

Eugene's Historic River Road



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Front Cover: A cow at a gas station on River Road taken during the January 1946 flood. Superimposed over a c.1885 cadastral map. Photo courtesy of Lane County Historical Museum (GN2052).



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Eugene's Historic River Road was researched and prepared by Bernadette Niederer, Caitlin Harvey, Sally Wright and David Pinyerd of Historic Preservation Northwest, a local historic preservation consulting firm, in conjunction with the City of Eugene Planning and Development Department staff. The Context presents an overview of Eugene's River Road area and is intended to provide a broad understanding of the neighborhood's growth and development. The document also identifies the type and likely location of historic resources in the neighborhood.

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Aerial view of flooding in the River Road area. Photo courtesy of Lane County Historical Museum (GN6684).

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PREFACE

Eugene's Historic River Road is the culmination of an eight-month collaboration between Historic Preservation Northwest, the staff of the Eugene Planning and Development Department, and members of the public.

Since history is a process, this context statement must be seen as a "work in progress," periodically reviewed, corrected, and made current. It is a product that we hope will help us all to appreciate and evaluate the resources in Eugene's River Road neighborhood.

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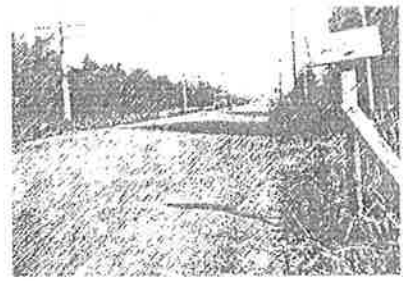


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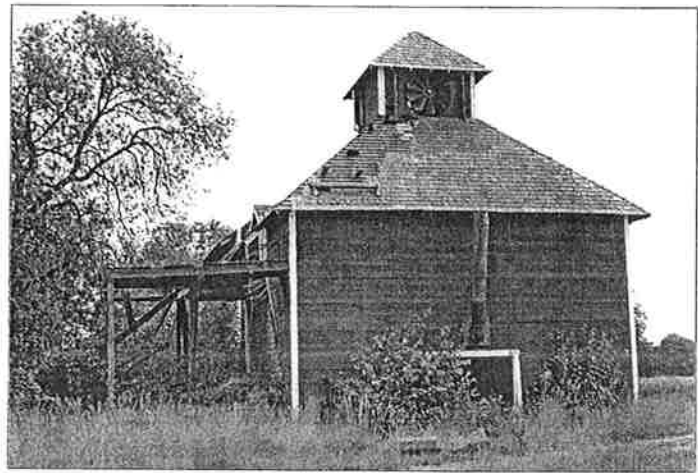
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INTRODUCTION



A historic context statement is a document used for strategic planning of a community's historic resources. It describes the broad patterns of historic growth and development of the community and helps to ascertain the historical themes, events, and associated individuals that have played an important role in that development. A context statement also helps to identify historic resource types, such as structures, sites, objects, and districts, that represent these patterns of development. It also helps determine the potential distribution of these resources. Just as importantly, the document provides guidance for evaluating and protecting significant historic resources. It is intended to be a dynamic document, evolving over time as community needs and desires change.

Eugene's Historic River Road is a context statement written in 2005 by Bernadette Niederer, Caitlin Harvey, Sally Wright and David Pinyerd of Historic Preservation Northwest, a local historic preservation consulting firm. The historic context is a geographically-oriented study that covers Eugene's River Road neighborhood. It is intended to assist in the preparation of city and county policies pertaining to the identification and protection of historic resources in the area.



Hop barn in the River Road area. Demolished. Photo courtesy of Lane County Historical Museum (GN2053)

The National Park Service developed context-based planning as a means of organizing activities for preserving historic resources. Such planning is based on the following four principles:

1. Significant historic properties are unique and irreplaceable.
2. Preservation must often go forward without complete information.
3. History belongs to everyone.
4. Planning can be applied at any scale.

This project was financed in part with Federal funds from the National Park Service, a division of the U.S. Department of the Interior, and was administered by the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office. All work was completed in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archaeology and Historic Preservation.

Historic Context Definitions

Determining what is to be studied is an important first step in understanding a historic context and helps keep the research focused. The three elements used to determine the parameters of a historic context are theme, time, and place.

