

Butteville: The Tale of a River Town

When Rob Forrest took over management of the Butteville General Store, he didn't realize he would be bitten by the history bug. He is now our expert on Butteville history. Here is a little of what he has discovered.

Most visitors to Champoeg State Heritage Area know Butteville only as the little oasis at the end of the bike path. In fact, Butteville was once a thriving river port with several stores, schools, churches, warehouses, a livery service, vinegar factory, and other commercial services. As you travel the bike path to Butteville, picture what it would have been like to go by sternwheeler. Imagine the town of Champoeg being swept down the river beside you!

Butteville's early residents were mostly French-speaking Canadians. I found an 1851 letter complaining that doing business in Butteville was almost impossible without the ability to speak French. Butteville competed with Champoeg for river commerce until the disastrous flood of 1861, which damaged Butteville but destroyed Champoeg. From then on, it was Butteville that filled the need for French Prairie trade and services. But near the turn of the 20th century, Butteville's fortunes plummeted as river commerce was replaced with the more-efficient railway, which passed Butteville by.

Some structures from old Butteville are still standing. These include the General Store—the oldest operating store in Oregon—the small garage across the street which was formerly a tavern, and the W. R. Scheurer house, a large, gray, Victorian place on the left as you go down to the old sternwheeler landing. Scheurer, one of Butteville's most prominent residents, controlled river shipping from this area, and owned two warehouses that once sat on either side of his house. The Butteville General Store was first operated by J. J. Ryan in the 1860s. (Josie Ryan, named in the photo below, was his son.) Several photos from the early days of Butteville can be seen in the store's Heritage Room.

If you have time, visit the interesting Pioneer Cemetery on Case Road. Laid to rest are several key figures in the early history of both Butteville and Champoeg, including Donald Manson, original owner of the park's Manson Farmstead. Enjoy your visit to Butteville, and if you want to talk history, come on into the store and ask for me.

—Rob Forrest

Manager, Butteville General Store & Forrest Gallery



Butteville in 1910. These simple one- and two-story white clapboard buildings are probably similar to the ones that were built in Champoeg. Notice the absence of pavement, landscaping, and electricity.

Old Butteville tells us about old Champoeg

What did the town of Champoeg look like? If it had survived the flooding river, what would it be like today? The best answers might be found downstream in Butteville, another small river town that did survive. On your next visit to the General Store, take this guide with you and see how the town has changed during the last century.

In the photo above:

The General Store is the building on the far right: "Josie Ryan General Merchandise." The adjoining saloon, featuring Weinhard's Beer, was where the store's deck now stands. The next building down, an Oddfellows Hall, was on what is now the store's lawn. The church-like building, which was across the east-west street, was actually a Masonic Temple. A small house stands there now.

The end of the street dipped down to the Willamette River and the steamboat landing. Although this area is now grown with trees, it is still public access, and you may go take a look. This path was once followed by large quantities of produce, merchandise, farm animals and people.

The only surviving structure from the left side of the photo is the small building—another saloon—with a few men standing in front of it. This is now a resident's garage. At the very left edge of the photo you can see the corner of a porch. This was Butteville's hotel. The hotel advertised the naturally-occurring stream behind the building—a stream that now runs through a culvert.

—Brian Z. Snyder