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LEWIS COUNTY, WASHINGTON History and Historical Sites

From rolling hills and valleys in the west to mountainous regions in the east, Lewis County, named after the explorer, Meriwether Lewis, is rich in history and historic attractions. Even the downtown areas of Centralia and Chehalis maintain turn-of-the-century small-town charm – with specific areas recognized on the National Register of Historic Places. This sprawling county, the largest and oldest in the state, was formed in many ways by the contributions, dreams and vision of many spirited and unique individuals.

Simon Plamondon discovered fertile ground

The first non-Indian resident of Lewis County was an important part of this rich history. Simon Plamondon, a French-Canadian, developed land for the Hudson's Bay Company and proved to the world that land could be prosperous north of the Columbia River.

When the first documents of the Oregon Territory, Washington Territory and Lewis County were being written up, Simon Plamondon was there to mark his signature with an 'X'. With a reputation reaching tall-tale proportions this handsome man, who some claimed to be seven-feet tall and have 60 children from 19 marriages, might have been forgotten. Legend has it, Simon Plamondon was illiterate and could not write his own story. Because of this his name was nearly dropped from history.

George Washington claimed the land and fed the people

Another interesting piece of history is revealed through the life of George Washington, an African-American pioneer who founded Centralia, one of the first towns in Lewis County (initially called Centerville). His struggle for basic rights not afforded black men of his time led him to settle in this area in 1852.

Through his adoptive (white) father, Washington staked a claim for 640 acres where the Skookumchuck River flows into the Chehalis River. (It wasn't until 1857 that Washington was allowed to own the land under his

own name.) By 1891, he had sold 2,000 lots. During the Panic of 1893, Washington kept the town fed. Over the years, he grew wealthy and well respected. He remained involved in the town until his accidental death in 1905 at age 88.

Eliza Barrett constructed Chehalis' first buildings

Around the same time George Washington developed Centralia, Eliza Barrett was impacting the future of the neighboring town of Chehalis. Against the wishes of men in town Eliza took her time dividing and selling her 300 acres of land. Unlike the men, Eliza was not willing to sell her holdings to make quick money. Her large land ownership and foresight gave her control over much of the way the town grew and expanded.

Together with her first husband, Eliza claimed 300 acres of land in the Chehalis Valley. After nine years and five children, Eliza and her first husband divorced. She remarried three times, had one husband leave her while the other two marriages ended in divorce. She had three more children by these marriages.

Through all this Eliza held on to her land and gradually donated it to the community. She constructed the town's first music hall, the Tyman Opera House, in 1889, its first Catholic Church in 1889, a Catholic boarding school for girls in 1895, and the commercial building, Barrett block, in 1891. The way Chehalis looks today can be attributed in great part to Eliza Barrett.

Centralia Massacre site nationally recognized

The Centralia Massacre of 1919 focused national media attention on Centralia. Recognized as a major event in the history of Lewis County, labor unions across the U.S. still recall the Massacre. Although the original buildings are no longer standing, memorial markers at Washington Park (at Main and Pearl Streets) note the location of the Armistice Day Riot. The original site of the encounter is on the National Register of Historical Places.

To celebrate the end of World War One, the Centralia American Legion organized a parade. At the same time, a group from the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), frustrated by the terrible working conditions at the logging camps, spoke out against capitalism, the wage system, big business and big government. Viewed by the Legionnaires as unpatriotic and a threat to the community, the I.W.W. members, or "Wobblies" as they were referred to, were targeted. So, in 1919, the Legionnaires stormed the I.W.W. hall. Four Legionnaires were slain and eleven Wobblies were indicted for their murders.

Elements of Lewis County's unique history are present today in the many historic landmarks throughout the county. For more information, call the Lewis County Historical Museum at (360) 748-0831.