Theme

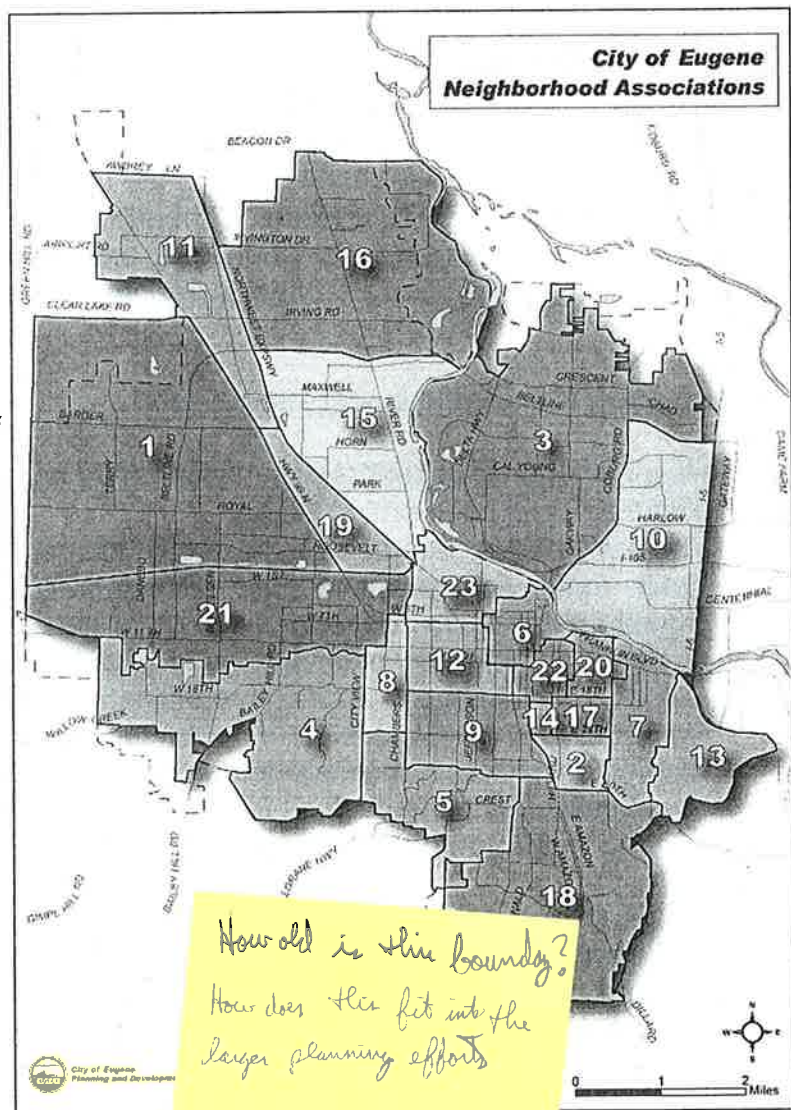
The theme of the context statement identifies what is to be studied. This can vary in scale from an entire community to a significant historic trend, such as the college fraternal movement, or to a single resource type, such as schools. This context is a geographically-based study, as it covers the River Road neighborhood. Significant activities, events and people are discussed within the context sub-themes, which includes Transportation, Government, Residential Development, Commercial Development, Education, and Religion.

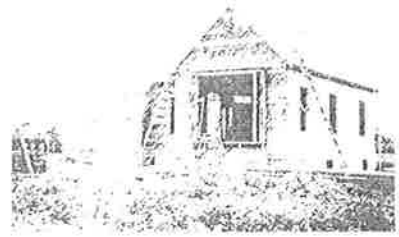
Time

The time boundary of a historic context establishes the dates that bracket the period of study. In the River Road area we are documenting and evaluating the period of Euro-American settlement (circa 1850) up until 1970.

Place

The place or spatial boundary of a context statement describes its geographic limits. Determining a reasonable area of study keeps the research manageable, yet the boundary should not be chosen arbitrarily. The boundaries of this study encompass the River Road neighborhood, labeled "15" on the figure to the right. The boundaries are formed by Beltline Road to the north, the Willamette River to the east, Cross Street to the south, and the Northwest Expressway to the west.





