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# Canemah Nomination to National Register of Historic Places

Transcribed from Documentation provided to the Department of the Interior

## **NOMINATION BACKGROUND:**

This is an update of the June 23, 1978 nomination. The Period of Significance has not changed. The District Boundaries have not changed. The district was not initially inventoried until 1983, at which time resources were designated as primary, secondary, contributing, compatible or intrusive. This update provides a re-inventory of existing historic resources, notation of significant changes and demolition of prior contributing resources. The update also provides additional description and research especially in relation to the context, natural setting, historic public and private improvements and systems. Much of the original nomination is encapsulated or briefly restated below. Additional detail, however, is not repeated but may be found in the original nomination. Where that information is incorrect, it has been noted in this update.

## **SUMMARY:**

The Canemah Historic District is located at the southwesterly edge of the city limits of Oregon City, on the southerly (rocky ledge) bank of the Willamette River, just above the Falls. The community lies within a crescent-shaped hollow in the basalt cliffs that rise to the south above the river. Its name is said to derive from a Native American word "kanim" for "canoe place" and it was the existence of a graveled beach that gave rise to the town's establishment in 1845. Because of the falls, cargo and passengers had to be portaged at this point. This location allowed the founding of the town for the purpose as a river boat building and trade destination during the 1850's through 1870's. Canemah is significant to the state as one of only a few remaining intact former riverboat towns. Canemah was annexed to Oregon City in 1928, although it has remained separate in many ways since.

Canemah is generally bounded by on the north by the Willamette River, on the east by the hillside that descends steeply to the river, on the south by the upper bluffs. The western boundary is less confined by topography than by the original land claim. The district is comprised of several large lots and 41 blocks; 37 blocks from the original 1850 plat and 4 from the 1891 First Addition to Canemah with a total area of approximately 63.71 acres.

## **SETTING:**

Although Canemah was laid out in a grid pattern, there is limited level ground, consisting primarily of the block on both sides of Highway 99E, parallel to the river. South of 99E the terrain begins to rise steeply, up a series of narrow shelves to Fifth Avenue, and beyond, to South End Road which winds to the top of the "third level," the uppermost bench and terminus of the gentle rolling land having a deeper soil layer more suitable for agriculture. Due to its irregular terrain, few streets run through from the river, and traffic within the neighborhood is via a zigzag pattern, back and forth, up and down the levels. This has helped preserve the spatial integrity of most of the district. The narrow streets, some only fifteen feet in width, are paved but lack curbs and sidewalks [residents walk down the streets]. Many of the public right of ways are still not improved. Great opportunity exists to develop interconnecting pedestrian paths and stairways, which would provide more district cohesiveness. With little space for a garage, many residents park their cars in front of their homes, effectively slowing traffic. Although platted with alleyways, few are recognized, and in some cases houses intrude. There are no uniform building setbacks or consistent orientation or siting. Some structures are located right on the road, while others are located up or down the hillside connected to the street with pathways or stairs. Despite Canemah's proximity to urban areas and tremendous recent regional



growth, the district retains an informal, leisurely, rural flavor. The vegetative setting has alternated throughout the past 150 years. During the boat building era many large trees were cut for material for boats and for buildings. The result for a while was an open vista to the river and beyond, hemmed in by the remaining dense underbrush. In time, taller vegetation returned recreating the early setting. One of the important aspects of the district is its steep hillside setting with dense vegetation, and relatively few distant view corridors. Most of the neighborhood has a distinct intimacy despite the proximity of the highway, river and railroad. This quality is difficult to convey in still photography.

### **Vegetation and Landscape:**

The presence of many large trees, such as Douglas Fir and Big Leaf Maple, as well as brushy undergrowth, especially above Third Avenue, creates an aura of privacy and separation between neighbors. Early photographs indicate Canemah was densely covered with large evergreen trees, primarily Douglas Fir. As the community developed, the hillside “terraces” were cleared of trees, for building homes and boats, and for fuel. However, slightly later photographs from the 1880’s to 1900 reveal that smaller trees or seedlings were allowed to regenerate, often very close to homes. In addition, deciduous trees, especially fruit trees, were planted, providing a high, thick canopy which continues to be a characteristic of Canemah. Removing trees to “clear a view” of the river is not a historic feature of Canemah. Views of the river from the hillside, even when homes face downhill, are typically only available from late fall to early spring.

There is a one park of about a third of an acre with room for picnics and playground equipment located at the west end of Fourth Avenue (the site of the former school house) that is actually within the district. It is generally referred to as the Children’s Park. But just outside of the district at the east end of Third Avenue, its only access, there is another park and picnic area that was more recently developed. It is located at the west end of the former Canemah Park that was Oregon’s first amusement park. In 1900 when the interurban electric rail line was extended to Canemah, it was popular for passengers to make day outings, and ascend the series of wooden stairs up the bluff where the park was located. The park featured several ball fields, picnic areas, playgrounds, a covered dance hall, and one of Mr. Ferris’ wheels. By 1905 there was competition from Oaks and Cazadero parks. The open space of the park is retained and accessed with hiking trails.

