



MILWAUKIE

Dogwood City of the West

Milwaukie History Series #1:

DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS

BACKGROUND

Milwaukie's physical development patterns have been incremental, small-scale, and eclectic. Early development patterns were low-density, and responded to physical constraints such as the surrounding forest to the north and east, the Willamette River to the west, and Kellogg Lake to the south. This resulted in a compact city center that expanded outward gradually.

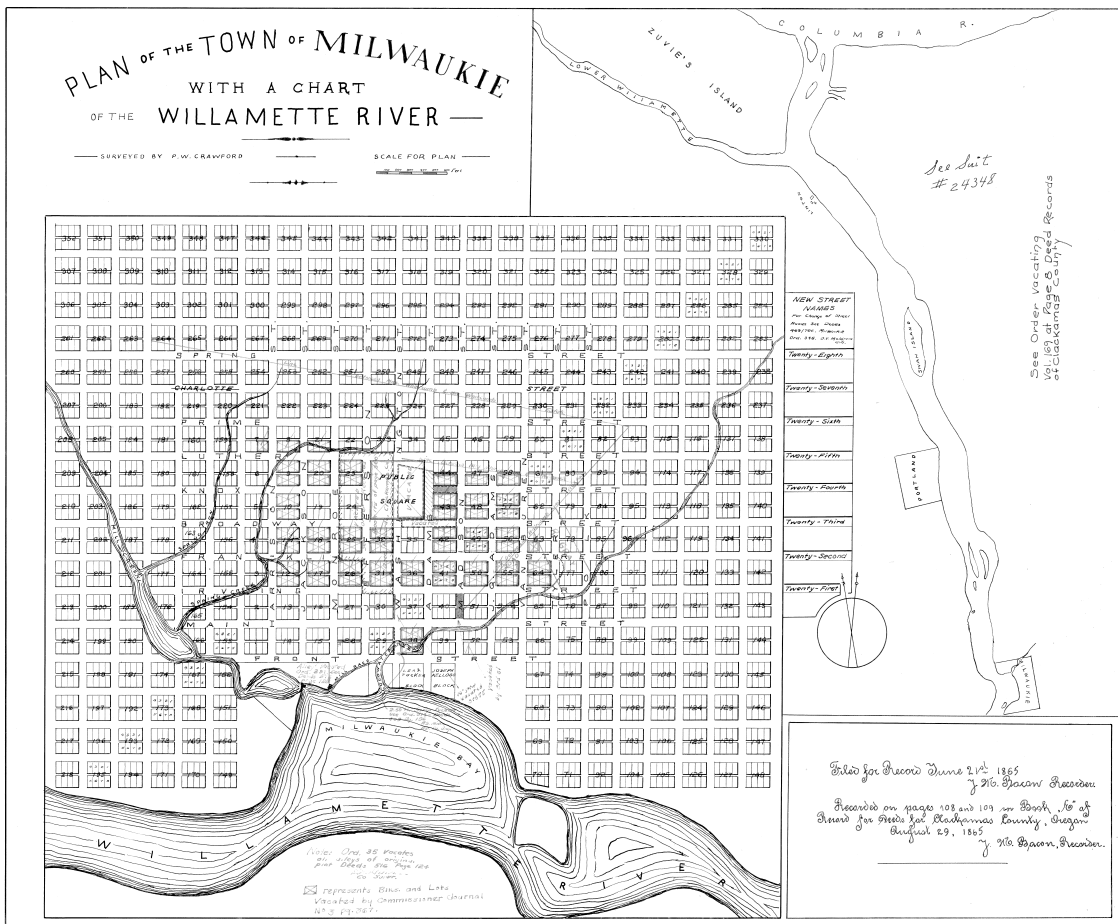
Early downtown development was a mix of residential, commercial, and industrial uses, often within the space of a single block. Into the 1930s, dwellings and accessory buildings occupied lots within the commercial core. In many cases, buildings were separated by vacant lots and open space. Downtown blocks generally retain their original dimensions of 200 by 200 feet square, a dimension which resulted in compact, walkable area.

The extant architecture ranges from remnants of the early pioneer village of the 1850s; the small town of the 1900s to the 1930s; and the suburban community of the 1960s to today. Though Milwaukie is in many ways a traditional small town, its residents have historically been progressive and independent, and have shown a willingness to experiment with architecture as evidenced by unique structures like the Masonic Temple and the St. Johns Catholic Church.

HISTORY

The City of Milwaukie was founded in 1847 by Lot Whitcomb, who purchased a Donation Land Claim (DLC) of approximately 600 acres from an earlier settler on the site.ⁱ He chose the site on Milwaukie Bay and named the town after Milwaukee, Wisconsin;ⁱⁱ he intended the town to become the shipping and transportation leader of the Willamette Valley. The early prosperity of the city was driven by lumber, flour, agriculture, and shipbuilding; however, the town remained a small, rugged trade center reachable only by difficult roads, isolated in the winter, and without a city government until the early 1900s.ⁱⁱⁱ Significant public improvements, including sidewalks and streetlights, closely followed the town's incorporation in 1903.

