

Fort Yamhill State Heritage Area

Walking Tour



Beginning in the late 1700s, the lives of northwestern Native Americans, such as the Yamhill Kalapuya who had lived in this area for thousands of years, were disrupted by the arrival of the Spanish, British, French Canadians and Americans. The explorers were lured by the prospect of fur, land and gold.

Settlers' hostilities toward the native peoples brought four U.S. Army officers and some 80 enlisted men to the Yamhill River Valley with a unique mission—to prevent violence rather than engage in battle. By 1855, hostilities had grown so fierce that Joel Palmer, Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Oregon, feared for the lives of all the native people living in the western region. In a letter to his superior, Palmer called the murders of southern Oregon Native Americans a “war of extermination.”



Panels placed along the trail share glimpses of fort life.

“The embattled eminence of Fort Yamhill never presented a quieter or lovelier scene. The national colors drooped languidly from the peak of the towering staff of the parade ground, and close by an aged, outspreading oak, among whose glossy leaves and yellow tassels the spirit of peace was softly brooding, the rude and angular block house arose like a somber but picturesque reminiscence of forgotten violence. The garrison buildings and the neat picket fence that enclosed them had just received fresh coats of paint and whitewash and were displayed in beautiful relief against the green phalanx of firs that crowded up to the crest of the hill from the east like a storming column of grenadiers.”

Sam Simpson, *The Willing Captive*, 1885



Student archaeologists unearth the foundation of a fort building.



This heritage area is a joint project of the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department and the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon.



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A perfect location for a fort

Strategically located on a saddle between two hills and along the main passage into the Grand Ronde Reservation, Fort Yamhill was established to serve as a buffer between the settlers and Native Americans. The notch between the hills forced travelers through a narrow area and helped regulate who entered and left the reservation. From the upper reaches of the fort grounds, soldiers had magnificent views of the Grand Ronde Valley to the northwest and the Yamhill River Valley to the south and east.

“A stately flagstaff, supported by two gleaming field pieces, stood in the center of the parade ground.”

Sam Simpson,
Maya, the Medicine Girl, 1898

The fort was manned by regular military soldiers from 1856-1861, when all members of the regular army were ordered East to fight in the Civil War. Plans were made to close the fort because it lacked strategic military importance. Oregon was strongly sympathetic toward the South, however, and the United States Army decided a Union presence was necessary. White settlers near the reservation also opposed closure of the fort, fearing hostilities with the Native Americans. Volunteer citizen soldiers from Company D, Fourth California Infantry replaced the regular army.

Removing the exterior of a remodeled farmhouse revealed the framework of an original officer's quarter.



Relics of daily life.

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Fort Yamhill Blockhouse after it was moved to Grand Ronde, Oregon.

Early Oregon Events

- 1770s-1790s — Spanish and British explorers arrive on the Northwest's Pacific Coast by ship, bringing the first wave of diseases that devastate Native American populations.
- 1800
- 1805 — Lewis & Clark reach the Pacific
- 1810
- 1811-1830s — British, American fur companies arrive
- 1820
- 1830 — Flu-like epidemics strike Oregon Native Americans
- 1834 — Reverend Jason Lee builds mission, now Willamette Mission State Park
- 1842 — 500 Americans, French Canadians live in Willamette Valley
- 1843 — Oregon Provisional government organized at Champoeg, now Champoeg State Heritage Area
- 1830
- 1843-1850s — Settlers come for land
- 1848 — Oregon Territory established
- 1840
- 1850 — Oregon Indian Bill directs Native Americans onto reservations; Oregon Donation Land Law allows government to seize all non-reservation Indian land and redistribute to settlers
- 1850
- 1851-1855 — Western Oregon tribes and bands sign treaties with the United States government, giving up their homelands in exchange for reservation life and government promises, many unfulfilled.
- 1856 — Fort Yamhill established
- 1860
- 1857 — Grand Ronde Reservation formally established
- 1859 — Oregon becomes 33rd state
- 1861-1865 — U.S. Civil War
- 1870
- 1866 — Fort Yamhill closes, property auctioned

Historic Remnants

In 1856 Fort Yamhill was the first post built adjacent to the proposed Grand Ronde Reservation. Lieutenant William Hazen had established camp at the site and supervised the initial construction of the quarters and barracks. However, a young second lieutenant, Philip H. Sheridan, is credited with bringing the work to an early completion. The 25-year-old Sheridan used Native Americans as laborers and hired civilian carpenters, masons and painters.

