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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide:    Locally:   

Applicable National

Register Criteria: A X B    C X D

Criteria Considerations

(Exceptions): A    B    C    D    E    F    G

NHL Criteria:

1, 4

NHL Theme(s):

I. Peopling Places

3. migrations from outside and within

4. community and neighborhood

III. Expressing Cultural Values

5. architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design

6. popular and traditional culture

V. Developing the American Economy

3. transportation and communication

4. workers and work culture

6. exchange and trade

Areas of Significance:

Architecture, Commerce, Entertainment/Recreation, Exploration/Settlement, Maritime History, Social History, Transportation

Period(s) of Significance:

1857-1929

Significant Dates:

N/A

Significant Person(s):

N/A

Cultural Affiliation:

N/A

Architects/Builders:

E. M. Burton, Architect; Charles Ertz, Architect; Aaron H. Gould, Absalom B. Hallock, Architects; Justus Krumbein, Architect; Edgar Lazarus, Architect; Architect; Ion Lewis, Architect; Harold D. Marsh, Architect; McCaw &amp; Martin, Architects; E. B. McNaughton, Architect; Pickles &amp; Sutton, Architects; W. W. Piper, Architect; Piper &amp; Burton, Architects; P. H. Schulderman, Builder; Olin J. Warner, Sculptor; J. M. Wells, Architect; D. L. Williams, Architect; Warren Williams, Architect; William Marcy Whidden, Architect; Whidden &amp; Lewis, Architects.

Historic Contexts:

XVI. Architecture

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G. Renaissance Revival (1830-1920)

3. Cast Iron: Gothic, Romanesque, Renaissance

XII. Business

D. Trade

1. Import-Export

2. Wholesale

E. Finance and Banking

1. Commercial Banks

9. General Finance

L. Shipping and Transportation

XXX. American Ways of Life

D. Urban Life

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**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.****INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANCE**

*Portland's Skidmore-Old Town marks the site where the city started and then flourished. It contains buildings in a variety of high Victorian styles, many made of cast iron, comprising one of the most impressive commercial blocks (sic) on the west coast.*

-“Skidmore/Old Town Historic District,” National Historic Landmark Nomination, 1977

Portland's Skidmore/Old Town Historic District is nationally significant under National Historic Landmark Criterion 1 for its historical associations with the early development and economic growth of the Pacific Northwest's most important urban center of the last half of the nineteenth century. Portland's pioneer merchant-entrepreneurs, speculating and capitalizing on the city's strategic location at the head of ocean-going navigation on the Willamette River and its connection to the greater Columbia River system, transformed it from a stump-strewn clearing to the cultural, financial, trade and transportation hub of the Pacific Northwest—second only to San Francisco as a “metropolis” of the Far West. Its mercantile houses, commission agents, steamship companies and financial institutions, clustered along Front and First streets in and near the present Skidmore/Old Town Historic District, supplied the goods, services and trade connections that not only supported the development of western Oregon, but that of the greater Pacific Slope region. Skidmore/Old Town's historic commercial buildings memorialize Portland's position as a commercial entrepôt that linked a large dependant hinterland to national and global economic systems, and highlight the sometimes under-emphasized role of key urban centers in facilitating the settlement and development of the western United States. The district also served as a major West Coast locus for the provision of important “social services” and related urban functions oriented to the working classes and in some cases ethnic minority groups, including: lodging for itinerant workers, sailors, and loggers; union halls; reading rooms; missions and chapels; ethnic publishing houses; and various popular entertainment and vice venues like saloons, gambling halls, burlesque houses, and brothels. Finally, Skidmore/Old Town's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century transition from commercial core to Skid Road—an association it has yet to fully shed—exemplifies the changes in urban spatial organization seen in port cities across the nation whereby central business districts and high-status residential areas migrated away from historic waterfront areas which subsequently suffered from neglect, disinvestment, and loss of historic fabric through public “improvement” projects.

The 1857 erection of the brick and cast-iron Hallock and McMillen Building, the earliest surviving structure in the district and the second-oldest building on its original site in the city, marks the beginning of Skidmore/Old Town's period of significance. Over the next three decades, Portland solidified its position as the primary urban center of the Northwest, built on the foundation of its trade-centered economy. As a part of the city's commercial core along and near the Willamette River highway, Skidmore/Old Town was central to this role.

However, beginning slowly in the late nineteenth century and accelerating in the early twentieth century, growth steered away from the Skidmore/Old Town area, and neglect set in for the city's earliest commercial district, with its old-fashioned buildings and its increasingly gritty, flood-prone waterfront location. The status of the area declined and its mix of businesses and building uses changed, as Portland's central business district shifted to the south and west. In the late 1920s, and continuing into the 1970s, a wave of large-scale public works projects and accompanying building demolitions significantly altered the physical and economic fabric

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of the district. The first of these was the completion in 1926 of the new Burnside Bridge and the related widening of West Burnside Street. This resulted in the removal of significant portions of the district's Burnside-facing buildings and turned the street into a major auto arterial that bisected the district and complicated access to its businesses. This intervention was followed in 1929 by the construction of a seawall and sewer interceptor along the Willamette River. Marking the end of the period of significance, this major infrastructure project necessitated the removal of most of Front Street's by-then decaying wharves—structures once central to the city's economic vitality and civic identity—a clear expression of the district's shift away from a maritime orientation. Dozens more cast-iron buildings were removed in the 1940s to allow for the construction of the Harbor Drive freeway.

In the late twentieth century, however, public sentiment began to shift as the economic and cultural significance of the district's historic structures became better understood and valued. Concerted advocacy, policy initiatives and public and private investment arrested the demolition trend and inaugurated a still-continuing era of preservation, renovation and rehabilitation. While many resources have been lost, a significant and cohesive collection of historic structures remain. Together, they remind us not only of a "grand era" of commercial architecture, but of the critical role Portland played as a regional metropolis—a financial, mercantile and transportation hub integral to the settlement and growth of the greater Pacific Slope.

The district is equally significant under National Historic Landmark Criterion 4 for the exceptional architectural values of its mid- and late-nineteenth-century cast-iron commercial buildings—one of the finest collections in the nation and perhaps the most outstanding in the Far West. These two- to four-story, primarily Italianate structures work in concert with sympathetically scaled and designed late nineteenth-century Richardsonian Romanesque and early twentieth-century buildings to define the rich urban character that marks it as a national treasure. With elaborate decorative elements echoing Italian Renaissance designs, Skidmore/Old Town's "Commercial Palaces" notably contribute to Portland's architectural distinctiveness and collectively reflect both the economic success of its early businesses, and the high cultural aspirations of its citizens and leaders.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE**

### **Chinookans, Furs and Forts: the Lower Columbia Region to 1840**

For centuries prior to first contact with Europeans and Americans, Chinookan-speaking peoples, including the Clackamas and the Multnomah, and the Kalapuyan-speaking Tualatin, inhabited the lower Columbia basin in the vicinity of the area now known as Portland. Chinookans inhabited both sides of the Columbia with villages, camps, resource areas, and trade routes located along portions of the lower Willamette. A large population resided seasonally on Sauvie Island, at the Willamette's mouth, where Lewis and Clark reported encountering 2,400 individuals living in 1806.<sup>38</sup> Chinookan societies relied on the bounty of the region's temperate climate, rich forests and plains, and extensive river systems. Important staples included salmon and wappato, a nutritious root. Cedar trees offered basic material for products such as clothing, water craft, and large plank lodges. Active trade networks were maintained among the inland, valley and coastal cultures of the area.<sup>39</sup>

European exploration in the Northwest began in the sixteenth-century with the tentative approaches of Spanish and British navigators along the Pacific coast. With the 1792 sighting of the Columbia River by the American Robert Gray, a centuries-long search for a great western waterway that promised significant economic benefits

<sup>38</sup> Carl Abbott, *Portland: Gateway to the Northwest* (Northridge, CA: Windsor Publications, 1985), 9.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon DeMarco, *A Short History of Portland* (San Francisco: Lexicos, 1990), 8.

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was rewarded. Fourteen years later, William Clark became the first European-American to sight the mouth of the Willamette, almost 100 miles up the Columbia. Clark's exploration of the river took him as far south as the bluff bearing today's University of Portland.<sup>40</sup>

The first forty years of the nineteenth century in the greater Columbia River region were marked by the rise of a prosperous fur trade, Christian missionary activity, the devastation of native societies, and the beginnings of permanent European-American settlement. The Hudson Bay Company's Fort Vancouver, founded at the confluence of the Columbia and the Willamette in the 1820s, was the Columbia region's most important European outpost and trade center, and served as the first "metropolis of Northwest."<sup>41</sup> The fort was the nerve center for the Columbia fur trade and served as a locus for the exchange of goods and information among and between Europeans, Canadians, Americans and American Indians. While the Hudson Bay Company was averse to agricultural and urban settlement of the Oregon Country, which it felt was incompatible with the fur trade, Fort Vancouver and its Chief Factor John McLoughlin would provide critical respite, provisions, and information to the earliest waves of American settlers, who emerged exhausted, bewildered and occasionally starving from their continental treks.

### **Settling the Valley and the Birth of Portland, 1840 - 1851**

Diseases such as small pox and influenza, introduced by early European contact and transmitted along trade routes, killed vast portions of the Northwest's indigenous population by the late 1830s, devastating Chinookan societies. With an estimated 50 to 90 percent reduction of the indigenous population in the Lower Columbia region, White settlers found little of the native resistance encountered by their counterparts in other parts of the continent when major settlement of the Willamette Valley began in the early 1840s.<sup>42</sup> Encouraged by prospects of "free" land, new markets and the emerging ideology of "Manifest Destiny," pioneers poured into the Oregon Territory, drawn especially to the fertile Willamette Valley. The first land claimed by settlers was generally easily accessible by water, including the Willamette, Tualatin and Yamhill Rivers, in a settlement pattern not uncommon during pre-railroad era western expansion. By 1843, the most significant settlement hugging the lower stretch of the Willamette was Oregon City, 30 miles south of the river's mouth. What would become Portland was merely a glade used by Indians and trappers for respite and trade known as the "The Clearing."<sup>43</sup>

But the potential of the future townsite, relatively free of all-too-common riverside swamps and with plentiful timber for construction, soon caught the attention of speculators. As early as 1840, Massachusetts sea captain John Couch logged an encouraging assessment of the river's depth adjacent to The Clearing, noting its promise of accommodating large crafts—a pivotal element in the future city's early growth. Three years later, William Overton, an 1841 pioneer from Tennessee, established a 640 acre claim at the site, sharing it with 1842 pioneer Asa Lovejoy in order to cover the 30-cent filing fee. The claim included the southern portion of the present-day Skidmore/Old Town Historic District. The following year, a destitute Overton bartered his half of the claim to Oregon City merchant Francis Pettygrove for \$50 worth of provisions to resettle in California.

In 1844 Maine-born Pettygrove and Lovejoy set up a log-built warehouse/wharf/store at the foot of present-day

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<sup>40</sup> Abbott, *Portland: Gateway*, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Dorothy O. Johanson and Charles M. Gates, *Empire of the Columbia: A History of the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 148-154.

<sup>42</sup> DeMarco, *Short History of Portland*, 17; Johansen and Gates, *Empire of the Columbia*, 148-154, 274.

<sup>43</sup> Abbot, *Portland: Gateway*, 15.

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Washington Street, marking the modest beginnings of Portland's rise as a marketing center and port.<sup>44</sup> In 1845, Lovejoy sold his share of the land claim to Benjamin Stark, a young New Orleans-born merchant who had arrived aboard the *Toulon* in charge of a shipment of Eastern goods bound for Pettygrove's warehouse and store. Stark and Pettygrove were instrumental in establishing the city's first major trading pattern, the "triangle trade" between San Francisco, Honolulu and Portland, involving lumber, wheat, salt fish, sugar, and general merchandise.

In 1845, with Pettygrove's store serving as the commercial hub for the tiny settlement and high hopes for the future, Lovejoy hired 1843 pioneer Thomas Brown to plat a grid of sixteen blocks just south of today's Skidmore/Old Town Historic District. Bordered by narrow streets, blocks measuring 200 feet by 200 feet were divided into eight 50-foot by 100-foot lots, setting the scale for future street frontages throughout the early city.<sup>45</sup> In 1849-50, new townsite owner Daniel Lownsdale platted over 100 new blocks, extending the city right to the northern edge of the original Overton claim (the south line of today's Ankeny Street). In 1850, John Couch platted a portion of his claim abutting just to the north in the same pattern (although at an off-set, with streets now running true north-south). Thus by this date, all of the land within the present historic district was platted (though not necessarily improved) with a fine-grained grid that was perhaps more suited to a small village than an aspiring metropolis.

Like all nascent pioneer towns urban plans notwithstanding, 1840s Portland was dominated by the surrounding wilderness. An early diarist described the frontier character of the town in early 1848:

*Portland has two white houses and one brick and three wood colored frame houses and a few cabins ... We traveled four or five miles through the thickest woods I ever saw ... [on an] intolerably bad road ... These woods are infested with wild cats, panthers, bears and wolves.*<sup>46</sup>

The visions and efforts of Portland's early proprietors, unlike those of many other hopeful western speculators, soon began to bear fruit. Utilitarian wood-frame stores, warehouses and hotels, often designed in vernacular interpretations of Classical Revival styles, sprang up rapidly in the modest but growing downtown, which extended south from the southern fringes of Couch's Addition along Front and First Streets, through the current historic district. The location and date of the first structure within the historic district proper is not known with certainty, but was possibly John Couch's warehouse and wharf, constructed by 1849 near the foot of what would become Couch and Davis Streets. One of the first documented businesses within the district was that of Andrew Skidmore (father of the fountain's namesake, Stephen Skidmore), who established the California House hotel in the late 1840s atop his house on First Street, between what is now Burnside and Couch streets. Here he housed his family, ran a general store, and sold insurance.<sup>47</sup> By 1851, as many as thirty businesses were in operation, including Henry Corbett's dry goods store at Front and Oak and William S. Ladd's wholesale liquor business at 46 Front Street. Both men would become leading figures among Portland's economic and political elite.

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<sup>44</sup> Jewel Lansing, *Portland: People, Politics, and Power, 1851-2001* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2003), 1 and 6; MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 8; DeMarco, *Short History of Portland*, 33-35.

<sup>45</sup> Hawkins, *Grand Era of Cast-Iron Architecture*, 24.

<sup>46</sup> Charles H. Carey, *General History of Oregon* (Portland: Metropolitan Press, 1936; reprint, Portland: Binford & Mort, 1971), 655 (reprint edition). The reference to a brick structure at this early period is intriguing, but not supported by other sources known to the authors.

<sup>47</sup> Eugene E. Snyder, *Skidmore's Portland: His Fountain and Its Sculptor* (Portland: Binford & Mort, 1973), 16; MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 19.

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By 1850, the 800-person community was the largest settlement in the Pacific Northwest, but was still very much a frontier village, derided by outsiders as “Stumptown” and “Mudtown.” It was a place where “stumps from fallen firs lay scattered dangerously about Front and First Streets ... humans and animals, carts and wagons slogged through a sludge of mud and water ... sidewalks often disappeared during spring floods.”<sup>48</sup> Portland’s future as the region’s leading city was far from assured. Other valley and river towns, such as Milwaukie, Linnton, Milton, and not least, the venerable Oregon City, competed fiercely for population, business, and the vital transportation and trade services and relationships needed to connect the still isolated area to regional, national and international markets.

**Front Street: Commerce and the Rise of a Metropolis, 1851 - 1880**

*The Far West was more distinctively urban [than the Midwest] in its own way. San Francisco and Portland grew earlier, in comparison with their hinterlands, than Chicago and Detroit; they were the bridgeheads from which the East conquered the wilderness. And they were general headquarters as well, throughout the complex warfare of settlement and development. They collected and paid out the capital that the whole region needed—to water its dry land, to dig its mines, to build its railroads, to collect its ores and crops and ship them back to the East. —Earl Pomeroy, *The Pacific Slope*.*

In the three decades between 1850 and 1880, Portland experienced remarkable population growth and economic expansion. In its first census in 1850, the city’s population was 821 and, like many frontier towns, was predominantly male, with 653 male whites, 164 female whites and four “free colored” individuals. By 1880 the city had grown to 17,577 persons, and, though dwarfed by San Francisco, with a population of 233,959, Portland was the largest city in the Northwest, clearly outdistancing Seattle with its 3,533 persons.<sup>49</sup> Within ten years following incorporation by territorial charter in 1851, Portland opened its first public school, formed a fire department, installed telegraph lines, and established the third gas works on the Pacific Coast.<sup>50</sup> In 1872 the city’s first public transit service was established—a horse and mule-drawn railway running along First Street through Skidmore/Old Town. That same year Portland was lauded as one of the richest cities, per capita, in the country. By 1880, the former village had transitioned into a complete, fully urban community—the “Metropolis of the Northwest.”

In this era, Portland’s downtown, centered on Front and First Streets,<sup>51</sup> developed into the region’s most impressively urbanized area, its substantial three and four-story brick and cast-iron buildings lending the city a

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<sup>48</sup> MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 18-19.

<sup>49</sup> See Table 1 Population of Selected Western Cities 1850-1920, for more population figures and data sources.

<sup>50</sup> City of Portland Auditor’s Office, “Portland Historical Timeline,” <http://www.portlandonline.com/auditor/> (accessed May 19, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> Portland’s first central business district stretched south along Front and First Streets from about North D Street (now NW Davis Street), to about Taylor Street, encompassing today’s Skidmore/Old Town Historic District. The geographic boundaries of the historic district were drawn to encompass an *extant* concentration of downtown Portland’s Italianate, American Romanesque and Commercial Style buildings, dating from the mid-nineteenth through early twentieth centuries. From a strictly historical perspective, however, these boundaries especially along the southern edge of the district, are somewhat artificial as the earliest commercial core was not confined to Skidmore/Old Town, but stretched south to the vicinity of the Yamhill Historic District where another smaller collection of extant early commercial buildings is concentrated. The downtown’s “first” early buildings located south of the present Skidmore/Old Town, including such structures as the Cree Building (1862) and the Ladd and Tilton Bank (1868), have generally not survived, many victims of the Great Fire of 1873 or “uptown” redevelopment pressure in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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metropolitan ambiance surpassed in the Far West only by San Francisco. But Portland's prominence was not limited to mere appearances for it had emerged as the economic capital of the Northwest, that, in Paul Merriam's words "extended its economic influence in important ways so as to dominate leading sectors of the economy of its hinterland—especially in trade, transportation, finance, and manufacturing."<sup>52</sup> Front Street's wholesale merchants, such as Allen & Lewis, Corbett, Failing & Company, and McCracken & Company supplied manufactures, dry goods, groceries and commodities to communities throughout the developing West, from the farms of the Willamette Valley and Columbia Basin to the mining towns of Idaho and the lumber camps of Puget Sound. Many wholesale merchants also operated as commission, consignment and export agents, brokering agricultural commodity transactions. This typically involved extending credit to farmers or grain dealers in advance of expected harvests, and then buying and reselling their products on the San Francisco, East Coast or foreign markets. The Oregon Steam Navigation Company, with its massive warehouse and dock facility between Pine and Ash and a huge fleet of river steamers, monopolized the Columbia-Snake river transportation system as far upriver as Walla Walla and Lewiston, controlling a vital trade link between the Oregon Country and the markets of California, the East Coast, the Far East and Europe. Portland's financial institutions, such as the Ladd & Tilton Bank and the Mortgage Bank of Oregon and Washington, provided the capital and exchange services needed for urban and agricultural land development, farming and commercial growth throughout the northern Pacific Slope, from Portland's growing East Side to the Columbia Basin and the Inland Empire.

