

River Rivals: Champoeg and Butteville

The sudden and dramatic destruction of the town of Champoeg left us with two mysteries: what did the town look like, and what would have happened if the town had survived? The neighboring town of Butteville gives us some clues.



Brian Z Snyder

Butteville thrived after Champoeg was destroyed in 1861. The Historic Butteville Store, which now belongs to the park, is the only business that has survived from those times.

The river provided. In the 1850s—in Champoeg’s heyday—wheat drove the town’s economy. Wheat was the primary crop of the farms on French Prairie, the area surrounding Champoeg. The only way for farmers to get their wheat to market was to ship it down the river on steamboats; railways had not yet arrived, and the awful roads were out of the question.

Champoeg, right on the Willamette River, was a natural shipping point. The town had three steamboat landings, and it provided services for farmers and other people who were traveling through: stores, a post office, a hotel, blacksmiths, livery stables, stage coach lines, and various sorts of entertainment (mostly involving alcohol and tobacco). The town also provided for the needs of the people

who lived there: a doctor, churches, a school, and meeting places for civic organizations such as the Masons.

There were hopes that Champoeg would someday become an important city. But at its height it had only 200 residents, and in all probability, this was as large as it was going to become under the wheat-and-steamboat economy. Also, it had rivals. Fewer than three miles downstream the town of Butteville was siphoning off shipping business.

Butteville was smaller than Champoeg: only one steamboat landing, fewer services, and

fewer people. But it had its advantages. At a time when three or four miles on land were a significant distance, Butteville was more convenient for the

Key Concepts

- The small river towns of Champoeg and Butteville competed for shipping business from the surrounding French Prairie. Only Butteville was left after the 1861 flood.
- Butteville’s economy depended on the river’s steamboat traffic. When that ended in the 1920s, Butteville’s economy collapsed.
- Butteville can help us imagine what Champoeg was like, and what would have happened to it if it had survived the flood.

farmers who lived nearby. Also, there is evidence that Butteville catered to French-speakers, and many of the area's early farmers were French Canadians. But its ultimate advantage was its altitude. Most of the town was higher than Champoeg.

And the river took away

In December, 1861, the Willamette River flooded to a level that is still a record today. Butteville lost its riverside buildings and infrastructure. Champoeg lost everything. Soon after, the Reverend S.M. Fackler described the disaster in a letter to the editors of the Episcopalian journal, The Spirit of the Missions (July, 1862:207):

You have heard from the Bishop that Champoeg is destroyed—not a house left. This is a great loss to us, as we had a favorable beginning there. Nearly all our communicants lived there and near. It is not likely that the place will ever be rebuilt. It was quite remarkable that there was no loss of life, as the houses were swept off in the night, and men, women and children had to be taken

in two small boats at several trips, across a very rapid current, to the high land about a third of a mile distant. The night was pitch dark, and nearly the whole distance the boats had to pass, was filled with driftwood; many of the fir-logs being two hundred feet long. The school-house, which Mr. Newell, one of the first settlers here, had kindly given to us, and which we have used so long as a place of worship, went off to the tolling of its own bell. I had hoped that the bell would be found, but as yet nothing has been heard of it. The houses near the bank of the river went down the main stream, but those back went down an open space between the timber on the river-bank and the high land, and were broken and mangled with such a mass of drift-wood that but little of any value has been saved from the wreck. If the bell is found, it will be convenient for the church in Butteville, where one is much needed.

Champoeg's loss was Butteville's gain. The bell was found, and still hangs in a small Butteville church. Everything else that Champoeg provided

continued on Page 4



Salem (Oregon) Public Library, Historic Photograph Collections

The Butteville waterfront in 1905, as seen from across the river. The two riverside warehouses used chutes to send bagged grain down to steamboats. The Butteville store (not visible) is two blocks up the rutted street. The store and the ornate Victorian house toward the right still exist, but little else has survived to the present.



Butteville in 1910. These simple one- and two-story white clapboard buildings are probably similar to the ones that were built at Champoeg. Notice: no pavement, landscaping, or electricity.

On your next visit to the Historic Butteville Store, take this handout with you and see how the town has changed during the last century.

The Historic Butteville Store is on the far right: “Josie Ryan General Merchandise.” The adjoining saloon, featuring Weinhard’s Beer, is 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 is across the east-west street, was actually a Masonic Temple. A small house stands there now.

The end of the street dips 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 crowded with people, farm animals, and wagons bearing produce and merchandise.

The only remaining structure on the left side of the photo is the small building—a 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 is the corner of a porch. This was Butteville’s hotel, which advertised the naturally-occurring stream behind. The stream is still here, but it runs invisibly through a culvert.

shifted to Butteville as well. But the town's good times didn't last.

In the 1870s, a railway pushed south from Portland, passing some miles to the east (it runs through Aurora). A significant amount of river shipping was lost to the railway, and Butteville stagnated. By the 1920s, improved roads and motor vehicles brought an end to the steamboat era entirely. Butteville's economy collapsed. The only surviving business was the Butteville General Store (now the park's Historic Butteville Store), which became a sort of rural convenience store, pumping gas and selling bread and sundries to the people who lived nearby.

What did Champoeg look like?

In a stagnant economy, people can't afford to build, so they make do with the structures they have. Consequently, even though the 1910 photo of Butteville (*previous page*) was taken 50 years after the flood, it can help us imagine what Champoeg's downtown area may have been like.

Like Butteville, Champoeg had white clapboard buildings (and probably some older log structures too). It had dirt streets, muddy in winter and dusty in summer. It had, as in the photo, stores, saloons, and wooden sidewalks—where there were sidewalks at all. It, too, had some two-story buildings; the tallest building in town had a store on the ground floor and a Masonic Temple on the second floor.

This photo, however, lacks a sense of bustle and business. In Champoeg you would have seen more people, horses and wagons (and maybe chickens and

dogs), as well as stacks of goods outside the stores or by the landing, waiting to be shipped.

What if Champoeg had survived?

When you look at Butteville today, you see a handful of historic buildings, but most of the development is recent. Most likely, this is the best that could have happened to Champoeg. Or it might have suffered the same fate as Fairfield, or Lincoln, or any number of other little towns that depended on river traffic for their existence. By now it might have dwindled to a few old, decrepit houses, or maybe even disappeared entirely.

So perhaps Champoeg is better off being what it is: a mysterious lost town that fascinates thousands of visitors, rather than a forgotten, empty field that no one cares about.

Further Reading

- **Champoeg: Place of Transition** by John A. Hussey, printed by the Oregon Historical Society in Portland, 1967. This book is our primary source of historical information about Champoeg. Although out of print, it can be found in libraries and in used book stores such as Powell's Books.
- To learn more about the 1861 flood, read the handouts called "The End of the Town of Champoeg" and "A Personal Account of the 1861 Flood, as experienced by eight-year-old Mary Higley."

The development of this material was made possible through a grant from the Helen E. Austin Pioneer Fund of The Oregon Community Foundation. More topics are available at the Champoeg State Heritage Area Visitor Center, or download copies at www.Champoeg.org



© 2008 Friends of Historic Champoeg
503.678.1649 info@champoeg.org

Research & Writing: Brian Z. Snyder
Graphic design: Ann Virtu Snyder