The fort contained 24 separate structures arranged in clusters by function. No known photos of the buildings exist, although written descriptions describe them as whitewashed, in the “cottage” style with vertical board and batten siding, and peaked roofs with overhanging eaves. Foundations were made of stones, and chimneys were made with locally-manufactured bricks.

What we know of the fort and buildings today comes from archaeological research, historical maps and documents, a soldier’s perspective as written in his journal and stories written by the son of the Sutler’s Store manager.

1 Sutler’s Store

The sutler’s store provided goods and supplies for the military, Native Americans and settlers, and was one of the few places where the three groups crossed paths. A sutler, or civilian storekeeper, was authorized to operate a general store near a military outpost. With what little money they had, Native Americans bought bare necessities—items negotiated by treaties, but not provided. The native community ended up paying twice for their supplies.

The store was 64-feet long and 17-feet wide, with a front-porch on the north. The front door was flanked on either side by windows.

Early Oregon entrepreneur Benjamin Simpson was at one time the manager of the Fort Yamhill Sutler’s Store. His son Sam reportedly worked in the store, and he later became one of Oregon’s most popular poets. His vivid descriptions of fort life are chronicled in *Maya, the Medicine Girl* and *The Willing Captive*.

“The threatening attitude of the community led me to apprehend a general and combined attack upon the camp of friendly Indians, located at the Grand Ronde, and the slaughtering or driving into hostile position all who might be residing in the valley.”

Letter from Joel Palmer, Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Oregon, to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, April 11, 1856.

2 Original Officer’s Quarters (under restoration)

Beneath this 1915-style building lies an original structure from the fort era. Only two original buildings remain: the other is the blockhouse. Long thought to be an “Arts and Crafts” style house with no significance to the fort, this farm house was scheduled to be razed. A park ranger recognized the building as a modified mid-nineteenth century military structure.

Moved to this location prior to 1915, all siding and exterior casings from the military period were removed except the vertical boards of the military board and batten system. The marks on the remaining vertical boards are a clue to the building’s military history. Other internal architectural features all point to the building’s military function, including a fireplace position that is consistent with Officer’s Quarters floor plans.

The military-era building that is the core of the 1915 remodel, has long been referred to as the home of Phil Sheridan. As late as 1938, *The Sheridan Sun* mentioned

a building still standing, “known now and for a long time as the ‘Sheridan house.’” Sheridan was 2nd Lieutenant, Fourth Regiment Infantry, Philip Henry Sheridan, who served at Fort Yamhill and Fort Hoskins in Benton County from 1856-1861. Sheridan went on to serve in the Civil War, best known for his campaign in the Shenandoah Valley. He was later promoted in 1884 to Lieutenant General succeeding William T. Sherman. In 1888, he was conferred the grade of General of the Army while still on active duty.

3 Blacksmith and Carpenter Shops

The blacksmith and carpenter shops were housed in a single building. The blacksmith shop was 20 feet by 20 feet, with the forge located in a corner. The carpenter shop was 12 feet by 18 feet.

4 Horse Stables and Granary

A fenced pasture surrounded a complex of four buildings and a shed. The stable was between 75-feet to 100-feet long and 25-feet wide, with 31 stalls.

5 Bake House and Laundresses’ Houses

The bake house was 16 feet by 20 feet with a large chimney. The laundresses lived in five buildings, each 16 feet by 20 feet.