### **Water Use:**

Another important aspect of the district siting is its handling and use of water. The early settlers utilized the springs and streams coming out of the bluffs for domestic water and to some extent gardening and livestock. Some springs and streams run under homes, where the original owners used the water for refrigeration. The “Rakel Property” was a farm with two prolific springs. The water from these springs provided a source of drinking water in Canemah prior to its annexation to Oregon City in 1928. It is said that there were some wooden pipes to transport the water to users located away from the spring sources; however, no evidence of these pipes were discovered inside the historic district. At the opposite end of town at Miller Street and the unimproved Right-of-Way of 5th Avenue, there are four concrete “tanks,” that capture water from an adjacent spring. Prior to its open stream passage and its descent to the marsh like wetlands area just east of Fourth Avenue. These reservoirs still exist, though now covered heavily with ivy and the lower wall of the east one has deteriorated nearly to grade. This first one receives the main spring source and is constructed of plastered brick 8” thick, measuring 11’ in width and 12’ front to back. Adjoining this tank to the west and now without a dividing wall is one constructed of 6” thick concrete that extends 15’ in width and 11’ front to back. There are two additional concrete reservoirs adjacent and in a line to the west, each measuring 12’ in width. All are approximately 4’ deep with open tops. The level bottoms are currently covered with sediment and debris but appear to have been finished to hold water. It is not possible to determine how they were interconnected or utilized as a system, but these additional tanks were cut into the hillside.



## **Water Containment:**

The residents also created permanent improvements to channel and control the flow of the water that otherwise would be disruptive during high runoff periods. These included a variety of rock walls and channels that have been extended, altered and improved over the years to date. One system is at the southwest part of Canemah running from approximately 5th Avenue and Blanchard Street, thence downhill along the west side of Apperson Avenue to the river. Parts of this diversion system are visible in the form of rock and concrete lined culverts, ditches and flumes above ground; in other sections the water goes underground, through rock-lined channels. This may be part of the drainage from the old Rakel water system. Above 4th Avenue at approximately Apperson Street a large stone culvert emerges from the steep bank. The water disappears under the road but until recently flowed down the open hillside. It now goes into a pipe laid under 4th Avenue. The water course that formerly filled the four tanks above 5th & Miller noted above, descends to the bench area south of houses along 4th Avenue to a point near Apperson and 4th, where it is channeled into a pipe and combines with the above waterway. At the southeast part of town there are ponds south of 5th Avenue that join with Coffee Creek further to the east, and descend the steep hill into the waterway that flows under the Carothers house<sup>4</sup> at the corner of 3rd & Ganong (302 3rd), thence emerging into the side yard and flowing under and along 3rd to emerge once again in the back yard of the Captain Sebastian Miller Houses<sup>5</sup> (402 South McLoughlin), thence turning northward and entering a culvert, where it is directed to the river. The stonework is composed of basalt believed to have been quarried locally, or reused from blasting operations as they occurred. It is dry set in some areas and mortared in other locations. Portions of the creek bed are utilized, while other areas are structured to conform to lot and street lines.

## **Stone Walls:**

In addition to the many flumes, ditches and culverts that contain and channel water, stone retaining and landscape walls are an important feature in Canemah. These may, in part, be the work of individual residents or undocumented public works projects. Beginning in the 1850's there were many occasions when large pieces of basalt were available for building. The earliest was 1849 when Peter Hatch blasted a roadway out of the cliff along the river, between Oregon City and Canemah. In 1918 a portable rock crusher and dynamite were used in the construction of the Pacific Highway (now 99E/McLoughlin Boulevard). Finally in the mid-1930's South End Road above Canemah was widened and arched rock walls added there, as well as along McLoughlin Boulevard at either end of Canemah. Material also may have come from some of the several quarries in Clackamas County; there are marks of quarry drills and line bar marks on some of the stones in the walls in Canemah. There is a retaining wall of large, cut, un-mortared basalt stone (measuring approximately three to four feet on a side) under ivy on 4th between Ganong and Miller Streets? Local lore has it that the "house of a judge" was above this wall, and that the stones were "ship ballast." There is also a long overgrown wall of stacked basalt, varying in height from four to six feet, running along the upper edge lots of 5th Avenue, south of Ganong to Miller Street, above the four water tanks.

## **Public stairways:**

Stairways have been constructed at opposite ends of Canemah. There is one long staircase between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4th Avenue at Blanchard Street with a landing and turn at the top onto 4th. It is of dressed, mortared basalt with a flat cap of concrete. It has wide, shallow concrete steps, and the walls have been opened to allow steps into the yards of homes on either side of the stairway. The stair, constructed between 1911 and 1925 would have provided pedestrian access to the Children's Park and Schoolhouse from below. At the opposite end of Canemah, on the west side of Miller Street between McLoughlin and 3rd Avenue there is a half-block section with two low stone walls. It resembles the one on Blanchard Street but lacks steps, and instead it is filled with sloped dirt and grass. One resident stated that this did not have stairs (Miller below 3rd is not



steep), but rather a plank surface. Another resident stated that there was a wooden stairway leading up the steep hillside from this walkway to 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The stairway was in bad condition and was removed by the city which "promised to replace it but never did." In addition to these improvements along the public way, there are wall efforts by homeowners (with and without mortar, and with rubble or dressed stone) to create terraces on steep yards, for planting flowers and shrubs. They have also built low retaining walls to provide paths for moving around their sloping properties. Along Pacific Highway at the far west end of Canemah, there is a well constructed basalt stone barrier wall designed with arched openings similar to other auto barrier walls on Oregon State highways.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF THE DISTRICT:**