Lot Whitcomb's Plat of the Town of Milwaukie, 1865



Source: Clackamas County Surveyor's Office

Though Milwaukie has always had a strong civic spirit, early civic buildings were temporary in nature. City Hall had a least three rented locations before moving to its current site; the public library moved numerous times between its founding in 1889 and final move to the Ledding Library facility in 1965; and the first elementary school was established in about 1850, moved across the street to the City Hall site in 1859, and finally moved to today's Milwaukie Elementary upon its completion in 1916.^{iv}

EXPANSION

The city has experienced three periods of growth, each with a unique physical character:

- 1850-1860: The "golden period," fueled by the success of the shipbuilding, timber, and milling industries.
- 1893- 1930: Electric interurban rail began service between Portland and Oregon City in 1893; this new accessibility brought growth to Milwaukie.
- 1950-Present: Through a combination of orderly annexations and Milwaukie's increasing popularity as a Portland suburb, the population has quadrupled since the 1950s.

Pioneer Village (1850-1860)

The city's first phase of growth was spurred by the interrelated advancements in transportation, agriculture, industry, and commerce. The early pioneers built lumber mills to provide lumber for San Francisco, which was growing quickly because of the California gold rush. According to early photographs, the town was surrounded by thick forests to the north, east, and south; the Willamette River, Johnson Creek, and Kellogg Creek provided power for the mills and the means to transport their products to other cities. Soon after the lumber mills were established, a grist mill was built to grind wheat from the outlying areas into flour, which was also in high demand in California.

In response to the growing population and the creation of the Oregon Territory in 1848, Lot Whitcomb platted the town the same year.^v The plat shows an ambitiously scaled city of 352 square blocks (or about 1 square mile); each block was bisected by a 10-foot alley running north to south. A public square was located near the center of town. Although the plat showed orderly blocks surrounding a public square, the reality of Milwaukie in 1848 was somewhat different. According to local historian Charles Oluf Olsen, early Milwaukie was a generally unpleasant place:

“Houses and shacks were of raw lumber, unpainted and crude. Streets were narrow, muddy and full of stumps, with miry puddles in which hogs wallowed. Cattle roamed at large. But there was virile life in the primitive settlement, and its position as the future metropolis of the Oregon Country seemed assured.”^{iv}

Downtown Milwaukie residences, 1850s.

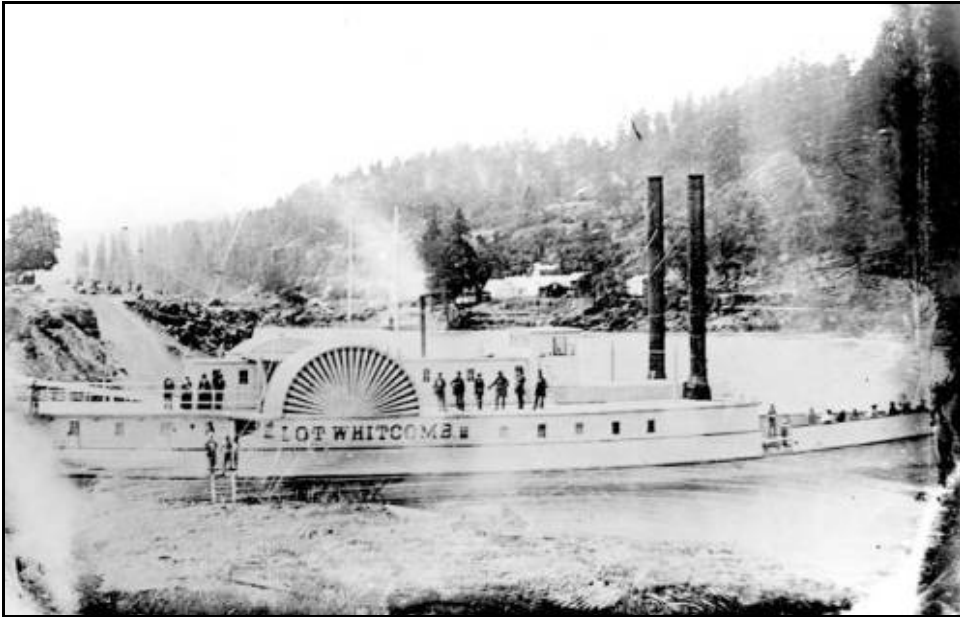


Source: Oregon Historical Society

By the fall of 1850 Milwaukie had 500 residents, two hotels, a post office, a sheet iron and copper plate works, a shoe store, several general stores, several saloons, four mills, a waterfront warehouse and wharf, and a school.^{iv} A free public ferry and Episcopal church followed a year later. The city even had its own newspaper, the *Western Star*, for a brief time in 1850.

Lot Whitcomb built and launched the steamer “Lot Whitcomb” in 1850. His intention was to protect Milwaukie’s growth and damage Portland’s by providing shipping services to Milwaukie while ignoring Portland, which had become a rival. Due in large part to the success of the “Lot Whitcomb,” Milwaukie became a Port of Delivery by Congressional Appointment in April, 1851, and a shipbuilding industry sprang up.^{iv}

Sternwheeler “Lot Whitcomb” in Milwaukie Bay, ca. 1850.