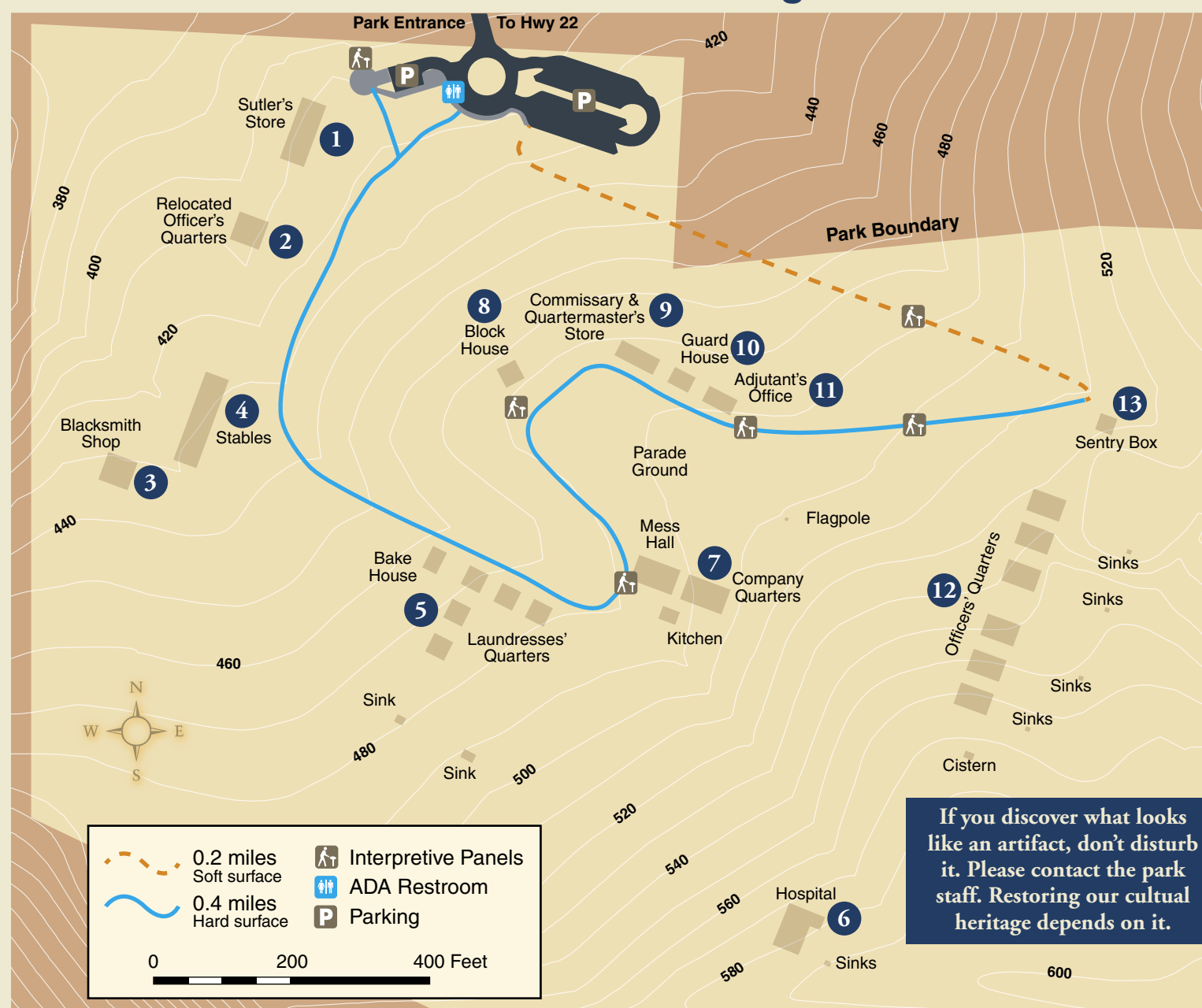
6 Hospital

The hospital had two wings, one added after the original. The northern wing contained two rooms, one 10 feet by 14 feet and the other 16 feet by 14 feet. The southern wing also had two rooms, each 11 feet by 26 feet. Each wing had a central chimney for heat.

7 Mess Room, Company Quarters and Kitchen

As many as 69 soldiers lived in the 30-foot by 50-foot company barracks, with a porch built along the north side, facing the parade grounds. The mess room was 30 feet by 40 feet, also with a porch facing the parade grounds and steps that ran the length of the building. The 16-foot by 20-foot kitchen had a large hearth. The soldiers shared a combined living space of 3,020 square feet, as opposed to a single building for each officer living in the Officers’ Quarters.

Fort Yamhill State Heritage Area



9 Commissary & Quartermaster’s Storehouse

The 24-foot by 40-foot commissary and quartermaster’s storehouse held the fort’s equipment, supplies and provisions.

