

OREGON CITY Historic Context Statement



Rivercrest Neighborhood

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Oregon City: Historic Review Program, Historic Survey & Update Project
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Note that corrections to information on any property surveyed for this report may be made by contacting Christina Robertson-Gardiner at (503) 722-3789 or crobertson@orcify.org.

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OREGON CITY

Historic Context Statement

RIVERCREST HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT

Purpose

One of the overriding goals of the larger Oregon City survey was to identify neighborhoods with the potential to be listed as local (or state or national) historic districts. In other words, we sought to identify geographic areas united by historic or architectural themes that also retained sufficient integrity to be considered historic districts. Because there was a particular emphasis on mid-century modern resources in this project, there was also interest in any mid-century neighborhoods that might qualify as a district. There was also a stated interest on the part of Oregon City to learn more about its mid-century resources which had not, to date, been the subject of survey activities in the city. The Rivercrest neighborhood, within which two subdivisions were surveyed for this project, was chosen as the subject for a brief context statement to learn more about Oregon City at mid-century, and to explore the potential for this neighborhood to be considered for listing in the future.

Methodology

Through consultation with the City, the Rivercrest neighborhood was chosen as a cohesive, mid-century neighborhood that could potentially qualify for listing as a local historic district. A context was developed to help record the neighborhood's history and identify its key historic resources. Research for the Rivercrest Context Statement took place through a focused reconnaissance survey and subsequent site visits in March and April of 2011. Research materials including city directories, aerial photos and pictorial reviews were reviewed at the Clackamas County Family History Society, located in the Museum of the Oregon Territory. Research material was also found in the newspaper archives located at the Oregon City public library, in histories prepared for Oregon City, and in deeds and records gathered from the Records Management office of the Clerk of Clackamas County. Special thanks go to Linda Lord, a local neighborhood historian who was interviewed on the development history of the Rivercrest neighborhood and who provided valuable historic records regarding Pioneer Trust and the Rivercrest Development Company.

Background

Mid-century modern neighborhoods in Oregon City, as in other west coast cities, have a direct relationship to what occurred in the larger Portland metropolitan region during World War II. Industrial and military expansion in the build-up to World War II and during the war itself was unprecedented. Major shipbuilding contracts were let by the US Maritime Commission, the Defense Plant Corporation made large investments in aluminum processing plants, and major military installations were constructed in the Portland region. As expressed by historian Gerald

