

From ORNC to OHSU

Marquam Hill has a strange and convoluted history that plays into the creation of both Terwilliger Parkway and Oregon Health and Sciences University. Many people wonder how it is that two large medical facilities – OHSU and the VA Medical Center - would be in such a hard-to-access location. To answer that we have to go back to 1880 and efforts to bring the first transcontinental railroad link to the Northwest.

An oft-told story is that an out-of-town railroad company bought land for a rail yard “sight unseen” in Portland in 1880 (see this [short video](#) about OHSU history). They looked at a map and decided that a chunk of land south of downtown Portland would be a good location. But it wasn’t a topographical map that they consulted and they ended up buying Marquam Hill, surrounded by steep slopes and inaccessible to trains. However, there are several problems with this story. The company building the first railroad into Portland from the east was Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company (ORNC) in which several of Portland’s wealthy elite were invested and on whose board they served. Granted, the president of ORNC was financier Henry Villard who controlled the company from New York City. But Villard was no stranger to Portland and had actually been up to Marquam Hill when he first visited Portland in July 1874. He wrote the following in his book “Early Transportation in Oregon”:

“I had heard much praise for the situation of Portland, but its attractiveness went much beyond my anticipations. Paul Schulze ...took me up on Marquam Hill the first day, and the grand panorama I saw spread out before me from that height with the three snow-clad giants of Mt. Hood, Mt. St. Helens, and Mt. Adams clearly visible in their mighty splendor, seemed to me one of the finest sights I had ever enjoyed.”

- Henry Villard



The mistaken land purchase was probably the result of a lack of due diligence on the part of Villard and his New York staff. The ORNC (eventually re-named the Oregon-Washington Railroad and Navigation Company) continued to hold portions of the Marquam Hill property until 1917.

In 1903, city leaders hired the Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architects to design the fairgrounds for the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition and, at the same time, design a citywide master plan for Portland parks. The parks plan proposed many new parks

throughout the city as well as a system of parkways and boulevards to link new and existing parks together into a kind of green infrastructure comparable to the city's transportation, water, and sewer networks. One of the proposed parkways, referred to as the South Hillside Parkway, was to run from the South Park Blocks "...to Riverview cemetery, or even further to a forest park on the beautiful ridge south of the cemetery." The park plan was presented to the Parks Board in late 1903. It was then up to city leaders to acquire the land and make the improvements to realize this innovative vision. Portland has always been a city that likes to dream big but then is reluctant to spend the money to make those dreams a reality. On top of that, the success of the Lewis and Clark Exposition caused a boom in Portland's economy and its real estate prices, making the purchase of park land that much more expensive. Very little happened to implement the park plan until two important results of the election of June 1909: Portland voters passed a one million dollar bond for creating the parks and boulevards envisioned in the Olmsted Plan, and they elected Joseph Simon as mayor.



"Simon was singly the most powerful political force in Oregon politics from 1880-1910" and "...was an intense, ambitious, 'wheeler-dealer' of great personal charm who dedicated his life to business, law, and politics. He never attempted to separate his private and public affairs." - E. Kimbark MacColl

Simon was a pro-business conservative and, among his many business endeavors, he served as corporate secretary of the ORNC and was a partner in the Fulton Park Land Company. Simon only served 2 years as mayor but accomplished quite a lot in that time. Portland historian E. Kimbark MacColl wrote that "...Simon deserves credit ...for acquiring through donation and condemnation enough parcels of land to begin the Hillside Parkway." The park bond money likely motivated Simon to use his business and railroad connections to secure land for the proposed hillside parkway. He arranged the first land donation from Fulton Park Land Company (in which he had a business interest), which consisted of 3.7 acres between SW Cheltenham and Capitol Hwy. A second donation of 19.24 acres between SW Hamilton and SW Westwood from the heirs of James Terwilliger was received in 1911 (see [article](#) in previous FOT newsletter.) And Simon negotiated with ORNC on a controversial series of land trades that included 65 acres of their Marquam Hill property in which the city would purchase the property for half its assessed value. In the end, ORNC donated 41.2 acres between Marquam Ravine and SW Lowell to the city in 1912, after Simon's term had ended. It is not clear if it was an outright gift or if the city paid a reduced price.

Work on the acquired portions of the parkway route started during Simon's tenure as mayor. The section from Hamilton Street south to Capitol Highway largely followed an abandoned railroad route and was graded by the time Simon left office in 1911. Work on the northern segment (on the land from ORNC) was graded and complete enough for a parade during the national Elks convention in Portland in the summer of 1912. One fourth of the 1909 park bond funds were spent building Terwilliger Parkway, with the remainder going to purchase land for Mt. Tabor, Laurelhurst, Sellwood, Peninsula, and Kenilworth parks. But no land was ever purchased for any of the other parkways that the Olmsteds had proposed for Portland in 1903.

The remainder of the ORNC land on Marquam Hill became OHSU and the VA Hospital. In 1917 Dr. Kenneth McKenzie, the staff surgeon for the railroad, persuaded the company to donate 20 acres to the University of Oregon Medical School (now OHSU.) A few years later the widow of C. S. "Sam" Jackson (owner of the Oregon Journal) bought the remaining 88 acres and donated it to the medical school so that a children's hospital could be built to fulfill her late husband's wish. This last donation was called "Sam Jackson Park" in his memory, and the main road to OHSU is named Sam Jackson Park Road. 25 acres of Sam Jackson Park was given to the Veterans Administration in 1926 so that they could build a veteran's hospital. Thus, a complex of medical facilities started to take shape on Marquam Hill on land that the Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company had rashly purchased and then was unable to utilize. While their mistake benefited both the development of Portland's only scenic parkway and a large medical education center it also set the stage for conflicts between those two sometimes-incompatible uses.

Sources:

1. *Early Transportation in Oregon*; Henry Villard, ed. by Oswald G. Villard; Univ. of Ore.; 1944; re-printed 1981 by Arno Press
2. *The Shaping of a City*; E. Kimbark MacColl; The Georgian Press; 1976
3. *Portland – People Politics and Power*; Jewel Lansing; OSU Press; 2003
4. *Terwilliger Parkway Inventory*; City of Portland Bureau of Planning; 1982
5. *Marquam Hill Plan – Background Material*; City of Portland Bureau of Planning; 2002