

An aerial photograph of St. Helens, Oregon, showing the waterfront, downtown buildings, and a park area. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The title text is positioned in the upper left quadrant.

St. Helens Riverwalk Interpretive Framework Plan

February 3, 2022

Prepared by Mayer/Reed
For City of St. Helens

Overview

PURPOSE

The purpose of the St. Helens Riverwalk Interpretive Framework Plan is to outline the goals and intent for interpretive elements that contribute to a meaningful visitor experience. This plan includes a long-term vision for storytelling along the Riverwalk and Strand Street, which make up the Riverfront District. As each phase of work is designed and implemented, the plan should guide the design and content of the interpretive elements to support the overall experience.

WORKING GROUP

The framework was developed with the support of the following working group. Additional content experts may be needed for the development of final interpretive content.

Jennifer Dimsho, City of St. Helens
John Walsh, City of St. Helens
Les Watters, Columbia County Museum Association
Amber Kester, Columbia Soil & Water District
Tom Myers, Scappoose Bay Watershed Council

GOALS

- Ground the visitor in time and place
- Prioritize site specific stories over regional stories
- Respect the natural setting
- Provide accurate information

AUDIENCE

St. Helens Area Residents - Primary Audience

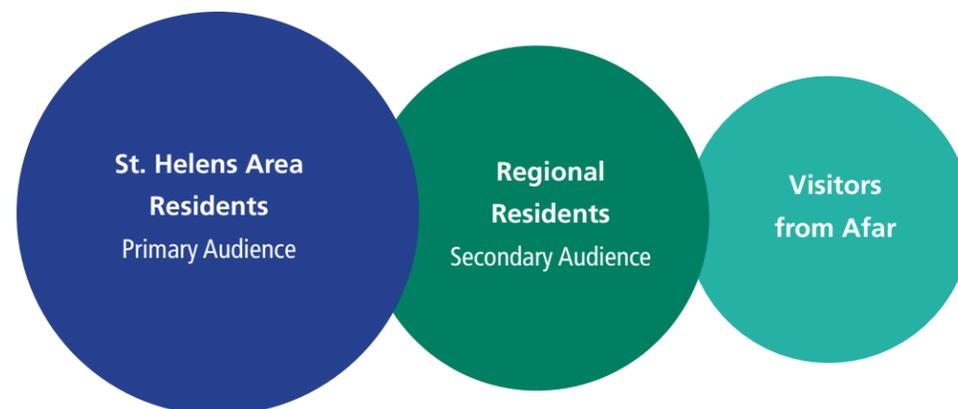
The Riverwalk is expected to be a significant City amenity providing recreation and river access. Residents that live within walking distance may be frequent visitors for weekly exercise, recreation, or respite. Interpretive content should be approachable to the community by employing familiar design elements and an accessible reading level.

Regional Residents - Secondary Audience

As outdoor recreation opportunities in the area become more popular, the City has seen an increase in visitors from Columbia County and adjacent Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas Counties which are within an hour drive. These visitors may have a basic understanding of Pacific Northwest natural and cultural history.

Visitors From Afar

Visitors from beyond the local region are expected to be a small percentage of annual visitors.

