

CHAMPOEG

A STATE IS BORN, A TOWN IS LOST

A flood vanquished the town where pioneers voted to choose a future allied with the U.S. instead of Britain.

By Dan Hays for the Statesman Journal

<http://www.rootsweb.com/~orpionpr/Champoege.html>

The town that gave birth to Oregon as we know it no longer exists. Today, Champoege isn't a town, but a state park. But it has a colorful history. This is its story:

The first white settlers who came to Oregon may have intended to build towns, but their initial priorities were building their farms. Thus, beginning in 1829, a series of farms grew up along the south bank of the Willamette River about 20 miles north of what is now Salem.

The first settlers were French-Canadian farmers who had retired from the fur trapping trade. Gradually, enough farmers built homes close enough together to begin the natural process of forming villages. One impetus for settlement formation was the necessity for a warehouse that would hold and distribute grain for shipment on the boats that carried freight on the Willamette River. The building of such a warehouse was, in effect, the seed that produced the town of Champoege.

The name itself is something of a puzzle. Some early settlers claimed it was a name for the site used by the Kalapuyan (a group of Native American tribes who shared a common language). Others say the word is a corruption of the French "Campment du Sable" ("sand camp"), used by many of the French-speaking settlers to refer to an early camping place (and the site of Champoege is, indeed, an area of sand surrounded on three sides by loam and on the fourth by the river). Still others say the name is a double corruption, a combination of the French "champ" (field) and the Kalapuyan "pooitch" (an edible root). Then again, it may be a corruption of "champoo," a native word for weed. At any rate, it was pronounced "champ-OO-ee."

Champoege soon became a prime port for the thriving river trade on the Willamette. The town was well established by 1843, when it became the cradle of statehood for Oregon. On May 2 of that year, meetings were held to discuss the vital question of a provisional government, which would provide law, order, and protection for residents of the territory.

The Vote

There are two schools of thought as to just what was decided that day. The most common idea is that the Oregon settlers decided Oregon would be part of the United States, not part of Canada (and, therefore, part of Britain). A "yes" vote – there would be a vote to divide Oregon from Canada and Britain).

The second theory is that the May 2 vote established a provisional government and was not, in and of itself, a vote to join The United States. The 102 farmers, trappers, laborers, and adventures who gathered that day included 52 who came from Canada and 50 who had come to Oregon from American states. They met in Champoeg because it was a convenient site for the majority of them. The meeting was actually a group of small meetings. The climactic moment came when mountain man, trapper, and farmer Joseph Meek forced the issue. He cried out "Who's for a divide? All for the report of the committee and an organization, follow me!" Meek himself, speaking some years later, claimed he actually said: "Divide! Divide! Who's for a divide! All in favor of the American Flag, follow me!" While this version is more flamboyant, he was evidently the only person who remembered it that way. Some accounts of the vote omit any reference at all to a "divide" from Meek's statement.

Regardless of what he said, Meek's statement set the future course of Oregon. The 49 other Americans joined him, and before the men could be counted officially, Francis X. Matthieu (a Canadian opposed to British ways) joined the group, accompanied by his friend Etienne Lucier, also a Canadian. They settled the issue by a vote of 52-50.

The formation of the Oregon Provisional Government (Meek was elected sheriff and was one of the prime movers in seeking statehood for Oregon) led directly to the naming of Oregon as an official Territory of the United States in 1848, and to statehood in 1859. The Provisional Government was also the first organized American government west of the Mississippi.

Champoeg as a town continued to grow after the meeting. The 1860 census estimates a population of 180 persons for the Champoeg precinct, with up to 29 houses. Of the 131 workers listed in the Champoeg Precinct in that year, 79 (60 percent) were farmers. The others ran shops and offered services in support of the community (including a professional gardener).

The End

A statewide economic slump had begun in 1859. This slowed the growth of Champoeg, but far worse was just around the corner. Toward the end of November 1861, the Pacific coast from Southern California to northern Washington suffered from torrential rain. The rain lasted for 18 days in the Willamette Valley. On Dec. 2, 1861, the Willamette River created a destructive flood from Albany to Portland and Vancouver.