During the 1850's trade and shipping activity allowed Canemah to prosper. There were building operations along the shore and in close proximity to the Willamette River. Housing was located somewhat intermixed and just beyond (historic photos show what appear to be hotels or rooming houses on the bench area close the manufacturing areas). Housing grew up the hillside, on bench above bench. A major flood in 1861 removed many of the structures close to the river, including warehouses, piers, the old Canemah Hotel, and a large portion of the "Canemah Boardwalk". This was a wooden pedestrian way around the falls providing connection to Oregon City. The flood enlarged the basin area allowing additional space for the rebuilding effort. In 1865, a portage railroad was constructed in part by large scale blasting of the cliff that separated the two communities. This operated until 1873 the year that marked both the opening of north side locks around the falls as well as arrival of the south (Canemah) side Oregon & California Railroad located at the river's edge. While Canemah's portage services were no longer needed, strong river traffic allowed the boat building activity to continue until 1878. After this time the success of the railroad diminished Canemah's business activity. Some residents who worked in nearby woolen and paper mills commuted to their jobs by boat. By the 1890's Canemah, like other once thriving, independent shipping communities along the Willamette River, had changed into a bedroom community. It existed in this manner until the late 1920's. An inter-urban electric trolley from Portland was extended to Canemah in the early 1900's facilitating commuter traffic. It was curtailed in 1922 due to increased automobile use. The construction of Pacific Highway 99E, and improvements to McLoughlin Blvd. created a second northern edge parallel to the railroad, but separated by one block. The combination of the two transit corridors isolates Canemah from its river frontage, and the major portion of the district south of the highway from its minor one block wide portion that lies between the two corridors. Although the railroad activity is slight, the track construction on a levee topographically, and to some extent visually separates the community from the river's shore. The highway traffic, however, has now grown in volume and speed such that it is perilous much of the day to cross. There remains some light commercial and service activity along the highway that serves the immediate region rather than provides for neighborhood. In 1928, Canemah residents, concerned about their adequacy of providing community services, successfully petitioned Oregon City for annexation, ending their self governance.

## **BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES:**

A good representation of residences built between 1850 and 1880 for Canemah's river boat captains, builders and owners still exist. Houses once owned by: Captain George Jerome, Captain John Cochran, Captain Sebastian Miller, Francis Paquet, Samuel Stevens, E.B. Fellows, John Coburn, George Marshall, Isaac Beals, Captain William Caseday, and Captain James Wilson are extant. Most of these houses are along or close to McLoughlin Boulevard. A few are located up the hillside. The area closer to the river lost many structures during floods and with transportation related construction. Some are believed to have been relocated during the historic period to sites above high water. The original houses were built in the styles popular during the period consisting of Gothic Revival, Mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century-Late Victorian or Classic, and Vernacular, but each



has some unique characteristics. The houses were generally more modest in size and detail than may be found in more prosperous communities. In styling they were, and remain typically very stripped down and Vernacular, for every type of style. This for example, means that a house described as having Victorian elements would have scroll brackets at the front porch on simplified, chamfered posts, and perhaps a limited amount of trim work in the gable area. It would not have cut away or projecting bays, patterned shingles, elaborate railings, and stained glass. These houses built from available materials, often pre-railroad, in a folk or Vernacular interpretation. They were typically framed of sawn wood, with double hung divided windows, paneled doors, porches with generally simple roof structures, steeply pitched roofs, brick chimneys, and board siding. Some originally may have been built on brick or stone piers, but now most have continuous concrete perimeter foundations. Most have retained their residential use, although some along McLoughlin Boulevard have light commercial space, often in conjunction with residential quarters in the basement or second floor. Very few accessory buildings from this historic period exist. This may be in part due to the availability of water and the lessened role of agriculture. Most of these early buildings have had alterations best summarized as small additions, basement or attic finishing, or maintenance related. Original wood shingle roofs are now replaced with composition shingles. Brick support piers, or rustic un-mortared stone footings at the exterior walls have mostly been replaced with concrete, or concrete block. Between 1910 and the end of the 1920s, modest bungalows were built, primarily along the lower level from the railroad tracks to Third Avenue, although some exist up the hillside where available and suitably level sites existed. In certain instances these were replacement homes for Canemah residents who moved from their older abodes. These bungalows have a larger and more squarish footprint than their older cousins. Roofs are lower sloped and extend to form porch coverings where a front to back pitch is employed for the design. Most have either no dormer or a relatively small one, with no more than one per roof slope. Projecting side bays, exposed masonry chimneys, and simple craftsman wood detailing at the roof and porches is common. Windows include double hung (1/1 or divided /1) for most rooms, with larger fixed front windows having side lights, and smaller secondary casements. Finishes include horizontal wood siding and composition roofing, all historically in earth tone colors. These homes are principally used as residences and generally have had only slight modifications to their form. There are some with additions, filled in rear porches or sun rooms, window and door alterations. Most of the homes are structured on concrete perimeter foundations. Most detached accessory sheds and garages are of more recent construction. Because of limited level building land, Canemah's older homes, especially above McLoughlin Boulevard are sited as dictated by the existing terrain. Steep hillside lots were not re-graded or filled. Houses neither "step" down a sloping lot nor are they cantilevered out on "stilts." As a result, some homes lack setbacks, with front porches opening almost directly onto the street. For this reason houses do not uniformly face the river, but uphill, or towards other houses across the street.