LANDSCAPE

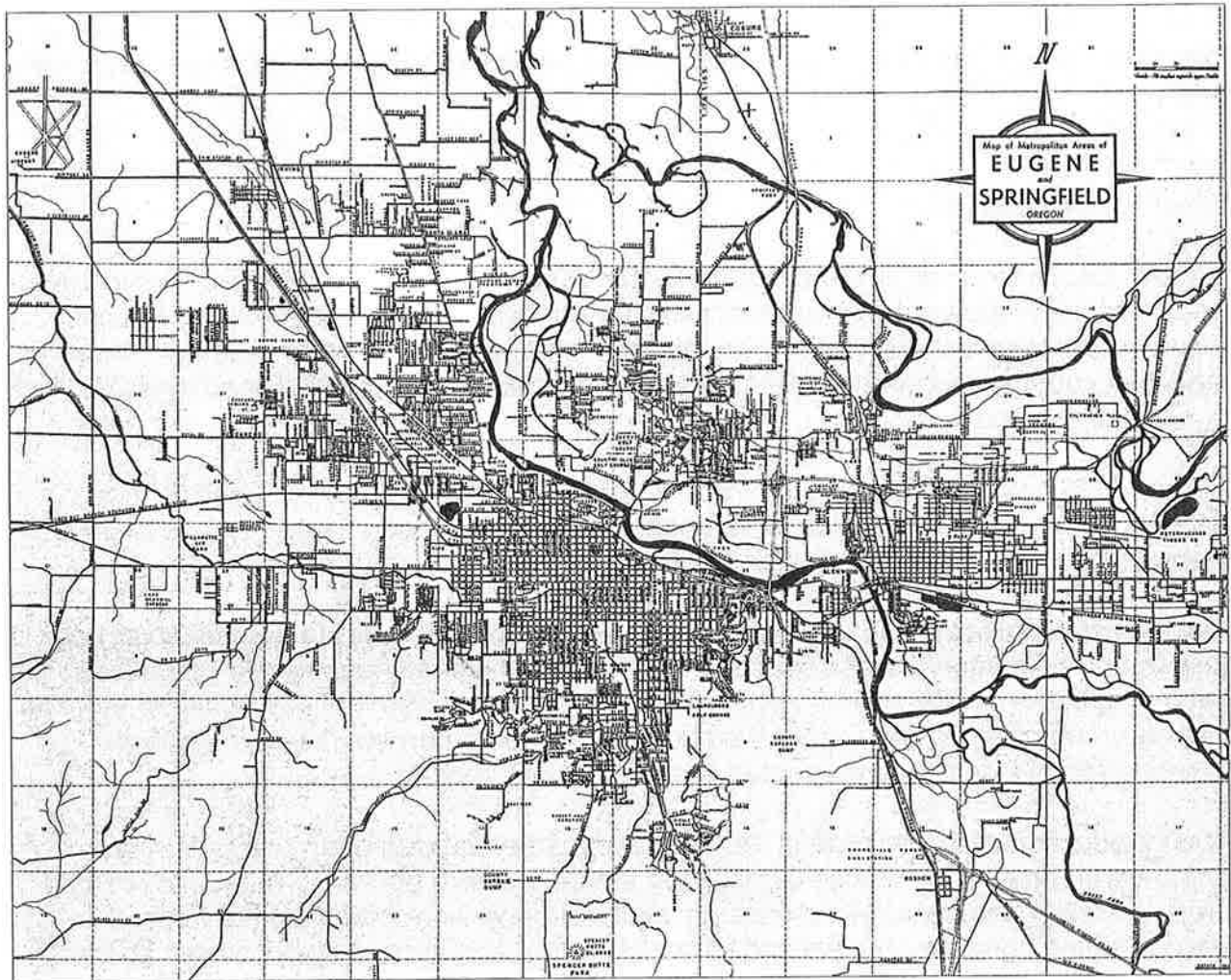
The Willamette Valley is characterized by small volcanic buttes and alluvial plains. Annual spring flooding was a fixture before flood control measures were introduced in the twentieth century¹ and major floods could be expected every ten years.² The land lies within the rain shadow of the Coast Range with 70% of the annual rainfall concentrated between November and March. Only 1% of annual rain falls in July through August. The native vegetation consists of oak woodlands, riparian forests and prairie grasslands. The latter were artificial creations maintained by annual aboriginal burning.³

Today, the River Road area is not easily perceived as a landscape, and upon a cursory examination, appears more like an entirely human-made environment. Its only natural boundary is the Willamette River toward the east, while its other edges are man-made: Beltline Road on the north, the Northwest Expressway on the west, and Cross Street on the south. A few pockets of landscape exist along the river or in carefully tended gardens, but these seem like rarities among the asphalt and noise generated by the major thoroughfare that is River Road. Though these impressions are essentially true, there is also an underlying cultural landscape, one that is in a constant state of change and has been shaped by human hands in various forms for centuries, perhaps even for millennia.

