

Canby's Southern Pacific Railroad Depot

In 1870, the arrival of the Oregon and California Railroad (O&C) and the filing of a townsite plat launched the transformation of Baker Prairie, a dispersed collection of farms, into the rural community of Canby.¹ Shortly thereafter, at the intersection of North Grant and First Avenue, the O&C constructed a depot described by one resident as “a small 8x12 house.”² For over a century the Depot site served as the focal point of the community. Canby's first business, Knight Mercantile set up shop directly across the street in 1871. Canby's first financial institution, Canby Bank & Trust, was constructed in 1906 on the lot diagonally opposite the Depot.³

Twenty years after its construction, the town's expansion in terms of businesses, people, and freight rendered the first Depot inadequate. Moreover, Southern Pacific's 1887 acquisition of O&C and subsequent extension of the line provided the community with a direct connection to markets in California and beyond.⁴ Residents repeatedly communicated with Southern Pacific (SP) about the “need for better depot facilities,” citing the volume of goods shipped to and from the community and arguing that Canby was “the natural shipping point for the southern part of our county.”⁵ One resident described the existing facility as “not much better than a chicken coop.”⁶ In the fall of 1891, a wind storm toppled the structure, forcing SP to build a replacement.⁷ By January 1892 Canby residents could brag about the new facility, noting that it was “the best one between Salem and Portland, which shows that the railway recognizes the place as one of future importance.”⁸

¹ *Canby Herald*, “1870 Townsite Mapped on \$26 Per Acre Land,” May 9, 1968. “Canby's Historic Railroad Depot,” Box 2001.4.450, Weston Collection, Canby Depot Museum.

² *Oregon City Enterprise*, “Clackamas County,” November 6, 1891.

³ *Canby Herald*, “Depot closure ends over a century of use,” August 4, 1976. Mildred Baker Burcham, “Our Knight Heritage,” 1976, Knight File, General Collection, Canby Depot Museum. Intensive Level Survey, Canby Bank & Trust, Oregon Historic Sites Database, 2014.

⁴ *Oregon City Enterprise*, “Clackamas County,” November 6, 1891. Bill Yenne, *The History of the Southern Pacific* (New York City, NY, Smithmark Publishers, Inc., 1994), 59.

⁵ *Oregon City Enterprise*, “County News Items,” April 24, 1891.

⁶ *Oregon City Enterprise*, “County News Items,” August 7, 1890.

⁷ *Oregon City Enterprise*, “Clackamas County,” November 6, 1891. Portland and Salem newspapers during that period contain no mention of a damaging windstorm. It is possible that the 20-year-old depot could not withstand a moderate windstorm or that human intervention played a role in its collapse.

⁸ *Oregon City Enterprise*, “Clackamas County,” January 29, 1892.

Canby continued to grow in the decades before and after the turn of the century and Southern Pacific responded on multiple occasions to the need to update or enlarge the facility. The most significant occurred in 1911 when approximately twenty feet was added to the warehouse portion of the Depot.⁹ Residents remarked on how the addition made it “possible to handle both freight and passenger traffic in a satisfactory manner.”¹⁰ In addition to providing space for people and goods, the Depot housed enterprises such as Western Union and Railway Express and remained in operation until 1976.¹¹

The Depot’s closure and SP’s subsequent offer in 1978 to donate it to the community prompted Mayor Robert Rapp to appoint an advisory committee. Concurrently, the city council passed Resolution CCII on October 25, 1978, declaring the Depot a historic site. SP’s proposal included the stipulation that the Depot be removed from their property in a timely manner by a professional moving company. In August of the following year the city council approved a mutual aid agreement with the county whereby the county agreed to pursue federal funding and both entities agreed to work together to obtain and relocate the Depot.¹²

For three-years, city staff worked with local supporters to identify a new location for the Depot. Several privately owned locations were considered and rejected due to cost. The city, for

