

6. History and Significance

This segment of Salem’s northern millrace originally served the mills that operated along the Willamette River in the late nineteenth century north of downtown. The most significant mills within the area of the inadvertent discovery were the built west of Front Street, along the Willamette River in 1882 (Figure 13), and were initially known as “Scotch Mills”.

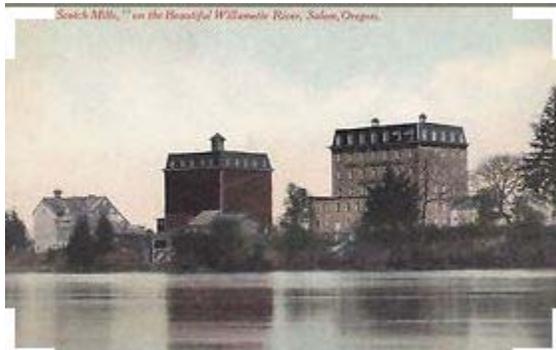


Figure 13: Scotch Mills



Mill Creek flows approximately thirty miles northwesterly from the Cascade Mountain foothills to the Willamette River. In Mill Creek just west of Church Street was a dam which diverted the creek. It was one of two man-made channels that diverted Mill Creek’s flow within the city. The “Division” race was a manmade concrete water channel which originally ran from a dammed portion of Mill Creek along Division Street NE to Front Street NE and then north to the mill site where it turned west to empty into the Willamette River (Figure 14.) The water from this channel served to power a large steel water wheel at the mill.

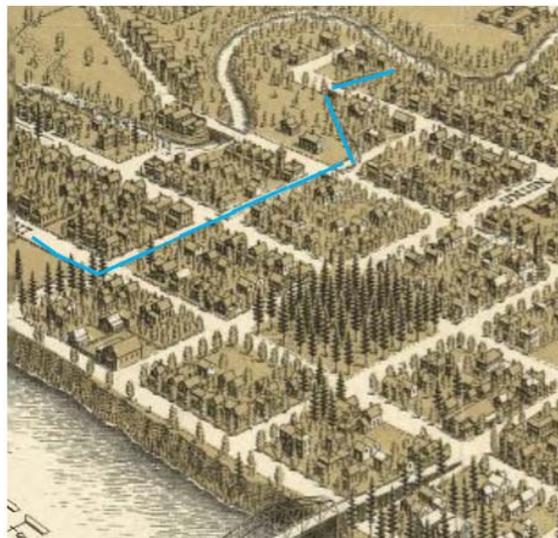


Figure 14: Capital City, Salem Oregon 1905; Detail of North Mill Race

In 1882, Scotch Mills had been granted a franchise by the Salem City Council to construct this millrace diverting water from Mill Creek down Division Street toward Front Street, limited to a width of 25', in order to provide power to the mill.¹ While it was hoped that the Scotch Mills could compete with the Salem Flouring Mills, their business was not sustainable, and the mills were sold in 1890 to the Willamette Valley Milling Company. This photo from 1890 shows the open Millrace, looking from the Willamette Valley Milling Company building (Figure 15).²



Figure 15: View of Millrace from Willamette Valley Milling Company

Sanborn Fire Insurance maps from July 1890 clearly show the inadvertent discovery area (the intersection of Division and Front) as a segment of the race which was underneath a plank bridge (Figure 15). Several newspaper articles from this time period describe the condition and use of this bridge. The Statesman Journal describes the bridge: *“Broken Bridge: The planking on the covered mill race on Front street, between Division street and the big mill, in some places, is not in the best of condition. On the corner of Front and Division yesterday noon a portion of the bridge sank down under a load of wood, and, although the wagon was safely brought out, the hole in the bridge is there as a menace to travel. The matter should be looked after, as there is liable to be serious damage done if it is neglected.”*³

Industry challenges also caused difficulties for the Willamette Valley Mills, and in 1895, The Willamette Valley Mills were sold to the competing Salem Flouring Mills company. It was decided to remove the machinery from the buildings to other mills at other locations, vacating the premises and abandoning the use of the millrace. As shown in the 1895 Sanborn maps, this segment of the millrace had been planked over, with the millrace running north along Front Street NE underneath the road toward the mill (Figures 16 and 17).

