

Portland Basin Chinookan Villages in the early 1800s

By Robert Boyd and Henry Zenk

During the early nineteenth century, upwards of thirty Native American villages were documented in the Portland Basin (present-day Multnomah, Clark, Clackamas, and east Columbia Counties). Most of the villages were sited on riverbanks and in wetlands along the Columbia and Willamette Rivers and were occupied by people who spoke dialects of a Chinookan language or languages. In their journals, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark classified the villages under three headings: “Wappato Indians” for those villagers around Sauvie Island and on the Columbia River between present-day Kalama and Vancouver; “Sha-ha-la” (for *šax* / (a) ‘upstream’) from Vancouver to the Cascades Rapids; and the peoples of the lower Willamette River, including the Clackamas River and Willamette Falls. Non-Chinookan villages, mostly upstream on tributaries to the Columbia, were home to Sahaptin-speaking Upper Cowlitz and Klikitat [*var: Klickitat*] in present-day Clark County, Clatskanie in present-day Columbia County, and Molala in present-day Clackamas County.

Lewis and Clark’s “Estimate of the Western Indians,” the most complete listing of Portland Basin villages, appears in two versions in their journals, with different population estimates for many Chinookan villages. They estimated the population of the Portland Basin peoples at 4,840 (Estimate 1) and 10,940 (Estimate 2). The most likely explanation for the variable numbers is that they represent seasonal populations that the explorers observed during their two transits of the Wappato Valley. At first transit, from late October to early November 1805, most local people had retired to their winter villages; at the second transit, from late March to early April 1806, the population was augmented by visitors who had arrived to take advantage of the seasonal Columbia River fisheries (sequentially, eulachon, sturgeon, chinook, and coho salmon).

Lewis and Clark’s estimates date to a generation after a major smallpox epidemic that had significantly diminished the Native population. The Portland Basin villages continued as functioning entities until the early 1830s, when annual summer epidemics of “fever and ague” took most of the people to their graves. After 1835, most riverbank villages were abandoned, and non-Chinookan interior peoples moved closer to the rivers. Villages of Chinookan survivors, often mixed with newcomers, continued at Wakanasisse below present-day Vancouver, West Linn, Gladstone (Clackamas), and the Upper Cascades. A Cascades seasonal village was located on the south bank of the Columbia River opposite present-day Vancouver. All villages were vacated in the mid-1850s, when most surviving Native people in the Portland Basin were removed to the Grand Ronde and Yakama Reservations.

Archaeologically, the record on the early 1800s Portland Basin villages is mixed. Most of the villages were destroyed soon after they were abandoned, and only a few survived to be excavated by professional archaeologists. Multnomah village, for instance, was burned by the Hudson’s Bay Company after the epidemics, and the site itself has mostly washed away. Most exposed sites were destroyed by looters after 1830, and some were excavated by the Oregon Archaeological Society in the mid-1900s (particularly along Lake River). Only a few survived to be examined by professional archaeologists after 1980, including Cathlapotle, Meier near Scappoose, Clahclellar at the Middle Cascades, the Portland St. Johns sites, and the “Sunken Village” at the Sauvie Island bridge. Several seasonal and nonsettlement sites—for example, resource areas and cemeteries—suffered similar fates.

Table of Portland Basin Chinookan Villages in the 1800s Wapato Valley to The Cascades:

according to Lewis and Clark’s *Estimate*: “Wappato Indians” Name Phonemic Spelling
Location Population Callamaks *ga* *ák* *alama* ‘those of the rock’ Kalama River mouth 200
Cathlahaw’s Kalama River/Deer Island Quathlapohtle *gá* *ap* *u* *x* ‘those of *náp* *u* *x* (Lewis R)’
300/900 Clannarminnamun, Cathlaminimin lower Multnomah Channel 280 Cathlahcumup
ga *áq* *map* ‘those of the mound’ Multnomah Channel 150/450 Claninnata Multnomah Channel
100/200 Clackstar Nation *áqst* *ax* Scappoose Plains 350/1200 Cathlahnahquiah *ga* *ánaq* *aix*,
naq *áix* Fort William 150/170 Cathlahcommahtup Sauvie Island bridge 70/170 Nemaquiner
nimá *x* *inix* lower Willamette River 100/200 Clannahqueh Sauvie Island, Columbia River bank

130 Multnomah má■numax■ ‘those towards the water’ Sauvie Island Columbia River bank
200/800 Shoto Lake River 160/460 Nechacolee, Nechacokee ni■áq■li ‘stand of pines’ (?) Blue
Lake 100 Total population: 4840/10940

2. Clackamas River and Willamette Falls

Clackamus Nation gi■áq■imaš, gi■áq■imaš ‘those of niq■ímaš (Clackamas R)’ Clackamas R
800/1800 Cushhooks k■ášx■kš Abernethy Cr 250/650 Charcowah ■aká-wa (Molala name) above
Willamette Falls 200

3. “Shahala Nation” (šáx■l(a) ‘upriver, above’; total population: 1300/2800)

Neerchokioo west of Portland Airport Wahclelah, Clahclellars wa■ála ‘small lake’; ■a■ála,
ga■a■ála ‘those of wa■ála’ north side of Lower, Middle, and Upper Cascades (multiple locations)
Yehuh wáyaxix ‘his face place’ south side of Upper Cascades

Noted in later sources.

Historical spelling/Source Phonemic Spelling Location Naiakookwie (Gibbs, 1853) náíaguguix
St. Helens Scappoose (Gibbs, 1853) sq■pus Milton Cr (?) Namouite (Ross, 1821) namúitk
Sauvie Isl, Columbia River bank Gah■lávaks■h■n (Curtis, 1911) ga■áwakšín ‘those of the dam
(wákšín)’ St. Johns, Portland Wakanasisse (Gibbs, 1853) wák■anasisi ‘diver ducks’ below
Vancouver Clowewalla (Henry, 1814) ■áwiwala, ga■awálamt (‘those of wálamt’) Willamette Falls
Wasuscally (Ross, 1821) ga■awašúx■al ‘those of wašúx■al’ Washougal, WA Skamány■k
(Curtis, 1911) sk■mániak ‘obstructed’ between Middle & Upper Cascades Wat lala (Hale, 1841)
wa■ála ‘small lake’ Wauna Lake

Sources

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https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/wappato_valley_villages/