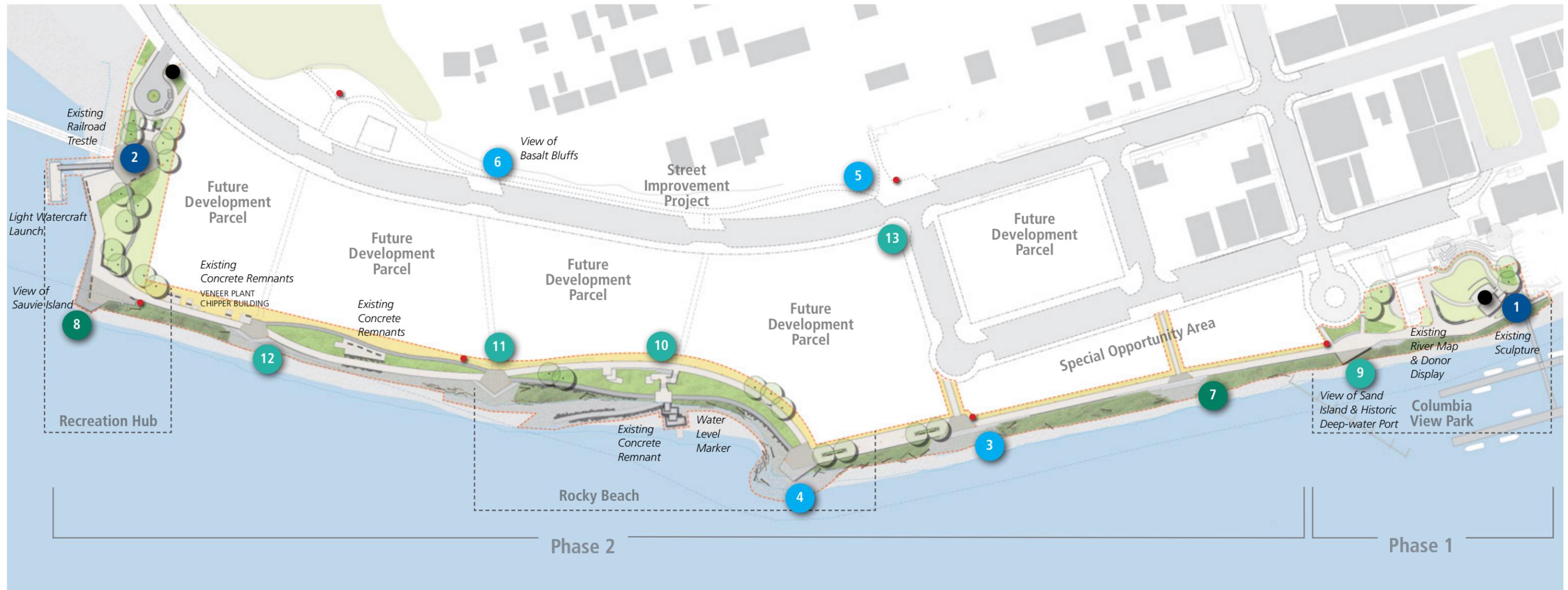


DESIGN

Riverwalk wayfinding and interpretive signs will be designed as an extension of the St. Helens wayfinding master plan sign system.



Interpretive Locations



XX Interpretive Site Features

X Interpretive Elements

● Identity Sign

● Pedestrian Directional



St. Helens Riverfront District Overview -
Introduction to St. Helens and the Riverfront District. Content will provide an overview of all interpretive themes. May include a map, cultural and natural history images.

1 Greets visitors arriving by boat. View of Columbia View Park and edge of downtown.

2 At Recreation Hub plaza with view of light watercraft launch and railroad trestle.

Theme 1 - This site was created by geological events that shaped the mountains, river, and landforms.

Theme 2 - The City of St. Helens is located at a unique spot along the Columbia River with abundant natural resources and opportunities.

3 Small plaza with territorial views. (2a-2c)

4 Territorial views and view of water level marker at Rocky Beach. (1a-1d)

5 Bluff Trail Trailhead (1a, 2b, 2c, 3a, 5i)

6 Trail along Future Bluff Trail. (1a, 2a, 5i)

Theme 3 - Long before the City of St. Helens was founded, there were dozens of Native American villages in the area along the Columbia River.

Theme 4 - St. Helens was shaped by its connection to the Columbia River, the courage of early explorers and traders, and the entrepreneurial spirit of its early explorers, traders, and settlers.

7 Small plaza with territorial views. (3a-3g, 4a-4c)

8 Overlook with view of Sauvie Island. (3a-3g, 4a, 5h)

Theme 5 - St. Helens has provided ease of transportation and trade to industries such as shipbuilding, quarries, wood product mills, and now offers views of the modern-day shipping channel.

9 Overlook with view of Sand Island and the historic deep-water seaport. (5a, 5b, 5g)

10 View of existing mill remnants. (5c, 5d, 5e)

11 Overlook with view of the Rocky Beach and existing mill remnants. (5c, 5d, 5e, 5f)

12 Overlook with view of channel and existing mill remnants. (5c, 5d, 5e, 5h, 5i)

13 Riverfront District Marker (5a - 5e, 5i)

Interpretive Themes

The City of St. Helens is shaped by its connectivity, entrepreneurial spirit, and awe-inspiring beauty of the Columbia River.