Source: Salem Public Library

By 1851 Portland had edged ahead of Milwaukie in the shipping business, and the “Lot Whitcomb” was sold to buyers in California in 1854. Although Milwaukie was no longer dominant in shipping, it quickly became the center of fruit production in the region. The Llewelling brothers, Seth and Henderson, carried nursery stock from their homes in Iowa and planted their first nursery on the present site of the golf course at the Waverly Country Club.^{vi}

Milwaukie Bay in late 1860s, with the Standard Mill on the left.

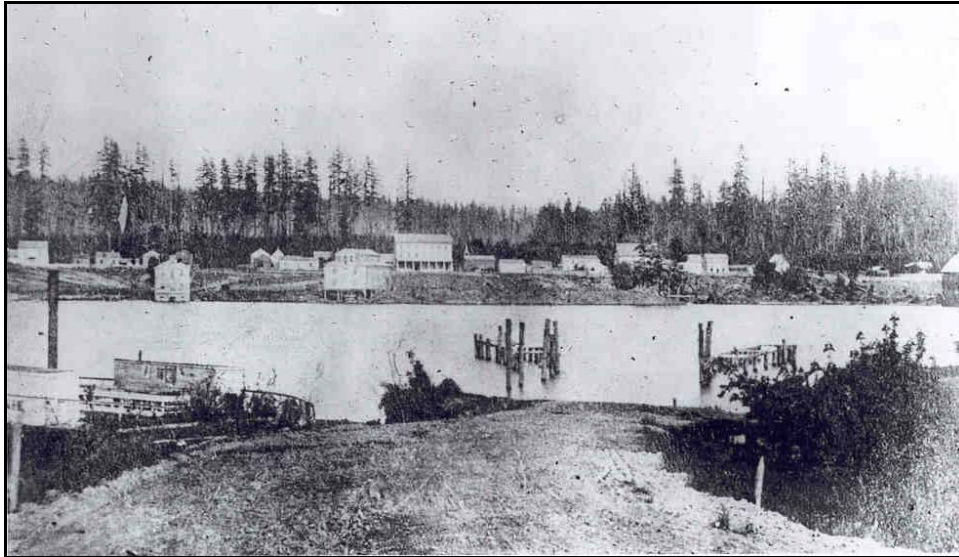


Source: Milwaukie Museum

By 1860, Milwaukie had fully ceded shipping dominance to Portland. After about 1865, lumber and flour milling became the town’s primary industries. During this time, flour produced by the Standard Mill was shipped throughout the country and the regional transportation network continued to improve: a macadamized wagon road between

Portland and Milwaukie was completed in 1863; the East Side Railroad reached Milwaukie in 1869 and provided a convenient way to ship goods to other parts of the state; and the free Milwaukie ferry continued to operate across the Willamette until the turn of the century.^{vii}

Milwaukie in the 1870s. Note the mills on the waterfront.



Source: Milwaukie Museum

Small Town (1893-1930)

The second phase of Milwaukie's growth occurred as a result of the electric streetcar line. Service between Oregon City and Portland began in 1893; the streetcar ran along the west side of McLoughlin Blvd (today's Trolley Trail route) to a "car house" at the corner of McLoughlin and Jackson St, then turned left at Jackson St and continued across Johnson Creek to Portland. The new accessibility to Portland encouraged employees of the Eastside Electric Railroad Company to live in Milwaukie, and a number of subdivisions were platted during this time.

The population had declined to 100 people by 1901. The streets were muddy and blocked with stumps; livestock roamed free; and there were a number of "powder houses" within the city that posed a threat of explosion and fire.^{viii} In response to the poor condition of the town site, the Town of Milwaukie was incorporated in 1903. The town's first fire department and water works (1904); sidewalks (1906); streetlights (1910s); and franchises for telephone, gas, and electric service followed closely behind.

According to a map of downtown Milwaukie drawn from the memory of early residents,^{ix} development along the streetcar route remained sparse into the early 1900s. At that time, the center of commercial activity in the city was the Main St and Front St (today's McLoughlin Blvd) blocks between Jackson St and Washington St.

Main Street ca. 1916.



Source: City of Milwaukie

The development pattern throughout this period remained low-density, and the buildings were separated in many cases by open, undeveloped lots. According to Sanborn Fire Insurance maps from 1928 and 1936, residences, sheds, and accessory buildings occupied properties in the downtown core into the mid 1930s and beyond. Several of the remaining downtown buildings were constructed between 1900 and 1926, and most replaced the older frame buildings.