### Foundations of a Trade Economy

Central to Portland's emergence as a major West Coast city was its role as a commercial trade center, serving not only the immediate region, but the greater Willamette Valley and eventually the "Inland Empire" of the Columbia River system, stretching into what would become parts of Washington, Idaho, Montana and British Columbia. A number of factors contributed to the city's early mercantile success and set the stage for its growth trajectory. Critical was Portland's ability to take advantage of its geographic location by developing transportation and business connections to both its hinterland and national and international trade networks. Positioned just below the Ross Island sand bars that obstructed ocean-going vessels from navigating further upriver on the Willamette, Portland was a natural trans-shipment point for the Willamette Valley's agricultural products, sent downriver by barge or stern-wheelers and loaded onto ocean-going sailing and steam vessels from the Front Street wharves. In 1868, Judge Matthew Deady noted that "in 1850, shipping began to arrive freely from California and the Sandwich [Hawaiian] Islands. Couch & Co. dispatched the Brig Emma Preston to China ... [in 1851] regular steam communications with San Francisco was established."<sup>53</sup> So too the city was located only a few miles downriver from the first major navigational impediment on the Columbia, "the Cascades," the portage around which would prove to be a critical link in the greater Columbia trade system and which Portland's merchant-elite would fight successfully to monopolize. Another early factor was completion of the Canyon Road in 1853, providing Portland with the best connection of any of the competing upper Willamette towns through the West Hills to the rich farmlands and settlements of the Tualatin Plains and Yamhill Valley.<sup>54</sup>

If Portland was favorably positioned at the deep-water head of an extensive river network with the potential to knit together a vast hinterland, it still needed markets for its commodities, goods and services. The demand for

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Gilman Merriam, *Portland, Oregon, 1840-1890: A Social and Economic History* (PhD diss., University of Oregon, Eugene, 1971), 256.

<sup>53</sup> Matthew Deady, "Portland-On-Wallamet," *Overland Monthly* 1 (1868): 34-43.

<sup>54</sup> Johansen and Gates, *Empire of the Columbia*, 336-350.

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provisions and materiel to fuel the Northwest's sporadic Indian Wars provided an early boost to the fledgling city's traders. Of even greater significance for Portland's economic success was the growth of Western gold and mineral mining. Touched-off by the famous 1848 discoveries near Sutter's Mill in Northern California (which nearly depopulated Portland for a time but also brought enormous profits to the merchants that stayed, as prices in California skyrocketed), the great Northwest mining era stretched into the 1870s and encompassed at least eleven major mining districts and numerous smaller ones throughout Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Nevada, Montana, and British Columbia. Portland was not the only entrepôt serving the vast mining frontier, but it dominated the mining trade north of California in the early phases into the early 1860s. Over time, it was challenged in British Columbia by the rise of Victoria, in the south by Salt Lake City, and from the east by St. Louis and other Midwestern cities (via the Missouri River system and later the ever-westward extension of the railroads). San Francisco, the urban dynamo of the Far West, had a jump on everyone; by the mid 1850s its political sophistication, financial resources, trade connections, and business expertise made it a commercial threat virtually everywhere west of the continental divide. However, throughout the mining era, Portland controlled at least portions of the trade associated with all of the major mining areas north of California, and it firmly retained dominion in the "inner circle" most easily served by the Columbia River, including the Kootenay, Clearwater, Salmon, Powder, and John Day mining districts (see Map MO7).<sup>55</sup>

The mining frontier provided early markets for Oregon's agricultural and lumber products and the imported manufactured goods that were distributed by the wholesale merchant houses beginning to dominate Front Street. In the opposite direction, gold quickly became one of the Portland's most important "exports." Gold dust was shipped downriver from the eastern mines on Oregon Steam Navigation Company boats, usually in the custody of Wells, Fargo & Company agents, whose offices were located on Front Street, north of Stark,<sup>56</sup> where it was assayed and prepared for re-shipment to San Francisco or New York on coastal steamers or ocean vessels docked at the Front Street wharves. In 1864, \$7.6 million in gold was shipped from Portland to San Francisco; in 1865, Wells, Fargo alone shipped over \$6 million in gold from Portland. Smaller amounts of gold were handled by Portland's homegrown Land & Tilton Bank, located at First and Stark.<sup>57</sup>

This two-way commerce with the mining frontier established trade patterns and relationships that Portland's mercantile and shipping concerns would continue to exploit for many decades, as the markets for manufactured goods and foodstuffs in the boom-and-bust mining areas were augmented by the more reliable needs of the settlements and farming communities of the interior and coastal Northwest. Mining also helped the region's economic system by hastening the adoption of gold as a means of exchange and building the capacity of Portland's financial institutions. In the words of Johansen and Gates, "gold rushes and Indian wars gave the Willamette Valley farmers markets, and the Columbia River and its tributaries were the highways over which their produce moved. Portland was the depot for this traffic and by 1858 had overshadowed all of its rivals [along the Willamette and lower Columbia rivers]."<sup>58</sup>

### Wholesale Trade: Supplying the Pacific Northwest

Wholesale trade and distribution was critical to Portland's economic success and rise as a major urban center. Concentrated in the riverfront-oriented urban core encompassing today's Skidmore/Old Town Historic District

<sup>55</sup> D. W. Meinig, *The Great Columbia Plain: A Historical Geography, 1805-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), 214-219 and passim.

<sup>56</sup> Wells, Fargo later had offices at First and Stark and First and Ankeny.

<sup>57</sup> Merriam, *Portland, Oregon, 185-191*, 226-228; DeMarco, *Short History of Portland*, 36-39.

<sup>58</sup> Johansen and Gates, *Empire of the Columbia*, 338.

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and stretching to the south along Front Street, the city's trading companies supplied a wealth of products to cities and towns throughout the growing Pacific Northwest, including all kinds of manufactured and dry goods, hardware and building products, agricultural implements and machinery, food stuffs and liquor. One of the earliest and most long-lived of the Skidmore/Old Town firms engaged in this trade was Allen & Lewis, which specialized in the wholesale grocery business. Founded in 1853 by Cicero Lewis and Lucien Allen, their first building was located at the northeast corner of Front and Burnside Streets. Expanding into grain export in the 1870s, Allen & Lewis became one of the "foremost wholesale houses not only in Portland but of the entire West Coast," with branches in Spokane and Walla Walla, Washington and La Grande, Baker City, Eugene, and Marshfield (Coos Bay), Oregon. In 1882, they constructed a full-block, three-story cast-iron building designed by Warren Williams on Front between Couch and Davis (demolished in 1942). Its 100,000 square feet of space (including docks) housed their business and, initially, other wholesale firms, including paint, glass and door suppliers. For a time the company also operated out of the Bickel Block (#91).<sup>59</sup>

Another example of the district's enterprising wholesale firms is Corbitt & Macleay, located at 13 and 15 Front Street, between Ash and Vine, and later further south at 64 and 66 Front Street. Starting in the wholesale grocery and liquor trade, the firm, led by Scottish transplant Donald Macleay, diversified and expanded, becoming a major commission and shipping merchant and leading exporter of Columbia wheat to Europe. The firm also canned and exported salmon and supplied ship spars, planking and other products to the Hong Kong market.<sup>60</sup>

Liquor was a valuable and in-demand product on the western frontier and Portland quickly became one of the major liquor distribution centers in the Far West. Ladd, Reed & Co. located at 73 Front Street, was a pioneering firm in this lucrative business. The company, dating from the 1850s, provided a source of early wealth that partners William Ladd and Simeon Reed later parlayed into myriad other successful business ventures, including shipping, banking, manufacturing and real estate development, setting them atop Portland's political and economic elite. In 1865, Portland had at least four wholesale liquor suppliers, including Millard & Van Schuyver, which advertised itself as "successors to Ladd, Reed & Co." By 1878, there were at least ten wholesalers specializing in liquor, two of which were listed by R. Dun & Co. as among the city's ten wealthiest companies, including the Portland branch of A. P. Hotaling, a San Francisco-based firm that would later bottle and sell liquor as the first tenant of the 1889 Skidmore Block on First and Burnside (#72). Most of the liquor sold out of Portland was imported, but Addison and Starr Lewis, who would found the First National Bank of Portland, operated a distillery at 70 Front Street, between Pine and Oak. Portland distributors supplied establishments throughout the greater Northwest and did a good business with intermediary suppliers of the saloons and camps in the mining districts of eastern Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and British Columbia. The records of the firm of Humiston, Wilson & Company, located at 87 Front Street, show accounts between 1859 and 1864 in Canyon City, Dalles City, and Umatilla Landing, Oregon and Lewiston, Idaho, as well as Mid- and Upper-Willamette Valley towns such as Eugene City, Albany, Butteville, and Scio. Portland itself formed a large home-grown market, judging by its forty-four retail liquor establishments in 1865, which grew to no fewer than seventy-three by 1873. These included a number of famous (or perhaps notorious) saloons in and near Skidmore/Old Town such as the Oro Fino on Stark between Front and First, with its "choicest qualities of wines, liquors, ales, porter and fine cigars" and oyster bar "where the bivalves will be served in all styles, and at

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<sup>59</sup> MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 31-33, 154; Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 122-123; Arthur L. Throckmorton, *Oregon Argonauts: Merchant Adventurers on the Western Frontier* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1961), 127; *Allen and Lewis Preferred Stock*, 1, no. 6, June 1, 1916.

<sup>60</sup> MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 215; City Directories for 1873 and 1890.

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all hours.”<sup>61</sup>

Portland’s merchants, some of whom branched into manufacturing, also supplied the farming, mining, milling and lumbering machinery and other equipment needed to develop the Northwest’s expanding agricultural and resource extraction economies. The Parke & Lacey Machinery Company manufactured, imported and exported various engines, boilers, milling and logging equipment and other machinery from its location in the Bickel Block (#91) at Front and Couch. Following the closure of the theater and public market in the New Market Block (#45) in the late 1880s, the building housed the firm of Staver & Walker, “Largest Machinery and Vehicle Repository on the Coast,” which marketed agricultural and milling equipment, engines, wagons and carriages throughout the Northwest, with branches in La Grande, Oregon, Walla Walla, Spokane, and Pullman, Washington, and Moscow, Idaho.<sup>62</sup> The Portland machine shops and foundries that supplied architectural ironwork for Skidmore/Old Town’s buildings also manufactured agricultural machinery and implements that were exported from the city and constituted an important sector in Portland’s modest but growing manufacturing base.<sup>63</sup>

While some of Skidmore/Old Town’s early trading companies, such as Allen & Lewis, remained prosperous into the twentieth century, numerous others were more short-lived. One example worthy of note is the mercantile firm owned and operated in the 1850s by Abner Hunt Francis at Front and Stark. Abner, a friend of famed abolitionist Frederick Douglass, arrived in Portland in 1851 with his wife Sydnia and his brother O. B. Francis and were among the early city’s very few African-Americans. Within days of opening their trading business, Abner’s brother was arrested for violating the territorial exclusion law of 1849, which made it illegal for “any negro or mulatto to come in or reside within the limits” of Oregon. In September 1851, Judge O. C. Pratt ordered the Francis family to leave the territory. The expulsion order was not enforced however, after a petition signed by 211 Portland residents protesting their expulsion and urging repeal of the law convinced the legislature not to enforce it. Abner Francis remained in Portland for a decade, operating a profitable trading business and amassing a fortune estimated at \$36,000 when he left for Vancouver Island in 1860. If Francis’ economic success was unusual for an African American in early Portland, it is not surprising that it was earned by running a trade house on bustling Front Street.

Portland competed directly with San Francisco in the wholesale distribution trade. That city had risen meteorically as the undisputed premier city of the West Coast following the gold rush, and its financial, trade, and shipping interests were preeminent throughout much of the Far West. Even with its geographic advantage with respect to much of the Pacific Northwest and the Inland Empire, Portland was at a disadvantage as long as its merchants were dependant on San Francisco as the shipping intermediary for imported goods from the East Coast and Europe. Beginning in the late 1860s, Portland merchants, conscious of “working under the hand of San Francisco,” in the words of *Oregonian* editor Harvey Scott, made concerted efforts to arrange for direct purchase and shipment of goods to Portland. As Portland’s trading firms matured in the 1870s and 1880s, they were increasingly successful in cutting-out San Francisco as an intermediary, lessening port duties, tariffs, mark-ups, and other “friction” costs. Increasingly free from dependency on San Francisco, Portland acquired a larger and more independent regional economic status, which its business and political elite used, in turn, to extend the city’s economic hegemony over its own burgeoning hinterland, which included not only the

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<sup>61</sup> MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 213; *Portland City Directory*, 1865, 1873; Portland *HRI*; Sanborn Map 1901, *Guide to the Humiston, Wilson, and Company Records*, 1859-1964 (Oregon Historical Society Research Library, finding aid).

<sup>62</sup> *Portland and Vicinity: Willamette Valley, Columbia River, Puget Sound* (Portland: L. Samuel, 1887).

<sup>63</sup> Portland’s early economy was distinctly commercial. Manufacturing, while important locally, was relatively underdeveloped in the nineteenth century and to some extent well into the twentieth century.

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Willamette Valley, but, large parts of western and coastal Oregon and Washington and the great interior region stretching up the Columbia and Snake river drainages.

### Export Trade: Regional Development and World Markets

Portland had quickly established itself as the Northwest's primary importing and wholesale supply center, but it also emerged as its most important export hub—the nerve center for financing, marketing and shipping the region's growing agricultural surpluses. By the 1870s, maritime export of agricultural products, especially wheat and flour, was Portland's most important commercial activity, a trade sector important to Portland's economy to this day. Initially, much of the agricultural trade was actually “upriver,” as the produce of the Willamette Valley was shipped to booming interior mining regions. With the transition of the interior Columbia Basin to an agricultural base following the successful adoption of “dry-land” farming techniques, this trade reversed, and, beginning in the mid-1860s, Portland exports of grain and other agricultural products from the Columbia region grew markedly, assisted by improvements to the Columbia River transportation system, such as channel dredging and portage railroads, pushed forward by Portland's business interests. This pattern, in which the produce of a broad interior region was brought to international markets via a river-based transportation network that was focused on a lower-Columbia trade hub, was a clear echo of the earlier trade systems of the North West and Hudson's Bay Companies, which had likewise funneled furs from the vast Pacific Slope to their trading and export centers at Ft. George (Astoria) and Ft. Vancouver on the lower Columbia. With its deep-water port, access to the Pacific Ocean, urban infrastructure, and an established and successful wholesale merchant community, Portland was the logical trade and finance nexus for the massive expansion of the Columbia grain trade and the development of the Inland Empire that began in the 1860s and extended well into the next century (see Maps MO6 and MO8).<sup>64</sup>

Through the 1860s, most of the grain and other agricultural products shipped from Portland were bound for California. In 1867, products valued at about \$2.5 million (excluding shipments of gold valued at about \$4 million) were exported from Portland, including some fifty different types of trade articles, most of which went to San Francisco, bound for California consumers or re-export to foreign ports. The most valuable products (other than gold) were wheat, flour and bran, collectively worth over \$800,000. Other exports included \$130,000 worth of wool, \$90,000 of fresh and dried apples, \$62,000 of bacon and \$35,000 of butter. In a pattern that would continue for many decades, manufactured and highly processed goods made up a small proportion of exported products, but a sizable quantity of barrel headings and staves valued at \$750,000 were also shipped.<sup>65</sup>

By the early 1870s wheat was Portland's largest export product and with the grain trade rapidly rising as the one of the city's primary economic engines, Portland's merchants worked hard to break San Francisco's control of the export market for Oregon wheat by expanding direct connections to growing national and international agricultural markets. In what was probably the first direct shipment of Oregon grain to Europe, 22,166 Centals (100 pound sacks) of wheat, worth \$31,000, left Portland for Liverpool on the *Helen Angier* in 1869. The deal was brokered by John McCracken of J. McCracken & Co., a successful importer, shipping agent and commission merchant with offices on Front Street north of Ankeny (the firm would later have offices in the United Carriage and Baggage Transfer Co. building (#49)). In an 1872 advertisement, the company claimed to represent five Oregon flour mills and specialized in flour, grain, bacon, lard and fruit—“purchases and sales made for the

<sup>64</sup> Throckmorton, *Oregon Argonauts*, 304-309; Earl Pomeroy, *The Pacific Slope* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 6, 50, 120-139; Merriam, *Portland, Oregon*, 256-299; MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 144; Meinig, *Great Columbia Plain*, passim.

<sup>65</sup> Deady, “Portland-on-Wallamett,” 34-43; Scott, *History*, 217-245.

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Boston and New York markets.”<sup>66</sup>

Direct foreign grain exports grew in size and value through the 1870s and into the 1880s. In 1871, wheat and flour valued at \$475,000 accounted for more than 86 percent of the city’s foreign exports (see Table 4). In 1879, \$3.1 million worth of wheat and flour left the city, carried away by more than 90 visiting grain vessels. By 1882, the value of foreign wheat and flour exports had risen to nearly \$6.5 million and accounted for almost 99 percent of Portland’s foreign exports and more than half of all foreign and domestic exports combined.<sup>67</sup>

The largest single export market for Portland’s wheat was Great Britain. In 1871, more than 80 percent of foreign wheat exports were shipped to Great Britain, primarily to the English port of Liverpool. Portland’s trade relationship with Britain was cemented through strong personal and financial ties between business interests that illustrate the extraordinary entrepreneurial and investment efforts of British—and especially Scottish—capitalists and traders in the development of the American West in the last half of the nineteenth century. Arriving in 1866, Donald Macleay was among the earliest and most successful of the Scottish businessmen to come to Portland. Leading the aforementioned wholesale firm of Corbitt & Macleay, he became one of Portland’s largest wheat exporters in the 1870s, using his English and Scottish connections to steer grain towards British ports. In Scotland for business in 1874, Macleay wrote to Portland banker and trade magnate John Ainsworth recommending a fellow Scot, William Reid, who was soon coming to Portland representing “an extensive company of capitalists in Scotland who are looking to our new country for an outlet of capital which we so much need.” Reid would become one of the city’s most influential businessmen and a key channel for Scottish investment in the Northwest. Another important individual in Portland’s relationship with Britain was Scotsman James Laidlaw, who came to Portland in 1872 and established the grain trading and shipping firm of James Laidlaw & Co., with offices at 16 North Front. Laidlaw’s trade successes and business connections in Britain resulted in his appointment as Vice-Consul for Great Britain in 1874. Managing both his private interests in grain trading and his public duties representing the commercial interests of Britain, Laidlaw flourished in Portland for several decades. He finally closed his trading firm in 1896, when he became Consul for Great Britain in the district comprised of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Alaska, which had its headquarters in Portland.<sup>68</sup>

In 1878, Balfour, Guthrie & Co., a division of the huge British commodity trading firm Balfour, Williamson & Co., established a Portland branch under the local direction of Scotsman Walter J. Burns. Balfour, Guthrie was soon one of the largest grain traders in Portland, surpassing locally-based trading firms like Corbitt & Macleay and Allen & Lewis in wealth and longevity. The firm’s representatives purchased wheat from Northwest farms and exported it from Portland via their subsidiary shipping line. Expanding into crop financing, farm mortgaging, fire insurance and flour milling, Balfour, Guthrie invested heavily in Portland and the Pacific Northwest, constructing more than seventy warehouses on Portland’s waterfront, and building one of the largest flouring mills in the Northwest on the waterfront north of Skidmore/Old Town (Crown Mills). By 1890, more than ten major Scottish business institutions were thriving in Oregon. Scotsmen such as Macleay, Reid, Burns, and Laidlaw had joined the ranks of Portland’s economic and political leadership, alongside Yankees like William Ladd and Henry Corbett and German Jews like Bernard Goldsmith and Philip Wasserman, both

<sup>66</sup> Throckmorton, *Oregon Argonauts*, 304-309; *Samuel’s City Directory*, 1873, 378.

<sup>67</sup> Scott, *History*, chap. 5 and 7; MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 144, 154-155; Merriam, *Portland*, 282-290.

<sup>68</sup> MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 214; Joseph Gaston, *Portland, Oregon: Its History and Builders in Connection with the Antecedent Explorations, Discoveries and Movements of the Pioneers that Selected the Site for the Great City of the Pacific*, 3 vols. (Portland: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1911), 21-22.