There is no historic representation of industrial or commercial buildings. Some were lost by floods, fire or the construction of the railroad and highway. Others disappeared over time as Canemah developed into a residential community without commerce. Old photographs indicate that the historic commercial buildings resembled the larger wood framed ones (especially rooming houses or possibly the hotel) still found in the Aurora Colony Historic District. There certainly would have been specialized structures for the particular industry involved, boat building, and the pottery plant of which no specific records have been found. Landscape features in Canemah were relatively simple and reflected the population and lifestyle at the time. In addition to the stone work noted above, there were a few picket fences, mostly at the lower level where yards could be developed. Paths were often dirt or gravel, but some have been improved over time to have stone either mortared or loose laid. Plantings on the damp and shady north sloping hillside were mostly native shrubs and trees except where a large enough bench allowed more ornamental plantings, gardens or fruit trees for harvesting. Extensive paved areas and ornamental gardens were nonexistent, although pasture grasses could have been found.



## **ALTERATIONS AND IMPACTS TO THE DISTRICT:**

The railroad's construction had an early impact on Canemah as noted above and likely was a major force in the loss of the town's commerce. That aside, its primary impact today relates to the barrier it creates between the river and the town, and to a lesser extent, the noise and disturbance of rail traffic. At the time of the original nomination Southern Pacific Railroad (now owned by Union Pacific Railroad) was considering a track realignment project that has since been dropped. Much of the land along the river is currently owned by the utility company Portland General Electric (PGE). The second major impact on the district was the construction of highway 99E, McLoughlin Boulevard. The highway now is a most significant detriment for Canemah. Traffic has increased as outlying areas have grown and contribute more commuter and freight traffic. As a four lane high speed (much higher than posted) thoroughfare, it is difficult and often dangerous for residents to access their community. Businesses along McLoughlin Boulevard appear to continually struggle for survival and some of the buildings are unoccupied. Since the end of the period of significance in 1928 and the time of the original nomination, there have been some newer non-compatible buildings erected. Primarily along McLoughlin Boulevard and consisting of either apartment houses or metal industrial buildings, these additions from the 1960's through the 1970's are disruptive to the historic fabric. They do, however, provide an opportunity for future more compatible development, provided the negative effects of highway 99E can be reduced or mitigated. There are some small residences or structures of post 1928 construction and style scattered through the district. Some are compatible with the district, while some are less so. It is note worthy to mention that the historic street names changed by 1925, perhaps in anticipation of annexation the Oregon City for more consistent naming and orientation. The current names have been used throughout this document. The names are as follows with the current name listed first:

1st Avenue - Water  
McLoughlin Blvd - Main  
3rd Avenue - Center  
4th Avenue - Hill  
5th Avenue - Washington  
Paquet Street - 1st  
Blanchard Street - 2nd  
Apperson Street - 3rd  
Jerome Street - 4th  
Miller Street - 5th  
Hedges Street - 6th  
Ganong Street - 7<sup>th</sup>

## **Infill Houses:**

More currently, a number of new infill speculative houses have been constructed on vacant lots or have replaced historic buildings (some lost by fires). These homes, a number of which are recently constructed and are yet to be occupied, have large profiles, massing and visual dominance. Most have attached garages, projecting raised decks, and are situated to allow better car access from the street, rather than to preserve the natural topography and setting. While these impact the historic neighborhood, the residents are working with the contractors and new owners to mitigate their presence, especially with denser plantings. New design guidelines adopted since the homes' approvals should, hopefully, restrain additional pressure on the neighborhood. A separate issue involves the remaining open space to the west and south (adjoining outside) of the district boundaries along either side but not including the historic road leading to the 1864 pioneer cemetery that is still in use. The forty acre property was acquired in 1997 by Metro, the regional governmental agency. The area is known as the Canemah Bluffs, and it is intended to be managed as a natural area with public access



restricted. The road is retained for cemetery and resident use. While impacts on the district are not yet known, they should be minimal unless the area becomes a popular public destination.

## **NOTES ON INVENTORY CHANGES:**

Most of the historic buildings listed in the 1983 survey survive. Some have been restored. Some have minor, reversible inappropriate alterations, such as exterior paint colors, doors, fencing, paving, and landscaping. A few homes, unfortunately some from the earliest period of construction, but mostly ones previously classified as secondary, have been demolished or lost to fire. These demolished homes include the 1870c Kate Shannon house at 906 Fifth, the 1885 Frederick Rakel House at 917 Fourth, the 1895c Bowers house at 913 Fourth, [the 1866 Gist house at 408 Third? verify], an 1880c house at 610 Third, and a 1900c house at 516 First. A couple home addresses have been revised to better assist location by the fire and police departments. A few homes have been rehabilitated, or there has been new information and research to better establish their historic qualities. Two houses have been found to be better attributed to others; the Coburn house at 902 McLoughlin Blvd. was found to be a Paquet house; the Stevens house at 316 McLoughlin Blvd revised to be the Cason house; more information is noted on the inventory. The classifications have thus been revised. The original nomination used resource classifications, primary [22 homes], secondary [27], compatible [40], and intrusive [10]. The primary resources were those considered most significant from the earliest period. While later homes and those with lesser historic significance, were ranked secondary or incompatible. This classification system has been revised to contributing/eligible, non-contributing/non-eligible, and noncontributing/out of period.

