

# TAHPDX: TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT

*A partnership between Portland State University, Portland Public Schools and the Beaverton School District, funded by the U.S. Department of Education*

## VANPORT CITY GOOGLE EARTH GIS PROJECT METADATA

This project prepared as part of the Teaching American History Project, a partnership between Portland State University, Portland Public Schools and the Beaverton School District, funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

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Project URL [home page]: <http://www.upa.pdx.edu/IMS/currentprojects/TAHv3/Home.html>

**Date:** October 2008

**Description:** VANPORT CITY encapsulated the America of its time, a time of returning optimism following the depression of the 1930s. Though Vanport was thought of as temporary and transitory, the miracle may have been that it worked at all. Yet work it did, in a robust, galvanic manner, full of a buoyant faith in America, a faith in stark contrast to the doubts and hesitations of today. It died as it had lived - quickly and dynamically - but not without its contributions to the future. Now, as a Portland public park area, nothing of Vanport remains to remind the new generations growing to maturity that Oregon's second largest city was once located there. To those who knew Vanport, it is only on the occasional days when the race cars thunder along what was once Cottonwood Street in the heart of the black district that the real spirit of Vanport City seems to come alive - vibrant, bruising, pulsating (*from "Vanport" by Manly Maben*).

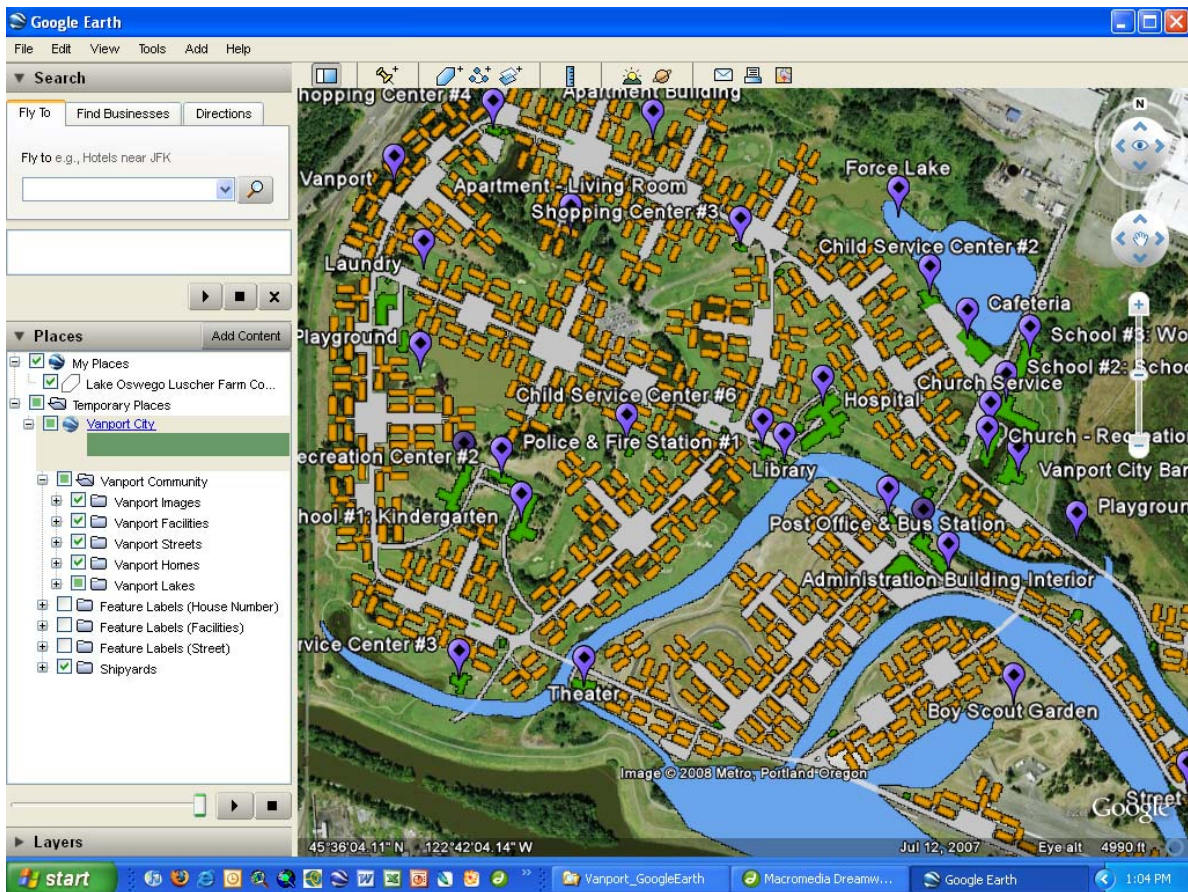
Summary: Vanport was a hastily constructed city of public housing located in Multnomah County, Oregon, between the contemporary Portland city boundary and the Columbia River (currently the site of Delta Park and the Portland International Raceway). It was constructed in 1943 to house thousands of workers at the wartime shipyards in Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, Washington. At its height, Vanport was home to approximately 50,000 people, many of them African-American, making it Oregon's second-largest city at the time, and the largest public housing project in the nation. Though less densely populated, Vanport remained a vibrant community after the war ended until it was destroyed dramatically at 4:05 pm on May 30, 1948

when a 200 foot section of the dike holding back the Columbia River collapsed during a flood, killing fifteen. The city was underwater by nightfall leaving its inhabitants homeless. The Vanport Extension Center refused to close after this disaster and quickly reopened in downtown Portland. Dubbed by a national magazine "The College that Wouldn't Die," it became present-day Portland State University.