By the 1920s, the automobile had become the dominant form of transportation in the city. McLoughlin Blvd (also known as 99E and the Superhighway) was completed in 1932, which resulted in faster travel times to Portland and other towns to the north and south. Several auto-oriented businesses, including service stations, restaurants, and car garages, were built along McLoughlin Blvd. Despite this development, many streets east of Main St remained unimproved into the 1940s.^x

NW corner of Main and Jefferson Streets, ca. 1935



Source: Oregon Historical Society

NW corner of Main and Monroe Streets, ca. 1935

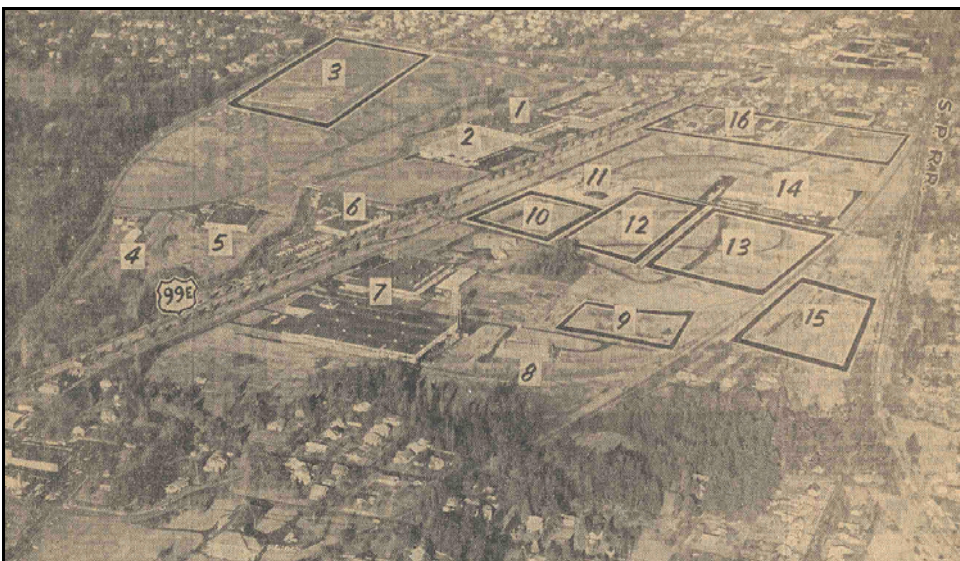


Source: Oregon Historical Society

Suburb (1950 to Present)

The third phase of Milwaukie's growth impacted both the physical and municipal development of the city. During World War II, development in Milwaukie came to a halt. Ship yard workers came from all over the country to work in the ship yards of the Columbia and Willamette Rivers. The Housing Authority of Clackamas County built the Kellogg Park housing development in the early 1940s to house the workers. The site was sold to the City of Milwaukie between 1946 and 1950, leveled, and converted to the Milwaukie Industrial Park (now the Manufacturing Zone M north of downtown) and annexed to the City in 1956.^{xi}

Milwaukie Industrial Park, located on the former site of Kellogg Park housing, 1958.

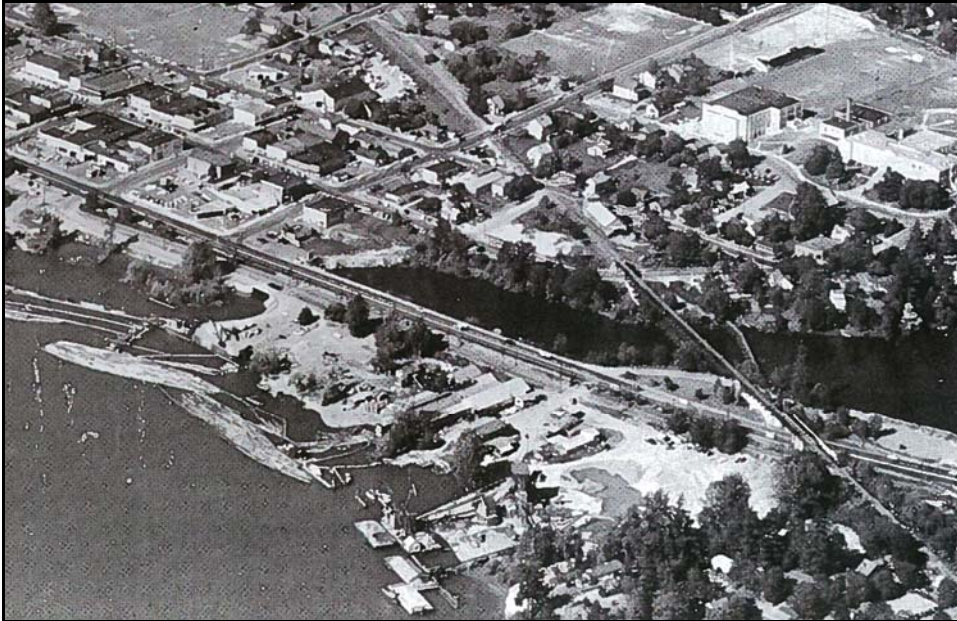


Source: The Oregonian

The city's northern boundary expanded in 1956 to include the Milwaukie Industrial park. As a result of the expanded city boundary, many of the buildings north of Harrison St and

along McLoughlin Blvd were constructed in the 1950s and 1960s. Much of the development that occurred during this period was suburban in style, comprised of boxy, low-rise buildings surrounded by surface parking. The Milwaukie waterfront was dominated by a log dump and various industrial uses, and downtown was cut off from the river by McLoughlin Blvd.