## **GOVERNANCE:**

At the time of the 1978 nomination, Oregon City had just amended their comprehensive plan to reflect actual existing zoning. That has now been revised with most Canemah falling under an R-6 single family zoning with an historic district overlay and with an historic commercial overlay for sites along highway 99E. Sites are also governed by Geologic Hazards, for steep sites, and Water Resources overlay requirements. Alterations to existing historic contributing buildings are reviewed under the City's Design Guidelines for Alterations and Additions and through review by the Historic Review Board (HRB). The Design Guidelines for New Construction in Oregon City Historic Districts, adopted in September, 2006, similarly govern new construction in concert with HRB review. The district was not inventoried until 1983, several years after the nomination was recorded. A Reconnaissance Level Survey (RLS), conducted by the State Preservation Office in June, 2007, provided an update of the first inventory. An Intensive Level Survey (ILS) is included as part of this nomination update.

## **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:**

Canemah is on the east side of the river approximately one mile above Oregon City. The Falls were a natural obstruction to river travel, the primary mode of transportation through the Willamette Valley until the 20th century. Beginning in the mid-1840's the process of moving goods and people around the Falls led to the initial phase of Canemah's development as a portage and staging point. It then grew through the 1870's to prominence as a center of steamboat building and operation, continuing as an independent working-class residential community until its annexation to Oregon City in 1928. Canemah retains many early features from this period of development including homes from the mid 19th- early 20th century; its irregular, narrow streets up the hillside and a series of stone waterworks, drainage ditches and stairs; it is historically significant at the state level under criteria A, for the history and development of river related industry and its community, and criteria C, for the architectural resources dating from the mid nineteenth century to early twentieth century.



## DEVELOPMENT OF CANEMAH:

Canemah's first white settler of record was Absalom Hedges, who arrived over the Oregon Trail in 1844 and claimed a triangular piece of land of just under 64 acres on the Willamette River. "Canim," which translated as "canoe" in Chinook Jargon was the Native American name for the spot, which had a shallow beach where canoes could land. While this same geographical feature was an impediment to river traffic it was also useful as a source of water power. When Dr. John McLoughlin retired as factor of the Hudson's Bay Company at Ft. Vancouver in 1842, he relocated and established Oregon City, constructing a water-powered grist mill at the Falls. By the early 1840's former fur trappers and HBC employees had settled and were farming in the Willamette and Tualatin Valleys. Agricultural surplus, primarily grain, was an important source of income and needed to be transported to ocean-going ships below the falls to be exported. Goods going either way on the Willamette River had to be unloaded from ship or large Indian canoe, moved up the hillside, around the falls and reloaded onto a bateau, flatboat or ship. Passengers and their baggage also faced the same portage. The other option was to debark and allow the boat to "run the gauntlet of the rapids." Although they could ride on horseback and avoid the river by traveling to the east of Oregon City, abundant rainfall turned the "roads" into mudholes and made rivers and creeks impassable. Consequently, travel and shipment by water was the preferred and quickest way to move through Oregon's valleys. Those having to make the arduous and time consuming portage sought ways to improve and speed passage. In the same issue of the *Spectator*, the editor reported that subscription papers were available in the stores in Oregon City to fund "construction of a road around the Falls, on the eastern bank of the Willamette." It appears that by 1850 adequate funds had been raised and blacksmith Peter Hatch of Oregon City began blasting a roadway into the side of the cliffs adjacent to the Falls. In the same year Absalom Hedges divided his land claim into 50x100 foot lots, and with his brother-in-law William Barlow, built a store, sawmill and warehouse. Although Hedges named his community "Falls City" the Indian name prevailed, becoming Canema or Canemah. By the spring of 1850, flatboats 65 feet long were traveling on a regular schedule between Canemah and upriver farming communities. At the same time an engine was added to a fifty-foot longboat, was renamed the *Hoosier*, and became the first "steamer" on the Willamette River, running between Oregon City and Portland. On Christmas Day, 1850, Oregon's first purpose-built steamboat, the *Lot Whitcomb* was launched in Milwaukie, on the lower Willamette River. The race to improve river transportation from man power to steam power was on. Canemah founder Absalom Hedges was from the small town of McConnellsville, Ohio, on the Muskingum River, a tributary of the Ohio. In his youth the Muskingum was part of the river transportation network that connected and moved 19th century Americans between the Great Lakes, through the Ohio, Missouri and Mississippi River valleys. Steamboats were a familiar sight in Hedges' hometown, where the river had been dammed and locked to improve navigation. Most of the men who arrived in Canemah in the 1850's to build, repair, operate or work on steamboats were from that part of the United States. In April, 1851, Hedges returned from a trip to New Orleans, where he purchased and had shipped the engines for both a steamboat and a steam-powered sawmill. Construction of the first purpose-built Canemah steamboat boat was well under way by the time Hedges returned to Canemah. In June the *Spectator* reported that "two others were being refitted" at the head of the falls. "There is quite a drive of business going on in Canemah and a large number of hands employed." On July 8, 1851, a refitted steamboat that operated on the upper Willamette was launched, the *Multnomah*. According to Howard McKinley Corning "she was built of Jersey oak shipped West, with a barrel hull that required no caulking." The first steamboat to be built entirely in Canemah was the *Canemah*, launched in late September, 1851. A side-wheeler, 135 feet long, her construction had been financed by Capt. Absalom Hedges, Alanson Beers, Capt. Charles Bennett, Hamilton Campbell and John McClosky. By this time Dr. McLoughlin had constructed a breakwater parallel to Peter Hatch's road that provided a protected basin for boats waiting to unload and soon a carriage "shuttle" service was available to convey passengers between Canemah and Oregon City. By late 1853 the "Defiance Line" of steamers was advertising three boats on the upper river: the *Wallamet*, under Capt. A.F. Hedges; the *Canemah*, Capt. Charles Bennet, and the *Fenix*, Capt. John Miller. As boat building increased, the 1850's saw the arrival in Canemah of many experienced engineers, pilots, blacksmiths, and ship carpenters,