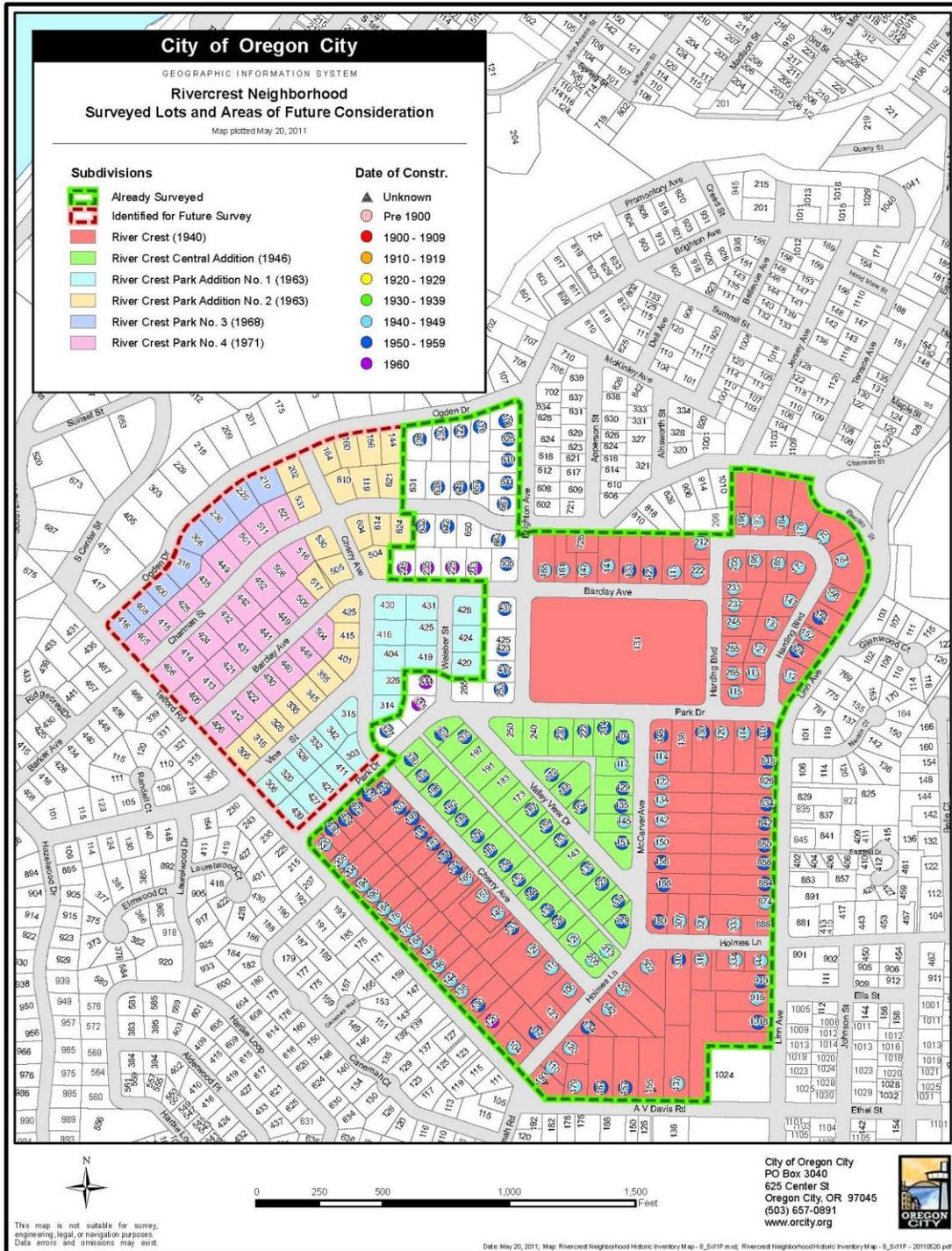


Figure 1 - Rivercrest Neighborhood Surveyed Lots and Areas of Future Consideration

Nash, “Ships, aluminum, and power were the three main ingredients that transformed Oregon’s economy during wartime, diversifying its hitherto largely agricultural and natural resource economy.”¹

Portland gained 160,000 in population during the war. Collectively Troutdale, where Alcoa developed a new plant, Oregon City, Vanport and Vancouver gained 100,000 workers. Vanport, one of industrialist Henry J. Kaiser’s largest facilities, transformed from vacant fields in 1940 to a city with 10,000 housing units and a population of 40,000 in three years.² Corvallis saw an 93% increase in population during the war, due to the Camp Adair military installation, which was Oregon’s second largest city in the war years.

These boom times put an unprecedented strain on housing that was already in short supply as a result the lack of building during the Great Depression. Some public and private housing was constructed during the war to meet this demand, but much of it was temporary.³ During the war materials and labor were reserved for the war effort, as little building occurred that was not directly related to defense. As a result, there was a long standing need for housing after the war and renewal of communities. In addition to returning servicemen (and women) who wanted to settle down and start families, many who were stationed in west coast cities either stayed or returned to places like Portland, Seattle and the Bay Area after the war. This placed further strain on housing and communities.

Among the areas in Oregon City that were annexed and developed to meet this demand were the Rivercrest Additions, particularly the early additions profiled here, which were developed on land that had been annexed to the city in 1940. The Hedges Addition area and Lawton Heights were annexed to the city directly after the war, in 1946. In this survey approximately 750 mid-century residential homes were recorded. While this represents a substantial number of properties, it does not fully represent the development that occurred at this time. Further work needs to be undertaken to fully document this period in Oregon City’s history.