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successful merchants who served terms as Portland mayors.<sup>69</sup>

While grain dominated the export trade, other commodities were shipped out of Portland as well, including wool, lumber, fruit and salmon. By 1867, wool was second only to grain and flour in export value in Oregon, much of it sent down the Columbia from The Dalles, “fast becoming the largest primary wool market in the world,” and shipped from Portland to East Coast ports, especially New England, a major textile milling region. Lumber exports were also significant, although the natural advantages of massive timber stands adjacent to extensive ocean waterways would allow Puget Sound ports to eventually surpass Portland and Oregon in the lumber trade. Most of Portland’s lumber was intended for domestic markets, especially California, although some was sent to Asia, Australia and Hawai’i. George Weidler’s Willamette Steam Mills Lumbering and Manufacturing Company in Couch’s Addition produced lumber for local and export markets, including Australia and Hong Kong, much of it brokered by John Ainsworth, one of the principals in the Oregon Steam Navigation Company and co-founder in 1885 of Ainsworth National Bank, located at Third and Pine.<sup>70</sup>

### Diversification: Transportation, Investment, and Financial Services

Beginning in the 1860s, the most successful of Portland’s merchant-entrepreneurs were able to capitalize—literally and figuratively—on their early trading profits by diversifying into more complex business activities. First-generation merchants like William S. Ladd (who later took pains to hide his beginnings in the wholesale liquor trade), Henry Corbett (who made his early profits selling agricultural machinery), Henry Failing (hardware and miscellaneous goods), and Simeon Reed (a partner in Ladd’s wholesale businesses) parlayed their early trade earnings into a tightly held and closely knit, if occasionally acrimonious and competing group of banks, transportation companies, investment syndicates, and mining, manufacturing and real estate ventures that collectively broadened and deepened Portland’s regional economic preeminence. One of the best examples is the rise of the Oregon Steam Navigation Company (OSNC), which illustrates Earl Pomeroy’s adage that “few local enterprises were as large and as powerful as those that carried their goods.”<sup>71</sup> Although organized as a corporation, the OSNC was tightly controlled by Portlanders William Ladd, Simeon Reed, steamship owner Capt. John Ainsworth, and Robert Thompson of The Dalles.

Operating from offices on Stark Street and a massive wharf and warehouse (demolished) between Ash and Pine in Skidmore/Old Town, the OSNC was able to gain control of shipping on the Columbia within a few years of its founding in 1860 by successfully monopolizing key portages at the Cascades and The Dalles, sustained reinvestment of company profits into better equipment and infrastructure, and at times ruthless protection of its interests. At the time of its sale to rail magnate Henry Villard in 1880, its assets included four railways, extensive real estate holdings in Portland, Astoria, The Dalles, Umatilla, and Wallula, and 26 steam ships with a capacity of over 15,000 tons. The OSNC not only controlled shipping on the Columbia, from gold dust to flour, but also its passenger traffic. Because essentially all boats stopped in Portland, it also supported the local economy, moving “tens of thousands of people, who spent money at Portland’s hotels, restaurants and entertainment venues.” It became the city’s most influential company and perhaps the best local example of a large, “Gilded Age” monopolistic corporation. Reorganized as the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company and tied to the Northern Pacific rail empire after 1880, it extended Portland’s “national influence while

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<sup>69</sup> MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 214; W. Turrentine Jackson, *The Enterprising Scot: Investors in the American West after 1873* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968); City of Portland, Bureau of Planning, *Centennial Mill Historic Preservation Assessment*, 2006, 7.

<sup>70</sup> MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 150; Throckmorton, *Oregon Argonauts*, 300-301.

<sup>71</sup> Pomeroy, *Pacific Slope*, 96.

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solidifying its position at the center of the region's banking, trading and transportation network."<sup>72</sup>

Portland's early merchants were also instrumental in establishing and expanding the region's banking and finance systems, mirroring the ante-bellum American pattern in which large merchant houses came to control enormous amounts of the nation's available capital and increasingly handled many financial and credit transactions. Portland's first bank—the first in the Far West north of San Francisco—was founded in 1859 by William S. Ladd and his former trading partner C. E. Tilton, resident of San Francisco. The Ladd & Tilton Bank, housed at first in a second-story addition to Ladd's Front Street trade house, was immediately successful, helping Ladd become immensely wealthy. More importantly, the bank fulfilled the need for a full-service bank in the city and provided a supply of local capital for real estate development and non-mercantile businesses, such as sawmills, flouring mills and various manufacturing operations throughout the region. Quickly becoming a preeminent Pacific Northwest institution, a dedicated facility was completed at the northwest corner of Stark and First in 1868. Perhaps the most impressive building in the city at the time, the elaborate cast-iron fronted bank stood until 1954, when it was demolished. Fortunately, Eric Ladd (no relation to William Ladd), an early Portland preservationist, salvaged the iron façades which were incorporated in the 1967 expansion of the nearly identical 1869 Ladd & Bush Bank building in Salem, Oregon.<sup>73</sup>

In 1873, Portland had three banks; by 1892 it had 20 and was clearly the financial services capital of the Northwest. Portland's early financial district radiated from its core between Stark and Washington from Front to Third, and overlapped with the southern portion of today's Skidmore/Old Town district. It included a number of financial institutions directly tied to the city's merchant elite such as the First National Bank of Portland, located on First Street near Alder, organized by Addison and Lewis Starr in 1866 and purchased by traders-cum-financiers Henry Corbett and Henry Failing in 1869. Other local financial institutions included the United States National Bank of Oregon at Second and Pine and the Ainsworth National Bank at Third and Oak, founded by pioneer ship captain John Ainsworth.<sup>74</sup>

While local banks like Ladd & Tilton and the First National Bank were clearly important in the development of Portland's financial capacity, their capitalization was relatively small in the scheme of things, and shortage of local capital was a chronic problem in the Pacific Northwest, threatening to slow development. This state of affairs created significant opportunities for East Coast and foreign investors, eager to cash in on the economic potential of the American West. In 1865, the London-based Bank of British Columbia opened a Portland branch, establishing an early British financial connection to the city. The bank's flat-iron-shaped building, bounded by Vine, Ankeny and Front Streets was completed in 1868 and expanded in 1882. With its narrow west façade and entrance facing the Skidmore Fountain, the building was a distinctive Portland landmark until its demolition in 1928, part of a cluster of buildings and short, narrow streets whose "subtle relationships made the grouping of buildings on this street one of the most handsome in the city."<sup>75</sup>

Recognizing the need for capital as a force to maintain high interest rates, a group of Dundee, Scotland, capitalists established the Oregon and Washington Trust and Investment Company in 1873. A Portland office was established as the company's American headquarters, with a local board that included prominent

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<sup>72</sup> Dorothy O. Johansen, "The Oregon Steam Navigation Company," *Pacific Historical Review* (June 1941): 179-188; MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 124-139; William Toll, "Commerce, Climate & Community: a History of Portland and Its People," <http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/> (accessed May 5, 2006).

<sup>73</sup> MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 104-106; Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 44-47.

<sup>74</sup> Burrell, *Gold in the Woodpile*, 149 and passim.

<sup>75</sup> Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 42.

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Portlanders such as former Governor Addison Gibbs, Chief Justice E. D. Shattuck and merchant John McCracken. The company sent William Reid to Portland to act as agent and general manager in 1874. In 1876, he oversaw the construction of a distinctive three-story cast-iron building on First Street between Pine and Oak to house both the Oregon and Washington Trust and Investment Company and another Reid endeavor, the Oregon and Washington Mortgage Bank (#79).

Destined to become one of Portland's most prominent bankers and business leaders, Reid secured loans and mortgages throughout the Pacific Northwest attracting over \$6 million in Scottish capital over a ten year period financing a broad array of agricultural, commercial and residential real estate ventures. Reid would also help form the influential Portland Board of Trade (housed in the New Market Theater Building (#45), and later in the 1907 Board of Trade building at Fourth and Oak). He was also heavily involved financially and politically in the tangled development history of the Northwest's railroads, including promotion of a number of important short lines such as the Oregonian Line (later the Portland and Willamette Valley Railroad) along the west side of the Willamette River. Reid was also responsible for construction of Reid's Block (1883) at the northwest corner of Pine and First Streets, one of the district's now lost cast-iron buildings. However, graced with Scottish thistles and busts of the Earl of Airlie, the Oregon and Washington Trust and Investment Company Building has survived. Restored in 1996, it stands as a reminder of Portland's role as a major financial services center for the Northwest and the importance of international capital in the development of the West.<sup>76</sup>

### Urban Environment and Buildings, 1851–1880

Front Street's mercantile buildings, warehouses and wharves were perhaps the defining features of the district's urban character, their solidity animated by the coming and going of river and coastal steamers and ocean-sailing vessels, and the bustle of drays, wagons and carts moving goods to and fro. However, as a part of Portland's first compact downtown, Skidmore/Old Town contained a wide diversity of land uses and activities. Manufacturing, office, retail, institutional and residential uses were all to be found in close quarters to each other, reflecting the somewhat haphazard "mixed-use" spatial pattern common to downtowns of rapidly growing cities across the West in this era.

In 1857 the Hallock and McMillen Building—believed to be the city's oldest extant brick and cast-iron edifice—was constructed by Absalom Hallock at the northwest corner of Front and Oak. Hallock, often credited as the city's first architect, was an active Portland citizen, serving as City Surveyor, Chief Engineer of the Fire Department, and City Councilman. He is believed to have practiced for a time in the building, later working from offices at 51 Front Street advertising himself as "Architect, Civil Engineer, and City Surveyor." He partnered at various times with architect Lou Day and with William McMillen, the building's other namesake, described as a contractor by architectural historian Richard Ritz, who served as Multnomah County Sheriff in 1855. Hallock was also an early officer for the Willamette Iron Works located on the waterfront below NW Davis which producing much of the architectural iron used on Portland's buildings.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Jackson, *Enterprising Scot*, 24-28, 62, 249-250; E. Kimbark MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 214-215; Merriam, *Portland, Oregon*, 310-313.

<sup>77</sup> While inconsistent, sources indicate that William McMillen probably spelled his name with an "e." Although there is a small chance that the William McMillan mentioned by Richard Ritz as a partner of Hallock is a different individual, it seems unlikely. A William McMillen is listed as rooming at 51 Front Street, the location of Hallock's architecture and engineering practice, in the McCormick city directories of 1864 and 1865. The University of Oregon's online "Guide to Architectural Materials in Special Collections" states that the firm of Hallock & Day changed its name to Hallock & McMillen in 1855. Harvey Scott refers to the "Hallock & McMillen" building in his 1890 *History of Portland*. See also Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 15-16; George Belknap, *American Bibliographical Notes: And More Addenda to Belknap's Oregon Imprints* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1976),

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Another extant building from this early period is the nearby Delschneider Building (#90), erected in 1859 on Oak Street by Joseph Delschneider (or Dielschneider) to house his Novelty Iron and Brass Works.<sup>78</sup> William Hawkins states that the building housed the Oregon Iron Works in 1863, owned by Oregon Governor A. C. Gibbs.

One of the most significant surviving structures of this period is the three-story New Market Theatre building (#45), constructed in 1872 by prosperous businessman and steamboat operator Captain Alexander Ankeny on the large, irregularly shaped block bounded by Ankeny and Ash streets and First and Second Avenues. This brick, cast-iron fronted structure was one of the most expensive in the city costing Ankeny more than \$100,000. Following the “national fashion of incorporating culture and commerce in the same building,” it housed the city’s public market, commercial offices and a lavish 800 seat theater (1,200 at standing-room capacity).<sup>79</sup> The first floor market hall contained twenty-eight marble-countered stalls, displaying a variety of produce, meats, fish, baked goods, dairy products and other provisions. Anders and Rowe occupied three stalls, selling fine groceries including “imported delicacies” and “cordials, liquors, and fine teas and coffee.” One stall was occupied by Frank Fabre’s coffee and oyster bar. On portions of the second floor were the offices of the influential Board of Trade and the private apartment of Captain Ankeny (and his manservant Sam and dog Prince). The gymnasium of the Turn Verein Society, a prominent German-American athletic and social club, was located on the third floor. The building’s wings housed Pfunder’s Drugstore and the offices of several prominent businesses, including Wells Fargo and Co. (express and banking services), James Laidlaw & Co. (grain trading), Western Union Telegraph, the *Oregon Bulletin* newspaper, and a few insurance and real estate agents. The theater itself occupied most of the second and third floors. It finally opened in 1875 with a “beautifully mounted” production of *Rip Van Winkle* and immediately became Portland’s preeminent cultural facility and a symbol of its respectability and maturity as a city. It hosted all kinds of events from the best visiting theatrical productions to important social celebrations, charitable benefits and political rallies. Portland’s most important visitors were fêted here, including former President Ulysses S. Grant in 1879, who was likely struck by the evident growth of the city which he had often visited when he was a young U.S. Army Brevet Captain stationed at nearby Columbia (later Vancouver) Barracks in 1852-1854.<sup>80</sup> In 1884, champion prize fighter John L. Sullivan demonstrated his pugilistic prowess for local sporting enthusiasts there. That same year, the city’s Jewish community held a celebration honoring English Jewish philanthropist Sir Moses Montfiore. The house, “packed from pit to dome” with Jews and non-Jews alike, heard orations from the city’s leading dignitaries, including Jewish lawyer and merchant David Solis-Cohen and Unitarian minister Thomas Lamb Eliot.<sup>81</sup> The event “truly marked the success and acceptance of Oregon’s Jewish community,” from which many of the city’s successful merchants and political leaders were drawn.<sup>82</sup>

The New Market Theater was also the site for less savory popular and political events. In January 1886, the local contingent of the Knights of Labor packed the theater in a mass rally aimed against Chinese workers. Following completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1883 which had left many Chinese laborers out of work, and anti-Chinese agitation in other parts of the Northwest, Portland’s Chinese population had swelled to

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<sup>78</sup> McCormick’s 1865 City Directory lists an F. Delschneider as “machinist, Oak St.”<sup>79</sup> MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 187.<sup>80</sup> See Hawkins, *Portland’s Historic New Market Theater*, passim.<sup>81</sup> Matthew Deady, *Pharisee Among Philistines*, 455.<sup>82</sup> Steven Lowenstein, *The Jews of Oregon: 1850-1950* (Portland: Jewish Historical Society of Oregon, 1987), 68-69.

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around 4,000.<sup>83</sup> Speaking at the meeting was Seattle anti-Chinese agitator Daniel Cronin, who three months previously had led the violent effort to expulse 200-300 Chinese from Tacoma, most of whom ironically had now relocated to Portland. Although Cronin's declaration that day that within three months there would "not be a working Chinaman in Portland" was overblown, a number of anti-Chinese outbursts occurred in Portland over the next few months culminating in March with several violent attacks on Chinese that required deployment of the state militia.

The heyday of the New Market Theater was remarkably short-lived. It closed in 1887 after a mere 12 years, a victim of "competition from the more spacious and convenient 'up town' facilities."<sup>84</sup> As early as a few weeks after its opening in 1875, Judge Matthew Deady had noted in his diary that it was "a beautiful little theater, but too far downtown," indicative that even at this early date Portland's leaders were beginning to view the Skidmore area and the northern end of the commercial core in a less favorable light.<sup>85</sup> If this locale was perhaps no longer the right fit for a preeminent cultural facility, it was certainly still at the center of commercial and manufacturing activity, as the New Market Theater was quickly adapted for use by the Staver & Walker Company, makers of wagons and carriages.

At the end of the 1870s, Skidmore/Old Town was clearly still an integral part of the downtown commercial core with a strong waterfront industrial/mercantile character and a still healthy share of retail and office activity. Impressive multi-storied masonry and cast-iron buildings had largely replaced the district's early frontier-type, wood-frame buildings, reflecting the first decades of success of Portland's earliest generation of business leaders. First Street, anchored by the impressive New Market Block,<sup>86</sup> had emerged as a more genteel, retail- and office-oriented alternative to wholesale- and waterfront-flavored Front Street as a main thoroughfare. The 1879 *Oregon City Enterprise* enthused,

*First Street presents a gay and festive scene, and is encumbered with as much traffic, trading, strolling, beauty, and ornamental wealth as ere was Kearney Street, San Francisco. We cannot bring to mind a proportionate population that carried itself with so much dignity and importance as the metropolis of Oregon does.*<sup>87</sup>

### **Maturity and Change, 1880–1900**

Portland continued to grow in the period from 1880 through the turn of the century. In 1891 the city consolidated with the cities of Albina and East Portland on the east side of the Willamette, which had growing populations and expanding commercial economies of their own, continuing a sustained eastward urban expansion that shifted the city's population base—if not its political and economic gravity—away from the west side. Geographic, population and economic growth was facilitated by the first bridges across the river, beginning with the Morrison Bridge in 1887, the Steel Bridge just north of the district in 1888, and the first

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<sup>83</sup> Portland's Chinese population in 1880 was 1,612, constituting 9.2 percent of the city's population. In 1890 it was 4,539 or 9.8 percent of the population, the highest historical percentage making the Chinese the largest group of foreign-born persons in the city. Marie Rose Wong, *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 166.

<sup>84</sup> Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 68.

<sup>85</sup> Matthew P. Deady, *Pharisee among the Philistines: The Diary of Judge Matthew P. Deady, 1871-1892*, Malcolm Clark, Jr., ed. (Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1975), 189.

<sup>86</sup> The "New Market Block" was composed of three connected structures: the 1871 New Market, South Wing (# 61), the 1872 New Market Theater proper (#45), and the 1873 New Market, North Wing (demolished in 1956).

<sup>87</sup> Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 18.

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Burnside Bridge in the center of Skidmore/Old Town in 1894. The expansion of public transit service accompanied the city's growth; the street railway companies shifted from horse power to electricity in 1891 by which time ten transit companies were in operation in the city.

When viewed in relation to regional urbanization trends, Portland's growth in this period was not as spectacular as in the previous three decades, however. Other Northwest cities, especially Seattle and Tacoma on Puget Sound and Spokane in the interior, had grown up and began to successfully challenge Portland's economic hegemony. In 1880 Portland had almost five times as many residents as Seattle (17,577 compared to 3,553). By 1890, Seattle's population had nearly caught up with Portland's (42,837 and 46,835, respectively) and by 1910 it would surpass Portland as the Northwest's largest city (237,174 and 207,214, respectively). Seattle's growth was fuelled by a growing lumber industry, the profitable Alaska/Yukon trade, new rail connections, and, some historians aver, a more entrepreneurial business community than that led by Portland's now venerable and conservative economic/political leaders. The rise of these other cities marked the maturing of the Pacific Northwest as a region, and a "new balance of metropolitan centers in the Northwest which was considerably more decentralized and complex than that which had existed during the earlier period of Portland's preeminence."<sup>88</sup> Tables 1 and 2 show the populations of Pacific Northwest cities over a 70-year period, illustrating this regional urbanizing trend. Through 1880, Portland was clearly the most significant Pacific Northwest city, almost five times larger than its nearest competitors, Walla Walla and Seattle. Just ten years later, Tacoma had risen as a major Northwest city and considered together with Seattle, the Puget Sound cities were now eclipsing Portland.

### Railroads and Portland's Position in the Northwest

River- and ocean-going trade remained central to Portland's economy in this era. However, like it did throughout the West, the coming of the railroads altered Portland's transportation and economic landscape in profound and sometimes unexpected ways. Portland's preeminence as a commercial center during its first three decades was directly related to its ability to develop and control an extensive river transportation system that enabled a two-way flow of goods and products between the Pacific Northwest and extra-regional suppliers and markets. This system was the primary reason Portland was the Northwest's first and only true major urban center that was firmly established *prior* to the coming of a transcontinental railroad connection. However, Portland's economic elites, including the merchants and bankers of Skidmore/Old Town, were keenly aware that railroads were the critical engines of future economic growth and they fought long and hard to ensure that Portland would become the region's first transcontinental rail hub.

