

Technical Memorandum #19



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Subject: Clark County's Historical Land Cover
Project 14505
No.:

This memo summarizes some of the available historical information regarding Clark County's early transition from historic forest to agriculture. We have reviewed the following information:

- A 1888 map of Clark County
- State census information on cultivated and farmed lands in the early 1900's.
- Historical documents and newspaper articles from the Clark County Historical Museum

The historical descriptions, maps, and census data suggest that much of the developable portions of Clark County were cleared of and being farmed before 1900.

A 1888 map of Clark County

A review of an 1888 map of Clark County suggests that a large portion of Clark County was being farmed before 1900. This map shows the homesteads that were claimed across an extensive area of Clark County by 1888. The Homestead Act required claimants to live on the land, build a home, make improvements and farm the land for 5 years before they could gain title to the land.

State census information on cultivated and farmed lands in the early 1900's.

The US Census Bureau has conducted a farm census in Clark County every five years since 1880. This census data suggests that 46% of the 420,060 total acres in Clark County was farmland by the year 1900. In comparison, 21% of King County and 14% of Pierce County was farmland by the year 1900.

Of the total 420,060 acres in Clark County, there are 158,068 acres that is zoned as Tier I Forest. This area is in the eastern part of Clark County, in the Cascade Mountain foothills, and these areas have been designated for long-term production of commercially significant forest products. Development is not permitted in these areas; therefore, these areas can be subtracted from the total acreage of the County for a comparison of developable areas, or of farmed areas. Excluding the

areas zoned for forestry practices, and using the census data, the farmed areas would constitute 74% of the Clark County by 1900. The census results from 1880 through 1920 are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Washington Farm Census from 1880 to 1950 Conducted by the US Census Bureau

Year	Total Farm Acreage	Percentage of Entire Clark County	Percentage of Clark County without Tier 1 Forest Areas
1880	115,300	27%	44%
1890	138,600	33%	53%
1900	192,737	46%	74%
1910	186,926	44%	71%
1920	194,309	46%	74%

These results collaborates the information shown on the 1888 map, where a significant portion of the area west of the Cascade Foothills had already been homesteaded.

Historical documents and newspaper articles from the Clark County Historical Museum

Descriptive excerpts from various historical documents also suggest Clark County was swiftly becoming an agrarian landscape before 1900. Around 1860, the first American settlers in Vancouver described expanses of “great forest and dense undergrowth” to the north and west of town. Accounts describe “thousands of acres of agricultural land...being cleared of the splendid timber” as settlers arrived and built homes for their families. However, there were also several expanses of prairie land readily adaptable for agriculture, including First through Fourth Plains. The following excerpts are from *History of Clarke County, Washington Territory* by B.F. Alley and J.P. Munro-Fraser that describe the communities outlying Vancouver as they appeared around 1885:

- Battle Ground – “As we reached the more elevated places.....imagination ran riot into the future when the brush, fern, stumps and logs that now covered the surface shall have been swept away and the whole land be made to bloom ‘neath the magic touch of the husbandman.”
- Pioneer (15 miles northwest from Vancouver) – “From the vast number of stumps that still dot the expanse of country we are reminded of the fact that...the country was visited by a forest fire of marvelous proportions, wherein miles upon miles of magnificent timber fell prey to the devastating scourge. These will in time, however disappear and leave the land free to profitable agriculture.”
- Second Plain – “Is the second of the series of four pieces of open ground whereon in by-gone days the herds of the Hudson Bay Company were wont to pasture and as on the route to the Fourth Plain, the largest of these unwooded tracts.”
- Chelachie Prairie (20 miles northeast from Vancouver) – “Its settlement is of comparatively recent date, but even already splendid farms and excellent homes are found in every hand.”

These historical descriptions provide some indication of the aggressive land conversion from native forest to viable agriculture that was occurring in Clark County through the late 1800's. This trend continued through the first half of the 20th century as Clark County became a major fruit producer in the state and was once known as the "Prune Capitol of the World". The historical descriptions, maps, and census data suggest that most of the developable portions of Clark County were being farmed before 1900.

Clark County's proposed flow control standard maintains a forested pre-development standard where forest still exists, and also in watersheds where more than 40% of the forest has been reserved thereby protecting to the greatest level those watersheds that would be in the best condition today. For those watersheds where more than 40% of the forest cover has been removed prior to 1955, the requirement shifts to the land cover since 1955 that generated the least runoff. Typically, this would be fields and pasture lands as existed since the late 1800s and early 1900s.

The attached diagram shows the approximate areas of the county that would remain held to a forested pre-development condition (shown in green and yellow). Comparing that map to the map of the County in 1888 shows a similar extents of farmed properties.

References

1. Alley, B.F. *History of Clarke County, Washington Territory*. Washington Publishing, Portland, Oregon. 1885.
2. Hurley, R. *United States Census of Agriculture: 1950 - Volume I, Part 32*. U.S. Department of Commerce: Bureau of the Census. United States Printing Office, 1952.
3. Habersham, R.A. *Map of Clarke County, Washington Territory*. Library of Congress, 1888.