



McMenamins on the

Columbia

McMenamins on the Columbia has one of the best atmospheres this area has to offer. In almost every direction the place is hemmed in by a display of natural beauty.

True, the Columbia's powerful, hypnotic flow is a spectacular backdrop for enjoying great conversation along with good food and drink, but its steady pace also recalls the ceaseless march of time. Located in what was the famed Kaiser shipyard of WWII, and bordered by the old SP&S railroad, Fort Vancouver and the Columbia River, the spot teems with remarkable history, its story as deep and impressive as the river itself.

In November of the 1805 Lewis and Clark expedition, Captain Meriwether Lewis observed in his journal that this area was "...the only desirable location for a settlement I have seen on the west side of the Rocky Mountains."

Countless people who came later concurred with his observation, but prehistoric artifacts have shown that people have been coming here for centuries, long before Lewis and Clark made their campsite here. The earliest known inhabitants were the stone-age peoples called the Sketcu'txat. Later, the riverside provided berries and salmon to the Soto village as well as the Chinook. Like the Sketcu'txat before, the river was the focus of their life. For them however, it was the backbone of a network of commerce between the tribes that populated the banks of the Columbia from the Pacific Ocean clear to the Rocky Mountains.

In 1824 Dr. John McLoughlin heartily agreed with Lewis's earlier observation and constructed Fort Vancouver just up the bank. The fort was the headquarters for the Hudson Bay Company's (HBC) fur-trapping operation in the Columbia Department, a region encompassing

700,000 square miles of country. It became a symbol of the British stronghold on the Pacific Northwest. At its peak the outpost employed over 600 people, virtually all of whom lived and worked outside the walls of the fort. The village that grew around the fort was the political, cultural and mercantile center of the region, and for nearly three decades it was the largest, most important, and most culturally diverse settlement between San Francisco and Sitka, Alaska. The pub site was well within the fort's territory and several early maps show cultivated fields and utility structures near here. How fun to think that the "Father of Oregon,"

Dr. McLoughlin, lived just a few hundred yards from here and perhaps walked these very grounds, enjoying much the same view as you.

The river's role in settling the Northwest cannot be overstated.

The fort represented the end of the Oregon Trail, and Dr. McLoughlin's generosity

was legendary among the American settlers. Ironically, by aiding settlement McLoughlin eroded the British Fort's command of the region, and in 1846 the governments of the US and Great Britain agreed that the national boundary would not be the Columbia River as the Brits had hoped, but instead the 49th parallel to the north. The new border left Fort Vancouver in US territory, and by 1860 the HBC abandoned their once great outpost, relocating to Victoria, BC.



The Father of Oregon

For years following the fort's decline, the pub site, probably farm or grazing land, changed hands a number of times. It was first part of the 44.64-acre land claim settled by John T. Lovelace in 1854. Lovelace passed the property to John Sitzler in 1859, who

Where the pub now sits is what used to be the west end of the outfitting docks, the place where the ship hulls were finished and urgently readied for their voyage to war.

used it to run a private ferry between here and the Oregon side. It is hard to verify, but it is said that Sitzler was the first white man to operate a public ferry crossing the Columbia. Eventually, Sitzler relinquished the land to a former Fort Vancouver gunsmith, Morris Baker. Baker passed away in January 1883, but his widow Matilda and their six children continued on here for a good number of years.

As unstoppable as the Columbia's current itself, the flow of progress gradually altered the view from here. Over time, new buildings rose across the river and docks dotted the shore. In 1908, progress also brought the celebrated Spokane, Portland & Seattle railroad and levy just north of here. Progress also brought the Port of Vancouver, which acquired this property not long after its creation in 1912.

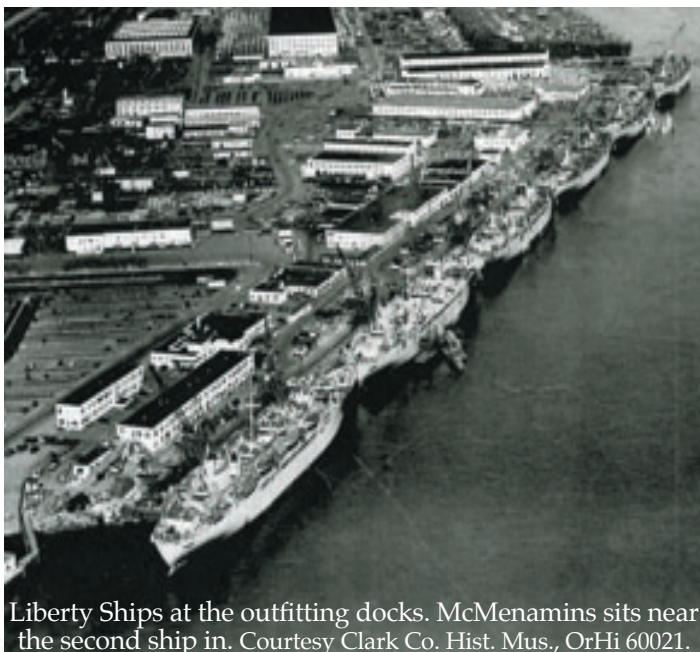
The port did little with the land other than provide some extra pastureland for the neighboring Hidden Dairy Farm. That is, until December 7, 1941, when the US was abruptly thrust into the Second World War. Just a month and two days following the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor, the industrious Kaiser Company was awarded a contract to construct a state-of-the-art shipyard within the city limits of Vancouver. The port leased its 30 acres to Kaiser and practically overnight, the pastureland was transformed into the most modern shipbuilding facility in the US, forever changing the face of the waterfront—and the region.

During its time, the Kaiser-Vancouver Shipyard burned extremely bright. The yard employed a staggering 40,000 workers, more than double Vancouver's pre-war population, and the assembly action never stopped, day or night. The yard shattered numerous shipbuilding records and produced 141 vessels of five types throughout the war, including the now famous "Liberty ships" and "baby flattops," each capable of carrying 37 airplanes. Where the pub now sits is what used to be the west end of the outfitting docks, the place where ship hulls were finished and urgently readied for their maiden voyage to war.

The Kaiser yard closed down abruptly in May 1946, following Japan's surrender. A number of uses were considered for the enormous yard through the '50s, but in 1960 the decaying yard was sold to Gilmore Steel of Portland. After that, this property on the bank of the Columbia passed from one investor to the next, being used as a light industrial park, a storage facility and then, finally, a modern, mixed-use development. Several structures remain from the storied yard just upstream from the pub and one can still see a considerable "Whirley Crane" from the patio.

Opened in January 1995, this pub overlooking the river was the first McMenamins to be constructed from the ground up. We felt pretty special to find this spot, resting on such history and commanding such an impressive view of the river. But within a short time, as people in the area experienced back in 1887 and again in 1948, the river swelled to remind us who was really in command. During the Great Flood of 1996, the mighty Columbia swallowed our patio, but, thanks to some plywood and sandbags, spared the inside.

While we are considerably less remote than the HBC's Fort Vancouver once was, we like to think that weary travelers are just as relieved when they come through the door. For more than a decade now, this place has been our outpost on the river, our own sort of hub catering to a much larger and more diverse "village" that has sprung up around here, continuing the tradition that has brought people to this spot for centuries.



Liberty Ships at the outfitting docks. McMenamins sits near the second ship in. Courtesy Clark Co. Hist. Mus., OrHi 60021.