849 and the territorial capital in 1851-1852. Incorporated in 1857, Salem served as the de facto state capital beginning in 1859 and, by popular vote, became the official capital in 1864. It is on the site of one of the earliest American settlements in the Oregon Country, a Methodist mission established by Jason Lee in 1841 near the Kalapuyan village of Tchimikiti. Lee established a town near the mission, which he named Chemeketa. In 1846, William Willson renamed it Salem, from the Arabic word *salam*, which means peace.

To the south of the city are the Salem Hills, originally called the Red Hills, a midvalley geologic formation of ancient Jory soils. To the north is Lake Labish, a marshland drained in the early twentieth century to create agricultural land, and to the east farms and small towns meet the foothills of the Cascade Range. Salem's western boundary ended at the Willamette River until 1949, when West Salem was incorporated into the city. The city is in two counties, Marion to the east of the Willamette River and Polk to the west.

Salem is drained by Mill Creek (Chemeketa Creek) and Pringle Creek (Harbor Creek), tributaries of the Willamette River. During the nineteenth century, the two creeks were joined by mill races to operate sawmills, grist mills, and woolen mills. Salem gets its water from the North Fork of the Santiam River, which was joined to Mill Creek by the Salem Ditch in 1857 to create better mill-race flows and provide clean drinking water.

Salem vies with Eugene as the second most populous city in Oregon (after Portland). The city's population was 1,137 in 1870, and it has doubled or tripled every decade since, with the most dramatic change occurring between 1870 and 1880, when the population grew by 122 percent. In 2017, the city had over 169,000 residents, 20 percent of them Latinx.

## Early Resettlement

In 1841, Lee moved his mission from French Prairie to Chemeketa, where he built a sawmill and a grist mill. His house, the first permanent non-Native residence in the region, was built in 1842. The Great Reinforcement of Methodist missionary families, recruited by Jason Lee, arrived on the *Lausanne* in 1840. Over the next three years, more than a thousand people traveled the Oregon Trail to the Willamette Valley, and many claimed land near the mission. By 1844, Lee's mission school was closed and the property transferred to William Willson, who platted the town.

Salem had grown enough by 1851 to be named the territorial capital. The city's influence on territorial politics increased when Asahel Bush and Samuel R. Thurston moved their newspaper, the *Oregon Statesman*, there in 1853. Bush used the publication to argue policy with Thomas Dryer of the Whig/Republican *Oregonian* in Portland, a public battle of wits that became known as Oregon-Style Journalism. The newspaper merged with the *Capital Journal* in 1980 to become the *Statesman Journal*.

The Salem area was opened to further resettlement when the U.S. government removed the Kalapuyans to the Grand Ronde Reservation in 1856. The only documented Native-white conflict in the area had occurred in the Salem Hills at Battle Creek in 1846, when the Oregon Rangers, a volunteer militia, attacked a group of Klamaths and Wascoes because they had stolen a horse. The militia eventually apologized for their overreaction.

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## Economy

The largest employer in Salem is the Oregon state government, and the State Capitol Building and Mall are the most prominent features of the city. Town founders William and Chloe Willson donated land for the territorial capitol building, and construction began in 1854. The project stumbled when the seat of government moved to Corvallis in 1855 for one session, but construction continued and the legislature moved in by December 1855, a little more than a week before the structure burned down. In 1935, fire destroyed a second capitol, built in 1876-1893. The current capitol was built in 1938. The Oregon State Hospital and Oregon State Penitentiary are in Salem, along with the Oregon Department of Corrections and the Santiam Correctional Institution.

Agriculture and ranching were Salem's earliest industries. In 1847, nurseryman Henderson Seth Lewelling arrived in the Willamette Valley with hundreds of seedlings, many of them Royal Anne cherry trees. Orchardists were so successful with the crop that Salem was named the Cherry City of the World in 1907, when the Pacific Coast Association of Nurserymen judged that it had "the greatest and finest display of cherries known in history." Salem held an annual Cherry City Festival from 1903 to 1967, and berries remain an important crop in the area. Agriculture still dominates the Salem economy, and NORPAC, the state's largest vegetable-and-fruit-canning cooperative, has been in business in the city since 1924.