The Rivercrest Neighborhood

The Rivercrest neighborhood is a prime example of a cohesive mid-century residential development. The areas of the Rivercrest neighborhood that were surveyed include the River Crest Addition to Oregon City (1940) and the River Crest Central Addition (1946), both pictured below. The River Crest addition is bounded by Linn Ave to the east, Holmes Lane and Telford Road to the south, Park Drive and Brighton Avenue to the west and Charman Street to the north. The central addition, added in 1946, fit into a triangular section at the center of the River Crest

¹ Nash, 1985:75.

² Nash, 1985:76. Vanport was later destroyed by floods.

³ Note that Clackamas Heights, Oregon’s oldest public housing project dating from the war years (1942) is scheduled for demolition.

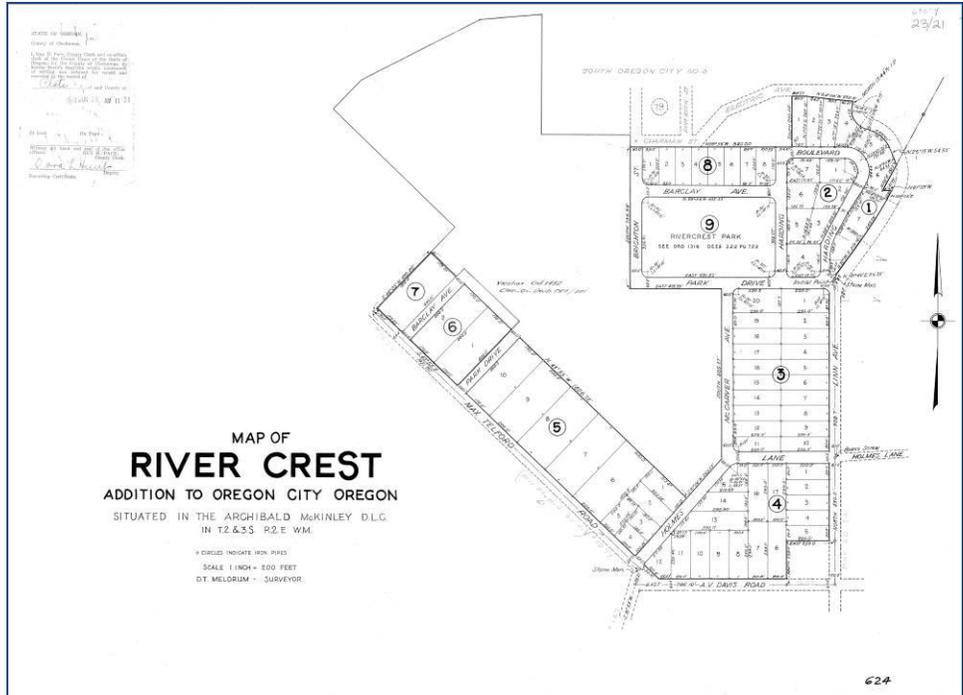


Figure 2 - River Crest Addition, 1940

addition. It is bounded by McCarver Avenue on the east, Cherry Avenue to the south and Park Drive to the northwest. The lots in these two plats were sold and developed individually. While the original River Crest addition included lots as large as 200 x 400 square feet, the 1946 addition added more modest lots. The majority were 80 x 150 square feet. In the early development, some of Rivercrest’s largest lots were subdivided. The resulting development includes a few lots that are still as deep as 260 square feet, but most are between 150 and 250 feet deep. The period of significance is defined as 1940 to 1960, when the majority of the homes in this neighborhood were built.



The neighborhood was designed so that homes clustered around a six-acre wooded park block that was left in its natural state until it was donated to the city pre-1950 and then landscaped. The park now includes tennis and basketball courts, picnic shelters and a spray park. Oregon City’s website refers to the park as “one of the most beautiful and heavily used park in Oregon City.”⁴

The neighborhood is characterized by a number of urban design features. Roads are wide, generally include room for on-street parking and are defined by rolled curbs in some locations. The neighborhood does not have sidewalks. Mature trees, including Douglas Firs that date from before the development, grace many of the earliest yards, and some landscaping features, including stone walls and

Figure 3 - River Crest Central Addition, 1946

⁴ “Rivercrest Park,” <http://www.orcity.org/parksandrecreation/rivercrest-park>.

