

Local History



The City of Independence is the third largest urban area in Polk County, Oregon. It is located twelve miles southwest of Salem, on the west bank of the Willamette River. It was known as the "Hop Capital of the World" from the late 1890's to the 1940's. The first group of wagon trains to arrive in Independence set out from Missouri in May, 1844, following the Platte River to Fort Laramie and continuing on the Oregon Trail to the city of The Dalles. At this point, they loaded onto boats, traveling the Columbia River, taking them around the Cascades, then continuing on the Oregon Trail arriving in Independence in June of 1845.

Among the members of the party were several families from Council Bluffs, Iowa, led by John Thorp. His son, Elvin staked a claim just north of Ash Creek, and in the southeast corner of the claim platted a small town site. Today, this area is referred to as either "Old Town" or "Thorp's Town".

Mrs. Thomas Burbank, the wife of an early pioneer who settled several miles southwest of the town site, is credited with suggesting the name of the Missouri town of Independence for the new settlement. Not only was it the starting point for many emigrants who came across the Oregon Trail, but also one source reports this as Thorp's hometown. Thorp consented to the name on the condition that the Burbanks move to the new town and build a store. The town flourished, as it was in a strategic transportation location due to access to the Willamette River. The town's success ended abruptly after the flood of 1861, leaving the town devastated. The residents were apprehensive about rebuilding on the original location, and plans for a new town began.

Henry Hill arrived in the area in 1847; on November 14th, he claimed a one square mile Donation Land Claim south of Ash Creek, and opened a log cabin store. After the 1861 flood, many residents wanted Hill to plat a new town, which was immediately to the south of Thorp's Town of Independence, but was on higher, flatter ground. In 1867 Hill platted 40 acres for a town site which became known as Henry Hill's Town of Independence.

By February 26, 1885, Thorp's and Hill's Towns of Independence were incorporated. The following decade of the 1880's brought prosperity and growth to the community. Most of the major buildings standing today were constructed during this period. It was also during this time that the town was officially incorporated. A city government was formed, and the first City employee, John Bohannon, was hired as City watchman and marshal at \$45.00 per month. A Mayor-Council form of government was established, and is still the form of government today.

After this burst of activity, Independence settled into the business of being a quiet, yet prosperous Willamette Valley river town. Its strategic location made it a valuable transportation point for the burgeoning lumber industry. But, during the 1920's and '30's, Independence saw a hop industry grow to such large proportions, that by 1946 Independence was known as being Independence the center of the most concentrated hop district in the world. During hop harvesting season the population of Independence swelled by 40,000 – 50,000 hop pickers. Unfortunately, the bottom of the hop market dropped out, and Independence settled back into peaceful existence.

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In 1989, a Historic District was formed in the City of Independence, and this District was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. This 30-block area is located on the west bank of the Willamette River, and retains much of the early character and architecture from the 1880's to the 1920's.

For an analysis of Independence's history excerpted from the 1982 National Register Listing, please [follow this link](#)

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Supporting Documents

 [Story of Independence](#)

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