Efforts to bring the railroads to Portland began in the early 1860s with halting work to build a line through the Willamette Valley and southern Oregon to California (Eugene was reached in 1870, Roseburg in 1872, and Sacramento not until 1887, four years after Portland's transcontinental link was completed). The struggle to link the city with the East, a decades-long chapter in the larger story of western railroading, was replete with power struggles between international financiers, manipulations of federal land grants, shifting alliances between national and local promoters, businesses and real estate speculators, and a ruthless environment of competition between various interests—including Northwest cities and towns vying for a link to the continental system. After decades of uncertain progress, Portland's link was secured in 1883 with the completion of the Northern Pacific between St. Paul and the line's nominal "western terminus" at Portland, although, in fact, the line crossed the Columbia River by ferry at Kalama and continued north to Tacoma, where the Northern

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<sup>88</sup> Johansen and Gates, *Empire of the Columbia*, 395.

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Pacific's main western maintenance facility was established. While the coming of the railroads is often credited with ushering in a long economic boom in the Northwest, its effects on Portland's economic growth and the city's status in relation to its hinterland and other Northwest cities were complex. The outcomes of completing the Northern Pacific in 1883, and securing another transcontinental link via the Union Pacific less than two years later, were not as singularly positive as many contemporaries had hoped, or as many still assume. By 1888, the Northern Pacific had completed a second, more direct connection to Puget Sound, branching from the mainline at Wallula and crossing the Cascades via Stampede Pass, thus avoiding the roundabout route along the Columbia River and bypassing Portland. Through the new route and a growing network of branch lines and joint leases between railroad companies, Seattle and Tacoma finally gained efficient connections to the Inland Empire, the Midwest and the East. With direct access to the Pacific Ocean offsetting potentially higher rail costs and Portland's river transportation advantages, the Puget Sound cities were able to successfully compete with Portland for much of the interior grain trade. While Portland continued to expand its grain trade economy, by 1910, Puget Sound ports (primarily Tacoma and Seattle) had firmly eclipsed those of the Columbia (primarily Portland and Astoria), exporting nearly twice as much grain (see Table 5).

So too, the integration of a continental rail system would diminish Portland's relative status as the region's primary wholesaling center and supplier of goods. The expanding rail network allowed other Northwest urban centers to more easily assume these functions within their own growing trade areas. Coinciding with broad national trends, the increasingly extensive and efficient rail system enabled large, "Gilded Age" midwestern and eastern corporations to reduce the importance of intermediary suppliers—which had been so central to Portland's commercial success. They could now directly market their goods to the Northwest's increasingly dispersed local wholesalers and retailers, and, with the rise of mail-order and catalog sales, even directly to consumers.

None of these trends spelled imminent doom for Portland or the merchants of Skidmore/Old Town. New investments in public infrastructure and private development, from improved shipping channels and extensive streetcar lines, to new eastside residential neighborhoods and increasingly larger downtown office buildings, are indicative that the city and its economy continued to grow in this era. But as the new century approached, the "economic dominion" that Portland had established over the Pacific Northwest by the 1880s had begun to fray, as other urban centers—most notably Seattle—matured, established their own hinterlands, and developed their own financial service capabilities. Portland was still a major western city, with a mature economy and significant competitive advantages. As late as 1913, a Federal Reserve committee found that Portland's preeminence in Pacific Northwest banking and finance had persisted well after Seattle had surpassed it in population and other urban statistical categories—but no longer was Portland *the* Metropolis of the Northwest.<sup>89</sup>

### Ethnicity, Urban Environment and Buildings, 1880 – 1900

In 1890, more than 37 percent of Portland's population was foreign-born and more than 58 percent had at least one parent born in a foreign country—by these measures making it one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the West, after only San Francisco and San Jose, California (see Table 8). The Chinese formed the largest single national/ethnic group in Portland in the late nineteenth century, with a population in 1880 of 1,612, constituting 9.2 percent of the city's total. By 1890 this grew to 4,539, making up 25.6 percent of the city's foreign-born population and 9.8 percent of the total. The same year, Germans made up the next largest foreign-born group, with 3,652 persons at 7.9 percent of the total population, followed by Great Britain at 4.5 percent,

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<sup>89</sup> Pomeroy, *Pacific Slope*, 138.

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and Ireland at 3.5 percent. Most of the rest of the foreign-born population was from Canada and Scandinavian and Western European countries, with small groups from Russia, Italy and other nations (see Tables 6 and 7). Portland's African-American community was quite small; in 1860 there were but 16 persons listed by the US Census; in 1870 there were 147. By 1890, the African-American population had grown to 480, constituting only one percent of the city's total but accounting for about 40 percent of Oregon's total African-American population. In 1900 more than 70 percent of the state's African Americans lived in Portland (see Table 9).<sup>90</sup>

With an area as geographically small as Skidmore/Old Town, it is difficult to chart with a high degree of precision historical patterns of ethnicity and nationality in isolation from the broader city. However, there is evidence suggesting that, throughout most of the period of significance, Skidmore/Old Town had an ethnically and socially diverse community of business owners, residents and workers. Perhaps not surprisingly, the highest levels of the district's economic ladder—the merchant, banking and propertied elite—were dominated by Yankees from the Northeast and British immigrants, although a number of Jews, predominantly immigrants from Germany, obtained considerable commercial and political success, for example Joe Simon, Bernard Goldsmith and Philip Wasserman. Other European nationalities represented in the district's merchant/capitalist class included Danes, such as Neils Blagen, builder of the 1888 Blagen Block (#71), and Russians.

Skidmore/Old Town's small business owners and labor force (as in western port cities more generally) were highly mobile, making their ethnicity more difficult to pin down. As a port-of-call for European, Asian, Pacific Island and American shipping, Portland drew fortune- and employment-seeking men (and in fewer numbers women) from all over the nation and many foreign countries. While many stayed, others labored for short stints on its wharves or in its warehouses and hotels, or ran a small shop for a time before moving on to other opportunities (California being a perennial draw). The district's lodging houses and hotels were occupied by large numbers of transient men looking for seasonal employment at a northwest lumber camp (a draw for many Scandinavians), mill, or farm, or to sign-up for a term on a steamer headed for the Sandwich Islands or Liverpool.

One of the most easily identifiable and significant immigrant communities in the city and Skidmore/Old Town was the Chinese, primarily from Canton (now Guangdong) Province, making up the largest single group of foreign-born in Portland for many decades. Portland's "Old Chinatown," which was coalescing by the 1860s, was located south of Skidmore/Old Town, centered on the intersection of Second and Alder. However, unlike in most other cities with large Chinese communities such as San Francisco, Tacoma, Chicago, and New York, which developed distinct, clearly-bounded Chinese enclaves, Portland's Chinese population settled in a less rigid spatial pattern. Skidmore/Old Town had a sizable number of Chinese businesses, despite its distance from the center of Old Chinatown.<sup>91</sup> The "Chinese Directory" in Samuel's 1873 *City Directory* lists several such businesses, including wash-houses, stores, physicians and the employment office of Ah Luke on Front between Pine and Oak. Beginning in the period after the flood of 1894, much of the Chinese community began migrating away from Old Chinatown partly by rising real estate values in the portions of the downtown south of Skidmore/Old Town. Chinese businesses, social activities and residences migrated primarily to the area north of Burnside between Third and Fifth Avenues, soon known as "New Chinatown" and forming the nucleus of today's New Chinatown/Japantown Historic District, overlapping the Skidmore/Old Town Historic District along its western edges. The 1911 Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association Building (# 1) on NW Davis and the Hip Sing Association, in the former Portland Seamen's Bethel (# 3) on NW Third, are legacies of this spatial and demographic shift.

<sup>90</sup> Paul G. Merriam, "The 'Other Portland': A Statistical Note on the Foreign-Born," *OHQ* 80, no. 3 (Fall 1979); U.S. Census.

<sup>91</sup> Wong, *Sweet Cakes*, 265-267.

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Most of Portland's small African-American population in the nineteenth century lived and worked in inner west-side neighborhoods, many in Skidmore/Old Town, where the community planted roots that persisted into the mid-twentieth century, when an influx of black workers serving the World War II ship building industry shifted the community's center of gravity to the East Side. In 1869, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church was incorporated, meeting in a church they erected in the district on 3rd Avenue, between Burnside and Couch (demolished).

Most Portland African Americans were employed in services. According to one study, "the majority were stewards, waiters, cooks and porters" in the restaurant and hotel industries, which were well represented in Skidmore/Old Town. Others were employed in clothing manufacturing and shoemaking, and in various roles as laborers, boatmen, barbers, domestics, messengers, gardeners, and others. A small number of African Americans owned their own businesses, such as the aforementioned merchant Abner Francis. Others operated boarding houses, restaurants, saloons, and barbershops, often catering to the African-American community. African Americans, like the city's white and Chinese population, also actively participated in the "underworld" economy, in part because many "legitimate" employment opportunities were difficult or impossible to obtain. Much of the vice activity was centered in the "North End" (which included the historic district's northern half), where there was "more racial intermingling; Japanese, French, white and black women were employed as prostitutes in houses, or worked as waitresses and dancers. Black men owned saloons and gambling houses." Sensitive to public perceptions of the city's black community and critical of associations with gambling and prostitution, prominent Portland African-American newspaper publisher and real estate investor Adolphus Griffin commented in 1901 that, "if co-operative associations and business enterprises numbered among us as many as our pleasure clubs, we would be a more important factor in the commercial world."<sup>92</sup>

Fine new commercial structures continued to rise in the district between 1880 and the turn of the century. The extant buildings dating from this period are not only among the most character-defining in the historic district, but also help to illuminate its social and ethnic history. The four-story Blagen Block (#71) was constructed in 1888 at First and Couch by Danish immigrant Neils (or Nils) J. Blagen, variously described as an architect, contractor and lumberman. It is one of the largest and most significant remaining cast-iron buildings on the West Coast, its impressive 100 feet of Italianate cast-iron street frontage recalling the rhythmic rows of columns and arches that once united numerous block fronts in early Portland. The building was constructed for the W. C. Noon Bag Company, one of the principal canvas manufacturers and distributors on the West Coast, whose tents, awnings, and sails were shipped from Portland to points throughout the West and beyond. In the 1890s, company partner L. F. Osborn, the first president of the Portland Chamber of Commerce and a bank director, expanded its business into building supplies, another important niche in Portland's economy—and one of its few manufacturing strengths—that supported development in the cities, farms and towns of the Far West.

The district saw a number of solid hotel and lodging structures built in this era, adding to and replacing the area's dwindling stock of smaller wooden lodging houses, many of which were in aging, formerly single-family houses. The newer residential structures were multi-storied and included ground-floor retail spaces. The Merchant Hotel (#s 12 and 28) was constructed in 1880 by brothers Louis, Adolphe, and Theodore Nicolai, German immigrants and wealthy pioneer Portland industrialists who operated lumber mills in Beaver Valley and Albina and had established the large Nicolai Brothers Co. (later Nicolai-Neppack Co.) planing mill and door and sash plant that filled the block bounded by First, Second, Everett and Davis in Skidmore/Old Town.

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<sup>92</sup> Elizabeth McLagan, *A Peculiar Paradise: A History of Blacks in Oregon, 1788-1940* (Portland, OR: Georgian Press, 1980), *passim*.

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Expanded in 1884, the Merchant was for a time one of the better Portland hotels, also containing retail and offices. Louis Nicolai's Portland Cracker Co. was housed in the building for a time. It also contained a dance hall and billiard room over the years.<sup>93</sup>

From about 1904 to the mid-1940s, the Merchant was a central fixture in Portland's vital Japantown (*Nihonmachi*), another rich layer of Skidmore/Old Town's historical and cultural identity. Japanese professional offices, a bathhouse/barber/laundry for Japanese laborers, specialized grocery and dry good shops, and the offices of the Japanese newspaper *Oshu Nippo*, were all located in the building. Renovated in the early 2000s, it currently houses the Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center, a fitting home for this Japanese-American cultural institution.<sup>94</sup>

The S. Ban Company Building (#14), constructed in the early 1890s on NW Third Avenue, housed a hotel on its upper floors, but is most significant for its associations with Shinsaburo Ban, whose offices and general store were located in the building for over three decades. Ban, a former Japanese diplomat, moved to Portland in 1891 and engaged in a number of business enterprises, including lumber milling, ranching, retailing and labor contracting. Aided by his diplomatic and business connections in Japan and excellent command of English, he became one of the most successful Japanese businessmen in the Far West. The S. Ban & Company firm, with branches in Colorado, Wyoming, and Japan, provided thousands of Japanese laborers to railroads, canneries, farms, mines, and other operations across the western states. Assisted by Portland's expanding shipping connections to Japan and running the largest Japanese business in Oregon, Ban was largely responsible for Portland becoming the most important Northwest distribution center for Japanese labor, primarily to the railroads.<sup>95</sup>

Another example of a multi-use hotel building is the Sinnott House (#6), constructed in 1883 on the corner of NW Third and Couch by German-Jewish lawyer, businessman and power-broker Joseph Simon. Simon served as Portland mayor (1877, 1909-1911), state senator (1880-1891, 1895-1898), Republican state chairman (1880-1886), and U.S. Senator (1898-1904). Known as "Little Joe" by his allies and "The Boss" by his opponents, Simon was "clearly the most powerful individual in Oregon politics from 1880 to 1910."<sup>96</sup> Simon also built and owned the adjacent building at 105 NW Third (#5). Patrick Sinnott, an immigrant from Ireland who came to Portland in 1862, purchased the building (Sinnott House) from Simon in 1892. Sinnott served for 17 years as the Federal Indian Agent for the Grande Ronde Indian Reservation, beginning in 1872. The building served as a hotel for over a century. Its ground floor housed Murphey's Saloon in the 1890s. Some of its upper-story hotel rooms were used as offices, including that of dentist Koyama Kei, who served Japanese and other patients for over 35 years from this location.

The three-story Failing Building (#67) was built in 1883 on the northwest corner of First and Oak by successful merchant-capitalists Henry Failing, former Portland mayor and president of the First National Bank, and Simeon Reed, business partner of William Ladd, principal in the OSNC, and future benefactor of Reed College. Designed by one of the city's most prominent architects, Warren Williams, this well-built masonry and

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<sup>93</sup> *American Preservation Magazine* (December-January 1978), 30; Lauren Rubin, "Merchant Steeped in City's History, Lore," *Oregonian*, December 8, 2005, "In Portland" section, page 12.

<sup>94</sup> George Katagiri et al., *Nihonmachi: Portland's Japantown Remembered* (Portland, OR: Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center, 2002), passim.

<sup>95</sup> Oregon Historical Society, "Shinzaburo Ban," Oregon History Project, <http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/>; Katagiri, *Nihonmachi*, 4.

<sup>96</sup> MacColl, *Merchants, Money and Power*, 243-246; Lowenstein, *Jews of Oregon*, 61-63.

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structural iron building finished in stucco and decorative cast iron was built as a wholesale and office facility. Its early tenants included the typical Skidmore/Old Town wholesale firm of Sichel & Mayer, cigar importers, and the J. K. Gill Company, a major Pacific Northwest wholesale and retail stationer, bookseller and publisher and a Portland business fixture well into the late twentieth century.<sup>97</sup>

The 1893 Haseltine Building (#36) was constructed at Pine and Second by merchant, real estate investor and bank officer James E. Haseltine who came to Portland in the early 1880s, after operating a successful hardware business in Portland, Maine, (where he also served on the City Council), and a three year stint mining in California. He soon gained an interest in the established hardware firm of E. J. Northrup & Co., eventually controlling it and reincorporating as the J. E. Haseltine Co. The firm operated out of the Haseltine Building for many years, selling heavy equipment, hardwood lumber and wagon-making materials throughout Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana and Northern California.<sup>98</sup> The structure's rusticated stonework and massive arches exemplify the transition to the new Richardsonian Romanesque vocabulary in Portland's commercial architecture.

Two significant buildings from this era, the 1882 Portland Mariner's Home (#2) and the circa 1889 Seamen's Bethel (#3) on NW Third and Davis, add another dimension to our understanding of Skidmore/Old Town and its role as an international port district. While the district's commercial buildings remind us of one facet of Portland's mercantile economy—the accumulation of wealth and power by successful traders—the Mariners' Home and Seamen's Bethel evoke another—the lives of the maritime laborers upon whom a trade economy depended. These buildings were constructed by the Portland Seamen's Friend Society, formed in 1877 as an affiliate of the American Seamen's Friend Society which was founded in 1826 in New York and dedicated to improving the “social and moral condition of seamen.” In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sailors were one of the most vulnerable and abused labor forces in the world. Paid low wages and subject to appalling conditions, sailors had fewer rights than most other workers. For instance, under international maritime law, seamen's ability to terminate employment was sharply restricted even under flagrant contract violations and abusive treatment by employers. In 1897 the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the semi-indentured status of seamen, noting that they were, “deficient in that full and intelligent responsibility for their acts which is accredited to ordinary adults.” Ships which often released their crews while in-port awaiting cargoes, were frequently hard to man and desertions were common. In ports around the world, *crimping*—the semi-legitimate practice of third-party buying and selling of seamen's terms-of-labor (often involving entrapment or forced debt), and *Shanghaiing*—essentially kidnapping and enslavement—were regularly used to crew ocean vessels. This system was widely decried but well-established, and it implicitly involved the collaboration of ship captains, traders, port officials, lodging house and saloon operators, and a cadre of professional and often criminal employment brokers known as “crimps.” The Columbia River ports of Astoria and Portland suffered a particularly “vile reputation on an international scale,” with Portland's notorious crimps such as Bunco Kelly and Jim Turk becoming the stuff of legend.<sup>99</sup>

The Portland Seamen's Friend Society was organized to address the worst of these practices and to provide services to sailors and longshoremen, such as safe housing, meals, reading material, sermonizing, and advocacy. Prominent merchants and businessmen serving on its board included Henry Corbett, Donald Macleay, William Ladd, Rodney Glisan, James Steel and Edward Quackenbush. Like most charitable organizations of the time, it had a decidedly Christian orientation as well as a healthy dose of temperance. Their first chapel, kitchen,

<sup>97</sup> Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 150.

<sup>98</sup> Gaston, *Portland*, Vol. II, 150-156.

<sup>99</sup> Denise Alborn, “Crimping and Shanghaiing on the Columbia River,” *OHS Quarterly* 93, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 262-291.