⁹ *Oregon City Enterprise*, “Local Briefs,” February 24, 1911. Intensive Level Survey, Canby Railroad Depot, Oregon Historic Sites Database, August 1, 2016. The survey notes an 1896 addition/upgrade. Photograph RR-091, Canby Depot Museum Photograph Collection. The caption reads “Canby Depot before warehouse addition in 1907.” Herman Bergman, undated memo, Box 2001.4.450, Weston Collection, Canby Depot Museum. Bergman, who worked on the rehabilitation and remodel of the Depot after its move to its current location, wrote that “Al Moore, and Herman Bergman, volunteers, surmised the station building had had at least five addition alterations.” They recognized that “some floor joists were quite a bit older in some sections of the building.” In his research notes, John Nieland, an active member of the Canby Historical Society at its founding and during the effort to save the Depot, notes a remodel/addition in 1907 and 1911. His research notebooks are available through his daughter Nora Clark, President of the Canby Historical Society.

¹⁰ *Oregon City Enterprise*, “Correspondence: Canby,” March 24, 1911.

¹¹ *Canby Herald*, “Depot closure ends over a century of use,” August 4, 1976. *Canby Herald*, “Volunteers make depot a museum,” October 3, 1984.

¹² George Kraus, Public Relations Manager, Southern Pacific Transportation Company, to Mayor Robert E. Rapp, September 6, 1978, Box 2001.5.450, Weston Collection, Canby Depot Museum. City of Canby, City Council Resolution CCLII, October 25, 1978. Myra Weston, “Review of the Save the Depot Project:1978-1983,” undated, Box 2001.5.450, Weston Collection, Canby Depot Museum. Jeff Durham, “Depot agreement reached with County,” *Canby Herald*, August 22, 1979.

various reasons, rejected potential state or county owned sites, including a small lot adjacent to the Clackamas County Fairgrounds, a lot west of North Elm adjacent to the highway, and a site west of Pine Street between the railroad tracks and the highway. Facing a deadline in terms of meeting the requirements of a federal grant, on May 15, 1981, the city planner recommended that the city end its participation in the mutual aid agreement.¹³

In response, residents interested in saving a significant part of their community's history took action. Canby's last railroad agent, Herman Bergman, civic activist Myra Weston, and others took the lead as part of the Save the Depot Committee (SDC). The organization commenced a multi-year fund-raising effort, which resulted in \$22,000 in contributions from individuals and businesses. They applied for and received multiple grants and obtained in-kind contributions from a dedicated cadre of skilled Canby residents.¹⁴

The Committee faced many challenges. At the top of the list was procuring a location for the Depot. In 1981, at the recommendation of former mayor Robert Rapp, then a member of the SDC, the organization lobbied for Wait Park as the Depot's new home. That effort, lauded by some, generated opposition from a contingent of civic leaders who gathered almost 300 signatures on a petition asking the city council to reject that option. As a last resort, the SDC, with the concurrence of the city, settled on the site adjacent to the fairgrounds. In 1984, the city deeded it to the Canby Historical Society.¹⁵

¹³ Myra Weston, "Review of the Save the Depot Project:1978-1983," undated, Box 2001.5.450, Weston Collection, Canby Depot Museum. City of Canby Staff Report prepared by City Planner Stephan A. Lashbrook for the Mayor and Council, July 12, 1979, Box 2001.5.450, Weston Collection, Canby Depot Museum. *Oregonian*, "Depot relocation plans remain in state of flux," August 12, 1979. Memo from City Planner Stephan A. Lashbrook to the Canby Planning Commission, November 21, 1979, Box 2001.5.450, Weston Collection, Canby Depot Museum.

¹⁴ Myra Weston to Mayor Swayze and the Canby City Council, October 28, 1981, Box 2001.5.450, Weston Collection, Canby Depot Museum. Herman Bergman to Friends, September 1984, Box 2001.5.450, Weston Collection, Canby Depot Museum. *Canby Herald*, "Volunteers make depot a museum," October 3, 1984.

¹⁵ Myra Weston, "Review of the Save the Depot Project:1978-1983," undated, Box 2001.5.450, Weston Collection, Canby Depot Museum. *Canby Herald*, "Petitioners protest proposal to move depot to Wait Park," March 3, 1982. R. Douglas Zenor, Canby City Administrator, to Myra Weston, Canby Historical Society Secretary, January 9, 1984, Box 2001.5.450, Weston Collection, Canby Depot Museum. The deed, recorded on March 27, 1984 by Juanita Orr, County Clerk, is on file at the Depot Museum.

