

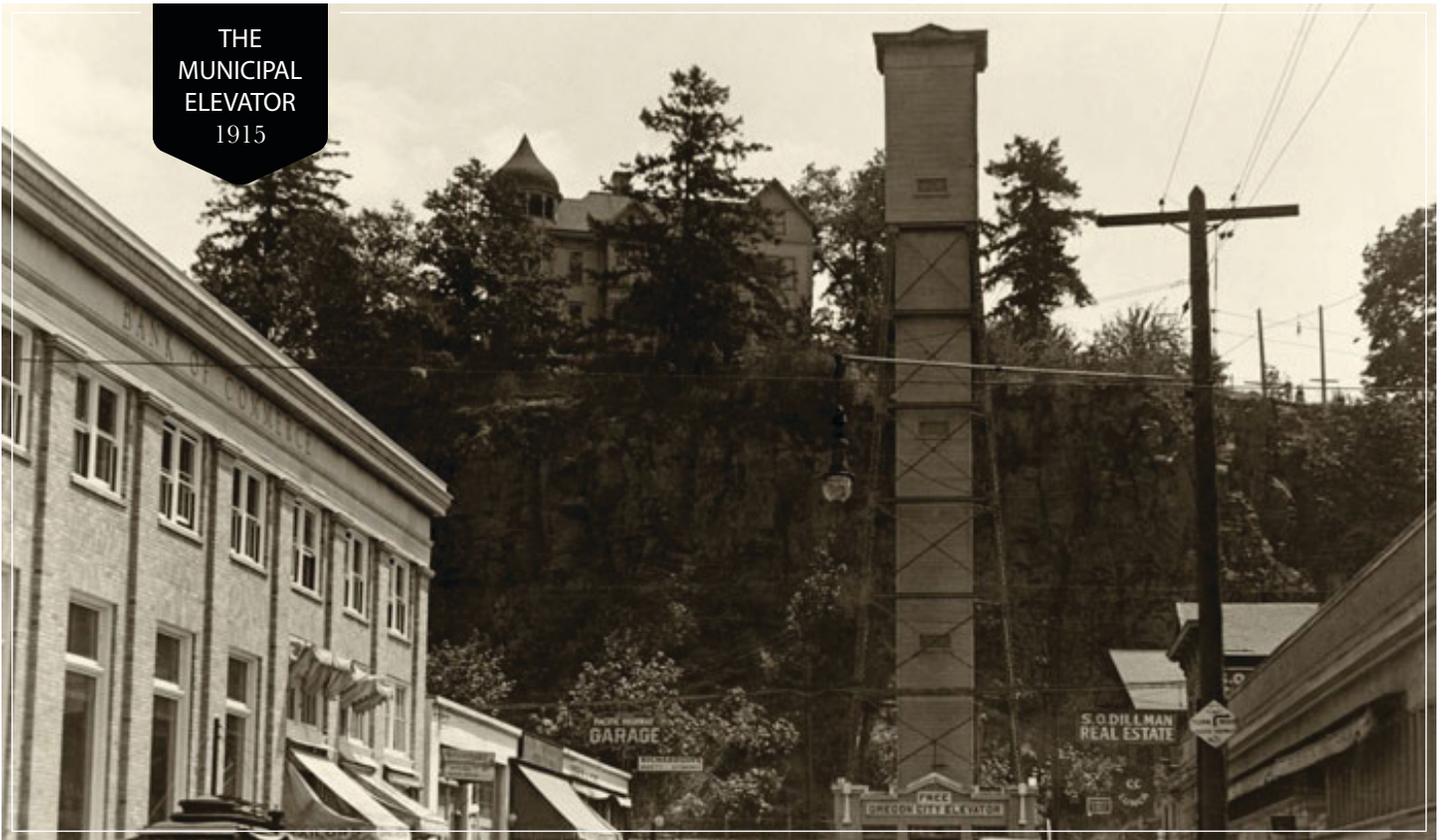


NATIONAL REGISTER *of* HISTORIC PLACES

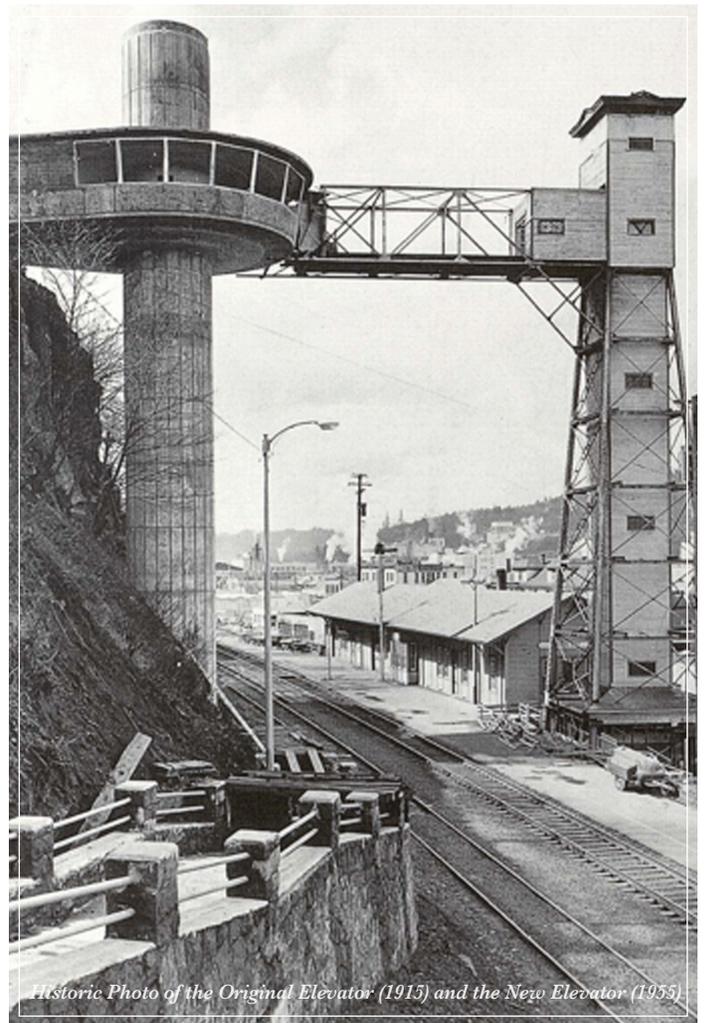
Municipal Elevator



THE
MUNICIPAL
ELEVATOR
1915



THE OREGON CITY MUNICIPAL ELEVATOR is a 130-foot-tall, public elevator tower rising from an underground tunnel in downtown Oregon City to connect with the city's second level atop a bluff to the east. The elevator is a Modern, reinforced concrete structure designed by Gordon E. Trapp (1915-2009) of the engineering firm, Stevens & Thompson of Portland, Oregon. It was constructed by the Portland engineering firm, James & Yost in 1955. The elevator was designed to be futuristic in style and to incorporate minimal ornament. From downtown, the elevator is accessed through a tunnel aligned with the intersection of 7th Street and Railroad Avenue or via a tunnel that runs east under the Union Pacific railroad tracks at the base of Singer Hill. Metal elevator doors are embedded in the tunnel's eastern wall. These doors access a staffed Otis elevator that rises through the elevator's narrow, cylindrical shaft into the center of an observatory. The horseshoe-shaped observatory has canted walls and large windows offering unobstructed views of the city below, including the Willamette Falls to the south. From the observation deck, pedestrians exit east to the paved McLoughlin Promenade, a linear park with a concrete pathway that runs north and south along the edge of the bluff. The elevator is backed by the natural vegetation and basalt outcroppings of the bluff, and is constructed of reinforced lightweight concrete. Routine maintenance has occurred over the years, but the tunnel, shaft