stone rings surrounding trees, are found in the park and on the surrounding lots. Housing types are consistent with other mid-century neighborhoods in Oregon. As most homes were built in the 1940s and 1950s, they include primarily Minimal Traditional and Ranch houses, with a small number of World War II-Era Cottages and some earlier styles as well, including bungalows and Colonial Revival homes. There are also a very small number of split-level Ranch houses. Since 1960, the neighborhood has absorbed four different subdivisions. These later additions to the north of the original neighborhood include houses built beginning in the 1960s. This survey examined historic resources built before 1961 and did not, therefore, include the subdivisions to the north. However, these resources may be worthy of examination in future city surveys.



Figure 4 -This aerial of the wooded Rivercrest neighborhood was published in the 1950 Clackamas County Pictorial Review

History

The Rivercrest neighborhood, sometimes spelled “River Crest,” sits atop the highest of Oregon City’s three bluffs. The nearby falls drew the first white settlers to this spot along the Willamette River in the 1830s, and Oregon City, the first incorporated city west of the Rockies, has been recognized as the terminus of the Oregon Trail. The third and highest bluff of the city was the last to be developed, but also one of the sites of earliest habitation. The site was known to Native Americans for many thousands of years. A well-worn footpath from the bluffs down to the waterfalls is now known as Linn Avenue, which forms the eastern boundary of the Rivercrest neighborhood. Before it was developed, the site was wooded and close to the border of pasture lands. Oregon City, though an early industrial leader, did not grow at the same pace as Portland or other urban hubs and its southern lands were primarily populated by farms before the 1940s.

The 1940 and 1946 Rivercrest plats were described in a publication produced for Clackamas County in 1950. The developers defined the neighborhood as follows:

“River Crest addition of Oregon City, Oregon consists of 68 acres situated on the heights above and southwest of the city, is part of the original Archibald McKinley donation land claim. It was purchased for development in 1939. Sixty-eight acres was platted in 1940 making 120 building lots with a 6 ½ acre park donated to the city. 60 ft. streets were graded and graveled to 30 ft. Lots are for residential purposes only except a few business lots on Holmes Lane. There are restrictions as to minimum size and set back lines. All city services and utilities are available. This beautifully wooded and scenic tract lies to the west of Linn Ave., bordered on the south by A. V. Davis road and the Max Telford road on southwest. The unplatted area extends northwest to the crest of the bluff and includes over 1200 ft. of bluff property. It is two miles from Main St. to the entrance at Park Drive via Linn Ave. The Mt. Pleasant school is less than one-quarter mile away. Beautiful views of snowcapped mountains, valleys and hills are to be had from many points in the addition. In April 1946, 46 lots were platted in the central part of the addition south of Holmes Lane. Lots there are 80 ft. wide and 150 ft. deep. Over 23 acres of unplatted land have been left for future development.”⁵

As a neighborhood, Rivercrest developed in two distinct phases. In 1940, the Rivercrest Development Company envisioned a middle class to high-end neighborhood that incorporated many of the large trees that defined the wooded bluff. Winding roads surrounded a naturally maintained park and the land was divided into deep lots with rolled curbs and naturalistic landscaping. Variations in topography were integrated into the neighborhood with retaining walls and small landscaped medians. This emphasis on landscape design in suburbs outside city centers had been common since the City Beautiful Movement of the late 19th Century. In the early 20th century, City Beautiful principles and the growth of the city planning field made for well-designed, cohesive neighborhoods.

Rivercrest’s developers controlled the look and feel of the neighborhood with detailed deed restrictions. They were following well-established national practices for controlling the look and feel of a neighborhood to protect its property values and to protect against industrial or other non-residential uses. The Rivercrest regulations limited building height to two and a half stories, limited garages to two cars, and defined setbacks as no less than 20 feet. Homes on some lots were to exceed \$3,500 and others were to exceed \$2,000 in construction cost. Members of the development company also reserved the right to review and approve or deny every building plan.