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reading room and chaplain's quarters were housed in a wooden structure relocated to the Third and Davis site in 1879 (the former Gem Saloon building, portions of which may have been incorporated in the existing Seamen's Bethel structure). In a report to the national organization, Portland's chaplain Richard Gilpin noted that in 1887 he had preached at Bethel 142 times to 3,478 individuals, visited 114 ships a total of 358 times and conducted Bible study and singing classes. He also stated that "forty apprentices and sailors signed the teetotal pledge," an altogether low, if perhaps unsurprising, success rate, given the hard-drinking reputation of his mariner flock."<sup>100</sup> A central concern of the Portland Seamen's Friend Society was the abusive elements of crimping. After working for several years to raise funds from Portland's leading businessmen and the likes of international rail magnate Henry Villard and Liverpool grain trader and shipping tycoon W. A. Guthrie, the society built a "Mariners' Home," on the site in 1882, providing a safer and more respectable alternative to the many suspect sailors' lodging houses that were frequently complicit in crimping and Shanghaiing. An addition was completed around 1889. However, the society was unable to manage its debt and was forced to rent-out portions of the building and eventually sell it. The structure housed the Portland Hospital for a time circa 1890 and later the California Lodging House on its upper floors with various retail uses in the storefronts below. The buildings stand today, highlighting Skidmore/Old Town's early role in providing transient housing and other "social services" oriented to the international maritime labor force that supported the city's critical shipping functions.<sup>101</sup>

### Effects of Flooding

In the 1880s and 1890s Skidmore Old/Town was a vital commercial area and central to downtown's urban fabric. A visitor in the early '80s found that Front Street's impressive brick and cast-iron houses created a "metropolitan appearance unlooked for in a place of this size."<sup>102</sup> The area's waterfront location, although still fundamental to the city's economic viability, was slowly becoming more of a liability, however. By 1903, Portland had experienced at least five major floods and numerous lesser ones since its founding. The flood of 1894 covered 250 square blocks, swept away wharves and warehouses, ruptured gas and sewer lines, and washed away impermanent pavements such as wood and macadam. On Front Street, the floodwaters inundated the first floors of all its establishments. Boat traffic on city streets was brisk, however, and some enterprising merchants made the best of it. August Erickson, proprietor of the famous saloon on NW Second Avenue (#31) boasting the longest bar in the world (684 feet), "rented a houseboat and stocked it full of booze and other necessities for his thirsty customers... Row boats, homemade crafts, catamarans and canoes brought customers to the floating saloon... Some of the customers never left the floating saloon until the waters receded and they were broke."<sup>103</sup>

Illustrative of the deleterious effects of flooding on the district's fortunes over time is the story of Bernard Freimann's upscale restaurant and catering business located at the corner of First and Oak (#84, #89). Ben Freimann (AKA Ben Freeman) was an internationally prominent and peripatetic linguist, real estate speculator, hotelier, diplomat, spy, and all-around adventurer in the Victorian mold. Well-connected to Portland's power brokers and financial leaders, he earned one of his many and transient fortunes in an East Portland and Albina

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<sup>100</sup> "Portland, Ore., Seamen's Friend Society," *Sailors' Magazine* 60, no. 7 (July 1888): 199-201.

<sup>101</sup> Portland Seamen's Friend Society Records, Oregon Historical Society; Seamen's Abuses: Pamphlets, Scrap Books and Letters on Seamen's Abuses at Astoria and Portland, Wilson Room, Multnomah County Library, Oregon; "Portland Seamen's Bethel," *Daily Oregonian*, September 13, 1880.

<sup>102</sup> Olive Rand, *A Vacation Excursion*, 1884, 133, quoted in Pomeroy, *Pacific Slope*, 138.

<sup>103</sup> E. Kimbark MacColl, *The Shaping of a City: Business and Politics in Portland, Oregon 1885-1915* (Portland: The Georgian Press, 1976), 170.

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development syndicate of the 1870s that included prominent Portland businessmen William D. Ladd, Henry Failing and Harvey Scott. Returning to Portland in 1885 after an absence, he opened “The New Freimann Coffee House and Restaurant” in a new brick building located at 11 Oak Street (now 79 SW Oak, #84). He had operated a similar venture in 1875 on Washington Street. It was perhaps Portland’s most prominent restaurant, serving the city’s most distinguished citizens and visitors. He expanded into the adjacent building and established a successful catering business. In 1886 he hosted a banquet for world-famous French actress Sarah Bernhardt, who was in town to dedicate the new (uptown) Marquam Theater. Bernhardt had heard of Freimann’s excellent reputation and made many demands, but, according to Freimann, upon tasting his *pâté de sauté de foie de volaille* “went into hysterics. Tears of joy ran down her cheeks.”<sup>104</sup>

However, disaster struck with the flood of 1890 leaving “nothing but desolation and dirt” in his building after the water receded. His wealthy friends ensured that he received the loans needed to rebuild his business. But when the even more devastating flood of 1892 struck, dislodging the building from its foundation and destroying his restaurant, saloon, kitchens and wine cellar, Freimann was unable to pay his debts. He turned over all his property to his creditors, including his Portland home, ocean-front property, and undeveloped land in Albina, and moved to Honolulu. Old Town was clearly a difficult place to operate a business at times, and increasingly businesses not dependant on proximity to the waterfront chose to locate elsewhere, when they had the means to do so.

### The Skidmore Fountain

One of the most significant and symbolically rich resources in Skidmore/Old Town, indeed all of Portland, is the fountain for which the district is named. Erected in 1888 just north of the New Market Theater, it was Portland’s first piece of public art and remains one of its finest. The idea for the fountain had its genesis in a bequest from druggist, businessman and City Councilman Stephen Skidmore, whose father Andrew had operated a store and hotel in the district beginning in 1849. Skidmore had left \$5,000 to the city, specifying in his will that it be used for “the erection of a Drinking Fountain to be placed in such public place as the City authorities may direct.” The popular notion that it was intended for “men, horses and dogs” was expressed in contemporary newspapers and has been perpetuated in many accounts over the years, but Skidmore’s actual bequest is silent on this issue.<sup>105</sup>

Taking up the cause, pioneer merchant and former mayor Henry Failing consulted with prominent and somewhat bohemian lawyer Charles Erskine Scott Wood about an appropriate design for the fountain. Rejecting several initial ideas, they agreed that the fountain deserved to be a civic monument of the first order and required the “very best” artist they could find. Wood, a celebrated and well-connected poet and painter in his own right, contacted two of the most highly esteemed sculptors in the country, Olin Warner and Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Saint-Gaudens was too busy to accept the commission, but Warner accepted. Such talent did not come cheap; final design and fabrication in New York and Philadelphia would cost \$18,000. Failing raised the additional \$13,000 from among the city’s well-to-do, including a large, unspecified sum from banker Tyler Woodward, who conditioned his gift with the proviso that the fountain be placed opposite a parcel he owned on First Street. It was an appropriate location, however, located as it was in the center of the old business district. The City vacated a 23-foot space for the fountain at the intersection of First, Vine and Ankeny, putting it in the

<sup>104</sup> Professor Freeman [Bernard Freimann], *Freeman of Stamboul: Being the Memoirs of Professor Freeman* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1934), 219.

<sup>105</sup> Donald J. Sterling Jr. “Skidmore Really Didn’t Rank Women below Horses, Dogs,” *Oregonian*, October 9, 1987; Charles Erskine Scott Wood, “The Skidmore Fountain,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* (June 1933): 97-102.

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center of a unique, irregularly shaped open area where the streets of the original Portland plat meet at an offset those of Couch's Addition. Warner came to Portland to inspect the site to ensure that the fountain was designed in "proper scale and harmony" with its surroundings. The exceptional space the fountain occupies remains among the city's most intimately urban and charming.

Executed in bronze and orange-hued granite, the classically inflected fountain's shallow top-basin is supported by a pair of caryatids flanking an ionic column rising from a wider octagonal pool. The elegant fountain was immediately hailed as a masterpiece, both locally and nationally. *Century* magazine noted in 1889 that there was "nothing so beautiful in statuary westward of Chicago." Art critic W. C. Brownell stated in *Scribner's* in 1896 that the fountain represented "the high mark of American imaginative sculpture."<sup>106</sup>

The historical significance of the Skidmore Fountain for Portland and Skidmore/Old Town is multi-faceted. As a nationally recognized piece of public art, it symbolizes the city's coming of age as a major urban center. To Portland's late nineteenth-century citizens it was a source of civic pride, that, like the New Market Theater 15 years earlier, announced that Portland was at last worthy of inclusion among the ranks of the nation's culturally sophisticated cities. However, some contemporary remarks about the fountain reveal the "East Coast" bias typically leveled against "upstart" Western cities that, ironically, projects like the Skidmore Fountain were intended to counter. For instance, the New York *Tribune*, commenting about the work when it was first previewed in New York, praised the fountain itself, but bemoaned that it was intended "for a western city with its bewhiskered, bepistoled lot of frontiersmen."<sup>107</sup> W. C. Brownell might have found it "the high mark" in American sculpture, but he also wrote: "the fact that Warner's figures look calmly down upon buggies and buck-boards, and shirt-sleeves and slouch hats in Oregon, instead of decorating [New York's] Central Park, is grotesquely significant of much."<sup>108</sup> Such remarks, and the indignant responses from Portlanders, evoke a historical sensitivity to the judgments of outsiders that is sometimes still evident in Portland today.

If the fountain was in one sense a crowning cultural achievement for Portland, its completion in 1888 corresponds more-or-less with the city's zenith as *the* metropolis of the Northwest, a status it was beginning to lose to faster growing Seattle. So too, its siting "downtown" in the center of the ageing first business district seems, in hindsight, a bit ironic, as the action was increasingly heading "uptown," away from the fountain and the district itself. If the fountain is today no longer in the physical center of downtown, it retains its symbolic status as a cultural landmark central to Portland's civic identity. C. E. S. Wood's words inscribed on its base, "Good citizens are the riches of a city," continue to resonate with Portlanders, evoking not only Stephen Skidmore's gift to the city and those of other wealthy Portlanders, but the high level of civic engagement for which Portland's citizens are nationally known.

### **Downtown Moves Uptown, 1900 – 1929**

The first quarter of the twentieth century in Portland was marked by enormous changes, many driven by technological advances in moving goods and people that swept much of the country. In this era the automobile came into its own as the preferred form of personal transportation. Between 1910 and 1926, six new auto-accommodating bridges spanned the Willamette. Ever-larger cargo ships spurred improvements to the Columbia and Willamette shipping channels and the construction of large, publicly-owned dock facilities in the lower Willamette Harbor area, south of downtown. In 1929, Portland's first commercial airport was

<sup>106</sup> Snyder, *Skidmore's Portland*, 134.

<sup>107</sup> Joe Bianco, "Famed Fountain," *Oregonian*, April 5, 1964, 10.

<sup>108</sup> Snyder, *Skidmore's Portland*, 134.

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established.

Portland continued to grow. Between 1900 and 1910, Portland's population more than doubled in size from 90,424 to 207,214. By the 1920s, almost fifty square miles of land on the east side of the Willamette River had been added to the City since 1891, housing over 70 percent of the city's population. Many historians have linked Portland's growth in this period to its successful efforts to promote the city and region nationally and internationally. The booster spirit of nineteenth-century "upstart towns", to use Daniel Boorstin's phrase, was clearly evident during Portland's first half century, from the promotional writings of the *West Shore* magazine, to the more ambiguous intermingling of public and private interests evident in the efforts by the city's leading capitalists to bring railroads to Portland. However, the epitome of Portland's boosterism was undoubtedly the 1905 Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition and Oriental Fair. Touted as celebrating the centennial of the Lewis and Clark Expedition's foray into the Oregon Country, the extravagant event used a nostalgic veil of history to promote regional investment and American imperialist ideals. Erected amidst a marshy lagoon on the northwestern outskirts of the city, attractions included sentimental statuary evoking the values of Manifest Destiny, a basilica-like edifice constructed of old growth logs, and even Venetian canals.<sup>109</sup>

The fair was a rousing success from the perspective of Portland's political and economic elite, who had pulled the event together, for a decade-long economic boom followed the fair, with an influx of new residents in the growing eastside "streetcar suburbs" and massive private investment in new downtown commercial buildings. However, the boom did not affect all parts of the City equally. Although new construction occurred in Skidmore/Old Town, Portland's central business district continued to shift south and west, away from the flood-prone, rough-and-ready waterfront—and the Skidmore/Old Town district. As the era of the skyscraper dawned (or, perhaps more accurately in Portland, the era of the proto-skyscraper), the city's newest, tallest, and most modern buildings were being sited farther "uptown," reflecting and precipitating a number of changes in the district.

### Spatial Shifts in the Central Business District

While it had always had a large share of the city's bread-and-butter wholesale, distribution and transportation services, Skidmore/Old Town had also been a part of the city's financial/office district, with its banks, lawyers, notaries, and insurance agents, as well as higher-end retail operations that serviced them, such as restaurants, hotels and tailors. However, in the early twentieth century, high rent-paying office and retail businesses began moving to newer and more fashionable uptown buildings and locations, increasing the overall proportion of manufacturing, wholesale and warehousing activities in Old Town. This shift was driven by a number of positive and negative locational factors, ranging from the desire for more distance from the working waterfront to the real estate premium and high status of close proximity to important civic buildings, such as city hall and courthouses, sited to the south and west. For instance, in 1907, Wells, Fargo completed what is commonly considered Portland's first "skyscraper," a twelve-story commercial tower west of the district at Sixth and Oak into which moved Wells Fargo itself and the offices of the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company (successor to the Oregon Steam Navigation Company), two major corporations long associated with Skidmore/Old Town. The international grain trading firm of Balfour Guthrie, which had a long-standing presence in Portland, built its new corporate office well away from the waterfront at SW Stark and Sixth in 1916. Construction of increasingly large downtown commercial buildings is illustrated on Map MO2, which charts patterns of "vertical density" (i.e. building heights) in 1879 and 1908 and clearly shows the westward and

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<sup>109</sup> See Abbott, *The Great Extravaganza: Portland and the Lewis and Clark Exposition* (Portland, OR: Oregon Historical Society Press, 2004).

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southward shift of the Central Business District's center of gravity away from Skidmore/Old Town and the riverfront.

The upper floors of many structures, once occupied by office activities, were increasingly used for storage and warehousing. In some cases upper floors, whether once offices or warehouses were converted to low-end, sub-standard lodgings. The formerly vital wharves were used less and began to decay, as the city's port activities shifted away from the older, smaller, and privately-owned downtown docks to larger and more modern down-river shipping facilities, including the new publicly-owned municipal terminals, proximate to large tracts of land suited for industrial expansion. Construction of the now numerous downtown Willamette River bridges had made it more difficult for vessels to access the wharves of Skidmore/Old Town and the upper harbor and ever-larger ocean ships increasingly found the narrower width of the river in the downtown insufficient for maneuvering and turning.

While First Street continued to have a retail orientation, it was no longer Portland's preeminent shopping area. In 1915, First Street retailers organized a booster group, the First Street Progressive Men's Association, to reinvigorate the area, its president lamenting that, "we don't deny that the city has moved away from us."<sup>110</sup>

Mirroring a national trend in which hotel living became increasingly less "respectable," many of the district's older hotels lost prestige and served a more transient and working-class clientele, although several new residential hotels built after the turn of the century maintained good reputations for a time. However, residential hotels, now often referred to as "Single Room Occupancy" hotels, were suspect in the eyes of many along with the district's lodging and boarding houses. Built in 1911, the Foster Hotel at 216 NW Third Avenue (#11) was a solid and dignified structure but its 180 small rooms lacked private bathing facilities. In the 1930s it housed Japanese workers and a Judo parlor. The Norton House (#55), located at First and Couch, had been heralded by *West Shore* magazine at the time of its opening in 1877 noting that it possessed "all the modern conveniences." But, as its current heritage plaque notes, it "may have had difficulty maintaining a first class hotel status, surrounded ... by sailors' saloons, laundries, heavy industry and houses of ribald reputation."

Notwithstanding notable changes in the early twentieth century, patterns of continuity in the district's character and functions are also evident, including its ongoing critical place in the city's economic geography. Many of its trade and manufacturing businesses continued to prosper, evidenced by major investments in new structures. In 1903, the George Lawrence Company completed an elegant quarter-block, four-story building at First and Oak, designed by the prominent architectural firm of Whidden and Lewis (#85). Described in 1905 as a "wholesale manufacturer of harnesses and saddlery" and "importers and jobbers of saddlery, hardware, leather, whips and robes," the company had deep roots in the district. Founded in 1857 by pioneer Samuel Sherlock, who operated a saddlery and leather shop at 52 Front Street, the company thrived under the leadership of Sherlock's brother-in-law George Lawrence from 1876 to 1922, reportedly employing as many as 250 workers during World War I. In response to the decline of horse-driven transportation, they expanded their product line in the 1920s to include auto supplies and other products although their now-legendary gun belts and holsters continued to be signature products until the business was sold in the 1980s. Occupying the First Street building until 1985, the George Lawrence Company's longevity over more than a century illustrates the historical continuity of Skidmore/Old Town's commercial and industrial economy and its adaptability to broad social and

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<sup>110</sup> "Prosperity Nicknames Old Business Thoroughfare Easy Street—No Depression," clipping from unknown 1915 newspaper, Vertical File "Portland Streets," Oregon Historical Society, Portland (hereafter cited as OHS). See also Chris Sawyer, *From White Chapel to Old Town: The Life and Death of the Skid Row District, Portland, Oregon* (PhD diss., Portland State University, 1985), 212.

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economic changes.<sup>111</sup>

In this period, the Chinese and Japanese communities continued to be perhaps the most recognizable ethnic groups within the district, but new groups added to the ethnic mix. In the early twentieth century, Portland's Greek population grew rapidly. In 1900, the census listed only six heads-of-household within Multnomah County who were born in Greece; by 1910 the number had grown to 921, with the area along and near lower Burnside forming an important residential and commercial nucleus for the community. The Maletis Brothers Grocery Store, located first in the building that now houses the Oregon Leather Company (#40) and later in the Estate Hotel (# 13), opened circa 1917 by Greek immigrants James, Peter and Chris Maletis. It served not only the North End's growing Greek population and the large number of Greek sailors that passed through, but also catered to other ethnic groups. James Maletis' daughter Mary, who worked there beginning as a small girl, noted in 1979 that, "Our shelf stock has always reflected the neighborhood. Besides Greek we've had every kind of food from Scandinavian to Japanese."<sup>112</sup>

### Vice, Social Services, and Labor: the Emergence of Skid Road

As a waterfront area, Skidmore/Old Town had long had its share of activities that affronted the nineteenth-century bourgeois morals shared by many of Portland's citizens and leaders. As the city's spatial organization became more hierarchical and its land uses more segregated, "high culture," once epitomized by the New Market Theater, moved away from the district and "vice" operations—brothels, saloons, gambling halls, arcades, dance halls, etc.—became more concentrated, or at least more prominent in what was known as the "North End."<sup>113</sup> Historian Gloria Myers describes the area (also sometimes called "White Chapel" after London's notorious red light district) in the first decade of the twentieth century:

*The North End district boasted the usual features of western port cities. Merchant seamen, traveling salesmen, loggers, farm hands and soldiers from the nearby Vancouver Barracks strolled the cobbled streets in search of a "good time." Blocks of shanty "cribs," which ... were rented to individual prostitutes "for \$15 a week," coexisted with grand bordellos housing dozens of "sporting women." ... The "favorite combination," according to a contemporary [1913] survey on vice abatement, was "a saloon, a grill, and a house of prostitution, all in the same building, same block, or immediate vicinity."<sup>114</sup>*

Of particular notoriety was the block bounded by Second and Third, and Couch and Burnside, known as the "blazing center," described by an *Oregon Journal* writer: "Here were the Erickson, Fritz and Blazier saloons, with the House of all Nations opposite Erickson's on the northeast corner of Second and Burnside. Lights glared, music blared, chips rattled and glasses clinked from dark till the milkman made his rounds."<sup>115</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Donald R. Nelson, *Progressive Portland II: Stop and Go* (Portland: Donald Nelson, 2006), 20-21; George Lawrence Co., <http://www.vintagegunleather.com/companyhistories.htm>; 1865 *Portland City Directory*.

<sup>112</sup> Ryan, *Burnside: A Community*, 1979, 18; Sara Cox, Maletis Brothers Grocery Store, <http://www.oldtown.pdx.edu/maletis.htm>.

<sup>113</sup> Just as the current historic district's boundaries do not conform precisely to Portland's "first downtown," neither do they conform to the area once referred to as the North End, which was generally north of Burnside Street stretching from the waterfront west through New Chinatown to the North Park Blocks.

<sup>114</sup> Gloria E. Meyers, *A Municipal Mother: Portland's Lola Greene Baldwin, America's First Policewoman* (Corvallis, Oregon: Oregon State University Press, 1995), 93. Meier's less-scholarly book, *Those Naughty Ladies of the Old Northwest*, contains interesting anecdotal accounts of prostitution in early Portland. For an in depth study of the North End as a vice district and skid road see Sawyer, *From Whitechapel to Old Town*.