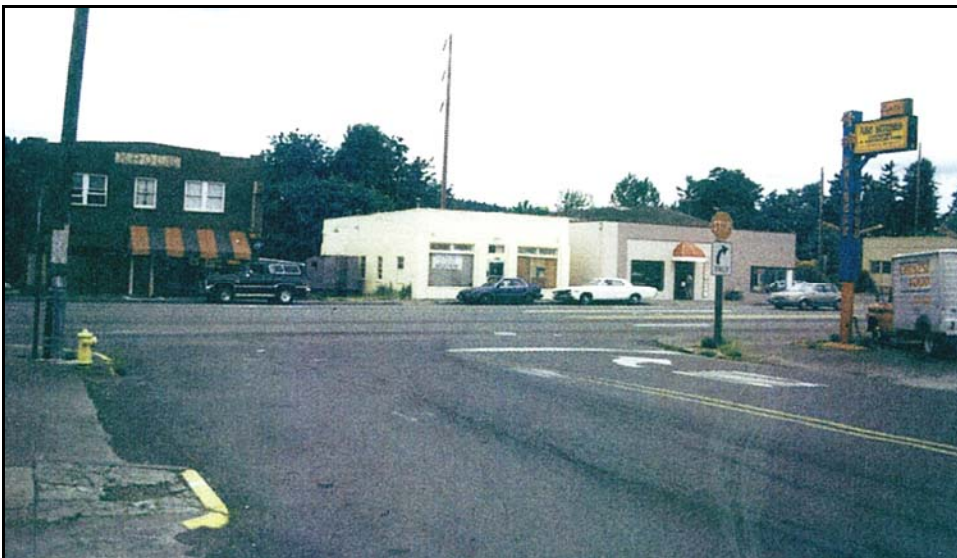
Downtown Milwaukie and waterfront in the 1950s.



Source: Oregon Historical Society

Due to declining ridership and lack of interest on the part of the company's owners, the last electric interurban route through Milwaukie ended in 1958.^{xii} Like many small towns, downtown Milwaukie entered a period of decline in the 1970s from which it is still recovering.

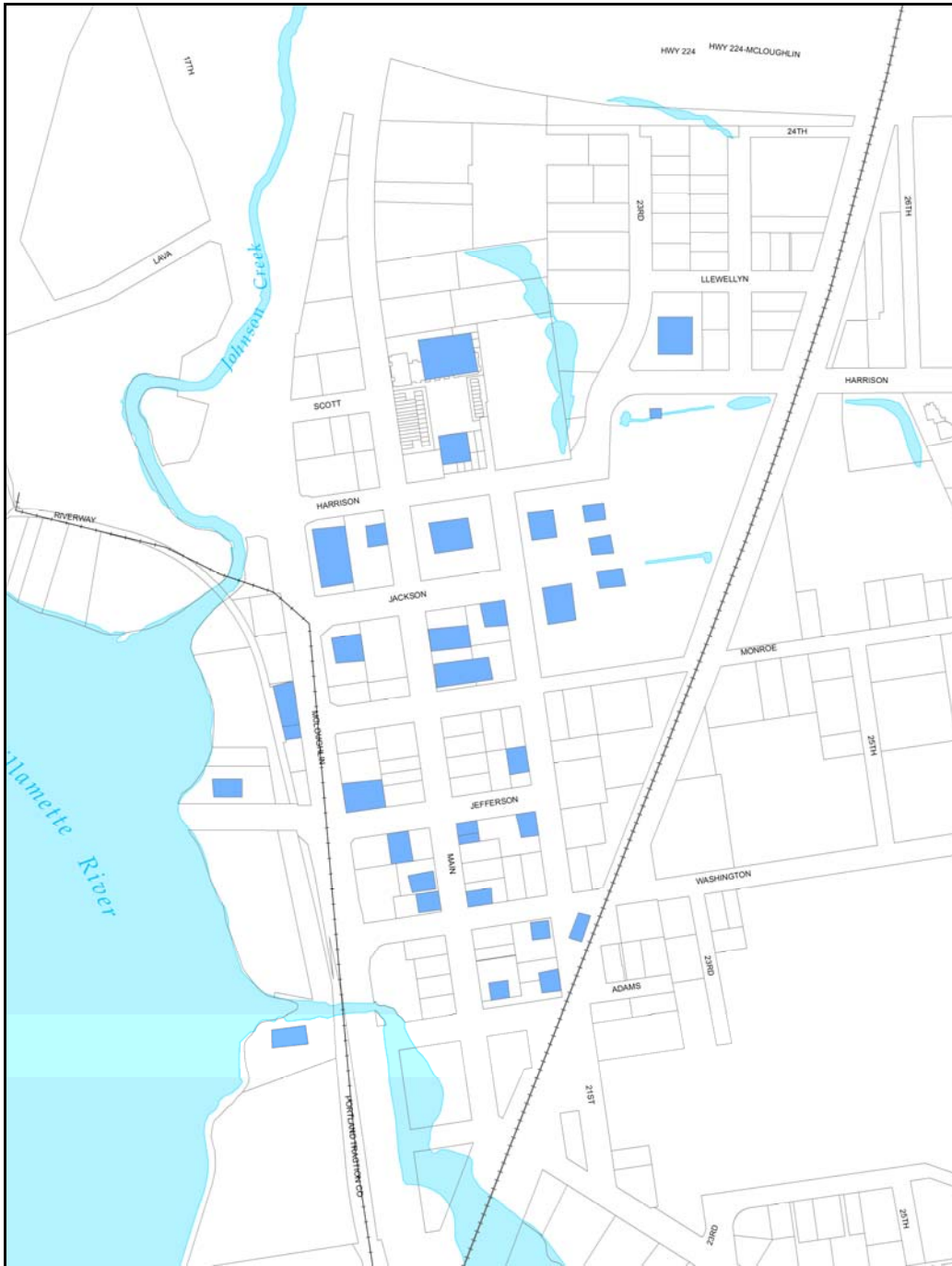
Jefferson St at McLoughlin Blvd, late 1980s.