¹ Ordinance No. 140, June 28, 1882 Salem City Council.

²Freidenburg and Burtchard reference the “Division Race” and the 1888 dam in Mill Creek, which replaced an earlier dam in their “Cultural Resource Evaluation of the Keizer, Mill Creek and Johnson Creek Projects. Linda L. Freidenburg and Greg C. Burtchard. “A Cultural Resource Evaluation of the Keizer, Mill Creek and Johnson Creek Projects.” Laboratory of Archaeology and Anthropology, Department of Anthropology. Portland State University, Portland, OR. August 1990. Page 12.

³ “Broken Bridge”, Statesman Journal, Salem Oregon. Tuesday October 5, 1897.

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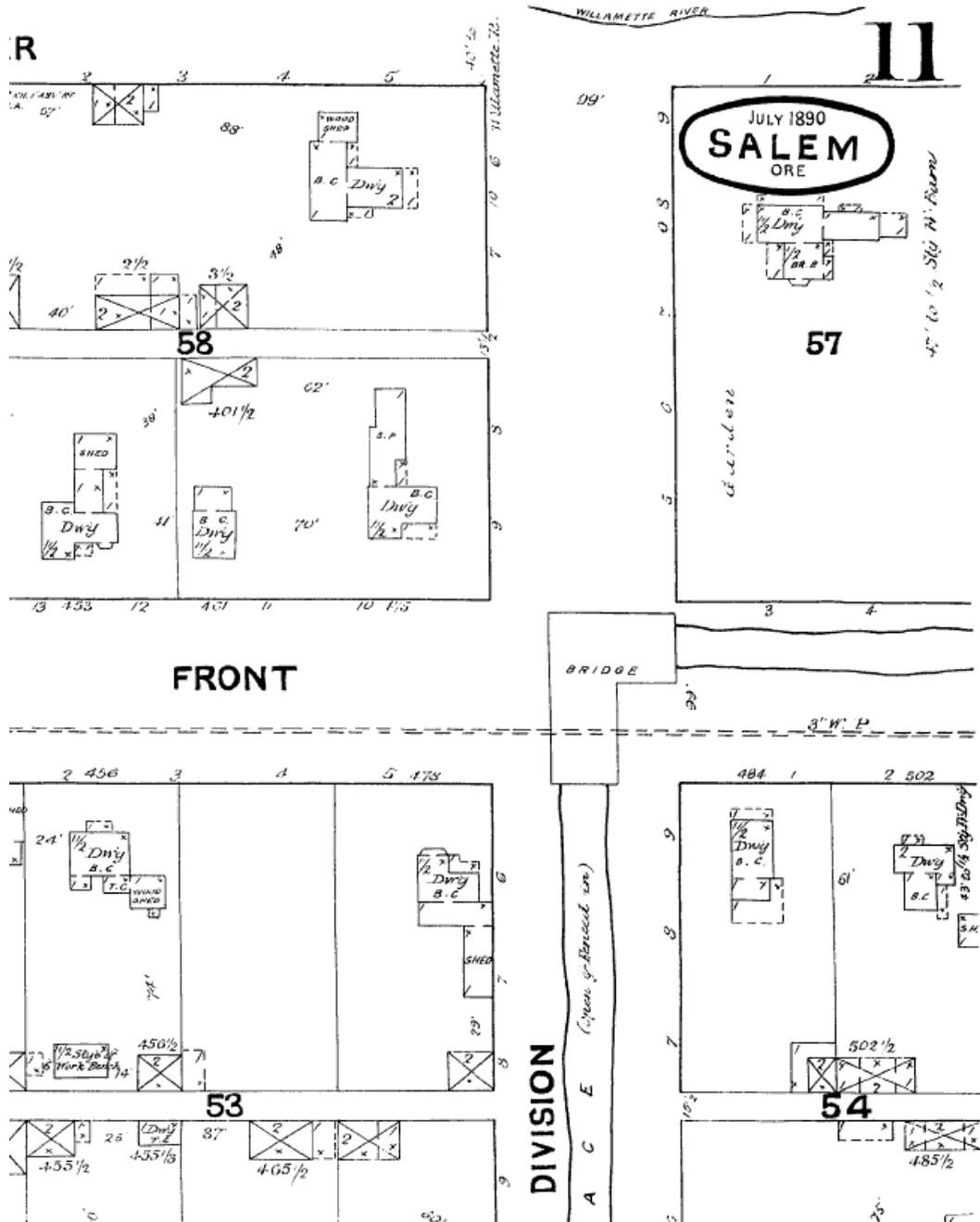


