

# Vanport Trees: Potential survivors of the 1948 flood

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BRUBAKER AERIAL SURVEY  
PORTLAND, OREGON



# Summary & Introduction

**Vanport was among the largest wartime housing projects in the United States, housing over 40,000 people at its peak during World War II.**

Today, there are few remnants of this community on the landscape. The following report, produced in collaboration between Nidus Consulting, Outdoor History Consulting, and the Vanport Placemarking Project, has documented several living trees that were very likely alive at the time of Vanport. As living markers, their designation as Heritage Trees will continue to share the story of Vanport and help the public connect this landscape to the intangible memories, stories, and history of our collective past. In all likelihood, these trees, still standing today, once grew alongside Vanport schoolchildren, shaded WWII

shipyard workers returning from their shifts, and survived the catastrophic flood that destroyed Vanport in 1948. Vanport's story has gained widespread attention from scholars, community activists, storytellers, and artists. Yet little has been documented about the landscape features of the site that connect back to its time as a city. It is critically important to document the living landscape of Vanport's legacy.

**Vanport operated from 1942 to 1948 and was the second largest city in Oregon at the time.**

Built in one year to house workers and families in World War II industries, primarily at the Vancouver and Portland Shipyards, Vanport contained up to 9,568 units of housing. Over the 650-acre site, as many as 42,000 people lived, worked, played, and went to school. Vanport's community housing was racially segregated, along with its hospitals and most of its recreation centers and shops. African American and Native American families lived in separate zones from white families, but schools and theaters were integrated. Historian Carl Abbott notes that Vanport's contradictory segregation policies made it so Black families "faced nasty incidents when the sheriff's office tried to enforce informal segregation of recreational facilities, claiming that mixed use might lead to trouble." After the war, many families stayed in Vanport and others moved to the city to take classes at the Vanport Extension Center, a college which eventually became Portland State University. The site holds special significance for Black and Indigenous families, as many Black and Indigenous people first moved to Oregon to work in wartime industries and live in Vanport. Vanport remained one of the only places they could find housing in the Portland area during and after the war.



City of Portland Archives, A2001-025.724

**Vanport was wiped out by Columbia River floodwaters on Memorial Day weekend, May 30th, 1948.**

The cheaply built homes and structures floated off their post and pier foundations, and in the span of a few years, most physical remnants of the site had vanished. The residents of Vanport were first displaced to makeshift refugee camps in schools, public buildings, and churches. Over time, Black and Indigenous families were pushed into deteriorated public housing such as Guild's Lake Courts and eventually into *de facto* segregated neighborhoods in North Portland.



Oregon Historical Society, OrHi 24149

Vanport's legacy is complicated. Its residents, who came from all over the continent, brought traditions and cultures with them. Those that have remained in Portland since have helped shape the culture and history of the city. And the stories of expediently-built housing, segregated communities, and the significance of war industry work are all important parts of the collective memory of the region that must not be forgotten.



Oregon Historical Society, OrHi 51922

The trees documented in this report were likely younger trees growing among clusters of larger trees during the time of Vanport. For over 75 years, they have grown at the Vanport site as the landscape transformed into a **golf course** and **racetrack**. Rooted in place amid great tides of change, they likely witnessed construction equipment building a city from farms and wetlands, countless workers leaving for shifts at the shipyards, kids playing in and around the banks of the sloughs, and the violent and sudden destruction of Vanport in the 1948 **flood**.

**The second largest community in Oregon was wiped out by floodwaters in 1948. While few physical remnants of Vanport exist today, several trees may have survived.**





# Cottonwood #1

**Cottonwood #1 is growing in a small grove near the eastern end of Mud Slough.**

This tree has good public access, a strong aerial photograph record, and (while in poor condition) may live for many more years.

**Species:** *Populus trichocarpa*

**DBH:** 47 inches

**Height:** ~75 feet

**Avg. Crown Spread:** ~35 feet

**Condition:** Poor

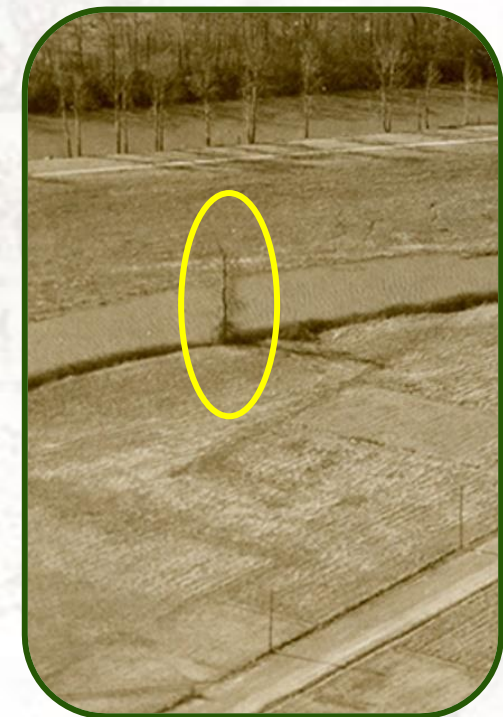
**Comments:** Lost top, several branches sweeping up to vertical, growing on slope with base adjacent to water, indicators of internal decay from base to top, relatively vigorous growth, dominant tree in dense linear cottonwood stand.



