

The history behind

Oregon's Capital

Trappers and farmers established some of the earliest permanent settlements in the Willamette Valley region, nestled between the Cascade and Coast mountain ranges. The trappers arrived in the early 1800s and some remained and turned to farming. Methodist missionaries, who came to minister to the Native Americans in 1834, encouraged further settlement and were the founders of Salem. Missionary Leader Jason Lee and his group built a mill on the Mill Creek. In 1842, they founded the first institution of learning west of the Rockies – the Oregon Institute, now known as Willamette

University. Salem was originally referred to as “Chemeketa,” a Kalapooya Indian name meaning “place of rest.” The missionaries, however, preferred the name “Salem,” an anglicized form of the Hebrew word “Shalom,” meaning “peace.”

In 1843, an overland migration arrived over the Oregon Trail to settle in the Willamette Valley. The influx of settlers traveling the Oregon Trail increased and agitation for U.S. control of Oregon resulted in the 1846 settlement between the U.S. and Great Britain. This action established the 49th parallel as the dividing line between British territory and the United States.

The Territory of Oregon, with its capital at Oregon City, was recognized in 1849. When Oregon gained statehood in 1859, Salem was sanctioned as the official capital.



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Photos below, l to r: Historic Elsinore Theatre; Zena Church; Mission Mill Museum and Historic Deepwood Estate.