Source: City of Milwaukie

However, due to the increasing appeal of Milwaukie as a bedroom community and the gradual annexation of unincorporated properties, the population and city have continued to grow at a slow but steady rate. Between 1950 and 2010, the population grew from about 5,000 to more than 20,000 people. The waterfront has been prepared for a new Riverfront Park, and the former streetcar line is being converted to a multi-use "Trolley Trail" by the North Clackamas Parks and Recreation District.

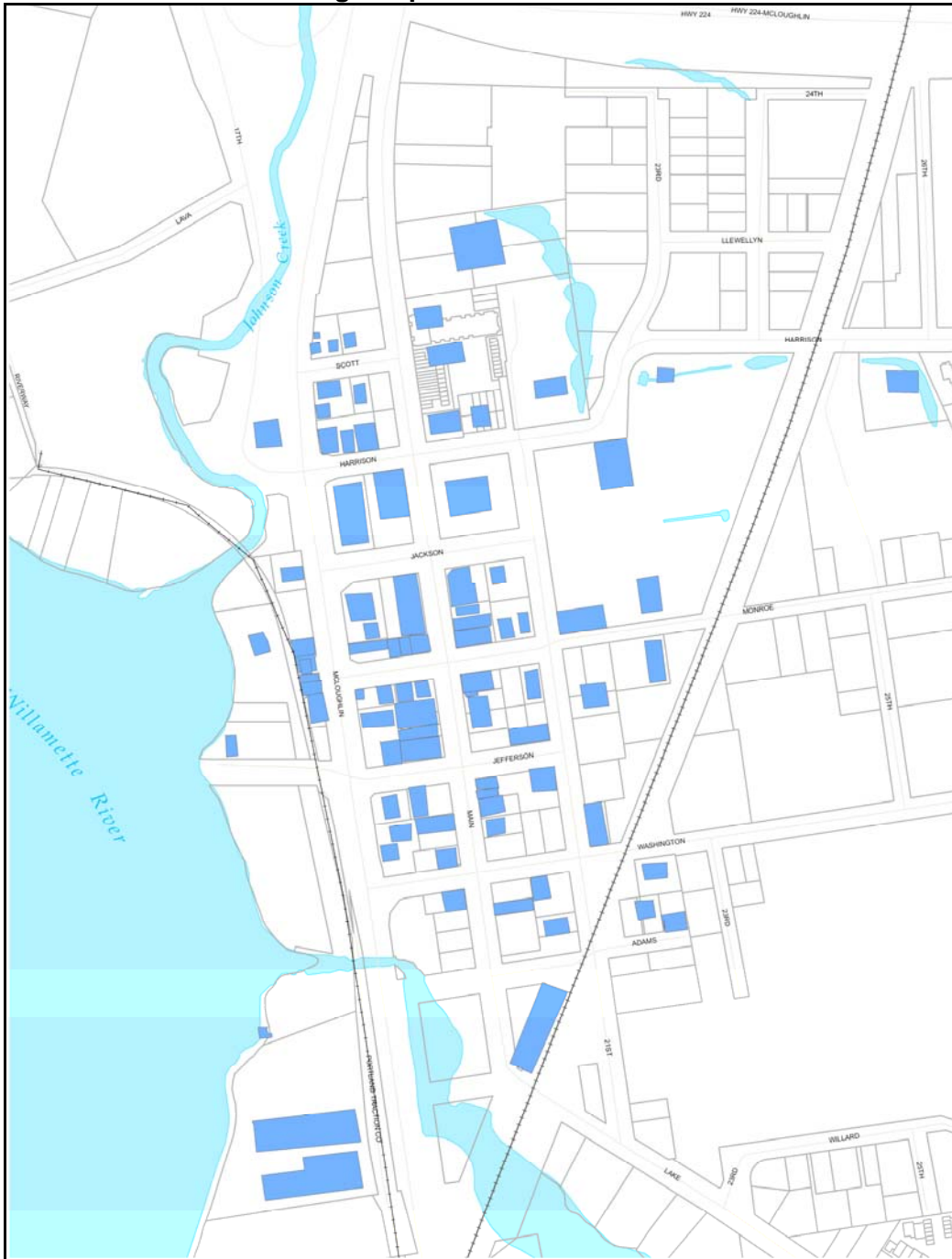
Historic Milwaukie building footprints in 1895, with streetcar line.