Accounts vary as to what this did to Champoeg. Some say it literally wiped the area clean, leaving it as "untouched" as when the trappers first saw it. But this wasn't quite true. A few homes survived, as did a river warehouse, though it was moved 150 feet and left a useless ruin. Dispirited and fearful that it could all happen again, the residents of Champoeg mostly moved away. Some left the state, some went elsewhere in Oregon; many moved to nearby Butteville (situated just high enough that flood damage was minor). The site of Champoeg, valuable for servicing river traffic, was never completely abandoned, but no known attempt was made to rebuild the town. In 1880, only 27 people were known to live near what was once Champoeg. A few structures were far enough from the river to survive.

Robert Newell a mountain man and self-taught doctor, built a home a Champoeg in 1852 (some sources say 1854). He built it well away from the river because minor floods had damaged his first home, which was in the village proper, near the river. A former trapper, Newell was a farmer, merchant, and orchardist. He eventually moved away from Champoeg. His home was in near ruins in 1955 when it was restored. It is now a part of Champoeg State Park, an area that encompasses the site of the town.

In 1900, it was decided that a monument should be built to commemorate the 1843 vote. So the Legislature informed Gov. Theodore T. Geer that the spot should be located and marked. Geer took this (wrongly) as his appointment as a one-man committee to get the job done. He contacted George H. Himes, Assistant Secretary of the Oregon Historical Society and Secretary of the Oregon Pioneer Association, and asked him to make an appointment for the two of them to meet with Francis Xavier Matthieu, 82 years old, the only known survivor of the 1843 vote. Himes made the appointment for, fittingly enough, May 2, 1900. Matthieu was to take the two men to the site of the vote. Geer set out on his bicycle on May 2 and rode to Matthieu's home near Butteville. There, he met Himes, but the two had to pass the day talking and playing horseshoes because Matthieu had forgotten the appointment and gone to Portland.

The Site

The three, accompanied by Portland Photographer James H. Eaton and two local landowners, set off to identify the site of the vote on May 3, 1900. Matthieu had a good memory---though he insisted that there really wasn't any one spot, since meetings and votes had occurred at various places throughout the town. The place he picked was the spot where people gathered around Joe Meek.

A stake was cut, the site was marked, and a photo was taken. But when Geer returned to Salem, he was met with a disgruntled staff and Legislature who had hoped to make more out of the search for the spot--and be included in it. Indeed, politics eventually prevailed. The actual site of the Meek gathering could not be seen from the river. River traffic, both commercial and passenger, was still highly important to Oregon in 1900. So, the location of the monument was moved closer to the river, where it could be seen by passing boats. There is no notice on the monument itself that says it does not mark the actual site of the voting.

The monument was dedicated on May 2, 1901, and Matthieu was given the honor of undrapping it. If he officially objected to where it was placed, that fact has not been recorded (he died in 1914 at age 96).