1. This site was created by geological events that shaped the mountains, river, and landforms.
 - a. Molten lava flows and Ice Age floods sculpted the varied landscape of the Lower Columbia River. Evidence of these geological forces are visible in the basalt bluffs and small canyons in and around the City of St. Helens.
 - b. The largest river in the Pacific Northwest and the fourth largest river by volume in North America, the Columbia River drains an enormous area. It flows more than 1,200 miles from its headwaters in British Columbia to its mouth at the Pacific Ocean.³
 - c. For thousands of years, the Columbia River has been the most important and intensively used part of Oregon's natural landscape. It connects Oregon and the Northwest region to the rest of the world.⁴
 - d. The Columbia River has a long history of flooding. River levels historically near the tops of several levees along the Columbia and Lewis Rivers.⁵
2. The City of St. Helens is located at a unique spot along the Columbia River with abundant natural resources and opportunities.
 - a. Located at the confluence of the Columbia River and the Multnomah Channel, the City of St. Helens is surrounded by basalt cliffs, forests, fertile land, wetlands, and fish and wildlife habitat.
 - b. St. Helens' riverfront offers stunning views of Mt. Hood, Mt. St. Helens, and Sauvie Island.
 - c. Wildlife in the area include black-tailed deer, river otters, osprey, sandhill cranes, bald eagles, great blue herons, and migrating geese. The river and channel support salmon, steelhead, sturgeon, walleye, shad, brown bullhead catfish, lamprey, crayfish, and a variety of other fish and invertebrates.



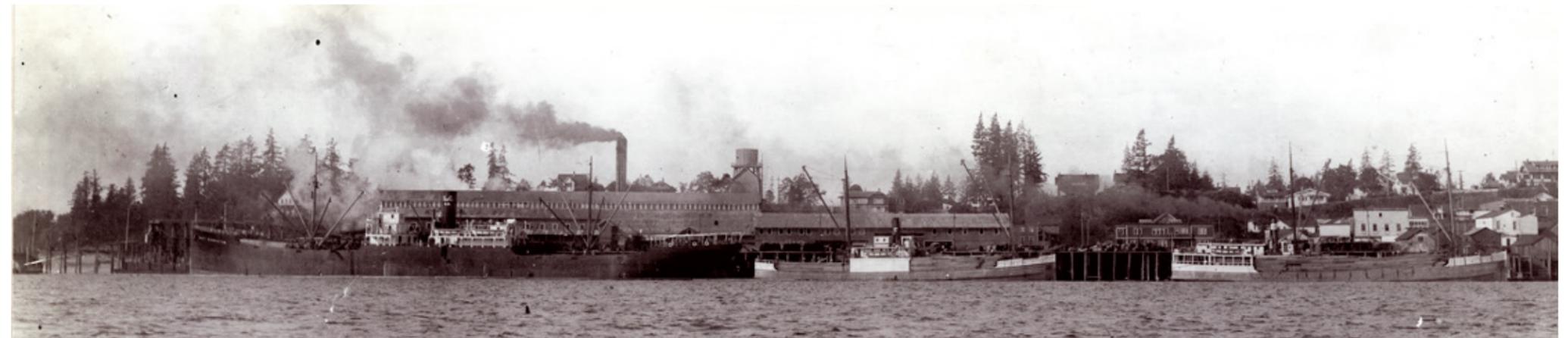
No. 8. — Portrait of Ca-sa-nov.

3. Long before the City of St. Helens was founded, there were dozens of Native American villages in the area along the Columbia River.⁷

- a. Native Americans have lived along the Lower and Middle Columbia River for thousands of years.
- b. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark called the resource-rich lowlands along the Columbia River between Vancouver and Kalama Wapato Valley and the people living there Wapato Indians. Most are believed to have spoken a variety of the Upper Chinook languages.
- c. About twenty villages in the Wapato Valley were documented in the early nineteenth century, mostly likely occupied by Upper Chinook people.
- d. Chinookan people of Wapato Valley lived in large, multifamily red cedar plankhouses.⁹
- e. Chief Kiesno was a major Chinookan leader in the Wapato Valley.
- f. During the summer of 1830 and summers following, Wapato Valley Native populations plunged by probably 90 percent due to an epidemic called “fever and ague.”¹⁶
- g. In 1855, those that survived (fewer than 100) were taken to two temporary reserves: Milton Creek near St. Helens and Fort Vancouver. The Wapato Valley survivors, along with other Chinookan and non-Chinookan people were then moved to new reservations at Grande Ronde and Yakama.¹⁷

4. St. Helens was shaped by its connection to the Columbia River, the courage of early explorers and traders, and the entrepreneurial spirit of its early explorers, traders, and settlers.