including William Caseday, John Coburn, John Cochran, John Apperson, E.B. Fellows, C.W. Ganong, James Gist, George Jerome, George Marshall, Sebastian Miller, James Wilson and Francis X. Paquet and his three sons. They built houses for themselves and their families, primarily on the level area (now 1st to 3rd Streets) not far from their place of employment. In addition to the boat building sheds, there were stores, warehouses, hotels, and feed yards for oxen, a blacksmith shop and a plough factory. Howard McKinley Corning estimated that of the fifty-two side or sternwheeler steamboats built on the Willamette between the early 1850's into the 1870's, twenty-seven were built in Canemah. In spite of a devastating flood in early December, 1861 that swept away most of the structures at river level in Canemah, rebuilding occurred quickly and work resumed. Those involved in construction, repair, and operation of the steamers were assisted by laborers and woodcutters. The amount of wood required to fuel even a single steamboat trip was significant. It is reported that the large side-wheeler *T.J. Potter*, making the roughly 200 mile round-trip between Portland and Astoria, nine hours one way, consumed 27 cords of wood. As was the case with other riverside communities, trees on the hillside above Canemah were gradually stripped of trees, both for construction of homes and boats, as well as fuel. The 1870 census for Canemah listed a population of approximately 350 people, living in more than 90 households. Male occupations, in descending order included laborer (42), farmer (20), carpenter (6) ship carpenter (5), pilot (5), engineer (3), factory worker (3), saloonkeeper (3), railroad worker (3), blacksmith (3). Others worked as grocers, cooks, boat firemen, boat stewards, and boatmen as well as servant, warehouse clerk, sawyer, surveyor, watchman, shoemaker, millwright, huckster, manufacturer and lumberman. Of the women in the married households, all were listed as "keeping house." With some families having as many as ten children, this was obviously a fulltime job of varied tasks. Almost half of Canemah residents were children twelve years old and younger (175) and it was in 1870 that Canemah parents were finally willing to pay a teacher and establish a school for their children. Their instructor was Canemah resident Mrs. Catharine Coburn, recently widowed with four young daughters to support. After teaching for four years at Canemah, Mrs. Coburn moved to a similar position in Forest Grove where she and her sister had been students at the Institute (now Pacific University). Later she became copy editor on the *New Northwest* newspaper (a suffrage paper started by her sister, Abigail Scott Duniway), followed by eight years as an editor of the *Portland Telegram*, finishing her writing and editing career at the *Daily Oregonian* as an associate editor, where her brother Harvey Scott was Editor. Another distinguished resident who grew up in Canemah was William Wortman, whose family arrived on the Oregon Trail in 1852. Mr. Wortman worked in his father's mercantile store in Oregon City and eventually became a partner in Olds, Wortman & King, a popular department store in downtown Portland. The members of the Paquet family, Francis Xavier and his four sons, were busy boat and house carpenters in Canemah. By the late 1880's-early 1890's they had moved to Portland, where they continued their general contracting, boatbuilding and repair activities. This included expanding into ferro-cement ship construction during WWI. Two other Canemah men became prominent in the grain and flour business. One was Arthur E. Davis who was the agent in Oregon City for the Portland Flouring Mills (originally John McLoughlin's Imperial Mill). In 1883 Portland businessmen T.B. Wilcox and Charles E. Ladd acquired the mill in Oregon City, along with several others in the Pacific Northwest. By 1889 Davis left his home in Canemah to move to Portland where he became Treasurer of the Portland Flouring Mills, and later a Vice President. By WWI the company had developed lucrative business shipping flour to Asian countries. The other individual was Joseph W. Ganong, son of Canemah blacksmith C.W. Ganong (1837-1904). After completing his schooling, Joseph took up blacksmithing and steamboat work. He was trucking wheat at the Imperial Mill in Oregon City when it was purchased by Wilcox and Ladd. Remaining with the Portland Flouring Mills he rose even higher in the company than A.E. Davis, becoming General Manager of the company when it was sold to Max Houser in 1918. During WWI he was appointed divisional chairman of Milling Div. No. 8, supervising 225 mills in the Northwest for the U.S. Food Administration. He finished his career with the Kerr, Gifford Company. In the "boom years" of steamboat construction and operation in Canemah, ownership and operation of the steamboats fluctuated. Individual boats changed hands as the companies that owned them competed to consolidate river transportation. Side and sternwheelers were moved to different routes as river conditions changed; overheated boilers exploded; vessels hit snags or rocks and sank. They were repaired, refitted,