Vanport transformed Portland and its story provides many lessons that resonate today. Vanport encapsulated the changes that occurred in American society during WWII and represents one of the government's most ambitious attempts at social planning and racial integration. Vanport's memory is worth preserving...it represents a dynamic chapter in the history of the Pacific Northwest.

**Project Name:** Vanport City.kmz

**Format:** Google Earth



**Data Layers:**

**Layer Names:** Vanport Facilities; Vanport Homes; Vanport Streets; Vanport Lakes (with labels)

**Source:** "Vanport City, Oregon" Map. Vanport: FPHA and HAP, August 1943.

**Description:** The map was georectified using the boundary streets on the map (which are still present today). The administrative buildings, homes, streets and lakes were then digitized from the rectified image into vector layers. The attributes reflect information available on the map (building numbers, street names, etc.).

**Placemarks:** Vanport Images

**Source:** City of Portland Archives – Housing Authority of Portland

**Description:** The images found in this project were obtained from the City Archives, photographed with a digital camera and resized using Photoshop. The narratives that accompany the images were obtained from various sources as listed in the bibliography.

**Spatial Extent:** Boundaries of Vanport City, Oregon; the Vanport City project conforms to the standard geographic projection used by Google Earth.

**GIS Data:** ESRI's ArcGIS 9.3 and other conversion tools have been used to create and convert the source GIS data into KMLs. The GIS data IS NOT packaged with the Google Earth projects. In most cases, you can retrieve the original GIS data files through the Teaching American History <Historical GIS Data> webpage.

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## Using the Vanport Google Earth Project in your Classroom:

This data supports a curriculum unit that looks at the diversity of Portland's population during World War II when labor mobilization was at its peak in Portland and Vancouver. Vanport City housed a diverse population, contributed to a significant increase in the African-American population in Portland, and represents a microcosm of life during the hectic, yet opportunistic, war years. Vanport's imprint is still on the landscape today, both physically and socially. Students can use the Google Earth project to explore what life was like in Vanport and how it still resonates today.

1. Click on the place marks to explore what life was like in Vanport City. Write a journal entry or a letter to out of state relatives from the perspective of a new Vanport resident.
2. Why do you think Vanport was located where it was (hint: look at the location of the shipyards and other industrial areas in Portland and Vancouver)?
3. How dense was the population in Vanport City (hint: read about the apartments, how many residents each building could accommodate, and make a rough calculation of density)? How does Vanport City compare to your neighborhood?
4. What were some of the amenities and facilities available to Vanport residents. Do you think the residents had it easy or hard compared to other areas in Portland/Vancouver at that time? What is distinctive or unusual about the amenities available to Vanport residents?
5. Zoom in to various features on the landscape. Turn off some of the layers and see if you can spot some lingering physical evidence of Vanport City's existence (hint: look for street and building footprints on areas that are now in the Delta Park region).
6. What happened when Vanport City was destroyed in the 1948 flood? Where did all the residents go, especially the African-American residents? Do some research on housing issues in the late 1940s (see the bibliography for resources).

### ***Curricula:***

Visit the TAHPDX: Teaching American History <Curriculum> webpage to locate some lesson plans that look at Vanport (including slideshows and dramatic vignettes). Google “TAHPDX” to get to the homepage.

### ***Bibliography and Additional Resources:***

Maben, Manly. 1987. *Vanport*. Portland, OR: Oregon Historical Society.

Sanders, Richard. 1991. *Glimpses from the Past: Fifty Years of Building a Better Community*. Portland, OR: The Housing Authority of Portland.

McElderry, Stuart. “Vanport Conspiracy Rumors and Social Relations in Portland, 1940-1950.” *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 99, pp. 134-163.

McElderry, Stuart. Summer, 2001. “Building a West Coast Ghetto: African-American Housing in Portland, 1910-1960.” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, Vol. 92. pp. 137-144.

Center for Columbia River History. *Kaiserville: "A Muddy Miracle."* Download at <http://www.ccrh.org/comm/slough/vpconstruc.htm>. Also contains additional links to Vanport memorabilia.

Kilbourne, Charlotte and Margaret Lantis, “Elements of Tenant Instability in a War Housing Project.” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 11(1), pg. 60.

Document: *Resident Handbook: Vanport* (Housing Authority of Portland). Download a transcription at <http://www.ccrh.org/comm/slough/primary/rules.htm>.

Document: *City Club Report on the Negro in Portland (1945-1957)*. Download a transcription at <http://www.ccrh.org/comm/slough/primary/progressrpt.htm>.