1940



1945



1968B



1971



1990



2022

Due to its location relative to geographic features and availability of aerial photographs, cottonwood #1 is the strongest candidate for a tree that survived the flood.





# Ash #2

## Ash #2 is growing in a grove of ash trees east of Force Lake

Force Lake is a natural gathering area with good public access, and a natural place to celebrate survivors of the flooding of Vanport. This grove has several large ash trees with #2 seemingly the largest. This area is on a small hill and would be an obvious place for a tree to survive while the lower areas were under water for a month or more. The photo documentation is not ideal because the tree is growing in a grove. This tree appears to be in the best condition of the trees identified but will likely die from Emerald Ash Borer in the relatively near future without insecticide injections.

**Species:** *Fraxinus latifolia*

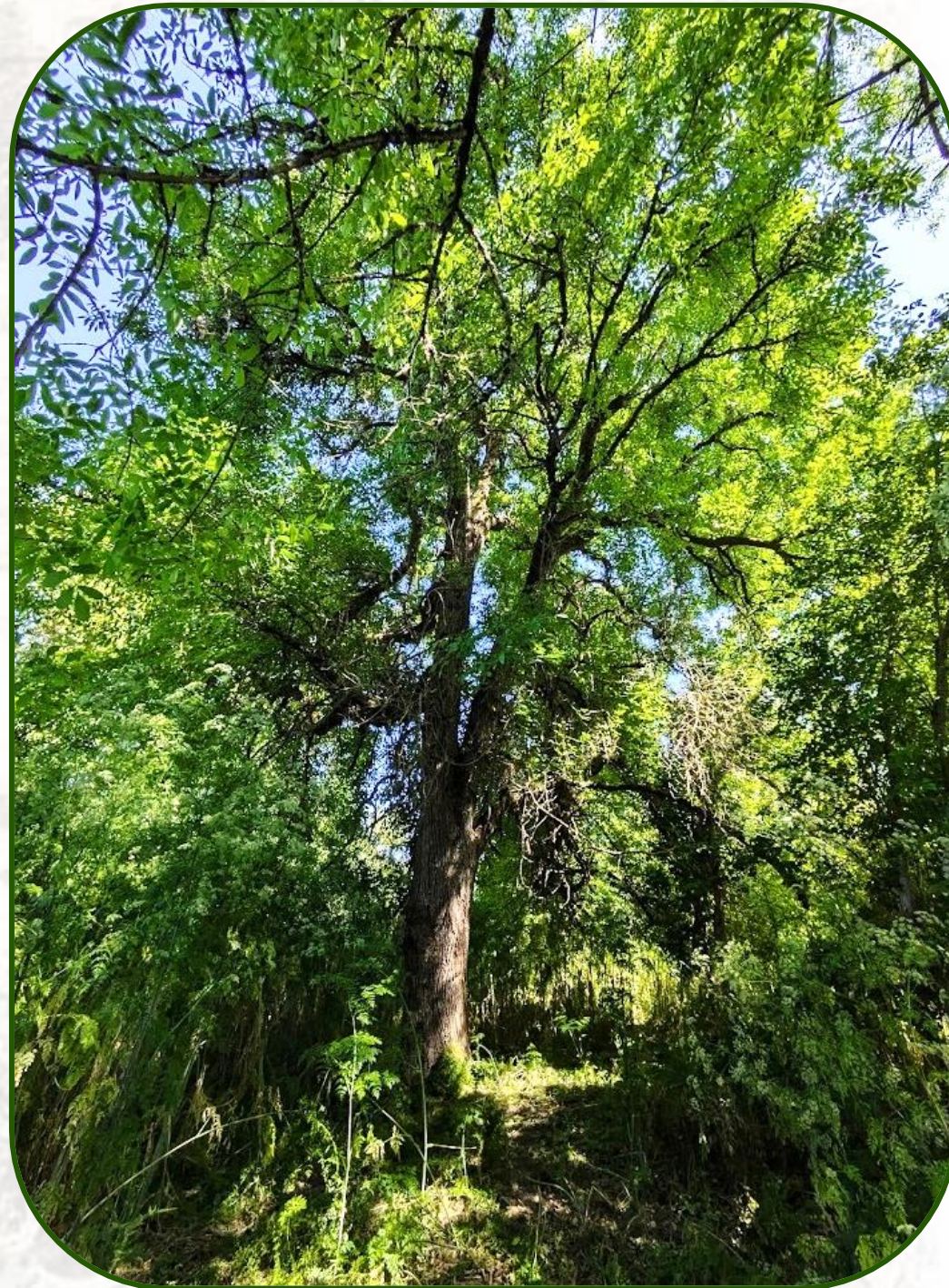