Rivercrest was platted and built during an era of great change in the housing market. The Great Depression had led to record foreclosures in the early 1930s, which brought on a re-examination of housing and lending practices. In 1934, the Federal Housing Administration was founded to broaden the possibilities of home ownership by offering federal insurance for private loans. As World War II ended, new federal programs were designed to help developers provide new housing opportunities and to help returning servicemen purchase homes. These new federal programs enforced regulations that began to shape the style, size and availability of homes and neighborhoods in the early 1940s, and Rivercrest adheres to these regulations, which emphasized green space, protective deed restrictions, safety and careful planning of streets and lots.

⁵ Production Surveys, Inc. Clackamas County Pictorial Review Mid-Century Edition (Oregon City: 1950), 137.

In Rivercrest, the idyllic neighborhood envisioned by the Rivercrest Development Company evolved slowly. While homes near the park were built as early as 1940, many others were not built until the later 1940s and the 1950s. In 1946, the development was bought by H. Hale Yeaple of Pioneer Trust who saw the coming need for more modest housing and divided the southwest section of the neighborhood into smaller lots, which became attractive to buyers at the end of the war. These smaller lots incorporate fewer trees and are not as elaborately landscaped, though a series of non-gridded streets have led to corner gardens and other attractive amenities. These two phases of development led to subtle differences in neighborhood design, but architectural style and street layout unite the neighborhood.

Post-War Development

Like much of the Pacific Northwest after the war, Clackamas County itself experienced a mid-century population boom, growing from 57,130 people in 1940 to 86,574 by 1950, an increase of more than fifty percent. Oregon City was the county seat. Its location near waterfalls had led to early industrial success. By 1950, local boosters were claiming that Oregon City was also booming as a retail center even as its primary employers continued to be industrial. A pictorial review of the county claimed that, "Five large manufacturing plants employ the bulk of Oregon City's labor force."⁶ Those five plants included Publishers Paper Company, the Crown Zellerbach Mill and the Oregon Woolen Mills, the Globe Union Battery Company, and the J. M. Smucker Company. After the war, the timber industry also recovered, as noted by Oregon City historian Michelle Dennis:

"World War II brought an end to the Great Depression and ushered in a fully modern period. Although growth and development was slowed during the war, the period following the war was one of substantial expansion in Oregon City, as it was in most communities around the country.

The timber and wood industry recovered from the Great Depression slump and was restored to its position as the state's leading industry with the building boom that followed the war. New residential neighborhoods expanded eastward to the third terrace above the river as newfound prosperity allowed many to buy their own homes. Schools followed and churches that had been located downtown for years migrated to the bluff as well."⁷

This expansion brought great benefit to the building industries. "Several factors -- the lack of new housing, continued population growth, and six million returning veterans eager to start families -- combined to produce the largest building boom in the Nation's history, almost all of it concentrated in the suburbs."⁸ In the mid-century, realtors were noting a move away from city centers and onto larger semi-rural lots. This trend was responsible for the development of numerous subdivisions around the country, but was also noted by professionals in Oregon City, who defined the primary trends for the mid-century development as: "the movement of populations from large crowded urban areas of adjoining counties to semi-rural and acreage tracts and the demand of real estate purchasers for increasingly larger home lots."⁹

⁶ *Clackamas County Pictorial Review Mid-Century Edition*, 1950:39.

⁷ Dennis, <http://www.orcity.org/planning/brief-history-oregon-city>.

⁸ Ames, 2002.

⁹ *Clackamas County Pictorial Review Mid-Century Edition* (Oregon City, 1950:131).

The housing boom was driven not only by the number of returning veterans eager to start families, but also by the fact that very little housing had been developed during the Depression and during the war years. “After 16 years of depression and war shortages,” claimed the Pictorial Review, “an unprecedented building boom hit Clackamas County beginning in 1946. Public, industrial and residential construction figures reached new heights each succeeding year.”¹⁰ This put the early Rivercrest neighborhood at the very center of an Oregon City expansion in the 1940s and 50s, though the neighborhood expanded and continued to grow throughout the last half of the 20th century.