John Minto, Joseph Watt, and Daniel Waldo opened the Willamette Woolen Mills in Salem in 1857, and the Oregon Wool Growers Association was formed in 1865, "the first permanent organization of wool men in Oregon." The Thomas Kay Woolen Mills opened in 1889 and was soon the second largest woolen mill on the West Coast. After the mill closed in 1962, it was repurposed as the Mission Mill Museum.

By 1866, the Capital Lumbering Company had built a major sawmill in Salem, and Oregon Pulp and Paper built a plant on the Willamette River in 1919. When Boise Cascade purchased both facilities in 1962, production operations included settling ponds for effluents across the Willamette Slough on Minto-Brown Island. Environmental concerns, including air pollution and water quality, caused a strain on profits, and the company ended pulp production in 1982 and paper production in 2007. The City of Salem reclaimed the land and opened it to condominiums and a riverfront park. On Minto-Brown Island, the former settling ponds are now an ecological preserve managed by the Audubon Society.

Major businesses in Salem include Amazon, Garmen, Kettle Foods, Don Pancho, NORPAC, Kerr Concentrates, Henningsen Cold Storage, Freres Lumber, May Trucking, and the Meier and Frank Department Store (sold to the May Department Stores in 1966). Salem has three sister cities: Tamil Nadu, India; Simferopol, Ukraine; and Växjö, Sweden.

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## Education

Salem is a center of research and education for the Willamette Valley. The Oregon State Archives and Oregon State Library are near the capitol, as is Willamette University, the oldest four-year university west of the Mississippi. Chemeketa Community College opened in 1970, and Corban University moved to Salem in 1969.

Forty thousand students attend schools in the Salem-Keizer School District (Keizer is a city of about 36,000 people north of Salem). Chemawa Indian School, sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, moved from Forest Grove to Salem in 1885; and Blanchet Academy, a Catholic high school, opened in 1995. The Oregon School for the Deaf has operated in the city since 1870.

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## Tourism, Recreation, and Culture

Salem has several musical groups, including the Salem Chamber Orchestra, the Salem Youth Symphony Association, and the Salem Philharmonia. The Oregon Symphony Association in Salem brings the Oregon Symphony to the city for several concerts a year. Choral groups include Festival Chorale Salem, Willamette Master Chorus, and the Salem Community Chorus, the oldest mixed community chorus in Oregon.

The Oregon State Fair has been at the same location in northeast Salem since 1862. The fairgrounds was annexed to the City of Salem in 1921 and is now managed by the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department. The Salem Public Market, the oldest farmers' market in Oregon, has operated in the city since 1943, and the annual Art Fair and Festival has been at Bush's Pasture Park and Conservatory since 1949. The *Willamette Queen*, the only operating sternwheeler on the Willamette River, is docked at Riverfront Park along the Willamette River. Also in the park are the Riverfront Carousel and the A.C. Gilbert's Discovery Village, which honors Alfred Carlton Gilbert, the inventor of the Erector Set.

Several movies have used Salem as a location, including *Promise* (1986), *Bandits* (2000), and *The Hunted* (2001). The Academy Award-winning *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), based on the novel by Ken Kesey, was filmed at the Oregon State Hospital. The city has several historic theater buildings, including the Elsinore (1926), Salem's Historic Grand (1900), and the Pentacle (1954), which present plays, musical performances, and special events.

Since 1996, the Salem-Keizer Volcanoes, a minor league baseball team affiliated with the San Francisco Giants, has played at Volcanoes Stadium in Keizer. At Mad House Salem, a recreational center on Madison Street, approximately 150 skaters compete as part of the Cherry City Derby Girls, a roller-skating league that has been a member of the Women's Flat Track Derby Association since 2012.

Many Oregon political leaders have called Salem home, and cultural figures such as Tabitha Brown, Cornelia Pierce, Hallie Ford, and Ava Helen Pauling have left their mark on the capital city. Salem maintains its connection to its past, in part, through its historic districts, including downtown State and Commercial Streets, Bush's Pasture, the Chemawa Indian School, the Jason Lee House, and the Union Street Railroad Bridge.

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