

Lake Oswego has a long and rich history. The area known as Old Town in Lake Oswego is where our community was born. Today, Lake Oswego is considered one of the finest residential communities in Oregon. Lake Oswego is a community rich with art, culture, historical resources, quality schools, vibrant business districts, and an abundance of activities and events for all ages. Located in the northwestern corner of Clackamas County on the banks of the scenic Willamette River and hugging the shore of a 405-acre lake, Lake Oswego is nestled among many of Oregon's greatest attractions: Mount Hood, the Oregon Coast, the Columbia Gorge and nearby vineyards, farmlands, and forests. Lake Oswego is also ideally situated close to Oregon's major metropolitan areas – just eight miles south of downtown Portland and about 45 minutes north of the state capitol in Salem.

History of Lake Oswego

The history of Lake Oswego and the larger Portland Metropolitan Area mirrors the troubled and yet hopeful history of the entire state of Oregon.

The City of Lake Oswego sits on the indigenious land of the Clackamas Native Indigenious Peoples. Due to European settlement and disease, most of the tribe perished before homesteaders even reached the area.

Albert Alonzo Durham founded the town of Oswego in 1847. He built a sawmill on Sucker Creek, thereby introducing the first industry to the town. A few years later in 1855 the state relocated the remaining Clackamas Native Indigenious Peoples to the Grand Ronde Indian Reservation in Yamhill County.

In 1841 iron ore was discovered in the Tualatin Valley but it wasn't industrialized until 1861. Four years later, the Oregon Iron Company was incorporated, paving the way as the first of three companies that helped industrialize Lake Oswego and dubbing it the "Pittsburgh of the West."

George Rogers Park hosted the first iron smelter in 1867. This smelter operated occasionally under the Oregon Iron Company, until a second corporation, Oswego Iron Company took it over. This new company operated the smelter until 1881. Then a third company, Oregon Iron and Steel took over and continued utilizing the smelter until 1885. A new smelter was located at Oswego Pointe Site with five times the original capacity.

The iron industry helped Lake Oswego boom, bringing in people, jobs and amenities. By 1890 the town was home to four general stores, a bank, three churches and an opera house!

In 1886 a railroad line was built to connect Lake Oswego to Portland. The Southern Pacific Railroad Company took over the line by the turn of the century. In 1914 the line became electrified. This new, clean and quiet mode of transportation and connectivity helped lead to the development of the residential areas of Lake Oswego in the 1920s and 1930s.

The City incorporated in 1910. Following the decline of the iron industry, the focus turned into land development. A power plant was erected in 1909. Large tracts of land were sold to Paul Murphy, a land developer and the Ladd Estate Company. The land was eventually converted into residential development. And in 1926 the first City Hall was built.

Paul Murphy took some of the land and used it to build the Lake Oswego Country Club. He also built the first water system to serve the west part of the City. He utilized the Country Club and water system to pressure architects to develop "fine and tasteful" homes across the City. Residential development continued and the eventual annexation of Lake Grove led to the name change from "Oswego" to Lake Oswego.

Unfortunately this boom in industry, residential development and “fine” homes only benefited whites. Like most cities in Oregon, Lake Oswego practiced discrimination and exclusion. The nice homes and wealthy school district that followed only allowed whites for many years. While the history references remain vague on the actual codifying of exclusion and “sundown town” status in Lake Oswego’s history, most historians and accounts of the time confirm that at some level the City practiced racial segregation and exclusion into the late part of the 20th Century.

This history of exclusion, segregation continues today. In recent years there have been some troubling incidents of racism at Lake Oswego public schools. As evidenced by their deep commitment to improving the learning environment for all students, the Lake Oswego School District responded by forming a new Diversity and Equity Committee to help support students, teachers, administrators and families tackle these issues and create a more inclusive learning environment.

The City, School District and community have work to do, especially on the issue of racial equity, but if recent events highlight anything, it is the willingness of the community to engage in uncomfortable conversations.

References

<https://youtu.be/EQYdj-6XIs0>

<https://www.ci.oswego.or.us/library/brief-history-our-city>

<https://pamplinmedia.com/wlt/95-news/434980-345003-uncovering-oregons-racist-history>

<http://lbcommuter.com/founded-in-white-supremacy-what-does-oregons-racist-history-mean-now/>

More Information on Lake Oswego and Schools

The City of Lake Oswego is known for its excellent shopping and dining, its superior school system and its beautiful Chamber sponsored Village Flower Baskets. Over 2,000 businesses flourish in Lake Oswego, made up of 12% home based, 75% businesses with one to three employees and 13% larger businesses. In its several shopping districts, Lake Oswego teems with trendy shops, great restaurants and boutiques. Situated around a 405-acre lake, Lake Oswego offers some of the most sought-after housing in the Portland Metropolitan Area.

City of Lake Oswego

<https://www.ci.oswego.or.us/>

Lake Oswego Chamber of Commerce

<https://lakeoswegochamber.com/>

Lake Oswego School District

<https://www.losdschools.org/>

Oregon Episcopal School

<https://www.oes.edu/>

Catlin Gabel School

<https://www.catlin.edu/>

History of Portland

In 2016, a staff writer at the *Atlantic* wrote a compelling and masterful piece on the true history of Portland and Oregon. Rather than attempt at a rewrite of such an amazing piece, we thought we would link it here as an opportunity to uplift an authentic perspective.

[The Racist History of Portland, the Whitest City in America](#)