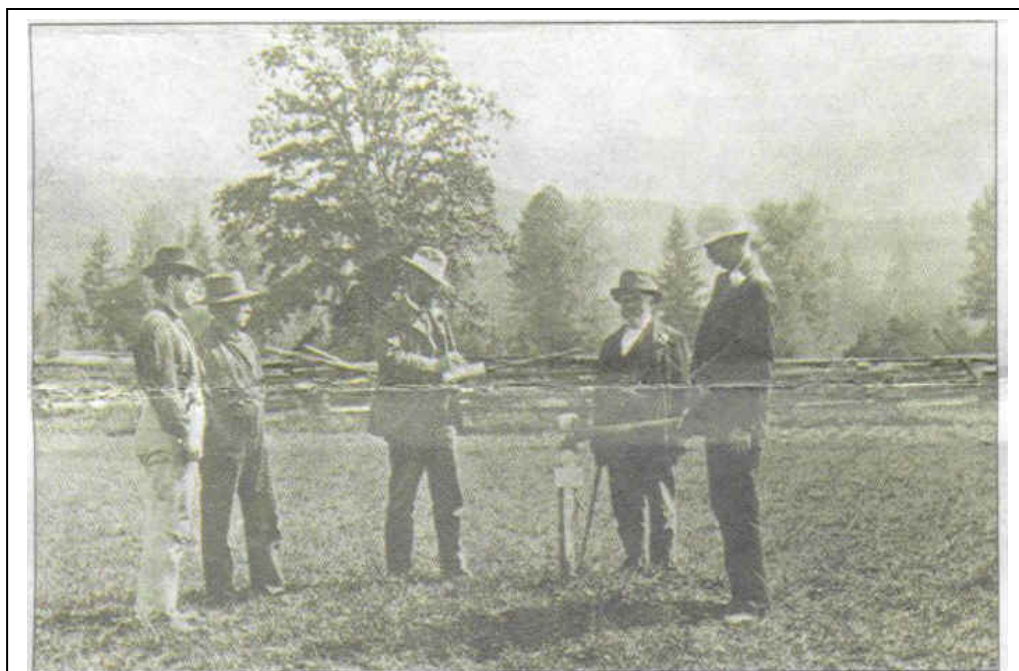
The face of the monument reads: *Erected on Thursday May 2, 1901 in honor of the first American government on the Pacific coast organized here Tuesday May 2, 1843. 52 persons voting for 50 against, the names of the former as far as obtainable are hereon inscribed.* On the other three faces are the names of the 52 persons who voted for the Provisional Government--sort of. There are actually 53 names, since one, Adam Hewitt, was added later at the insistence of his descendants.

The line "as far as obtainable" is also quite necessary. In fact, it has since been determined that several of the people listed on the monument were not a Champoege on that day, and that the names of several people who were there and voted 'yes' have been left off.

Provision to make the land state-owned had begun while the monument was being planned, beginning with just the square rod of land upon which the monument stood. But the State began to buy land around the monument almost immediately, and Champoege State Park (called Provisional Government State Park in official documents) was formed over a period of many years. Celebrations of the vote have been held many times, and will again this year. Champoege State Park Founder's Day celebration will be held on May 2 this year.

The event will take place in the Champoege Memorial Pavilion in the park. There will be speakers, entertainment, and refreshments. Sponsored by the Friends of Historic Champoege in cooperation with the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, the event is free (though there is a \$3 per vehicle park entry fee). Call (503)678-1251 for more information.

The standard work on the town, "Champoege: Place of Transition: A Disputed History," by John A. Hussey (Oregon Historical Society, Portland: 1967), is, unfortunately, out of print. So is the valuable "Champoege; A Frontier Community in Oregon, 1830-1861," by Lou Ann Speulda (Department of Anthropology, Oregon State University, 1988; Number 3 of the series Anthropology Northwest). Both are available in many libraries. Visitors to the park can obtain a copy of "Men of Champoege" for \$10. This book provides short biographies of the men who voted for the Provisional Government.



HISTORIC SPOT: In 1900, landowners Gus Hoefler (from left), C.W.A. Jette, historian George H. Himes, Francis X. Matthieu and Gov. Theodore T. Geer locate and stake the spot where Joseph Meek called for the vote establishing a Provisional Government for Oregon in 1843. Photo by James H. Eaton, courtesy Oregon Historical Society.



HISTORIC: The home of Dr. Robert Newell is seen on July 31, 1955, at Champoeg, just before restoration began. It was one of the few structures that survived the 1861 flood that some blame for the demise of Champoeg. Most residents moved away after the devastating flood, fearful the disaster would be repeated. The Newell house now is part of Champoeg State Park.



REVISED: The marker was not placed at the historic voting site. Instead, it was moved closer to the river, where it could be seen by boats.



The climactic moment in the formation of Oregon as a territory came when mountain man, trapper and farmer Joseph Meek (above) forced the issue at the meeting in Champoeg. He cried out:

**“WHO’S FOR
A DIVIDE?
ALL FOR
THE REPORT
OF THE
COMMITTEE
AND AN
ORGANIZA-
TION,
FOLLOW
ME!”**