Relocation was the next hurdle. The Northeast Fourth location was too small to accommodate the Depot so multiple additions to the warehouse had to be removed prior to transport. The SDC hired a Mount Angel firm, Berg and Sons to do both tasks. By August 3, 1983 Berg had completed the removal and the Depot was ready to be towed to its new location. To fit it the narrow site, the Depot was situated perpendicular to the railroad tracks on a new concrete foundation.¹⁶

Under the leadership of Al Moore the task of rehabilitating the deteriorating structure and repurposing it to fit its new role as a museum began. Working with a crew of local volunteers, Moore supervised installation of a new roof, replacement of rotten siding, restoration of windows and doors, rebuilding the loading ramp, painting, and other exterior tasks. Interior work included the addition of a bathroom, installation of display cases and storage cabinets, and lowering the warehouse floor to make it level with the office floor.¹⁷

Upon completion, the Canby Depot Museum was formally introduced to the community at a grand opening on October 6, 1984. Herman Bergman, President of the Canby Historical Society, served as the master of ceremonies. Former Canby mayor Archie S. Markee, station agent from 1923 to 1958, was the guest of honor. A ribbon cutting marked the opening of the community's first history museum.¹⁸

Historic Integrity

Built in 1891-2 as a Standard Southern Pacific Design #11 Combination Depot, the Canby Depot is a rectangular structure with a wood frame and post and beam floor structure. It features a side gable and wide overhanging eaves and shaped diagonal braces. The building is clad in horizontal board siding composed of cedar. Exterior trim boards are placed over the siding at vertical and horizontal angles. The prominent windows of the Depot are 12 over 4 double hung sash windows. The original windows were replaced in 2018 with vinyl windows, which present the same look as the original. The original wood window frames remain and one

¹⁶ *Canby Herald*, "Depot to be moved," August 3, 1983. Intensive Level Survey, Canby Railroad Depot, Oregon Historic Sites Database, August 1, 2016.

¹⁷ *Canby Herald*, "Renovations of depot exterior begins," July 18, 1984. *Canby Herald*, "Volunteers make depot a museum," October 3, 1984.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

of the original windows is on display in the museum. The cedar shake roof was replaced with composite shingles during the 1983-84 restoration and replaced again in 2019. The removal of the warehouse addition returned the building to its pre-1911 footprint. Although the perpendicular siting of the Depot vis-à-vis the railroad track is a significant alteration, the overall integrity of the structure could be characterized as adequate.¹⁹

Historic Significance

Canby's Southern Pacific Railroad Depot is eligible for listing on the Canby Historic Landmark Register for its association with the early development of Canby as a shipping and distribution center on the SP's mainline that linked Portland to California. The railroad brought greater economic flexibility, opened markets for shipping local crops and goods, and increased the number of permanent residents in the city. In City Council Resolution CCLII, Myra Weston described the Depot as "the heart of the city which has grown up around it. Passengers for Portland, San Francisco, and points between and beyond bought tickets and boarded trains at the depot. Incoming and outgoing mail was received and dispatched from there for Canby's and rural post offices in this vicinity. Innumerable tons of products of the area's productive soils were shipped out of Canby and merchandise was received there for firms in the area until the motor vehicle superseded the steam, and later the diesel, train." For almost nine decades the Depot was the focal point of the community's commercial core and a foundational element of its agricultural-based economy.²⁰

Southern Pacific Railroad was vital to the economic development of an area that extends west from Louisiana to California and north to Oregon. The firm constructed nine Standard #11 Combination Depots in Oregon. As one of three remaining, Canby's Depot is an architecturally significant structure.²¹

¹⁹ Henry E. Bender Jr., *Southern Pacific Lines Standard-Design Depots*, (Wilton, California: Signature Press, 2013), 97. Intensive Level Survey, Canby Railroad Depot, Oregon Historic Sites Database, August 1, 2016. *Canby Herald*, "Renovations of depot exterior begins," July 18, 1984

²⁰ City of Canby, City Council Resolution CCLII, October 25, 1978.

²¹ Henry E. Bender Jr., *Southern Pacific Lines Standard-Design Depots*, (Wilton, California: Signature Press, 2013), 99.

