

Champoeg State Heritage Area Visitor Center, Oregon State Parks Saint Paul, OR

The site of Oregon's first provisional government, Champoeg tells the story of Oregon's pioneer heritage. Working closely with park staff, historians, archeologists and advisors from the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, I researched and wrote all exhibit copy and interactives, researched and identified images, and wrote creative briefs for all multimedia programs.

Why Champoeg?

Paradise Found

People have been coming to Champoeg for millennia, drawn to its fertile prairies along the Willamette River. For thousands of years, Kalapuya Indians gathered here to harvest the prairie's rich, wild bounty. Its abundant game first lured British and French-Canadian fur trappers. Later, its fertile, ready-made farmland attracted American settlers.

On this placid spot, empires were built and lost. It was here that a historic vote ultimately ended British dominance and won the territory for the United States. For a time, the town of Champoeg prospered until the Willamette River reclaimed its prairie, wiping its grassy banks clean of all obvious traces of human settlement.

Journey through time and discover the reasons why this serene place draws us with its beauty and history. *What brings you here?*

Thousands of Years of Native American Stewardship

When trappers first saw the fertile prairies of the Willamette Valley, they thought they were looking at an untouched Eden. But the richness that drew them to the area was the result of careful management by Native Americans.

For thousands of years, Kalapuya Indians controlled the landscape of the Willamette Valley. Through the careful use of fire, they created a landscape of open prairie and oak groves. By burning off young shrubs and trees each fall, they encouraged the growth of camas and other important plants, which also provided habitat for game.

Trappers & Traders

The Commercial Frontier

Commerce led the way to the Northwest as fur trappers and traders chased the beaver across the North American continent, trying to satisfy an increasing demand for a diminishing supply.

The first fur trappers in the Oregon Country were French-Canadian *voyageurs*. On trapping expeditions into the Willamette Valley, they often camped at a large open space on the south bank of the Willamette River they called *Campment du Sable*, or Sandy Camp.

This rare clearing along an otherwise heavily forested river was a perfect place to come ashore. With its adjacent prairies, it provided easy access into the interior of the valley, making it an ideal spot to rendezvous and resupply. Later this area became known as Champoeg.

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The New Economics

It all started with a hat. Elegant felt hats were all the rage in the 18th and early 19th centuries, and beaver fur was the most popular material for making them. The huge demand for hats caused the fur trade to boom.

So important was the beaver that it became valued as currency. When trappers brought hides, they were paid based on a set value for each beaver pelt. Even other pelts were valued based on the beaver. Once they turned in their hides, trappers were given scrip that they could only redeem at the company store.

Winds of Change

From Furs to Farmlands

After the beaver was hunted to near extinction, many trappers turned to farming. Having traveled extensively throughout the West, they knew where the best land was to be found. So they brought their families to Champoeg and French Prairie, where Native American burning practices had created some of the richest land in the West.

The fertile prairies near Champoeg were ready-made for the plow. The open fields did not require the backbreaking labor of felling trees and removing stumps before crops could be planted. Even the most inexperienced trapper-turned-farmer was able to reap a bountiful harvest.

As word spread about the fertile farmland in the Willamette Valley, settlers arrived in droves, driving wagons overland on the Oregon Trail.

Oregon Fever

It was the letters and speeches of missionaries that spiked Oregon Fever. They described Oregon as a “promised land” where the soil was so fertile that wheat only needed to be planted once every ten years. Others wrote that cattle were so fat that tallow dripped from their horns. As fanciful as these stories were, they teased the imaginations of people back East. Encouraged by the missionaries’ descriptions and lured by the promise of free land, settlers suddenly set out for Oregon by the hundreds. In 1842 about 100 pioneers came to Oregon. The following year that number was close to 900.

Champoeg: a Town at River’s Edge

Washed Out

In early December of 1861, eighteen days of warm rain and melting mountain snow caused the Willamette River to rise. At Champoeg, residents began to anxiously watch the rising waters. As the swollen Willamette River broke over its banks, water swelled into Champoeg, moving buildings off their foundations and sending them floating down the river. The waters rose so quickly that some people became marooned in their houses and businesses. Many were rescued by canoe from windows and rooftops. Miraculously, no one at Champoeg died in the raging floodwaters. But the flood claimed everything they had.