redesigned or parts were salvaged and reused in other boats. The discovery of gold in Eastern Oregon and Idaho in the 1860's, required immediate transportation of men, supplies and equipment. Steamboats and their crews, including captains and pilots were often transferred by their companies to meet such temporary but lucrative demand.

### **DEMISE OF CANEMAH AS STAGING AND STEAMBOAT CENTER:**

Two types of employment mentioned in the 1870 census signaled changes that would alter and yet sustain Canemah: factory worker and railroad worker. The first was probably a job in either the paper or woolen mill in Oregon City. The "railroad worker" reveals the progress of that new form of transportation, which would create the first degree of separation between Canemah and the river. As speed and convenience of passage around the fall had led to road improvement and the growth of riverboat transportation, now railroads would begin to replace steamboats. Like steamboats, railroads were under construction in the eastern United States as early as the 1840's. The effort to connect the east and west coasts, of America were halted at the Mississippi River during the Civil War. But in the late 1860's, work on the intercontinental railroad recommenced. At the same time, railroad building within Oregon reached a frenzied level as competing investors raced along both side of the Willamette River in an attempt to reach Salem, the state capitol. By Christmas Day 1869, the first twenty miles of the East side line, the Oregon Central Railroad passed through Canemah and reached Parrott Creek near New Era. By 1871 the railroad had reached Eugene. Thereafter, construction of steamboats continued in Canemah but at a slower pace. At the same time, improvements to the passage around the fall also reduced Canemah's prominence as a staging and transfer point. Canemah had always had competition for control of river traffic at the Falls. Established in 1840, two years before Canemah, Linn City was on the river opposite Canemah. Its citizens had finally managed to obtain funding for construction of a lock system around the Falls on their side of the Willamette. When they officially opened on January 1, 1873, the passenger, stevedoring and warehouse services in Canemah became redundant; now freight and passengers could lock around the Falls in an hour, without leaving the boat. As boat building began to decline in the mid-1870's, some residents left Canemah. Others remained but sought employment outside the community. Two institutions of social importance survived. The small Episcopal Chapel built in 1878 at 3rd & Miller Streets was acquired by the Baptists and children still hiked up the hillside to their school at 5th near Blanchard Street. In the 1880's Canemah Park had opened at the east end of town, just beyond Marshall Street. People came to picnic, enjoy a baseball game, ride the ferris wheel or dance in the covered pavilion. After 1900 passengers arrived from as far away as Portland when the new interurban carline was extended beyond Oregon City. In 1928 Canemah was annexed to Oregon City. The school and church closed within a few years and its residents went outside their community for education, employment, services and supplies.

### **STONE WORK IN CANEMAH:**

Settlement era emigrants were opportunistic and inventive in using materials at hand to for structures, furnishings and fuel. Canemah residents used wood for houses, outbuildings, fences and heat, but they also took advantage of the stone which formed their community. Although difficult to date or attribute, many stone structures remain visible in Canemah. Basalt stones were mortared together for the foundations of some settlement-era houses, especially to provide a level surface on the often uneven sites. Rock retaining walls were constructed behind or around homes to stabilize slopes or to create terraced planting sites and paths. A low rock wall lines a flight of concrete steps at the west end of Canemah, between 3rd and 4th Streets at Blanchard, and was in place sometime before 1925. A similar pair of stone walls, a half block in length at 3rd & Miller Streets (it reportedly had no steps, but was lined with planks) apparently lined up with a flight of wooden steps that went up the steep hill between 3rd & 4th. At opposite ends of town there is evidence that water from two separate sources was captured to provide drinking water to Canemah residents.



