

Portland Basin Chinookan Villages in the early 1800s

By Robert Boyd and Henry Zenk

During the early nineteenth century, upwards of thirty Native American villages were documented in the Portland Basin (present-day Multnomah, Clark, Clackamas, and east Columbia Counties). Most of the villages were sited on riverbanks and in wetlands along the Columbia and Willamette Rivers and were occupied by people who spoke dialects of a Chinookan language or languages. In their journals, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark classified the villages under three headings: "Wappato Indians" for those villagers around Sauvie Island and on the Columbia River between present-day Kalama and Vancouver; "Sha-ha-la" (for šáx■l(a) 'upstream') from Vancouver to the Cascades Rapids; and the peoples of the lower Willamette River, including the Clackamas River and Willamette Falls. Non-Chinookan villages, mostly upstream on tributaries to the Columbia, were home to Sahaptin-speaking Upper Cowlitz and Klikitat [*var: Klickitat*] in present-day Clark County, Clatskanie in present-day Columbia County, and Molala in present-day Clackamas County.

Lewis and Clark's "Estimate of the Western Indians," the most complete listing of Portland Basin villages, appears in two versions in their journals, with different population estimates for many Chinookan villages. They estimated the population of the Portland Basin peoples at 4,840 (Estimate 1) and 10,940 (Estimate 2). The most likely explanation for the variable numbers is that they represent seasonal populations that the explorers observed during their two transits of the Wappato Valley. At first transit, from late October to early November 1805, most local people had retired to their winter villages; at the second transit, from late March to early April 1806, the population was augmented by visitors who had arrived to take advantage of the seasonal Columbia River fisheries (sequentially, eulachon, sturgeon, chinook, and coho salmon).

Lewis and Clark's estimates date to a generation after a major smallpox epidemic that had significantly diminished the Native population. The Portland Basin villages continued as functioning entities until the early 1830s, when annual summer epidemics of "fever and ague" took most of the people to their graves. After 1835, most riverbank villages were abandoned, and non-Chinookan interior peoples moved closer to the rivers. Villages of Chinookan survivors, often mixed with newcomers, continued at Wakanasisse below present-day Vancouver, West Linn, Gladstone (Clackamas), and the Upper Cascades. A Cascades seasonal village was located on the south bank of the Columbia River opposite present-day Vancouver. All villages were vacated in the mid-1850s, when most surviving Native people in the Portland Basin were removed to the Grand Ronde and Yakama Reservations.

Archaeologically, the record on the early 1800s Portland Basin villages is mixed. Most of the villages were destroyed soon after they were abandoned, and only a few survived to be excavated by professional archaeologists. Multnomah village, for instance, was burned by the Hudson's Bay Company after the epidemics, and the site itself has mostly washed away. Most exposed sites were destroyed by looters after 1830, and some were excavated by the Oregon Archaeological Society in the mid-1900s (particularly along Lake River). Only a few survived to be examined by professional archaeologists after 1980, including Cathlapotle, Meier near Scappoose, Clahcellar at the Middle Cascades, the Portland St. Johns sites, and the "Sunken Village" at the Sauvie Island bridge. Several seasonal and nonsettlement sites—for example, resource areas and cemeteries—suffered similar fates.

Table of Portland Basin Chinookan Villages in the 1800s Wapato Valley to The Cascades: according to Lewis and Clark's *Estimate*: "Wappato Indians"

Name

Phonemic Spelling

Location

Population

Callamaks

ga■ák■alama 'those of the rock'

Kalama R mouth

200

Cathlahaw's

Kalama R/Deer Island

Quathlapohtle

gá■ap■u■x 'those of *náp■u■x* (Lewis R)'

300/900

Clannarminnamun, Cathlaminimin

lower Multnomah Channel

280

Cathlahcumup

ga■áq■map 'those of the mound'

Multnomah Channel

150/450

Claninnata

Multnomah Channel

100/200

Clackstar Nation

■áqst■ax■

Scappoose Plains

350/1200

Cathlahnahquiah

ga■ánaq■aix, naq■áix

Fort William

150/170

Cathlahcommahtup

Sauvie Isl bridge

70/170

Nemalquinner

nimá■x■■inix

lower Willamette R

100/200

Clannahqueh

Sauvie Isl Columbia R bank

130

Multnomah

má■numax■ 'those towards the water'

Sauvie Isl Columbia R bank

200/800

Shoto

Lake River

160/460

Nechacolee, Nechacokee

nī■áq■li 'stand of pines' (?)

Blue Lake

100

Total population:

4840/10940

(Clackamas River and Willamette Falls)

Clarkamus Nation

gī■áq■ímaš, gī■áq■ímaš 'those of *nīq■ímaš* (Clackamas R)'

Clackamas R

800/1800

Cushhooks

k■ášx■kš

Abernethy Cr

250/650

Charcowah

■aká-wa (Molala name)

above Willamette Falls

200

"Shahala Nation" (*šáx■/a*) 'upriver, above'; total population: 1300/2800)

Neerchokioo

w of Portland Airport

Wahclelah, Clahclellars

wa■ála 'small lake'; ■a■ála, *ga■a■ála* 'those of *wa■ála*'

n side of Lower, Middle, and Upper Cascades (multiple locations)

Yehuh

wáyaxix 'his face place'

s side of Upper Cascades

Noted in later sources. **Historical spelling/Source**

Phonemic Spelling

Location

Naiakookwie (Gibbs, 1853)

náiaɣuɣuix

St. Helens

Scappoose (Gibbs, 1853)

sq■■pus

Milton Cr (?)

Namouite (Ross, 1821)

namúitk

Sauvie Isl, Columbia River bank

Gah■lákaks■h■n (Curtis, 1911)

ga■áwakšín 'those of the dam (*wákšín*)'

St. Johns, Portland

Wakanasisse (Gibbs, 1853)

wák■anasisi 'diver ducks'

below Vancouver

Clowewalla (Henry, 1814)

■áwiwala, *ga■awálamt* ('those of *wálamt*')

Willamette Falls

Wasuscally (Ross, 1821)

ga■awašúx■al 'those of *wašúx■al*)'

Washougal, WA

Skamány■k (Curtis, 1911)

sk■mániak 'obstructed'

between Middle & Upper Cascades

Wat lala (Hale, 1841)

wa■ála 'small lake'

Wauna Lake

Sources

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