<sup>115</sup> MacColl, *Merchants, Money, and Power*, 342

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Erickson's Saloon (# 31), the "Workingmen's Club" as its sign declared, was founded in the 1880s and gained fame for its 684-foot bar and legendary free lunch. In 1913, Gus Erickson sold the saloon building to Fred Fritz, owner of the adjacent Fritz Theater, a notorious burlesque house tied to gambling and prostitution. Fritz razed several buildings on the block, built new structures incorporating some of the previous structures and reestablished the "blazing center's" saloon, theater and hotel businesses.<sup>116</sup> It is unclear whether the block's lively reputation was changed much by the new digs.

Illustrative of efforts of Old Town businesses to bolster the perception of the area was a 1914 plan to illuminate every intersection on Third Avenue. From Yamhill Street north through the Skidmore/Old Town neighborhood to Glisan Street, a series of imposing luminated arches were built with the intention of luring commerce back toward the river. Reminiscent of medieval groin vaults and recalling the 1905 Fair's impressive displays of decorative outdoor lighting, the structures were glowing downtown icons until their removal in the 1930s for what was considered more practical lighting.<sup>117</sup>

Contemporaries clearly viewed Old Town as suffering from a decline in fortune and status. From a broader historical perspective, the changes in the area exemplify significant shifts in urban spatial organization seen in the downtowns of trade-centered, waterfront cities across the West and the nation. Urban geographer Larry Ford describes the typical conversion of historical city cores into "zones of discard" as the "peak land value intersection"<sup>118</sup> moved over time from the "semi-industrial chaos of the waterfront, with its flood hazards and congestion, to an area on higher ground which was once a zone of better residences."<sup>119</sup> The older zone of discard, better known as "Skid Road" or "Skid Row", with its aging and underutilized building stock and marginalized population of the down-and-out, became a defining feature of the twentieth century city.<sup>120</sup> By mid-century, Portland's Skid Road came to encompass all of the original waterfront downtown—with Skidmore/Old Town at the center (see Map MO3).<sup>121</sup>

Despite, on the one hand, contemporary concerns about the district's decline and the growing impetus to redevelop and "improve" it that would eventually result in the demolition of many historic structures, Skidmore/Old Town, as a part of Portland's Skid Road, served important functions within the social, cultural and economic ecologies of the city and the region. Its transient housing, employment agencies, popular entertainment venues, aid societies, missions, and labor organizations served the northwest's large itinerant working population—the loggers, mill workers, miners, farm hands and other workers who seasonally migrated to large urban centers in search of their next job or a place to spend their "stake." Portland's status as a major urban hub with a burgeoning economy and developed transportation linkages, in combination with

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<sup>116</sup> Historic Preservation Certification Application—Part 1 Erickson's Hotel, dated September 10, 1982; In City of Portland, Land Use Review file HLDZ 2-83. See also Stewart Holbrook, "Erickson's: Elbow Bending for Giants," in *Wildmen, Wobblies and Whistle Punks: Stewart Holbrook's Lowbrow Northwest*, ed. Brian Booth (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1992), 217-222.

<sup>117</sup> Catherine Sohm, *A History of Street Lighting in Portland, Oregon* (Portland: The City of Portland, Office of Transportation, 1997) 9.

<sup>118</sup> Essentially, it is the area of highest land values, typically within the CBD, and theoretically a function of high accessibility and maximum opportunity for interaction and economic transaction.

<sup>119</sup> Larry Ford, *Cities and Buildings: Skyscrapers, Skid Rows, and Suburbs* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 64-65.

<sup>120</sup> The older term "Skid Road" is used here in preference to the increasingly more common "Skid Row," reflecting western states usage and the original reference to logging roads paved with tree trunks, or skids, and, by association, the area of a town where loggers congregated, usually a rough neighborhood or red-light district.

<sup>121</sup> Donald J. Bogue, *Skid Row in American Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963), 35.

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Skidmore/Old Town's geographic centrality, numerous potential employers, and constant stream of newcomers, made the district a logical center of gravity for employment offices, labor organizations, and other institutions and activities that supported or were supported by the working classes and other vulnerable elements of society. The aforementioned Mariners' Home and Seamen's Bethel (#2, #3) which served the needs of maritime labor are early examples that recall aspects of these critical social functions. Places like Erickson's Saloon (#31) or Fred Fritz' hotel/theater/saloon operations (#18), as venues for "vices" such as gambling and prostitution—activities that clearly have socially corrosive effects—are perhaps more problematic examples. However, saloons, burlesque theaters, shooting galleries, billiard halls and the like were important institutions that provided social spaces for "working stiffs" and others who were not welcome at the uptown Arlington Club or Ben Freimann's upscale restaurant on nearby First and Oak (#89, #84). They were places of relief and fellowship (and occasional danger) but also supplied valuable services, such as inexpensive meals, informal banking and mail delivery, that were not otherwise available to the chronically underemployed, homeless and stigmatized (see Map MO5).

With the rise of radical labor movements around the turn of the century, groups like the International Workers of the World, or Wobblies, found a natural home in Skidmore/Old Town, among the northwest's growing "special labor force, the mobile and deracinated, upon which the expanding industries of the region more and more depended."<sup>122</sup> One of the earliest Wobbly Halls on the West Coast was opened in 1907 in the ground floor of the hotel on the northwest corner of West Burnside and Third Avenue (demolished).<sup>123</sup> From here, the first Wobbly-led strike in the Pacific Northwest was coordinated, with 2,000 mill workers walking out and shutting down all of the city's lumber mills and many of the Columbia Region's logging camps in March 1907.<sup>124</sup>

Portland's Wobbly Halls (another was probably located in the district circa 1919 in the Rich Hotel on North Second Street (#29), another at 222-224 West Burnside (#20), and the 1910 City Directory shows an IWW Reading Room at 33 North Fourth Street) were "more than mere union halls. They served as social clubs, dormitories, mess halls and mail drops." Portland's most famous radical John Reed (the only American buried in the Kremlin) noted that "wherever...there is an IWW local, you will find an intellectual center—a place where men read philosophy, economics, the latest plays, novels; where art and poetry are discussed, and international politics. In my native place, Portland, Oregon, the IWW hall was the liveliest intellectual center in town."<sup>125</sup>

Other unions had their headquarters in the district, including the Marine Workers Industrial Union (MWIU), housed in the Foster Hotel (#11). A radical, communist-led organization formed as an alternative to what was

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<sup>122</sup> Robert Tyler, *Rebels of the Woods: The I.W.W. in the Pacific Northwest* (Eugene: University of Oregon Books, 1967), 31.

<sup>123</sup> Sources consulted are conflicting on the location of the first IWW hall. Shawn Lingo places it in the hotel on the northwest corner of West Burnside and Third, a structure that was only recently demolished and was the only contributing structure demolished in the district since its nomination to the National Register. Michael Munk places it at 493 West Burnside, a street address not currently in use but presumably indicating the 1907 Grove Hotel (401-439 W. Burnside, just outside Skidmore/Old Town in the New Chinatown/Japan Town Historic District). Photos in the City Archives from 1928 show a Wobbly Hall on the second floor of the noncontributing building across Burnside (#20) from the Wax Building (#19). Shawn Lingo, "The IWW and the Disappearance of Portland's Working Class Cultural Landscape or Floppin' in the Hall," *The Journal of the Associated Students for Historic Preservation* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 6,7; Michael Munk, *The Portland Red Guide: Sites & Stories of Our Radical Past* (Portland: Ooligan Press, 2007).

<sup>124</sup> Tyler, *Rebels*, 54-55

<sup>125</sup> John Reed, *Liberator*, September 1918, as quoted in Franklin Rosemount, *Joe Hill: The IWW & the Making of a Revolutionary Workingclass Counterculture* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2003), 34.

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seen as the conservatism and corruption of the International Longshoremen's Association, the MWIU was active in the great Maritime Strike of 1934 that rocked West Coast ports, including Portland, where "special police" deputized by Mayor Carson fired on picket lines and wounded four workers.<sup>126</sup>

An important focal point for Portland and West Coast radicalism was jeweler Tom Burns's activist bookstore "The Clock Shop" (the signage read "Clocks-Jewelry-Read-Think-Learn") located on Burnside between North Third and Fourth and later in the Wax Building at Burnside and North Third (#19). Here one could borrow books by Karl Marx and Eugene Debs from the lending library in the basement, buy the latest issue of *The Masses* for a dime, or pick up Burns's own leftist newsletter, *FAX*, which attacked, among others, Portland's "political parasites—the first families like the Corbetts, Labbes, Wilcoxes—coupon clipping clowns that never did a useful day's work in the worthless lives." Active in the socialist and labor movements from before World War I until the 1950s, Burns was an icon of the city's radical scene and was known as the "Mayor of Burnside."<sup>127</sup>

In 1946, after the fiery radicalism of the first half of the century had waned, Stewart Holbrook evoked the deep symbolic association between radicalized labor and the Skidmore/Old Town area when he described Arthur Boose, the "last of the Wobbly paper boys" hawking the *Industrial Worker*, as he had for two decades, on the corner of Third and Burnside, in the "most celebrated Skidroad in Oregon, or on Earth."<sup>128</sup>

### Surviving "Civic Improvements:" Demolition, Adaptation and Preservation, 1929 – the Present

*"Portland's almost last link with the dusty past is about to go. The ornate façaded fronts of Front Avenue Buildings will fall to the wrecker's zeal, and in their place will rise the austere severity of modern architecture. The cobblestones of the narrow streets will disappear under the paving of the new super-highway, and the last gas-mantle lamp will metamorphize into neon. So look your last, Portland, as old Front Avenue goes glimmering. A new day is coming!"*—Oregon Journal, May 11, 1941.<sup>129</sup>

Before the 1920s, periodic flooding, the loss of shipping activities, and other economic and social trends contributed to the decline of Front and First streets as preeminent commercial streets and Skidmore/Old Town as an economically vital part of the downtown. With construction of the new Burnside Bridge in 1926, the pace of change quickened. West Burnside Street was widened for several blocks requiring major alterations to commercial buildings at the center of the historic district, many being essentially chopped in half. The widening also increased Burnside's role as a major east-west thoroughfare and as an attractive location for automobile sale and service businesses. Its left-turn restrictions and elevated bridge ramps, which completely passed over Front and First Avenues, complicated and reduced access to Skidmore/Old Town, further isolating it from the rest of downtown and constricting its attractiveness as a retail and office district. A direct result of the rapid rise and popularity of the automobile, the new bridge symbolized the transition of the nineteenth-century village, horse and pedestrian-accommodating street plan towards twentieth-century automobile-centered layouts. Less than forty years earlier, Olin Warner had sculpted the Skidmore Fountain in a

<sup>126</sup> Munk, *Portland Red Guide*, 99, 101.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 105, 126-127.

<sup>128</sup> Stewart Holbrook, "The Last of the Wobblies," in *Wildmen, Wobblies and Whistle Punks: Stewart Holbrook's Lowbrow Northwest*, ed. Brian Booth (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1992), 295-304.

<sup>129</sup> Quoted in Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 21.

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diminutive size allowing it to better harmonize with the surrounding two- and three-story structures that were the city's norm. The Burnside Bridge dwarfed not only the fountain, but the buildings themselves, as this characteristically twentieth-century piece of urban infrastructure loomed-over and bypassed half the neighborhood.<sup>130</sup> Suffering a symbolic indignity, a one-way traffic sign was actually affixed to the fountain itself for a time.

The Burnside Bridge project was just the first of a wave of large-scale public works projects and accompanying building demolitions that significantly altered the physical and economic fabric of the district. Following in succession, four major infrastructure projects further impacted the district. These were: 1) constructing a river seawall and sewer interceptor; 2) widening Front Street, extending bridge approaches and constructing Harbor Drive, necessitating removal of all remaining buildings east of Front Street; 3) removing Harbor Drive in order to create a landscaped waterfront esplanade; and 4) constructing light-rail transit (LRT), which brought about changes to sidewalks and traffic patterns.<sup>131</sup>

The construction of a seawall and major sewer interceptor in 1929 along the Willamette River, extending 5,400 feet from NW Glisan Street (three blocks north of the district) to SW Jefferson Street (ten blocks south of the district) helped bring an end to the periodic flooding that had plagued Portland's waterfront areas for nearly 80 years (major dam projects on the Columbia River also reduced flooding). However, the project also necessitated the removal of the by-then decaying wharves of waterfront buildings along the east side of Front Street—structures once central to the district's and the city's economic vitality and civic identity. Marking the end of the period of significance, the completion of the seawall in 1929 physically and symbolically severed the district's connection to the Willamette River. While many of Skidmore/Old Town's businesses would continue to be directed towards wholesale trade and industrial activity, a once fundamentally river-oriented trade district had lost the greater part of its marine infrastructure. In addition, 1929 saw the beginnings of the Great Depression which ushered in a period of stagnation not only in Skidmore/Old Town but throughout the nation.

In 1939, the "Front Street Project" was launched, ultimately resulting in not only a widened Front Street but the six-lane Harbor Drive expressway along the seawall with underpasses at all bridges. Before construction could take place, 79 buildings had to be demolished. The project included a concrete esplanade along the top of the seawall and "a narrow strip of park land" between Front Avenue and Harbor Drive.<sup>132</sup> This project, completed in 1943, forced the removal of a large percentage of buildings at the easterly edge of the Skidmore/Old Town Historic District—the last of the districts wharves and waterfront tradehouses on the east side of Front were gone forever. Few people at the time would have been able to predict that the expressway itself would be removed thirty years later for another civic undertaking - construction of Waterfront Park - which now defines the easterly edge of the district.

Private property owners were also beginning to raze the district's historic structures, beginning in 1928 with the 1867 Bank of British Columbia, a flat-iron style building adjacent to the Skidmore Fountain inaugurating a nearly three-decade long period of demolition for Portland's neglected cast-iron structures. In most cases, surface parking lots replaced the demolished buildings—many such lots remain today—further evidence of the car's dominance and economic conditions in the district which apparently did not make new construction

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<sup>130</sup> William J. Hawkins, III, "Befriending Your Cast Iron District."

<sup>131</sup> E. Kimbark MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon, 1915-1950* (Portland: The Georgian Press, 1979) 315.

<sup>132</sup> Lansing, *Portland*, 335; MacColl, *Growth of a City*, 529; Allen-McMath-Hawkins Architects, *Development Program, Skidmore Old Town Historic District* (Portland: Prepared for the Portland Development Commission, 1976), 5.

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attractive.

There is evidence that some citizens appreciated the “romantic” qualities of the early commercial district; a 1930 article in the *Oregonian* had stated: “It is not generally known in our city of Portland—by all accounts the oldest and most individual city in the northwest—that we have here, in the morning’s ramble or a leisurely survey from an automobile, a street drenched with pioneer associations which will please the eye and intrigue the memories of old days.”<sup>133</sup> But times had changed and there was no organized opposition from voters or civic groups to the demolition activities, although one observer likened the destruction wrought by the Harbor Drive project to the London Blitz.<sup>134</sup> New auto-accommodating public policies and development were in fact widely supported; even demolitions to create new surface lots were regarded as good economic sense—realtor Chester A. Moores stating in 1939, “If older buildings that are losing money were torn down and new ground areas made available for parking spaces, the remaining office buildings would reap... advantage.”<sup>135</sup>

Beginning in the 1960s, however, preservation advocacy, policy shifts and public and private investment, slowed the demolition trend. Pioneering Portland preservationists, such as George McMath, Bill Hawkins, and Gregg Sutton rallied around Old Town’s historic buildings, raised public awareness, organized a “Friends of Cast Iron” group and succeeded in landmarking key structures and creating a historic district by the mid-1970s. Preservation, renovation and rehabilitation took their place as urban planning and development tools in the district. Early noteworthy restoration and rehabilitation projects, many under the auspices of Bill Naito, that raised the district’s profile and set the stage for future reinvestments, included the Globe Hotel/Import Plaza conversion (1963, #70) and restoration work on the Smith Block/Railway Building (early 1960s and 1978, #96, #78). In the 1980s and early 1990s, a fresh round of rehabilitation and restoration occurred, including the Blagen Block (1983, #71), the George Lawrence Building (1985, #85), the Reed Building (1985, #74), the New Market Theater (1983, #45) and the Oregon & Washington Investment and Trust Co. (1991, #79). More recently, spurred in part by development activities in the nearby Pearl District and in New Chinatown, a new round of major renovations and rehabilitations has been initiated; the Freimann Kitchen Building was restored in 2002 (#89) and other major projects currently underway or recently completed include the Smith Block (#96 and #78), the White Stag Building (#92), the Bickel Block (#91), the Blagen Block (#71) and the Freimann Restaurant Building (#84). While a number of resources have been lost, a cohesive collection of historic structures remains in the Skidmore/Old Town district and ongoing investments in renovation, restoration and rehabilitation promise to preserve the district’s resources for future generations. Together, they remind us not only of a “grand era” of commercial architecture, but of the critical role Portland played as a regional metropolis and the complex spatial and social shifts older Western port cities experienced as they matured.

### Architectural Context and Significance

The Skidmore/Old Town Historic District is nationally significant for its exceptional mid-nineteenth to early twentieth-century commercial buildings. Its buildings reflect the evolution and diversity of design ideals and building practices evident in the United States during the period of significance. They present a broad range of commercial architectural styles that lend variety to the district’s urban character while also working in concert to create a cohesive and distinct historic sense of place. The district includes: elaborate, somewhat ethereal Victorian statements like the High Italianate Blagen Block (#71); transitional amalgams such as the Italianate-Sullivan-esque Skidmore Block (#72); solid Richardsonian Romanesque structures such as the Haseltine

<sup>133</sup> John Logan, *Oregonian*, September 7, 1930.

<sup>134</sup> Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 162.

<sup>135</sup> MacColl, *Growth of a City*, 529.

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Building (#36); and buildings exhibiting the cleaner lines and nascent functionalism of the early twentieth century Commercial and Utilitarian styles, as in the White Stag Building (#92). But the most noteworthy and defining elements of the district's historic character derive from its Victorian Era masonry and cast-iron buildings. This collection is one of the largest and best preserved in the American West. Use of architectural cast iron ranges from sparsely applied ornamental accents to full iron-fronted façades. Most of the cast-iron work is associated with Italianate buildings, but also appears in a few other stylistic modes, for example the Victorian Gothic style Oregon & Washington Trust building (#79). Skidmore/Old Town's cast-iron buildings, from the iconic New Market Theater (#45) and the Merchant Hotel (#12, #28) to less imposing "background" structures like the Portland Mariners' Home (#3) and the Fechheimer and White Building (#98) have long been noted not only for their individual beauty and rich contributions to Portland's built environment, but for their collective importance to the nation's architectural heritage.

Beyond their aesthetic value, the district's commercial buildings collectively express in architectural forms the success of early Portland's trade-centered economy and rise as a major urban center. The application of proto-prefabricated, cast-iron construction methods to the expressive Victorian styles evident in the district's commercial buildings constitutes an important West Coast reflection of nineteenth-century America's "Age of Enterprise." This complex historical era was characterized by: economic expansion and diversification; a spirit of entrepreneurialism, the rise of powerful corporations, managerial innovations and mass production; an increased pace of industrialization; rapid urbanization; and intensified exploitation of natural and human resources. In Portland, as in other cities across the country, the use of cast-iron architectural technology intersected with the adoption and adaptation of the Italianate and other European-influenced architectural styles, together providing industrial-age efficiency while satisfying the desires of building owners, businesses, civic boosters and designers for impressive and urbane downtown buildings and districts. Cast-iron building elements and the Italianate style are important historical markers of an increasingly specialized—and particularly commercial—form of architecture that anchored late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century business and trade districts throughout the country.<sup>136</sup>

The cast-iron era spanned most of the nineteenth century in the United States, beginning slowly in the 1820s, accelerating in the 1850s, and peaking in the 1880s. The development and use of cast-iron building elements was a significant achievement in architecture and technology, coinciding with broad and complex shifts in America's economy, population and national identity away from a rural/agricultural orientation towards one that was increasingly urban and industrial. Cast iron captured the urban imagination in a way that few building materials had in the past, and was embraced by architects, building clients, journalists, and the general public.<sup>137</sup> Between 1850 and 1890, entire structures composed of modular cast-iron elements were prefabricated in foundries and shipped to building sites in cities and towns throughout the country, creating new urban spaces with a distinctly orderly and "modern" commercial flavor.