and observation deck retain excellent integrity of design, materials, workmanship, site, location, feeling and association. In 2008, the City of Oregon City installed a permanent, non-contributing art exhibit designed by artist Michael Asbill. The observation deck's floor was painted with a map of Oregon City, and the tunnel and observation deck walls were hung with framed historic images of Oregon City.



Historic Photo of the Original Elevator (1915) and the New Elevator (1955)



HISTORIC LANDMARKS *in* OREGON CITY

OREGON CITY'S SITE ALONG THE RIVERBANK was chosen by Dr. John McLoughlin of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1829 because of the great power of the Willamette Falls. Oregon City soon outgrew the narrow shelf of the riverbank and expanded atop a series of three bluffs, which included dramatic changes in elevation. In its early years, most of the city was located on the "first level" along the Willamette River. As the city grew and developed along the bluff, it provided transportation challenges to those who lived on one tier and worked, shopped, or attended church on the other. Moving between levels was further complicated by the railroad tracks that ran north and south along the bluff's lower edge. Pedestrians had to move between tiers, but they also had to safely cross the tracks. Residents devised a series of solutions to these challenges. By 1867, steps were built up the bluff to supplement early Native American trails used by city residents. More steps were constructed over the years, but the climb was still difficult because the preferred route had 722 steps from the base of the cliff to the top of the bluff.