Figure 5 - Judge Holman house at the entry of the Rivercrest subdivision

The Rivercrest neighborhood developed in a time when cars were integrated into the lives of most homeowners. When the earliest homes were built in the northern section of the neighborhood, garages were placed on the lots, but could still be found detached or set back toward the rear of the lot. By the 1950s, garages were regularly integrated into Ranch style homes, the predominate mid-century style in Oregon City and much of the west. As the design of homes grew more expansive, with a pronounced horizontal emphasis in windows and treatments, the garage became a more integrated feature. In Rivercrest, most if not all homes have either detached or attached garages or carports.

As a neighborhood, Rivercrest is defined by a graceful entrance from Linn Avenue where a Rivercrest sign and a heavily ornamented historic home take up a large lot on Park Drive. This house originally belonged to Judge Holman in the 1940s and has been expanded multiple times since then. Similar to other larger homes built in the 1940s, it includes multiple stories and a very large yard.

Newer homes were built south of Park Drive and further from the park. As shown below, these homes are more modest and built on smaller lots, yet still show many of the hallmarks of mid-century development. The rolled curbs are absent, but these lots are also facing wide streets without sidewalks and with generous setbacks.

¹⁰ *Clackamas County Pictorial Review Mid-Century Edition* (Oregon City, 1950:131).



Figure 6 – Rivercrest’s smaller lots became popular directly after World War II

Current Condition

The Rivercrest neighborhood retains much of the charm for which it has always been known. Homes and yards are well maintained, as is the park that is central to the neighborhood and the site of many local gatherings. However, as in many mid-century neighborhoods, historic materials have been replaced and alterations to windows and siding have begun to erode the historic integrity of the neighborhood.

The current survey reviewed 145 properties in Rivercrest built before 1961. Seventy-eight were built between 1940 and 1949 and 67 were built between 1950 and 1959. Eighty of these properties were noted as having lost too much integrity to be considered for local listing or for designation as a contributing property to a potential historic district. Their windows had been replaced with vinyl windows, the siding had been replaced, or the form of the building had been changed by alterations and/or additions.

After 1960, four subdivisions were added to the Rivercrest neighborhood. These lots, north and west of the original subdivisions, include excellent examples of mid-century homes but were outside the scope of this survey. It is recommended that these later resources be considered for future research.

OREGON CITY'S MID-CENTURY RESIDENTIAL STYLES

In surveying Oregon City's mid-century resources, the project team identified a number of key styles. The Minimal Traditional house, the World War II-era cottage and two primary variations on the Ranch house, referred to here as "Early Ranch" and "Ranch" styles, were found to be the most common. Some mid-century residences had been greatly altered and are now more accurately referred to as "vernacular," as their primary character defining features have been lost or altered.

Mid-century resources are referred to as those that date from just before World War II, during the war, and the post-war period. By the 1940s Revival styles, including the small Tudor Revival cottage and the bungalow were falling out of favor. The Depression had led to stylistic changes that included a reliance on fewer materials; simpler features, such as a smaller porches; narrow or non-existent eaves; and simpler plans and building forms. Varied exterior materials sometimes provide visual interest on these small, simple buildings. Standard plans for the "Basic" or Minimal house were responsive to the new economic realities associated with the Great Depression. As building resumed in the post-war era, the new homes retained these practical, efficient qualities, but a new aesthetic emerged. Early Ranch homes, built in the immediate post-war era, reflected the lingering effects of the war years with material shortages and the fact that many new families were just starting out after the war. As time went on, increasing prosperity led to the long, low Ranch houses that we associate with the post-war era today.

In the post-war era, federally sponsored highway projects and the prevalence of car ownership enabled developers to move further from the city center, where land was cheap and easy to develop. The streetcar suburb pattern of development, with narrow, deep lots in first ring suburbs, was replaced by subdivisions with wide, shallow lots. Homes built here nearly filled the lots from side to side, and were set relatively close to the front lot line, allowing for generous rear yards for family recreation and privacy. The Ranch house that typified these developments is generally one story in height with shallow pitched hip or gable roofs and deep eaves, to give them a "ground-hugging" appearance. The strong horizontal lines of these homes are often emphasized with horizontal board cladding and windows with a horizontal emphasis, typically placed high under the eaves, reiterating the overall lines of the houses.