The apogee of the cast-iron era, between 1850 and 1890, also coincided with the settlement and development of the Far West and the rise of its first major urban centers, including Portland. This confluence allowed Portland to emerge as a key showcase for the architectural uses of cast iron. In his book *The Grand Era of Cast Iron Architecture in Portland*, William Hawkins notes: "the construction of the first 'Iron Front' in the United States

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<sup>136</sup> Richard Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street* (Washington: The Preservation Press, 1987), 13-19; Leland Roth, *American Architecture: A History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 192, 211.

<sup>137</sup> Antoinette J. Lee, "Cast Iron in American Architecture: A Synoptic View," in *The Technology of Historic American Buildings: Studies of the Materials, Craft Processes, and the Mechanization of Building Construction*, ed. H. Ward Jandl (Washington: Foundation for Preservation Technology, 1983) 97.

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and the erection of the first house on the site of what was to become Portland took place in the same year – 1842. In the fifty years that followed, approximately 180 of the 200 brick commercial structures erected in Portland are known to have used cast iron structurally or decoratively.”<sup>138</sup>

Although Portland’s cast-iron structures did not always reach the same scale or refinement of those in the largest eastern and Midwest cities, they did create a distinctive cityscape with a high degree of architectural sophistication. Portland’s business core, set alongside the Willamette River and encompassing today’s Skidmore/Old Town Historic District, was lined with rows of cast-iron fronted façades, together establishing a notable architectural unity that flowed from harmoniously arranged columns, arches and fenestration, on both full-block structures and buildings as narrow as 25 feet.<sup>139</sup>

In Portland, use of cast-iron facilitated the adoption of Italianate and other revival styles that were emerging in commercial architecture in more-established cities “Back East.” The Victorian Italianate style and its variants elaborated on earlier Renaissance-influenced revivals with much emphasis put on the treatment of windows—especially through the use of various types of arches—and use of ornament that, in the words of Marcus Whiffen, ranged from “out-and-out naturalism to a stylization of already stylized classical forms.”<sup>140</sup> Characteristic features include masonry bearing walls, bracketed cornices, and use of architectural cast iron and pronounced moldings on the façades. The brick walls were left exposed or covered with stucco. Arched openings and segmentally arched windows on the upper stories and bracketed cornices along the roofline were other defining features of this style. Commonly, windows pierced brick walls, and the pier between the windows was treated as a pilaster or was stuccoed to suggest a wide column. Upper-floor window arches were often capped with iron keystones, and iron decorations were placed at the capitals of the pilasters or in the spandrel panels between the arches.<sup>141</sup> Many of these buildings were of loft-type construction—creating flexible space usable for many retail, wholesale, warehouse, and manufacturing uses.

Portlanders’ decisions to use cast iron were pragmatic; prefabricated iron building parts could be erected more quickly than masonry, with fewer workmen and lower costs. The city’s merchant leaders were astute in business matters, many coming from Northeastern states where they would have been attuned to seeking out the newest developments in business practices and technology. From a broader perspective, the new and sophisticated design options expressed through cast iron created a means for the city’s aspiring architects, businessmen and political leaders to proclaim their cultural refinement and economic power, helping them to forge an urban and metropolitan environment that they self-consciously wished to differentiate from the “frontier” settings of the Far West.

The following sections discuss the historical development of architectural cast iron in the United States and Portland. A comparative analysis of selected remaining cast-iron building collections in other cities is also presented to provide a contextual background for understanding the significance of Portland’s Skidmore/Old Town Historic District.

### **Development of cast iron as an architectural material**

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<sup>138</sup> Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 12.

<sup>139</sup> The extant Fechheimer & White Building (#98) is one such narrow building with six-foot five inch arches, a span used on many larger buildings. These arches were cast in a single piece, a significant technical feat in 1870 (Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 146).

<sup>140</sup> Marcus Whiffen, *American Architecture Since 1780: A Guide to the Styles*, rev. ed. (1969; repr., Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 99.

<sup>141</sup> Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 20.

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Architectural cast iron was one of the many technological innovations of the Industrial Revolution. Before the eighteenth century, cast iron was scarce and its uses were limited. In the early 1700s, cast iron was used in Britain and Europe for steam engine parts, bridge and rail components, and structural columns. By the late 1700s, Europeans had learned to appreciate the advantages of cast iron over traditional building materials such as wood and stone. It had fireproof qualities, performed well structurally as columns in buildings, and could be molded into shapes that were compatible with evolving architectural styles and structural requirements. But until the mid-eighteenth century, cast iron was too costly to make in large quantities. With the introduction of new furnace technology in England, it became increasingly economical and practical for use in building construction. Slender cast-iron pillars were introduced in English mill buildings as early as the 1790s, replacing flammable timber elements.

While European interest in cast iron as an architectural element began to decline by the 1850s, it was enthusiastically embraced in the United States beginning in the 1820s and accelerating in the 1850s. First prevalent in industrial settings, cast-iron was used in machinery, railroad equipment, and urban water systems and street lighting. Its earliest uses in construction were structural, for example bridge components and bearing columns in large public buildings like theaters. It also allowed for bold advances in architectural designs and new options for rich surface ornamentation. Cast iron's inherent plasticity and the casting process itself allowed easy replication of architectural parts that could be used in different settings—over-and-over again; this marked an important step in the historical trend away from hand-craftsmanship and artisan-based construction towards pre-fabrication, modularity, and standardized design.

By the mid-1820s, one-story, insertable iron storefronts were being sold in New York City, with advertisements emphasizing protection against theft and fire. Through the rest of the century, the iron storefront would become ubiquitous in towns and cities from coast to coast. This cost-effective innovation not only helped support the load of upper floors, but also allowed installation of large glass display windows, bringing natural light into shop interiors and creating new opportunities for product merchandizing and advertising, another aspect of business practice rapidly changing and expanding in this era.

Consistent with the impulse to adapt and innovate evident in nineteenth-century America, there were few implicit design “rules” governing how cast iron should be used, and it came to be applied for purposes well beyond what had been accepted abroad. Architects, businessmen, and foundry operators were encouraged to devise new uses for this adaptable material. In 1840, early promoters claimed it was cheaper, safer, and capable of “greater display of taste;” the new material was touted as a “new architecture” that would diverge from forms dictated by “bulky materials.”<sup>142</sup>

Self-taught architect and engineer James Bogardus made a significant contribution to furthering cast iron use nationally. From 1840 on, he promoted its strength, stability, durability, lightness, affinity for casting in ornate shapes, and fire resistance. He also understood that the foundry casting processes were highly compatible with emerging industrial age-concepts of prefabrication, mass production, and use of identical interchangeable parts. In 1849, Bogardus is credited with erecting the first structure with self-supporting, multistoried exterior walls of iron, a building that was considered to be uniquely American.<sup>143</sup> The Laing Stores, in Manhattan, was a corner row of small four-story warehouses that looked like one building. It was remarkably completed in just two

<sup>142</sup> Lee, “Cast Iron in America,” 97, 101

<sup>143</sup> John G. Waite, *Preservation Brief 27: The Maintenance and Repair of Architectural Cast Iron* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1991).

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months. The real innovation of the Laing Stores was two street façades of self-supporting cast iron, consisting of multiples of just a few pieces – Doric style engaged columns, panels, sills, and plates, along with applied ornaments. Each component was cast individually in a foundry and brought by horse cart to the building site, then hoisted into position, bolted together, and fastened with iron spikes and straps to the conventional timber and brick structure.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, economic, urban and territorial growth in the U.S. provided fertile conditions for spreading cast-iron use. Hundreds of iron fronts were erected in commercial and public building projects across the country. Along with exterior uses, many public buildings displayed ornamental and structural interior ironwork. Examples include the Peabody Library in Baltimore and the great dome of the U.S. Capitol, completed during the Civil War. Ornamental cast iron also proved to be a popular landscape material, appearing in fences, fountains, lampposts, furniture, etc. With such widespread demand, many foundries added architectural iron departments.

Cast iron continued to be the architectural metal of choice throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, for both practical and economic reasons. The largest standing example of framing with cast-iron columns (and wrought iron beams, which had greater tensile strength) is Chicago's sixteen-story Manhattan Building, the world's tallest skyscraper when constructed in 1890. By this time, however, steel was becoming available nationally, and because it was structurally more versatile and cost-competitive, it was increasingly favored. Nonetheless, cast iron continued to be used well into the twentieth century for various structural and ornamental purposes, including storefronts, large window frames, street and landscape furnishings, and subway kiosks.

With the advent of better construction materials, changes in architectural styles, and shifts in urban economies and development patterns, iron-front buildings nationwide began to be demolished in the early twentieth century, accelerating after World War II in a rush of downtown redevelopment projects. The area now designated as Portland's Skidmore/Old Town Historic District was no exception. However, a few significant collections do remain in selected cities, as well as more isolated examples, across the country.

### **Cast-iron architecture in Skidmore/Old Town**

During the cast-iron era, Portland's business core, set alongside the Willamette River, was lined with rows of cast-iron fronted façades. These two- to four-story edifices were usually of brick construction, sometimes with wood and iron structural members, and their street faces were defined by decorative cast-iron elements ranging from modest adornments to ornate full-façade treatments. The earliest examples from the 1850s and 1860s, such as the 1857 Hallock and McMillen Building (#99) and the 1859 Delschneider Building (# 90), were smaller and more modest than the commercial palaces that followed in later decades.

The first iron elements used in Portland were obtained from San Francisco, where cast-iron construction had been utilized by the early 1850s (although cast iron was, from a relative standpoint, never as popular in San Francisco as it came to be in Portland). Its several foundries included the California Foundry, Fulton Iron Works, Sutter Iron Works, and the Phoenix Iron Works, which was represented locally by Portland's first architect, Absalom B. Hallock.<sup>144</sup> Hallock designed Portland's first brick commercial structure in 1853 (W. S. Ladd Building, no longer extant), and used the city's first iron pilaster columns on a structure he built for himself in 1857. The Hallock and McMillen Building still stands, although the exterior iron work is gone. The iron used on the exterior of the 1883 Bickel Block (#91) was made by Architectural Iron Works of San

<sup>144</sup> Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 16.

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Francisco, the western branch of the important early architectural iron foundry in New York established by Daniel Badger in 1842.

Beginning in 1864, Portland foundries, including the Willamette Iron Works and Honeyman's City Foundry, began producing cast-iron building elements and by 1867 were able to meet the increasing local demand for iron-fronted structures. The pattern designers for locally produced iron elements are not generally known, but wood carver and artisan John (Hans) Staehli is known to have sculpted the wooden forms for some of them, although it isn't clear which ones. Staehli emigrated from Switzerland to execute architectural details for structures at Johns Hopkins University. He later moved to San Francisco, designing building details for Stanford University, and eventually settled in Portland. He designed and executed a number of public art pieces here, including the Chiming Fountain in Washington Park and the large wooden figures of Atlas and Hermes that adorned the elaborate 1884 Kamm Block (demolished in 1939).<sup>145</sup>

The face of the city gained a cosmopolitan air in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Front Street, lined for blocks with solid masonry and cast-iron structures, many exhibiting markedly similar iron patterns, bore little resemblance to the wooden village of the 1850s. The Smith Block of 1872 (# 95, #96) provides a glimpse of how the area must have looked, with row after row of unified façades. Smith Block is particularly noteworthy for displaying a specific cast-iron pattern, introduced in the late 1860s, that was repeated on at least nine other buildings along First and Front Streets, north of Pine. This pattern, which featured fluted Corinthian columns, coffered arches decorated with flower medallions, and spandrel panels with heads intertwined with foliage, was used over approximately 1,000 linear feet of building fronts and created an architectural unity in the district rarely seen in American cities. Such vistas inspired the *Oregonian* to write in 1871, "Many of these buildings are costly and of handsome and imposing appearance. We doubt if any city on the Pacific Coast can show anything like a parallel. The exhibit proves conclusively and in the most appreciable manner the rapid strides of our city toward wealth and greatness." Another remaining example of the rhythmic rows of columns and arches that once united block fronts in early Portland, and reportedly the largest intact cast-iron commercial building still standing on the West Coast, is the one-hundred foot front of the four-story High Italianate Blagen Block (# 71), designed in 1888 by noted architect Warren Williams.<sup>146</sup>

In the 1880s, the growing city filled in the blocks between the Willamette River and Fourth Street until cast-iron columns lined almost every block. Notable buildings of the 1880s still standing in Portland include the 1880 Merchant Hotel (# 12, #28) and the 1888 Blagen Block (#71). The last structure in the City to use cast-iron pilasters and columns was the 1889 Glisan Building (# 48). Its decorations echoed the Modern Gothic style, with the addition of Art Nouveau elements. With this building, the cast-iron era in Portland came to a close.

Buildings from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the Richardsonian Romanesque and Commercial styles added a complementary layer to the district's rich architectural character. The Richardsonian Romanesque style began to replace the Italianate style beginning in the late 1880s, introducing an aesthetic that developed on the East Coast and was more suited to the era's increasingly tall structures. Walls were characterized by heavy brick and stone work rather than the more airy cast iron. The Art Nouveau style introduced decorative elements that looked more organic than applied. Examples of this new construction alongside existing cast-iron buildings include the Richardsonian Romanesque style New Market Annex of 1889 (# 46).

<sup>145</sup> Louise Aaron, "This Was Portland," *Oregon Journal*, September 16, 1956, 6A.

<sup>146</sup> Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 152.

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These compatible structures contribute to the historical and architectural significance of the district, but its earlier, primarily Italianate cast-iron buildings are what most distinguish it from other urban historic districts in the West. For instance, the Pioneer Square–Skid Road Historic District in Seattle, the city that would eventually surpass Portland as a “metropolis of the Pacific Northwest,” consists almost exclusively of buildings constructed after the fire of 1889, which destroyed most of that city’s much smaller collection of cast-iron structures. In San Francisco, despite its greater size and wealth, cast iron was comparatively less common than in Portland. Wooden construction predominated during the cast-iron era, a major factor in the catastrophic fire that followed the 1906 earthquake and consumed much of the city and many of its cast-iron buildings. A handful of cast-iron fronted buildings remain in the Jackson Square Historic District.<sup>147</sup>

Finally, the Skidmore/Old Town Historic District is significant for its collection of important examples of the work of several of Oregon’s most distinguished nineteenth-century architects, including: Justus Krumbein (Bickel Block, 1883); Warren H. Williams (Blagen Block, 1888); Piper & Burton (New Market Theater, 1872); McCaw & Martin (New Market Annex, 1889); and Whidden & Lewis (Reed Building, 1890). The Skidmore Fountain, Portland’s oldest piece of public art and the historic district’s namesake, was completed in 1888 by New York sculptor Olin J. Warner and J. M. Wells, supervising architect.

### **Cast-iron manufacturing in the Portland area**

Understanding the role of Portland cast-iron foundries and Oregon iron works<sup>148</sup> in the development of Skidmore/Old Town is helpful in evaluating its architectural and historical significance. Portland architect and cast-iron scholar William Hawkins, whose work informed this section, asserts that “the iron industry in Oregon was in every way analogous to the early growth and development of the state.”<sup>149</sup> The first iron smelted from raw ore on the Pacific Coast was produced in 1862 or 1863, when Dr. Aaron Knight Olds poured pig iron from a small blast furnace he constructed at Moores’s Mill on the Tualatin River, 12 miles south of Portland. Olds had come to Oregon in 1852, after erecting iron works in Michigan and helping to found what would become the great iron industry of the Lake Superior region. Although reportedly making “a superior article,” his Oregon iron works did not last long or produce large quantities of iron.<sup>150</sup> The state’s first iron foundry had been constructed next to the Clackamas River, near Oregon City in 1848, by English pioneer James Morfitt, who had moved west from Chicago after helping to build that city’s first iron foundry. A somewhat primitive

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 14; Karin Murr Link, “Pioneer Square—Skid Road Historic District,” National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2006); Karen Gordon, Seattle Historic Preservation Officer, e-mail message to author, “Re: Seattle cast-iron,” March 23, 2006; N. Moses Corrette, City and County of San Francisco, e-mail message to author, “Re: Architectural cast-iron,” May 31, 2006.

<sup>148</sup> Terms describing iron industry plants, equipment and products are sometimes used imprecisely in both early and recent sources. Use of related terms in this nomination are based on the following general definitions: *foundry*, an establishment where raw iron is poured into molds to make finished castings (e.g. architectural columns or machine parts); *iron works*, an establishment where iron ore is smelted in a blast furnace, producing metallic iron through a chemical reduction process (most often using coke or charcoal) and separation of impurities as slag. The term “iron works” was also occasionally applied to iron foundries and *forges* (establishments for making wrought iron products); *pig iron*, rough bars of crude iron poured from a blast furnace into sand molds, an intermediary product used later to make finished products of cast iron, wrought iron or steel; *cast iron*, a strong but brittle iron derived from melting and further processing pig iron, and then casting it into molds to create finished products in a foundry.

<sup>149</sup> Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 188.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 189; “Obituary of Aaron Knight Olds,” ca. July 1896, unidentified Yamhill County newspaper, transcribed, <http://genforum.genealogy.com/olds/messages/437.html>.

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enterprise, it used iron from Canada and California to produce the first iron castings in the state. The first foundry in Portland began operation five years later.

Portland's earliest foundries produced primarily industrial and agricultural tools, machines and parts. The architectural iron for Portland's cast-iron buildings of the 1850s and early 1860s was not supplied locally; most of it was imported from San Francisco foundries in finished form. After the mid-1860s, the majority of iron fronts used in Portland were made by local foundries, at first using imported raw iron but soon relying on pig iron produced by the Oregon Iron Company and its successors, the Oswego Iron Company and the Oregon Iron and Steel Company, in the nearby town of Oswego. The Oswego iron works, financed by William Ladd, Simeon Reed and Henry Villard, operated from 1867 to 1894, smelting brown hematite or "limonite" ore from two nearby mines in charcoal-fueled blast furnaces. In its peak year of 1890, the Oregon Iron and Steel Company was the largest manufacturing operation in the state, employing 325 workers, producing 12,305 tons of pig iron, and supplying foundries throughout the Pacific Northwest and California, including 33 in Portland.<sup>151</sup> Six Portland foundries played a prominent role in casting parts for iron-fronted buildings in Portland and Skidmore/Old Town.

The first of these foundries, the **Portland Foundry**, was established in 1853 on Front Street, near Morrison by Captain James Turnbull, H. W. Davis and David Monastes. Their pattern maker was Peter Taylor. The firm produced iron castings for agricultural and industrial use. In 1864 it began to produce the first architectural castings for commercial buildings in Portland. The Oregonian proudly noted, "this is the first work of the kind ever done in Oregon, and an examination of some of the castings already discloses the fact that they are of the first quality."<sup>152</sup> The foundry remained in its original location on Front Street until 1867, when it moved to Second Street between Morrison and Alder. It remained in business until the great fire of 1873.

**Oregon Iron Works** was established in 1863 by A. C. Gibbs, Governor of Oregon between 1862 and 1866. The business was located in Skidmore/Old Town Historic District's 1859 Delschneider Building at 71 SW Oak Street (#90). Although Oregon Iron Works leased the building, cast-iron thresholds bearing the OIW mark were installed and these are still evident. The foundry relocated a couple of times, finally purchasing property at SW Front and Harrison Street. The property and some equipment were sold in 1873 to Smith Brothers' Iron Works, and the company attempted unsuccessfully to reorganize.