One was from two springs on the former Rakel property, a farm of approximately forty acres, just beyond the western end of the historic district. Two long-time residents of Canemah stated that the Rakel family provided drinking water from their springs; one recalled a surface, cedar trough that as late as 1950 carried irrigation water from the area.<sup>20</sup> There are no visible remains of these pipes and written documentation is scarce. However, a document issued by the State Water Board in 1916 gave the "estate of Dorothy Rakel, Peter J. Winkel, Executor, of West Linn....the right to the use of the water of springs near the southwest corner of Canemah....for the purpose of domestic use for the Town of Canemah." A 1939 certificate gave Carroll J. Furre (a relative of the Rakels) permission to use "unnamed springs for the purpose of irrigation in Canemah." A former Canemah resident stated in a phone interview that Canemah got city water once it was annexed to Oregon City in 1928 and that the Rakels were persuaded to cease their private drinking water service when city water was extended to their farm (their property was outside the annexation boundaries). The surviving Rakel family member interviewed stated that he was five when his family left Canemah in 1928 and he had recollection of the water system. The Rakel property was acquired by Metro, the regional planning agency, for use as a natural area in 1995. It is said that the springs are still present on the property. At the opposite end of town at (unimproved) 5th Street at the head of Miller Street there is water collection system. This consists of four large open concrete tanks. One tank captures water from a spring that flows out of the hillside above and appears to be connected to the adjacent reservoirs. The current owners of the property, who purchased it in 1968, have no information about the tanks. One resident stated that she thought that Canemah residents "went to the tanks and got drinking water." No water permits were on file at the State Archives for these tanks. A single reference might have referred to this source. The 1901 obituary of Capt. Sebastian Miller stated that the day before died: "A pipe is being laid from his home to the springs some distance away and he had carried all the pipes for the work." Capt. Miller's house (1862) is located at the corner of 2nd (McLoughlin) and Hedges Streets. Another prominent use of stone was in the construction of conduits to move water down the hillside into the river. Beginning near the corner of 5th & Blanchard there are a series of stacked rock culverts and ditches that channel water down hill. Some of culverts have been subsequently lined with concrete and plastic pipes. The stone is both mortared and unmortared. Their date of construction and builder are presently unknown but Joshua P. Blanchard, who arrived in Canemah in 1851 from Vermont was listed in the Canemah cemetery records as a "bricklayer" (d.1884). At the other end of town the water from the overflow from the four water tanks off Miller appears to go west down unimproved 5th, then surfaces through a basalt culvert at 4th and (unimproved) Apperson Street. This now disappears into a city pipe recently laid under 4th street to combine with water from the Rakel springs. Although the water tanks, steps, walls and ditches were not included in the 1978 National Register nomination nor the 1983 survey, Most of the improvements are within the district boundaries and are a unique and significant historic resource.

## **TWENTIETH CENTURY CHANGES IN CANEMAH:**

The desire for faster and more convenient transportation which created Canemah in the 1850's eventually diminished its prominence. It began with the rise of railroad building in the 1870's and was in turn outpaced by the increasing popularity of automobile in the first quarter of the 20th century. In 1910 a group of promoters formed an organization to build the Pacific Highway, a modern paved road the length of the west coast from Canada to Mexico. In 1918 construction of this Pacific Highway resulted in the basalt cliffs at both ends of Canemah being blasted away to improve traffic flow. As cars and trucks began using the road at least two Canemah residents tried to take advantage of this transportation improvement: a gas station/grocery store and a café opened on 2nd Street (now 99E/McLoughlin Blvd.) Although Canemah residents benefited from these businesses, the arrival of the Pacific Highway and its subsequent widening in the late 1930's and again in the late 1950's had a negative impact on the community. One long-time resident who arrived just after WWII said that widening of McLoughlin Boulevard took five feet of front yard from the homes on both sides of the highway. As the speed and volume of traffic increased the highway became a barrier between the



river and the homes on the uphill side of McLoughlin Boulevard. By the 1970's the community's informal gathering points, the gas station/grocery shop and the tavern/café were gone. In addition, a zoning change that encouraged more commercial use along the highway had the potential to erase the historic fabric of Canemah. In the mid-1970 a group of residents worked with Oregon City's newly-established historic preservation office to place Canemah on the National Register of Historic Places, which occurred in 1978. A building survey was completed in 1983 and some rehabilitation of many of the community's oldest homes began. However, the booming economy that surged through the greater metro area in the 1990's created development pressure in Canemah. In 1995 a 330-house development was proposed for the "Rakel farm" property, approximately 40 acres just beyond the Historic District's western boundary. After much controversy the development was canceled and the property acquired by Metro to be managed as a regional natural area. Soon after, Canemah residents approached Oregon City's Historic Review Board with concerns about the potential for incompatible new houses within the district. Subsequently, in 2006 the HRB approved new detailed design guidelines for infill construction in the historic district's. However, in the interim several houses were built that would probably not meet the new infill guidelines due to their design, mass and scale.

## **SUMMARY:**

Canemah is a unique community which began to grow in the mid-1850 in response to transportation obstacles created by the Falls of the Willamette River, an immovable geographic feature. As human-powered watercraft gave way to technologically superior steam power, Canemah attracted emigrants with the technical experience to build and operate this improved form of transportation. They lived in the community in which they worked and built modest homes in a variety of architectural styles. It was a self reliant and contained community that included stores, a church and a public school. The skills of these inventive men eventually became outmoded by more modern forms transportation, the steam railroad and later, the automobile. The unceasing desire for faster, more convenient transportation that created Canemah has ultimately had a negative impact on the community, by gradually separating most of it from the river. The process began in the early 1870's with the arrival of the railroad. It continued, first in 1918 with construction of the Pacific Highway and between the 1930's-60's during several widening projects. At the turn of the 20th century, increased growth in the Portland metropolitan area saw farm towns south of Oregon City transformed into suburban "bedroom" communities. The resulting traffic on the four-lane highway through Canemah and disregard for the posted 45-mph speed limit isolates Canemah from its reason for being, the Willamette River. Finally, although there are some small private docks on the Willamette there is no public access to the river such as a viewpoint or pier, nor interpretive signs that present the history of the community to visitors or residents.