Source: City of Milwaukie

Note: Taxlots are 2010; building footprints are 1895.

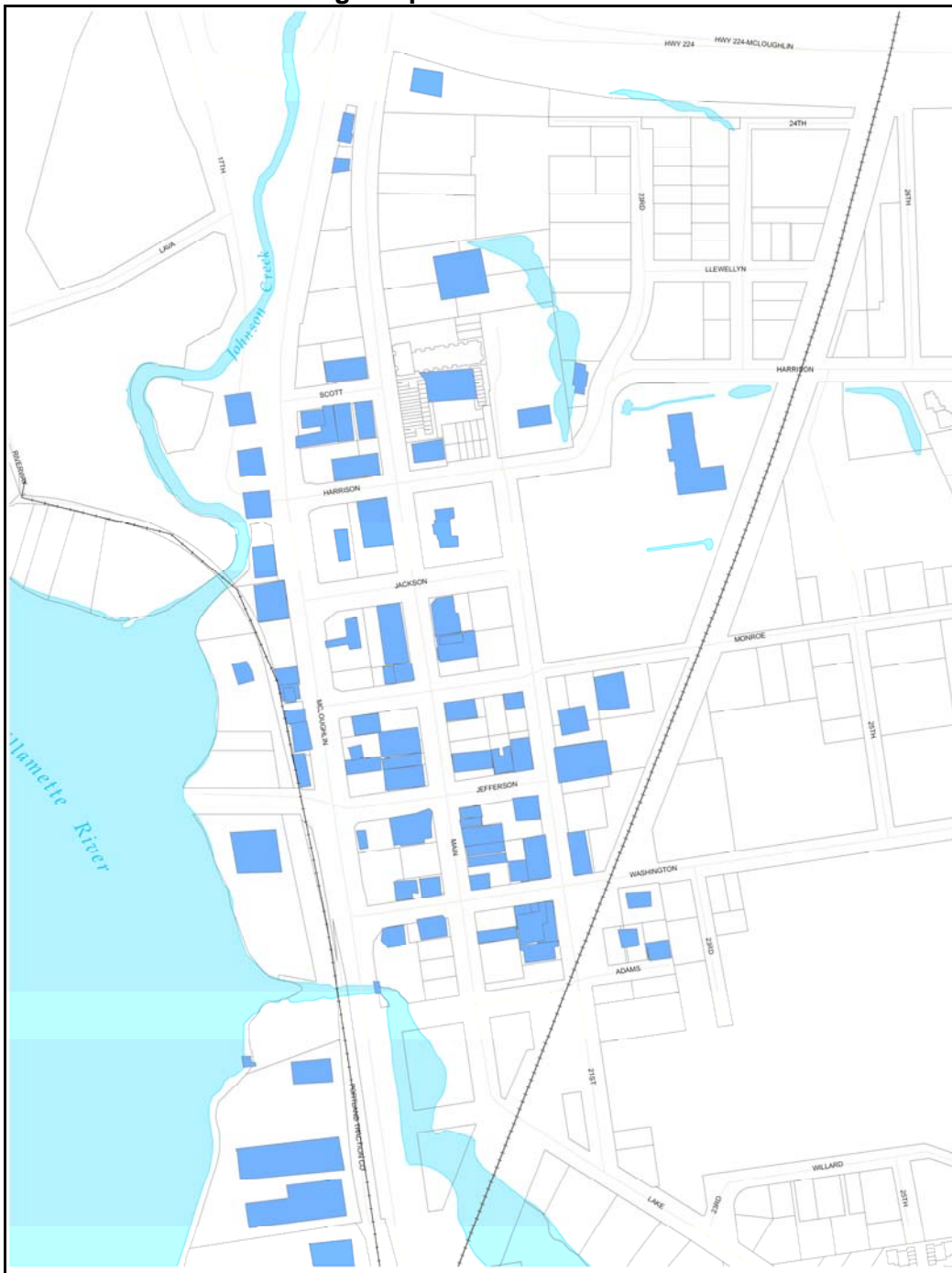
Historic Milwaukie building footprints in 1930.



Source: City of Milwaukie

Note: Taxlots are 2010; building footprints are 1930.