In May of 1912, the City Commission placed a ballot measure before the voters asking if the City should be authorized to issue bonds for "A Public Elevator at the Bluff." The first vote on funding a public elevator was first defeated but passed in December of 1912, when the voters authorized \$12,000 in bonds "to construct and operate an elevator from the lower to the upper town at some point to be selected." Most city residents thought an elevator was a great idea; however, none of the wealthier residents who lived on the bluff wanted the elevator near their property. By March 1913, negotiations had started to acquire access between 6th and 7th Streets for the upper portion of the elevator. The owner of the property objected to locating the elevator in front of her residence and refused to sell access to the City. The City took the matter to the State Supreme Court and the Court decided in the City's favor. The property owner remained opposed to the elevator and never did ride on it.

The City surveyed and platted the vertical "Elevator Street" and entered into a contract with Oregon Bridge and Construction Company to construct the elevator. The elevator could be operated by either electricity or water power. Water power was cheaper than electricity, but the City's Water Board refused to allow the connection, fearing the elevator would diminish the integrity of the water system. The City Commission resolved the matter by removing and appointing a new Water Board composed of City Commissioners. The issue went to court and the elevator committee was instructed to procure water from the Water Board to operate the elevator.

After years of discussion and conflict, the elevator, constructed of steel and wood, was placed into service on December 3, 1915, a day on which almost the entire population of Oregon City (3,869 persons) rode the elevator. The 89-foot ride to the top involved a wheezing, jerking three to five minutes. Once at the top, it was necessary to cross a 35-foot catwalk that bridged the two sides of the city high above the chasm. When the elevator worked, it generally lowered the water pressure in the surrounding area. When it didn't work, passengers had to wiggle out of a trap door and down a narrow ladder.

By 1924, the hydraulic power was replaced by electricity and the ride was reduced to 30 seconds. Dependability increased with the switchover and the elevator became the preferred method of pedestrian travel. By the 1950's, breakdowns became much more frequent and it was determined that a new elevator was needed to replace the wooden structure. The City Commission approved



The observation deck was designed to provide nearly 360-degree views of Oregon City and the Willamette River. Located on the banks of a river, near an impressive water fall, the city is an aesthetic gem. The deck, with canted windows that allow the viewer to lean forward and look down into the city below, was specifically designed to share the qualities of the location with the viewer, and provide a thrilling opportunity to get a bird's-eye view of the city and river below.

a resolution to study the feasibility and costs for a new elevator. \$7,000 was spent planning the structure that, under City Commission direction, was to be “as plain as possible without adornment.” A special election in May 1952 authorized bonds for \$175,000 to build a new elevator. Bids were received in November 1953; however, the low bid was over \$200,000 so all bids were rejected.

In January 1954, the firm of Stevens and Thompson submitted a new design proposal that could be built within the bond amount. The new design produced a low bid of \$116,000 and a contract was awarded to James and Yost, Inc. The new elevator was dedicated on May 5, 1955, and the City Commission accepted it on July 13, 1955. At that time, 2,000 elevator passes were printed. Even though the elevator ride has always been free, the distribution of these passes as a keepsake has continued as a City tradition. The existing elevator took over 751 tons of concrete and steel to construct, is 130 feet high, and passengers can zip to the top in 15 seconds in a high-speed Otis elevator car. It also provides a destination, unloading passengers into the futuristic observatory that seems to hover above the city, providing sky-high views of Oregon City’s most distinctive assets, the Willamette Falls, the historic, commercial downtown, the bridges over the Willamette River, and the industrial center, which has supported Oregon City with goods and jobs since the early-1800s.



Since its completion in 1955, the elevator has been celebrated as an effective transportation enhancement that greatly improves connectivity between the city’s two primary districts, thereby facilitating social and commercial interaction among city residents. The elevator has become a city icon and tourist attraction, shuttling approximately 120,000 riders between levels annually. The Oregon City Municipal Elevator continues to operate as one of only four municipal elevators in the world and “Elevator Street” remains the only “vertical street” in North America.



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