Figure 16: Salem, July 1890, Sheet 11 (Sanborn Fire Insurance Map)



Figure 18: Salem Flouring Mills/Capitol Flouring Mills 1903

Unfortunately two of the mill buildings burned in 1904, with arson suspected as the cause.⁴ By 1905 there was a significant debate at City Council regarding the future of the millrace in this part of town. The City Attorney issued an opinion stating that he did not believe the City council had originally had the authority in 1882 to grant a franchise to a private company to utilize the public right of way for the purposes of supplying power to a private company. Soon after, public health officer J. W. Lewis issued a report to City Council regarding the significant public health violations existing within this waterway caused by stagnant water, garbage, privies and other refuse being emptied into the unused waterway. In 1908, the situation was further exacerbated when the Salem Flouring Mills Company enjoined the Oregon Electric Company from lowering the bridge at High Street over the millrace. Their claim was that by lowering the bridge, the water flow would be obstructed, violating the franchise agreement of 1882. The city attorney argued that the mill had forfeited their rights under the franchise because they had neglected to maintain the raceway and its associated improvements. Therefore City Council declared the north millrace a public nuisance, and demanding that the company remedy and address the problem. Salem Flouring Mills withdrew their petition.

The Salem City Council referred the matter to committee to try to determine a solution. Two years later, in 1910 the Committee on Streets submitted their report on the north millrace to City Council with the surprising recommendation that the city retain the race, due to its potential to supply power and

⁴ Statesman Journal article

support future business growth, but that it be covered and located entirely below street grade in order to prevent future issues related to sanitation and public health. The Mayor, George F. Rodgers wrote several letters to City Council urging them to act on the matter by either requiring the race to be filled, or kept and covered, in order to address the significant related health concerns with the open waterway. The Council struggled with how to fund the improvements, and debated between assessing adjacent property owners and requiring that the owner of the mill property pay for the improvements, but they neglected to act.

Official action was delayed almost fifteen years, until 1924, after the property had been sold to the Oregon Pulp and Paper Company. A charter amendment was approved by Salem voters in November 1924, compelling the current owners of the property to cover the millrace in preparation for paving Division and Front Streets. The amendment was intended to make a statement of general Council policy, aimed at authorizing the City Council to compel owners of artificial waterways abutting or intersecting public streets to bridge and cover these waterways at their own expense. The charter amendment passed and the paving was completed. The millrace segments were either filled in, or covered and abandoned. A few years later it is interesting to note, the City Council ordered that a new fire cistern be constructed on Front Street, north of Division, for the protection of the industrial district. The new cistern was constructed by converting a portion of the north mill race and cementing the two ends: *“The new cistern will hold about 150,000 gallons of water and will serve to protect a cannery, the Western Paper converting company’s plant and several other major industries in the district. Construction of the cistern was not expensive. Formerly the fire department had made use of the old mill race. To construct the cistern it was only necessary to convert a portion of the race into a cistern. The cement on bottom and side was utilized and it was only necessary to cement the two ends. Water will be put into the cistern sometime next week when the cement has settled.”*⁵ It is not clear precisely where this cistern was located, as no maps were discovered along with this Council action, but future research, or work within the area of Front Street NE and Division Street NE may uncover its location.

6. Recommendation

Approximately 92 feet of the Division/Front Street Millrace was recorded within the site area. The site is recommended eligible under Criterion A for association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of Salem’s history, in particular the Division/Front Street Millrace which operated actively in Salem at the end of the 19th century. In the event that future segments of this race are inadvertently discovered, it is recommended that the City of Salem Public Works Department and the Portland and West Railroad adopt the specific approach and treatment utilized here as a method to ensure any future segments of the Millrace are not adversely impacted by the track replacement project, which will continue throughout 2018.

⁵ “New Cistern North Front. **Daily Capital Journal**. March 14, 1928.

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Accessed: October 9, 2017

Sanborn Fire Insurance Company. Salem, 1895, Sheet

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