- a. In October 1792, Lieutenant William Broughton, a member of the Vancouver Expedition, and his crew reached what is now called Multnomah Channel and claimed the Columbia River for Great Britain. They were the first Europeans to travel that far up the Lower Columbia River.¹⁸
- b. The Lewis and Clark Expedition camped in the area in November 1805 on their way to the Pacific Ocean.
- c. Chinookan people in Wapato Valley were active in the fur trade with Europeans soon after they arrived.¹⁹



5. St. Helens has provided ease of transportation and trade to industries such as shipbuilding, quarries, wood product mills, and now offers views of the modern-day shipping channel.

- a. In the mid-1800s, the area's deep-water seaport attracted Europeans and Americans who wanted to establish ports along the lower Columbia River to attract trade.²⁰
- b. The steamboat era began in Oregon in 1850 when the Columbia, the first steamboat built in the state, began a regular route between Portland and Astoria. That same year, St. Helens began competing with Portland to become the main port on the Columbia River.
- c. After the fur trade ended, logs and lumber replaced furs as the area's chief product.
- d. Railroad spur served industrial users on the property.
- e. In 1908, brothers Hamlin and Charles McCormick saw the potential of the town's strategic river location and proceeded to build several timber-related factories. As a result, the population of St. Helens exploded, the commercial core was revived, and the surrounding residential area rapidly developed.²⁶
- f. Three of the former McCormick businesses later continued under different ownership.
- g. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers maintains a safe navigation channel for commerce while also using dredge materials to create newly usable land.
- h. Warrior Rock Lighthouse on Sauvie Island was one of many early lighthouses typically built on headlands or near estuaries in remote locations only accessible by water.³¹
- i. St. Helens' basalt rock quarries were a major industry in the early 1900s. Multiple quarries employed approximately 300 men in 1909.³²

Support Information

1. This site was created by geological events that shaped the mountains, river, and landforms.

- a. Molten lava flows and Ice Age floods sculpted the varied landscape of the Lower Columbia River. Evidence of these geological forces are visible in the basalt bluffs and small canyons in and around the City of St. Helens.
 - From 17 million to 6 million years ago, hundreds of basalt lava flows erupted from fissures and vents in eastern Washington, northeastern Oregon, and western Idaho. Some eruptions covered thousands of square miles, sending flows hundreds of miles to the Pacific Ocean.¹
 - During the last Ice Age 18,000 to 12,000 years ago, some the largest floods ever known swept across eastern Washington and down the Columbia River.²
 - More than 500 miles to the northeast, an enormous lake called Glacial Lake Missoula broke through its ice dam, sending torrents of water, ice, and debris across parts of Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and down the Columbia River.
 - This ice dam formed and broke dozens of times, with the largest floods sending volumes of water equal to 10 times the modern flow of all the rivers of the world combined.
- b. The largest river in the Pacific Northwest and the fourth largest river by volume in North America, the Columbia River drains an enormous area. It flows more than 1,200 miles from its headwaters in British Columbia to its mouth at the Pacific Ocean.³
- c. For thousands of years, the Columbia River has been the most important and intensively used part of Oregon's natural landscape. It connects Oregon and the Northwest region to the rest of the world.⁴
- d. The Columbia River has a long history of flooding. River levels historically near the tops of several levees along the Columbia and Lewis Rivers.⁵
 - The City of St. Helens suffered significant damage in the Great Flood of 1894. Houses, barns, and fences were swept away for miles on both sides of the river.
 - Flood stage at the City of St. Helens is 21 ft. Historic crests include:
 - 27.10 ft on 06/14/1948
 - 23.20 ft on 06/05/1956
 - 24.00 ft on 12/25/1964
 - 23.00 ft on 02/10/1996

2. The City of St. Helens is located at a unique spot along the Columbia River with abundant natural resources and opportunities.