The third iron works established in the city was the **Willamette Iron Works**. It was incorporated in 1865. The city's first architect, A. B. Hallock, who had earlier brought to Portland architectural iron from San Francisco's Phoenix Iron Works, was among the first officers and stockholders. (Hallock is significant in Portland's history and in the development of Skidmore/Old Town for having constructed the earliest surviving building in downtown Portland, the 1857 Hallock and McMillen Building at 237 SW Front Avenue (#99). Willamette Iron Works was located on the levee below Davis Street. An 1866 advertisement proudly claimed that it manufactured "Building Fronts and castings of every description," with the "largest stock of patterns North of San Francisco." In 1869, the Portland Directory stated that "the Willamette Iron Works have turned out many large and elegant castings and machines which are equal in workmanship to any similar establishments in any country."<sup>153</sup> The company was quite prosperous. In 1882 it employed 80 men and produced iron worth \$200,000. At the turn of the century, the business became Willamette Iron and Steel Works and turned its focus

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<sup>151</sup> Susanna Campbell Kuo, Oswego Heritage Council, "A Brief History of the Oregon Iron Industry," <http://www.oswegoheritage.org/history.html>.

<sup>152</sup> Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 189.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

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to marine work.

In its earlier years, Willamette Iron Works produced cast iron for a large number of Portland buildings, including three that still exist in Skidmore/Old Town: the 1880 Merchant Hotel (#12, 28), the 1885 Fechheimer & White Building (#98), and the 1886 Failing Building (#67). It is likely that the company also supplied the 1888 Blagen Block (# 71). All are designated local landmarks in the district. Willamette Iron Works also produced material for the famed 1868 Ladd & Tilton Bank. Although demolished in 1954, the elaborate cast-iron façade was salvaged, and the parts were incorporated in 1967 into the rebuilt 1869 Ladd & Bush Bank, a nearly identical building in Salem, Oregon. The reassembled façades measure 165 feet and 102 feet, respectively, reportedly making it the largest cast-iron fronted structure on the West Coast, albeit not in its original state.

**Smith Brothers Iron Works** was established circa 1865 by Ferdinand and Charles Smith and began operation on First Street, near Salmon. They moved twice, finally locating at Front and Hall streets. In 1883 the name was changed to Smith & Watson Iron Works, and the firm operated until about 1890. By 1882 the firm was one of the largest in the city with ninety employees, however, there are few records of its work. It is known to have manufactured the iron work for the Canal and Lock Company of Oregon City which the City Directory noted was never surpassed as “superior iron work on the Pacific Coast.”<sup>154</sup> The perimeter iron rail around the National Historic Landmark Pioneer Courthouse (1875) has been attributed to this foundry.

The **City Foundry and Machine Shop** opened for business in 1871 at the corner of Front and Columbia streets. It was founded by Scotsman John Honeyman, a mechanical engineer and machinist, and his three sons. At peak times the foundry employed as many as 65 men. The business lasted until the death of John Honeyman in 1898. The Sinnott House (#6) at the northwest corner of Third and Couch features cast-iron pilasters on the first floor, most likely supplied by the City Foundry, since they are identical to identified cast-iron work on the Mikado Block in the nearby Yamhill Historic District. The iron-fronted Cully Building, located across the Willamette River in the former downtown of East Portland, still bears the company mark.

The **Union Iron Works** was the last known company to have produced iron fronts for Portland buildings. It was begun by Angus Campbell in 1879 and located on the southeast corner of Front and Main streets. By 1882, the business employed eighteen men. It was incorporated in 1885. The company produced its first iron front for the 1880 Harker Building, still standing in the Yamhill Historic District at 824 SW First Avenue.

### **Portland and Skidmore/Old Town cast-iron buildings in perspective**

In her essay “Cast Iron in American Architecture: A Synoptic View,” Antoinette J. Lee defines a cast-iron building as “primarily a commercial structure with at least one story of cast-iron components in the façade – in other words, a façade which is defined more by cast iron components than by brick, stone, or timber.”<sup>155</sup> By this definition, thousands of cast-iron buildings were constructed in American cities and towns. Extant examples may be found in the majority of cities that experienced commercial growth during the cast-iron era, including Baltimore, New Orleans, Philadelphia, St. Louis, New York City and others in the eastern, southern and midwestern states, and Portland, San Francisco, Seattle and smaller cities in the West. Unfortunately, natural disasters and redevelopment have wiped out many of the larger concentrations in intervening decades.

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>155</sup> Lee, “Cast Iron in American Architecture,” 99.

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At one time Portland had approximately 180 cast-iron structures. The city's surviving collection is currently tallied by William Hawkins at 68 buildings that feature prominent decorative, structural, and/or re-built cast-iron.<sup>156</sup> Twenty of these buildings are located in the Skidmore-Old Town Historic District. They vary in height from two to four stories and were originally designed for commercial uses ranging from manufactories and warehouses to hotels, offices and stores. They are generally defined by: 1) a first-story façade featuring major cast-iron features, including pilasters and columns and/or bolted storefront components (sometimes structurally integrated with wood framing or supporting upper level masonry walls); and 2) upper stories with varying applications of attached cast-iron design features and ornament, often including window arches. Some feature interior iron elements, including structural columns and post connections.

As a group or collection, Portland's cast-iron buildings merit comparison with that of other cities.<sup>157</sup> No comprehensive national study of cast-iron architecture has been identified. However, there are several cities in addition to Portland, that still have a number of buildings identified by cast-iron elements. In order to place Portland in a national context, the cast iron collections of a few such cities are briefly described below.<sup>158</sup>

### Baltimore, Maryland

Baltimore currently has 23 cast-iron buildings. Since 1991, four cast-iron structures have been demolished and one was reconstructed as a museum façade.<sup>159</sup> As was typical in many larger American cities with sizable numbers of cast-iron buildings, many of Baltimore's structures are five to six stories tall. Their original use was mainly as commercial structures and warehouses.<sup>160</sup> Current uses run the gamut from restaurants and galleries to offices, apartments, and housing for the homeless. Perhaps most noteworthy is the Sun Iron Building. With "two full iron façades and an internal support system of cast-iron columns and beams," it was the first large-scale commercial use of the all-iron construction method developed by James Bogardus, considered the inventor of the cast-iron front.<sup>161</sup>

### Louisville, Kentucky

Approximately 95 buildings with some cast iron on the primary façade, including several buildings with façades constructed entirely of cast-iron, grace Louisville's West Main Street Preservation District. Most of these structures are three to four stories tall, and a few are six stories. Their original uses were as warehouses,

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<sup>156</sup> Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 12. Hawkins' criteria includes recent restorations, hidden cast-iron decoration, and surviving buildings which once sported such decoration and to which original or replica cast-iron decoration could be replaced. See also City of Portland, *Historic Resources Inventory*, 1984.

<sup>157</sup> So palpable is Portland's cast-iron tradition that some have indicated it compares only to the much larger collection in New York's SoHo Cast-Iron Historic District (NHL, 1978) in size. See Hawkins, *Grand Era*, 14; Margot Gayle, *Cast Iron Architecture in New York: A Photographic Survey* (New York: Dover Publications, 1974) xiv; *Louisville Landmarks Commission Design Guidelines, West Main Street Preservation District* (Louisville: Louisville Landmarks Commission, n.d.), 1. Maintained largely in the mid-1970s, these assertions were made when few if any cities, excluding New York and Portland, had undertaken surveys of their surviving cast-iron structures. Imprecise use of terms within the architectural history and preservation communities, and the lack of a comprehensive national survey of cast iron architecture, continues to make inter-city comparative analysis difficult.

<sup>158</sup> Cities identified based on correspondence with selected SHPOs and other preservation organizations; the National Register of Historic Places "research" web site: <http://www.nps.gov/nr/research/> and other online sources; and a review of available secondary literature.

<sup>159</sup> James D. Dilts and Catharine F. Black, eds., *Baltimore's Cast-Iron Buildings and Architectural Ironwork* (Centerville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1991).

<sup>160</sup> "Cast Iron Architecture of Baltimore, Maryland, 1850-1904," National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1994).

<sup>161</sup> James D. Dilts, "Introduction," in *Baltimore's Cast-Iron Buildings and Architectural Ironwork*, ed. James D. Dilts and Catharine F. Black (Centerville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1991), 7.

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distilleries, saddle and harness makers, and outfitters for Ohio River journeys. Today, these buildings house a mix of offices, galleries, cultural centers, and retail uses. Overall, the West Main Street District's cast-iron buildings are considered to be in "excellent" condition. In addition, Louisville has many cast-iron commercial storefronts with commercial uses above.<sup>162</sup>

### New York City, New York

Of the nearly 500 buildings within the boundaries of New York's SoHo Cast-Iron Historic District (NHL, 1978), some 139 are iron-fronted.<sup>163</sup> In addition, estimates list the greater Manhattan area's total between 250 and 300. Generally taller than Portland's examples many of New York's cast-iron buildings range from four to six stories. Many of the buildings bear the mark of important architects and designers. There are a few taller buildings in the group, consisting mainly of late cast-iron examples, buildings that had stories added, and buildings with rudimentary iron framing anticipating twentieth-century steel skyscrapers.<sup>164</sup> The SoHo collection is arguably the nation's largest cast-iron ensemble.

### Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Unofficial counts estimate Philadelphia's number of buildings with cast-iron façades between 150 and 200. These structures include both storefronts and entire façades, and they are generally located within the Old City Historic District -- touted as "one of the country's greatest collection of cast-iron and industrial loft buildings." Most of the structures were built between 1850 and 1890 and almost all are four to five stories tall. Originally serving as industrial buildings with storefronts on the first floor and storage or manufacturing in the upper floors, most have been converted into residential units on the upper floors. Many of these buildings are the work of significant builders and designers.<sup>165</sup>

### San Francisco, California

Despite its early development and urban supremacy on the West Coast, San Francisco has surprisingly little cast-iron architecture. Although a large number of cast iron-fronted buildings were built, some as high as six stories, wood and masonry construction methods predominated in the city during the mid- to late 1800s, and most of the cast-iron buildings that were constructed perished in the earthquake and fire of 1906. There are an estimated dozen cast-iron façades in the city primarily in the Jackson Square Historic District, and a larger number of buildings with more limited exterior applications.<sup>166</sup>

### Seattle, Washington

There is no official count of Seattle's cast-iron buildings. However, the May 2006 draft updated National Register nomination for the Pioneer Square-Skid Road Historic District indicates there are roughly 20 buildings that feature some exterior cast iron, but the majority of these are not defined by cast-iron façades or major ornamentation, many containing just simple iron structural columns. None of them ante-date the city's major 1889 fire that wiped out much of its primarily wooden building stock and much smaller collection of Victorian

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<sup>162</sup> Joanne Weeter, Louisville Metro Historic Preservation Officer, e-mail message to author: "Re: Louisville cast iron," March 23, 2006. See also: *Louisville Landmarks Commission Design Guidelines, West Main Street Preservation District*.

<sup>163</sup> John G. Waite, AIA, and Margot Gayle, *Preservation Brief 27: The Maintenance and Repair of Architectural Cast Iron* - Technical Preservation Services (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1991), <http://www.nps.gov/hps/tps/briefs/brief27.htm>; "SoHo Cast-Iron Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Inventory Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1974).

<sup>164</sup> Gayle, *Cast Iron Architecture in New York*, iv.

<sup>165</sup> Laura Spina, Philadelphia City Planning Commission, e-mail message to author, "Re: Philadelphia cast iron," March 23, 2006; *The Old City Historic District: A Guide for Property Owners* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Historical Commission, ca.1995).

<sup>166</sup> N. Moses Corrette, City and County of San Francisco, e-mail message to author, "Re: Architectural cast-iron," May 31, 2006.

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cast-iron buildings. Like Portland's collection, Seattle's buildings originally housed a variety of commercial uses, including hotels, manufacturers, and financiers. Today, many are used as restaurants and retail establishments.<sup>167</sup>

### St. Louis, Missouri

St. Louis once had one of the largest collections of multi-story cast-iron fronted buildings in the country. As in so many cities, the vast majority have been demolished, many lost when 39 city blocks were cleared in 1939-1941 for construction of the Gateway Arch. Two six-story cast-iron fronted buildings remain in the central city, but the fine large commercial structures of the original central business district and riverfront are lost.

However, perhaps as many as one-thousand complete or partial cast-iron storefronts remain scattered about the city's neighborhoods and on short commercial strips, indicating that St. Louis has perhaps the most extensive if not concentrated collections of single-story cast-iron storefronts in the nation. The St. Louis Building Arts Foundation possesses a large collection of salvaged architectural cast iron, including 135 storefronts, a seven-story façade, and numerous cast-iron building elements.<sup>168</sup>

In summary, preliminary research suggests that New York's SoHo Cast Iron Historic District has the largest concentrated collection of multi-story cast-iron buildings, followed by Philadelphia. Louisville and Baltimore also retain impressive collections of multi-storied cast-iron buildings. St. Louis most likely has largest number of single-story storefronts but they are scattered and very few larger buildings defined by cast-iron façades remain. It appears that Portland can lay claim to significant, if not primary standing on the West Coast in terms of the number of surviving structures depending on how the term "cast-iron building" is defined. The Skidmore Old/Town Historic District collection is clearly of national significance when viewed as a cohesive concentration of cast-iron buildings. A comprehensive inventory and comparative analysis of the nation's cast-iron architectural heritage is overdue.

### **Designation History and Updated Documentation of a National Historic Landmark**

The following is a brief summary of Skidmore/Old Town's historic designation history, including information about the intent and findings of this major update of its National Historic Landmark nomination.

Efforts to officially recognize and institute protections for Portland's "Old Town" go back to at least 1962, when a 15-block "Design Zone" for the Skidmore Fountain area (sometimes referred to as the "Fountain Village" area) was established by City ordinance. With the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, public appreciation of preservation values was heightened nationally and locally. Spurred, in part, by the "overnight" demolition of the Ladd Block at SW Second and Columbia in 1966, concerned Portland citizens, including architects and preservationists such as George McMath, William J. Hawkins, III, Gene Westberg, Andy Rocchia and Al Staehli (grandson of sculptor and cast-iron form designer John Staehli), initiated a concerted effort to raise awareness of the city's architectural heritage, leading to the creation of Portland's first preservation ordinance in 1968. It established the Portland Historic Landmarks Commission, a local landmark designation process, and preservation zoning protections. As its first official project, the newly formed Landmarks Commission inventoried structures of potential significance and in October 1969, chose thirteen buildings in the area around the Skidmore Fountain as its first submission to the City Council for consideration as "Historical Landmarks." The Council accepted the recommendation and the thirteen properties were adopted

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<sup>167</sup> Link, "Pioneer Square—Skid Road Historic District."; Karen Gordon, Seattle Historic Preservation Officer, e-mail message to author, "Re: Seattle cast-iron," March 23, 2006.

<sup>168</sup> Larry Giles, St. Louis Building Arts Foundation, e-mail messages "Re: St Louis Cast Iron," June 15-16, 2006.

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as Portland's first designated local landmarks on December 3, 1969.<sup>169</sup> Recognizing the significance of the area's resources as a cohesive ensemble of historic masonry and cast-iron commercial buildings, the City Council created the 20-block Skidmore/Old Town Historic District on September 11, 1975, which, together with the concurrently created Yamhill Historic District, became the city's first.<sup>170</sup>

Interest in Skidmore/Old Town at the state and federal level was also high. On December 6, 1975, the district was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, becoming Portland's first district so recognized. The nomination prepared by Greg Olsen and Robert Sutton cited the significance of both its historical associations with the city's early growth and commercial activity and its outstanding architectural values, expressed particularly in its late nineteenth-century brick and cast-iron structures.<sup>171</sup> On May 5, 1977, the district was elevated to National Historic Landmark status.<sup>172</sup> No major new documentation of the district's resources or significance appears to have been prepared at that time. The 1977 National Historic Landmark nomination is a slightly revised version of the 1975 National Register nomination.

Although the 1975 and 1977 nominations were prepared consistent with the standards of the time, a number of shortcomings, stemming primarily from their brevity, have been identified. A lack of detail has made it difficult to develop and apply preservation protections, such as district-specific design guidelines, as well as educational and interpretive material. After consulting with the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office and the National Park Service, the Portland Bureau of Planning agreed to update the nomination following current standards for National Historic Landmark documentation. Overall, the intent of this updated documentation is to broadly reexamine the district's physical, architectural and historical contexts, expand and update documentation of its individual properties, and provide additional historical and architectural analysis. This nomination form and its supporting appendices are the result of that effort. They will supersede the 1975 and 1977 nominations as the principal National Historic Landmarks Survey and National Register of Historic Places documentation of the Skidmore/Old Town Historic District's physical characteristics and historical and architectural significance.

This update further develops the historical and architectural descriptions and themes included in the 1975 and 1977 nominations—clarifying, expanding upon, and in some cases correcting, their component parts. For instance, the period of historical significance was evaluated and established as beginning in 1857, with the construction of the earliest extant structure, and ending in 1929, with the construction of the Willamette River seawall.<sup>173</sup> In addition, as a result of new research and fieldwork and the application of current evaluation standards, the contributing/non-contributing status of a few of the properties has been changed, correcting errors, conforming to the period of significance, and reflecting alterations and rehabilitation of structures since 1975.

While falling outside the period of significance and National Historic Landmark Themes of this nomination, the ongoing story of preservation and rehabilitation efforts in Skidmore/Old Town adds an important layer to the

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<sup>169</sup> City of Portland Ordinance No. 139148.

<sup>170</sup> City of Portland Ordinances Nos. 140311 and 140593.

<sup>171</sup> Greg Olsen and Robert Sutton, "Skidmore/Old Town Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, (Washington, DC U.S. Department of the Interior, 1975).

<sup>172</sup> Elizabeth Potter, "Portland Skidmore/Old Town Historic District National Landmark Dedication, May 12, 1979," Dedication speech, Oregon State Historic Preservation Office files, May 16, 1979.

<sup>173</sup> The 1975 National Register nomination indicates 1872-1930 in the space for "Specific Dates" in Section 8; no dates are specified on the 1977 National Historic Landmark nomination form.

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district's overall significance. This history nicely encapsulates the broader story of the ebb and flow of neglect, demolition, renovation and conservation in historic city centers, as well as the trajectory of the preservation movement in Portland. This might be further explored and documented through a future amendment to this nomination, under the National Historic Landmark theme "Expressing Cultural Values" and the "Conservation" area of significance.

**CONCLUSION**

Beginning in 1857 with the erection of the brick and cast-iron Hallock and McMillen Building, the earliest surviving structure in the Skidmore/Old Town Historic District and one of the oldest in the city, and extending over the next three decades, Portland solidified its position as the primary urban center of the Northwest. Built on the foundation of its trade-centered economy, Skidmore/Old Town as a part of the city's commercial core along and near the Willamette River highway, was central to this role.

Portland's pioneer merchant-entrepreneurs, speculating and capitalizing on the city's strategic location at the head of ocean-going navigation on the Willamette River and its connection to the greater Columbia River system, transformed it from a stump-strewn clearing to the cultural, financial, trade and transportation hub of the Pacific Northwest—second only to San Francisco as a "metropolis" of the Far West. Its mercantile houses, commission agents, steamship companies and financial institutions, clustered along Front and First streets in and near the present Skidmore/Old Town Historic District, supplied the goods, services and trade connections that not only supported the development of western Oregon, but that of the greater Pacific Slope region. Skidmore/Old Town's historic commercial buildings memorialize Portland's position as a commercial entrepôt that linked a large dependant hinterland to national and global economic systems, and highlight the sometimes under-emphasized role of key urban centers in facilitating the settlement and development of the western United States.

The Skidmore/Old Town Historic District is also significant for the exceptional architectural values of its mid- and late-nineteenth-century cast-iron commercial buildings—one of the finest collections in the nation and perhaps the most outstanding in the Far West. These two- to four-story primarily Italianate structures work in concert with sympathetically scaled and designed late nineteenth-century Richardsonian Romanesque and early twentieth-century buildings to define its rich urban character. With elaborate decorative elements echoing Italian Renaissance designs, Skidmore/Old Town's "Commercial Palaces" notably contribute to Portland's architectural distinctiveness and collectively reflect both the economic success of its early businesses, and the high cultural aspirations of its citizens and leaders.