10 Guard House

The Guard House represented discipline and order. Enlisted men and Native Americans were punished at the guard house, sometimes for the same offense, but rarely the same punishment. Drunkenness resulted in a stint in the guard house for both, but the native peoples also endured lashings and shaved heads. The single room building was 16 feet by 20 feet and contained three prisoner cells. As many as 22 prisoners at a time were held here. Early documents mention that the building contained a stove and bench, as well as assorted hand tools.

11 Adjutant’s Office

The administration office was the operational hub for the fort. The building was 16 feet by 25 feet and contained two rooms with a connecting door.

12 Officers’ Quarters

Each officer lived in a separate house in relative comfort, compared to the soldiers in the company quarters. Four of the buildings were 1,462 square feet with a front porch facing the parade ground and an enclosed side porch. The front two rooms were 15 and one-half feet by 22 feet and were joined by a door next to the hearth. Another room attached to the rear measured 11 feet by 22 feet. A 14-foot by 16-foot kitchen with a small chimney and two 8-foot by 8-foot pantries completed the house.

Two of the buildings were unfinished and had different dimensions and lacked the kitchen addition.

The placement of the Officers’ Quarters next to the sentry box, looking out over the fort grounds, isolated the officers from the soldiers and served as a reminder of their rank.

13 Sentry Box

A sentry box and gate that crossed the main road leading from the Willamette Valley to the coast marked the official entrance to the fort. This route generally followed the route of the Old Killimuck Trail, a path used by Native Americans. The trail aligned with the topography from the South Yamhill River bottom over the saddle in the hill toward the coast.

Fort to Heritage Area

After the fort was abandoned in 1866, the buildings were auctioned off to the public. The government did not fare well in the proceedings: buildings that cost \$36,053 to build were sold for \$1,260. For the next 121 years, families farmed some of the land, and Douglas-fir trees and blackberries overran the rest. In 1971, the fort was listed to the National Register of Historic Places. The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department acquired the site in 1988, and opened the State Heritage Area in 2006.

Most of the soldiers and military volunteers had entered service hoping to fight for their country in battle. Instead, they fought rain, boredom, hunger, and mistreatment from their superior officers. Cramped living spaces did little to improve morale. The soldiers’ main duty was policing the reservation, and they often complained that chasing after Native Americans was no part of a soldier’s duty.

8 Blockhouse, Parade Grounds and Flagpole

The blockhouse was an imposing reminder that the fort protected and enforced Grand Ronde Agency regulations and military policies. In contrast to the whitewashed buildings, the blockhouse was built of square hand-hewn timbers. The blockhouse was 20 feet by 20 feet and the top story was rotated 45 degrees. The blockhouse was built well—it is the only original fort structure that remains mainly intact. The blockhouse was sold for \$2.50 at the public auction and moved first to the Grand Ronde Agency and later to Dayton, Ore., where it stands today.

The flagpole stood in the geographical center of the rectangular fenced in area.

The people of the Grand Ronde Reservation

Twenty-seven tribes and bands gave up their homelands during a time of tension and fear. In exchange, treaties promised materials, education and reservation land, but many of the promises were not kept. The people living on the reservation endured daily hardships and desperate conditions, and were forced to adapt to rules contrary to their cultural habits.

Tualatin Kalapuya	Umpqua
Marysville Kalapuya	Cow Creek Umpqua
Muddy Creek Kalapuya	Thomas Band Chinook
Long Tom Kalapuya	Williams Band Chinook
Yamhill Kalapuya	Johns Band Chinook
Luckiamute Kalapuya	Clackamas Chinook
Calapooia Kalapuya	Santiam Molalla
Mohawk Kalapuya	Southern Molalla
Winnefella Kalapuya	Rogue River
Santiam Kalapuya	Shasta
Tekopa Kalapuya	Salmon River Tillamook
Chafan Kalapuya	Nehalem Band of Tillamook
Yoncalla Kalapuya	Nestucka Band of Tillamook
Klickitat	

Names provided by the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon.

Oregon Historical Society, #022580



Chief Halo of the Yoncalla Kalapuya, circa late 1800s.