- a. Located at the confluence of the Columbia River and the Multnomah Channel, the City of St. Helens is surrounded by basalt cliffs, forests, fertile land, wetlands, and fish and wildlife habitat.
- b. St. Helens' riverfront offers stunning views of Mt. Hood, Mt. St. Helens, and Sauvie Island.

- Looking east across the Columbia River, the City's riverfront offers commanding views of Mount St. Helens in Washington State.
- The Multnomah Channel flows around Sauvie Island, one of the largest river islands in North America.⁶ It is often mistaken for the north shore of the Columbia River just beyond.
- c. Wildlife in the area include black-tailed deer, river otters, osprey, sandhill cranes, bald eagles, great blue herons, and migrating geese. The river and channel support salmon, steelhead, sturgeon, walleye, shad, brown bullhead catfish, lamprey, crayfish, and a variety of other fish and invertebrates.

3. Long before the City of St. Helens was founded, there were dozens of Native American villages in the area along the Columbia River.⁷

- a. Native Americans have lived along the Lower and Middle Columbia River for thousands of years.
- b. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark called the resource-rich lowlands along the Columbia River between Vancouver and Kalama Wappato Valley and the people living there Wappato Indians. Most are believed to have spoken a variety of the Upper Chinook languages.
 - Wappato Island, now called Sauvie Island, was the center of Wappato Valley.
 - The name comes from the wapato (*Sagittaria latifolia*), a wetland plant similar to a potato or onion, which was an important staple food.
- c. About twenty villages in the Wapato Valley were documented in the early nineteenth century, mostly likely occupied by Upper Chinook people. The largest villages were: ⁸
 - Cathlacumups at the lower end of Multnomah Channel in the vicinity of present-day St. Helens
 - Cathlapotle on the lower Lewis River
 - Multnomah on the Columbia bank of Sauvie Island
 - Shoto villages on Lake River north of Vancouver Lake
- d. Chinookan people of Wapato Valley lived in large, multifamily red cedar plankhouses.⁹
 - Every village of any size or significance had a recognized leader or chief.¹⁰
 - Chinookan people followed a seasonal round (pattern of moving from one location to another to hunt and gather food and other natural resources), living in plankhouse villages in winter and smaller bark lodges while hunting, fishing, and harvesting.¹¹
 - They hunted waterfowl, Columbia whitetail deer, and elk and fished for salmon, particularly chinook and coho, sturgeon, and other fish.
 - Wapato was harvested from ponds and lakes, camas from wet prairies, and various berries and Oregon oak acorns from dry prairies and open woods. All were dried, processed, and stored for winter use. ¹²
 - Chinookan people constructed dugouts of several sizes out of red cedar and engaged in long-distance trade. Wapato was a major export of the area.¹³