The Depot's association with a long list of civic leaders and activists who contributed in multiple ways to Canby's development contributes to its significance. Myra Weston, who served as secretary and president of the SDC, co-owned the *Canby Herald* with her husband William from 1947 to 1972. Weston served as the reporter and editor. She co-founded the city's Business and Professional Women's Club. As a member, Weston was instrumental in the campaign that resulted in the election of Bertha Dedman as the city's first woman mayor. Weston was a charter member of the Canby Historical Society. In 1966 she spearheaded the effort to pass an initiative to increase the city's tax base from \$14,000 to \$70,000. The ballot measure passed by a vote of 420 to 324. She was elected to the position of City Treasurer and served in that role for multiple years. After her retirement, Weston led the Chamber of Commerce as its Executive Director. Not only was she a driving force behind the effort to save the Depot, she put that same expertise and energy into the community pool campaign and the funding and organizing of Canby's 100th anniversary commemoration. Most importantly, her determination to record and preserve Canby's history has created an invaluable record of the community's past, which is accessible at the Depot Museum.²²

The Depot's association with Herman Bergman, station agent from 1958 to 1976, adds to its historic significance. Bergman was a tireless advocate for saving the structure and repurposing it as a museum. After the relocation was complete, he served for two decades as the Museum Director and is responsible for many of the additions to the document archive and the artifact collection, including the acquisition of the caboose in August 1989. The collection he amassed is the heart of the museum and an irreplaceable record of the community's history.²³

Last, the Depot's historic significance is embedded in its connection to two families that shaped Canby's pre-1900 development: the Lees and the Knights. Philander Lee sold 111 acres of his Donation Land Claim to the O&C. Lee insisted on including a provision in the sales agreement that required the firm to build a depot, a decision that proved critical to the emergence of a small town in what had been a farming area devoid of commercial structures.

²² *The Decades of History 1906-2006: A Unique Look at the Last Century in Canby, Oregon and the World, Told by the Reporters of the Canby Herald*, compiled and edited by Steve St. Amand for the *Canby Herald*, 2007, 43. *Woodburn Independent*, "Obituaries," October 14, 2000.

²³ *Canby Herald*, "Herman Bergman: A Living Memorial," December 10, 2005. *Canby Herald*, photograph caption, August 16, 1989.

By 1892, when the second Depot replaced the first, Canby had a thriving main street and a growing population; one year later the city incorporated.²⁴

In 1868, Joseph Knight purchased the Lucius Seely and Wesley Joslyn Donation Land Claims, moving his large extended family from Butteville to Canby. In 1870, he sold a small portion to the O&C. After the completion of the rail line through Canby, Knight's adult sons began transforming the community. William and George constructed Knight Mercantile. Charles built a pharmacy on the West side of what is now Grant Street. Joseph erected a sawmill on the Molalla River; George built a grist mill; Adam opened a blacksmith shop. The Knights constructed homes, a hotel, a school house, and multiple commercial structures. William Knight became civically and politically active. He was instrumental in the city's 1893 incorporation. The first city council meeting took place on the second floor of the Knight Building, with Knight serving as city recorder and Heman, Philander Lee's son, as mayor.²⁵

²⁴ O&C & Lee sales agreement, May 21, 1870, Box 2001.5.450, Weston Collection, Canby Depot Museum.

It reads: *"In consideration of conveyance of land and One Dollar the Co. agrees to put in two crossings at suitable points on the premises of said Lee, and Cattle Guards at division fences; and it is further agreed that the said Lee shall have the right to remove all trees and shrubbery included in the right-of-way in the garden orchard, and except to such extent as will be necessary for constructing and operating the Railroad. Said Company does agree to construct a Depot upon said Land—the Main track of the road, and to begin not farther to the South West than the frog at Station 182, and the Depot to be not be further to the South West that 650 feet from Station 182 aforesaid. Said Depot to be of such character as is suitable for the business to be done at said point."*

²⁵ Mildred Baker Burcham, "Our Knight Heritage," 1976, Knight File, General Collection, Canby Depot Museum. Ron Knight and Kate Sterry, "Knight Family History," Knight File, General Collection, Canby Depot Museum.