Components of the cultural landscape include:⁴

1. Historic patterns of spatial organization (landscape structure)
2. Historical land uses and activities
3. The response to natural features of built elements of the landscape
4. Trails, roads, railroads, and other circulation networks
5. Donation land claim boundaries and other historic boundary demarcations
6. Orchards, ornamental plantings, and other vegetation related to land use
7. Clusters of buildings in rural communities, centers, and farmsteads
8. Residences and individual farm buildings, industrial and commercial structures, bridges, canals, and drainage features
9. Small-scale elements such as isolated graves, farm, or logging machinery
10. Historic views and other perceptual qualities

When we see the landscape as a cultural element, we begin to see the forms that shape it: the Willamette River, the prime agricultural soils created by the river's flooding, residential and commercial structures of various shapes and periods, and transportation networks such as the railroad and, especially, River Road.



The highlighted area is the basic boundary of the study area on this 1965 map of Eugene, extending from Bellline Road to the north, the Willamette River to the east, Cross Street to the south, and the Northwest Expressway to the west.

Pre-Euro-American Settlement

Long before the arrival of Euro-American trappers and later settlers, Native Americans shaped the environment that is now the River Road area. The land immediately adjacent to the Willamette River consisted of riparian woodland, with Willow, Black Cottonwood, Oregon White Ash, and Red Alder. A transitional forest with Big Leaf Maple and Douglas Fir abutted the river lands to the west. These wooded areas transitioned into wide, flat prairie grasslands with isolated stands of White Oak and other large trees.⁵ Though a modern observer might be tempted to call it a wild landscape, it was, in fact, a human made creation. Native Americans, in the Eugene area, bands of Kalapuya, managed the prairie through periodic burnings, which facilitated their hunting and gathering activities. This native landscape included food staples such as salal, tarweed, camas, wapato, berries, acorns, fish, and game.⁶

It was the abundance of game which first attracted trappers. These transitional visitors may have over-hunted the area, but essentially left the landscape in its Native American form.

Settlement Patterns

Settlers began to arrive in Lane County in the 1840s. The River Road area would have been especially desirable because of its proximity to a water supply, but also because the open prairie required little clearing and provided ample fodder for livestock. The land was subdivided into the 320- and 640-acre plots characteristic of the Donation Land Claim period.

Some roads, such as River Road, were adopted from Native American trails. Others, such as Sunnyside Drive, Briarcliff Avenue, Owosso Drive, and Irving Road, developed along the borders of Donation Land Claims.

The size of claims resulted in a scattered settlement pattern, with farms placed at half-mile to one-mile intervals. As subsistence farms evolved into large-scale operations beginning in the 1860s, claims were fenced and native vegetation was replaced by grain and other imported plants.⁷ With the exception of some berries, few of the Native American food staples were adopted into the settlers' diets.

The introduction of the railroad in 1871 encouraged expanded grain production and engendered prosperity. It also established a hard western boundary to the River Road area. Farmhouses became increasingly elaborate and were often located near transportation corridors, but set back from the street and fronted by driveways shaded by allées with walnut trees, maples, or firs.⁸

The decline of large-scale agriculture in the 1890s spurred the division of Donation Land Claims among offspring as well as sales to new arrivals. The new farms, somewhere between 20 and 200 acres, rather than their original 320 and 640 acres, were also more diversely planted. As a result, the landscape took on an even more checkerboard appearance. The checkerboard became increasingly chaotic as the twentieth-century progressed and residential development expanded. The first subdivisions were platted in the 1910s and residential construction doubled the River Road population by the 1930s. However, in contrast to the housing boom following World War II, these early suburban enclaves were still uncrowded and surrounded by farmland.

Though more and more farmland was consumed to accommodate Eugene's exploding population following World War II, River Road maintained some of its rural character well into the 1970s. Some major thoroughfares, such as Sunnyside Drive remained unpaved, and pockets of agricultural landscapes persisted. It was not until the twenty-first-century that the last vestiges of farmland ceased to operate with Woodruff Nursery being the last holdout.