- e. Chief Kiesno was a major Chinookan leader in the Wapato Valley.
 - Kiesno’s main village had been located in the vicinity of present-day City of St. Helens; in 1825 he moved closer to Fort Vancouver.¹⁴
 - Kiesno maintained political influence over the Wapato people and had ties with neighboring groups—including the Clackamas Chinook near Willamette Falls, the Cascades Chinook at Cascade Rapids, and the Tualatin Kalapuya in the Willamette Valley.¹⁵
 - f. During the summer of 1830 and summers following, Wapato Valley Native populations plunged by probably 90 percent due to an epidemic called “fever and ague.”¹⁶
 - g. In 1855, those that survived (fewer than 100) were taken to two temporary reserves: Milton Creek near St. Helens and Fort Vancouver. The Wapato Valley survivors, along with other Chinookan and non-Chinookan people were then moved to new reservations at Grande Ronde and Yakama.¹⁷
- 4. St. Helens was shaped by its connection to the Columbia River, the courage of early explorers and traders, and the entrepreneurial spirit of its early explorers, traders, and settlers.**
- a. In October 1792, Lieutenant William Broughton, a member of the Vancouver Expedition, and his crew reached what is now called Multnomah Channel and claimed the Columbia River for Great Britain. They were the first Europeans to travel that far up the Lower Columbia River.¹⁸
 - Broughton encountered warriors in canoes at the northern tip of present-day Sauvie Island, which became known as Warrior Point.
 - Many of the landmarks named by Broughton remain in use, including Mount Coffin, Warrior Point, Sandy Island, Point Vancouver, and Mt. Hood.
 - b. The Lewis and Clark Expedition camped in the area in November 1805 on their way to the Pacific Ocean.
 - c. Chinookan people in Wapato Valley were active in the fur trade with Europeans soon after they arrived.¹⁹
- 5. St. Helens has provided ease of transportation and trade to industries such as shipbuilding, quarries, wood product mills, and now offers views of the modern-day shipping channel.**
- a. In the mid-1800s, the area’s deep-water seaport attracted Europeans and Americans who wanted to establish ports along the lower Columbia River to attract trade.²⁰
 - Two trading ships, the *Owyhee* and the *Convoy*, owned by the American trader Joseph Marshall, entered the Columbia and traded for furs in 1829.
 - The *Owyhee* was piloted by Captain Dominis. Many Native Americans believed that Captain Dominis was responsible for the disease that started during 1829 and continued through 1832.
 - The *Convoy* was piloted by Captain Tomson.²¹
 - Nathaniel Wyeth explored the lower Columbia River in 1832, hoping to start a colony that would be the base for his Columbia River Fishing and Trading Company.
 - St. Helens was founded by Captain Henry M. Knighton, who took up the land claim of Bartholomew White in 1847.²²
 - Knighton first named the town Plymouth, then briefly Kasenau (or Casenau) for Chinookan Chief Kiesno when the chief died in 1848. Kiesno’s village had been located on the Multnomah Channel near Knighton’s future land claim. Casenau (often spelled Caseneau) Street in downtown St. Helens was renamed 2nd Street when the streets were renamed in 1929.²³
 - By 1850, Knighton had changed the town’s name to St. Helens in recognition of Mount St. Helens, the volcano that dominates the horizon 39 miles to the northeast.
- b. The steamboat era began in Oregon in 1850 when the *Columbia*, the first steamboat built in the state, began a regular route between Portland and Astoria. That same year, St. Helens began competing with Portland to become the main port on the Columbia River.
- Knighton arranged with the Pacific Mail Steamship Company to make St. Helens its main office and only stop on the Columbia River. The company agreed and built a large wharf designed specifically for steamboats. Passengers and freight leaving from Portland would have to be shuttled to St. Helens.
 - Portland’s merchants boycotted the company and found other steamships to haul their cargo instead.²⁴
 - A large fire destroyed the new wharf, ending St. Helens’ bid to be the main port.²⁵
- c. After the fur trade ended, logs and lumber replaced furs as the area’s chief product.
- The steamboat era encouraged the growth of Columbia County’s timber industry. Steamboats needed lots of cordwood for fuel. The wood was transported to the docks by log flumes. By 1900, cordwood was the chief source of income in the area.
 - The timber industry changed dramatically in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The increase in logging productivity sped the transition from small, family-operated mills to large operations.
- d. Railroad spur served industrial users on the property.
- e. In 1908, brothers Hamlin and Charles McCormick saw the potential of the town’s strategic river location and proceeded to build several timber-related factories. As a result, the population of St. Helens exploded, the commercial core was revived, and the surrounding residential area rapidly developed.²⁶
- The McCormicks purchased the Muckle family mill, which burned in 1904, and established the St. Helens Lumber Company in 1909.
 - St. Helens Shipbuilding Company was started in 1912.
 - The first ship to be built at the new Sauvie Island shipyard was the *Multnomah* in 1912.
 - The company also built the steam schooners: *Merced*, *Celilo*, *Wampama* and *Everett*; and the motor ships: *City of Portland*, *S.A. Allard*, *City of St. Helens*, and others.
 - When the *City of Portland* was completed in 1916, it was the largest wooden single-deck vessel ever built at the time. It was 278 feet long and weighed 1,600 tons. Two million feet of lumber was used in its construction.²⁷