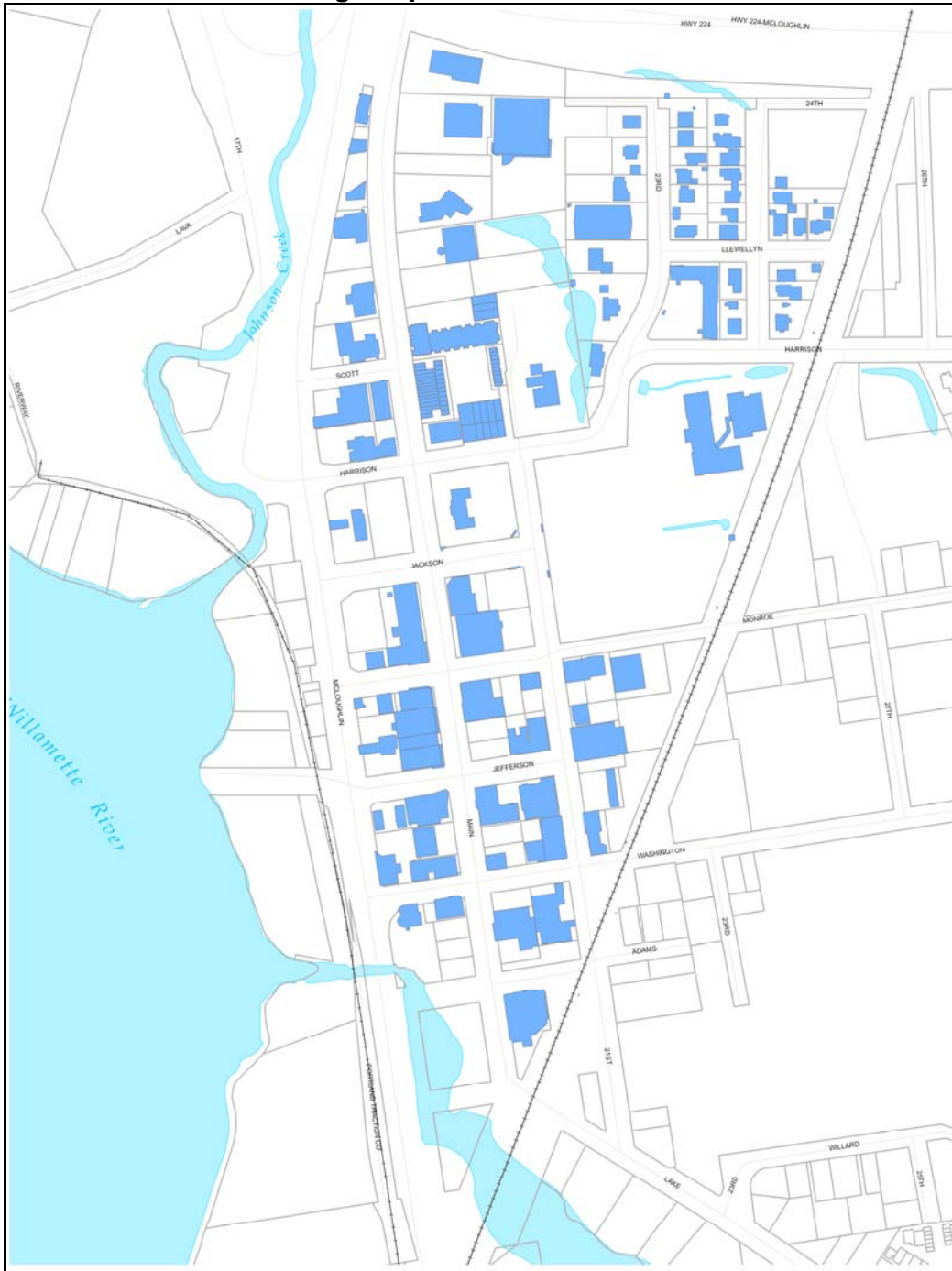
Historic Milwaukie building footprints in 1960.



Source: City of Milwaukie

Note: Taxlots are 2010; building footprints are 1960.

Historic Milwaukie building footprints in 2007.



Source: City of Milwaukie

Note: Taxlots are 2010; building footprints are 2007.

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- ⁱ Donation Land Claim #38, recorded December 8, 1847. Courtesy of Oregon State Archives.
- ⁱⁱ Some sources say that Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was Whitcomb's home town, but most agree that he emigrated from Vermont.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Clackamas County Cultural Resources Inventory, November, 1983; Charles Oluf Olsen, *The History of Milwaukie, Oregon*, 1965; Tom Humphrey, "As We Remember It," 1959.
- ^{iv} Charles Oluf Olsen, 1965. *The History of Milwaukie, Oregon*.
- ^v The plat was not recorded with Clackamas County until 1865, 8 years after Lot Whitcomb's death in 1857.
- ^{vi} Dimon, Elizabeth F., 1981. *'Twas Many Years Since: 100 Years in the Waverly Area 1847-1947*.
- ^{vii} Metro, November 1997. "South/North Project – Historic Context Statement."
- ^{viii} Ordinance 1, adopted July 6, 1903, addressed these dangers by prohibiting power houses within the City limits.
- ^{ix} Tom Humphrey, "As We Remember It," 1959.
- ^x City of Milwaukie. *Centennial Memories: 1903-2003*. 2003.
- ^{xi} Clackamas County Plat #729, recorded November 22, 1952; and Plat #803, recorded June 20, 1956.
- ^{xii} Clackamas County Cultural Resource Inventory, November, 1983.