A brief discussion of war-time and post-war architectural styles found in Oregon City follows.



***World War II-era Styles:
The World War II-era Cottage***

The World War II-era cottage is a compact building with a nearly square floor plan reflecting the Basic or Minimal house plan type.

Character Defining Features

A World War II-era cottage often has a shallow-sloped hip roof, no eaves, and a recessed entry. It can display a variety of window types, but steel casement or double-hung wood-frame windows with horizontally-oriented lights are often seen. Window type is one of the most unique features of many World War II era cottages. These homes may be found with wrapped corner windows on the primary façade, with round or octagonal windows near the entry, and with large square focal windows. Large chimneys are also common.





***World War II-era Styles:
The Minimal Traditional House***

The Basic or Minimal house refers to a plan type that came out of studies sponsored by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and controlled through the FHA regulations of the 1930s. It refers to a plan type(s) that minimizes circulation space and maximizes multi-use spaces, such as kitchen-dining or dining-living spaces in the interest of economic efficiency.



Character Defining Features

Typical characteristics of the Minimal Traditional house include a gable or hip roof, narrow or non-existent eaves, a square or slightly rectangular plan, and 'traditional' windows such as paired or single double-hung windows with multiple lights and shutters, although this era also saw emergence of the picture window.



Visual interest is often provided by cladding materials, such as clapboard with brick accents or shingle siding. Minimal Traditional homes were generally built without porches but often include small concrete stoops covered by gables, as seen in the Oregon City examples to the left. Minimal traditional houses are generally one story in height.



***Post World War II Styles:
The Early Ranch House***

The Ranch house was popular throughout the United States and assumed many forms and style variations, although the most common Ranch houses in Oregon City are the Early Ranch and the well-known Ranch style house. The Early Ranch house has a simple rectangular footprint and does not display the variations seen in the later Ranch house.



Character defining features

The Ranch house has an open floor plan in the public areas, where the dining and living rooms or kitchen and dining rooms may be combined. The kitchen is typically a small galley kitchen, often with a “pass-through” to the dining area. Bedrooms are often aligned along a hallway, rather than centered on a small vestibule, as in World War II-era houses. This was the era in which the family room made an appearance as well. The single car garage or a carport was typically integrated with the house, but could be separated from it by a breezeway.





***Post World War II Styles:
The Ranch House***

The origins of the Ranch house lie in its rustic, southern California and American southwest roots. But the Ranch house of post-war America could take many forms. Form types include L-shaped houses, U-shaped houses, houses arranged around a courtyard, split-level houses, which are one-and-two-stories, and split-entry houses, which are two stories. There are Traditional Ranch houses, which display rustic details, and Contemporary Ranch houses, which have clean, modern lines. Character Ranch houses take on the architectural details of other styles, such as Colonial Revival. The long, low rambling Ranch is often referred to as a Rambler. All share a long, low profile and an overall horizontal aspect.

*



Character Defining Features

The primary feature that distinguishes the Ranch house from World War II-era home is its horizontal aspect. After cars replaced streetcars as the primary mode of transportation, developers were able to move further from the city center, where land was cheap and easy to develop. Small city lots with compact houses were replaced by larger homes with wide facades that extended from side lot line to side lot line. The back yard was thus preserved for privacy and family recreation.



The resulting Ranch house is generally one story with projecting eaves that give them a “ground-hugging” appearance. Strong horizontal lines are further emphasized by shallow-pitched, side gable and hip roofs with deep overhangs, horizontal board cladding, and horizontally-oriented windows, often with narrow Roman brick cladding underneath.

Characteristics of a Traditional Ranch include a long, narrow, open porch, a reference to the corridor of the traditional hacienda, and rustic finishes including variegated brick and board-and-batten, and wood shingle roofs. Oregon City Ranch houses tend to be relatively straight forward in design, but variations are seen, including a few Contemporary Ranch houses. Split-level and split-entry Ranch houses are common in Oregon City, but most were built in the 1960s beyond the time frame for this survey.

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