- St. Helens Creosoting Plant, established in 1913
 - Columbia County Lumber Company, established in 1914
 - St. Helens Wood Products Company, established in 1923
 - St. Helens Pulp & Paper, established in 1926
 - Fir-Tex Insulating Board Company, established in 1930
- f. Three of the former McCormick businesses later continued under different ownership:
- Boise Cascade purchased the former St. Helens Lumber Co. mill site from Pope & Talbot in 1969. Veneer produced at St. Helens was shipped to Boise Cascade's mills in the Medford area for manufacture of plywood panels and engineered wood products. Boise Cascade permanently closed the facility in 2008.
 - Boise Cascade Pulp and Paper (formerly the St. Helens Pulp & Paper Co.). Crown Zellerbach operated the mill from about 1959 to 1965. Boise purchased the mill from Crown Zellerbach in 1965 and permanently closed the facility in 2008.
 - Owens Corning (formerly the Fir-Tex Insulating Board Co.)
- g. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers maintains a safe navigation channel for commerce while also using dredge materials to create newly usable land.
- The natural deepwater port at St. Helens was the farthest upstream ocean-going vessels could travel before the river was dredged.²⁸ Today, the shipping channel is continually maintained to 43 feet depth by dredging by the Corps of Engineers.²⁹
- h. Warrior Rock Lighthouse on Sauvie Island was one of many early lighthouses typically built on headlands or near estuaries in remote locations only accessible by water.³⁰
- The original Warrior Rock Lighthouse was a small, two-story wood-frame structure constructed on top of a sandstone foundation and built in c.1888 by the U.S. Lighthouse Board. It had the oldest fog bell in the Pacific Northwest, which was cast in Philadelphia in 1855.
 - The U.S. Coast Guard replaced the original lighthouse with the existing lighthouse in 1937.
- i. St. Helens' basalt rock quarries were a major industry in the early 1900s. Multiple quarries employed approximately 300 men in 1909.³¹
- Rock was in demand in the early 1900s, and nearby quarries supplied building blocks for the Columbia County courthouse (built in 1906) and cobblestones for Portland streets.³²
 - Columbia basalt was quarried from bluffs along the Columbia River. Paving stones were transported by wagon and loaded onto barges destined for Portland.
 - Skilled stonemasons split rock into brick-shaped pieces of a standard size known as Belgian blocks.
 - Workers in Portland used small Belgian blocks to pave Front Avenue and First and Second streets. These pavers are also visible in some areas of inner Southeast Portland as well.
 - Workers in St. Helens built the Columbia County Courthouse, current city hall, and fine residences with large Belgian blocks.
 - St. Helens' Belgian block industry provided jobs and income to the city until the 1920s when asphalt paving reduced demand.

Footnotes

- ¹ USGS; Bryan
- ² Bjornstad; Ice Age Floods Institute
- ³ Lang
- ⁴ Ibid
- ⁵ NOAA
- ⁶ Travel Portland; Sauvie Island Community Association
- ⁷ Boyd, Wapato Valley Indians; Boyd and Zenk; Hajda, Boyd and Zenk; Lewis
- ⁸ Ibid
- ⁹ National Park Service; Boyd, Wapato Valley Indians
- ¹⁰ Boyd, Wapato Valley Indians
- ¹¹ Boyd, Wapato Valley Indians
- ¹² Ibid
- ¹³ Ames; Boyd, Wapato Valley Indians; National Park Service
- ¹⁴ Lewis; Smith; City of St. Helens
- ¹⁵ Ames; Boyd, Wapato Valley Indians; Boyd & Zenk; Hajda, Boyd & Zenk; Lewis
- ¹⁶ Boyd, Wapato Valley Indians; Boyd & Zenk
- ¹⁷ Boyd, Wapato Valley Indians
- ¹⁸ Boyd, Cathlapotle
- ¹⁹ Ames; Fulton
- ²⁰ Smith
- ²¹ Fromm
- ²² Smith; City of St. Helens
- ²³ Ibid
- ²⁴ Ibid
- ²⁵ Fulton
- ²⁶ Fulton; NPS
- ²⁷ CCHMA, Launching of the City of Portland.
- ²⁸ From Dan Cary comments; still searching for source to verify this
- ²⁹ Port of Portland
- ³⁰ Salem
- ³¹ Fulton
- ³² Smith; City of St. Helens

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----- Living in St Helens, 1844-1853. St. Helens Library poster. Provided by Les Watters.

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Lancaster blockhouse in St Helens. Provided by Les Watters.

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