**Maximum DBH:** 31 inches

**Height:** ~55 feet

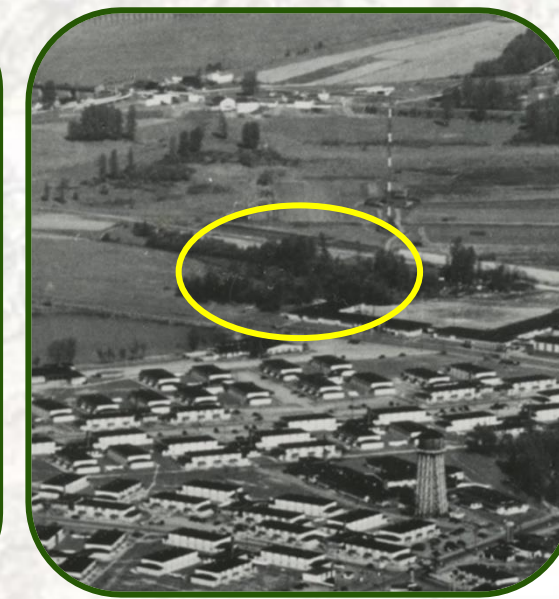
**Avg. Crown Spread:** ~45 feet

**Condition:** Good

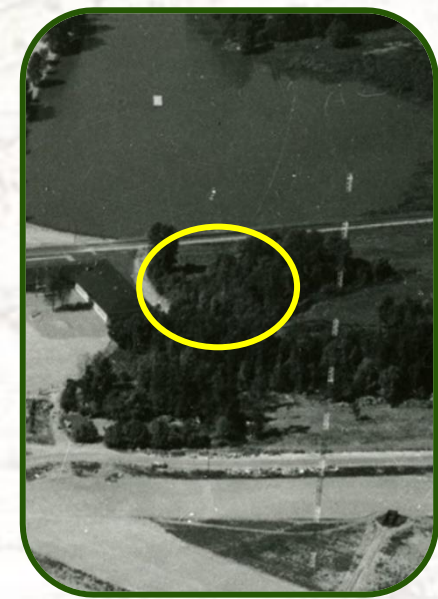
**Comments:** Growing on top of small hill; single trunk divides into two stems at ~15 feet; minor branch dieback, dense crown, in grove along with several other ash trees.



1940



194X



1945



1971



1990



2022

Based on aerial photographs, it appears that a grove of trees has existed in this area since the 1940's; it is not totally clear whether ash #2 was alive 80 years ago.





# Cottonwood #3

**Cottonwood #3 is growing in a small grove along Mud Slough close to where the road meets the Slough.**

This tree is in very poor condition and probably not a strong candidate, even though the photo documentation is relatively good.

**Species:** *Populus trichocarpa*

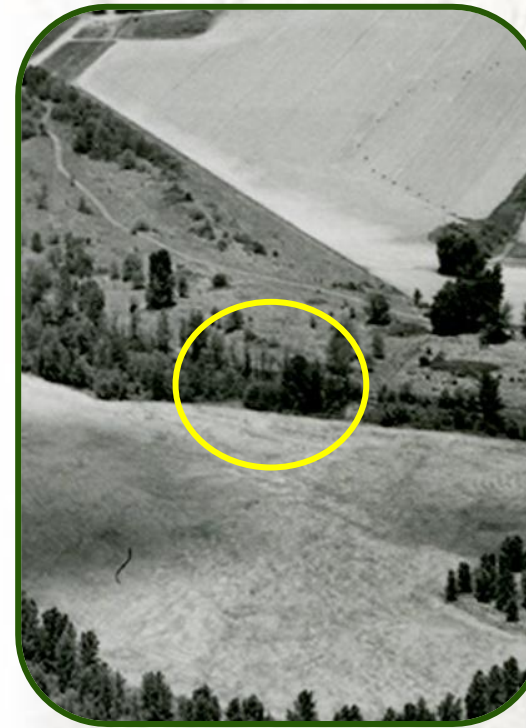
**DBH:** 42 inches

**Height:** ~ 90 feet

**Avg. Crown Spread:** ~25 feet

**Condition:** Very Poor

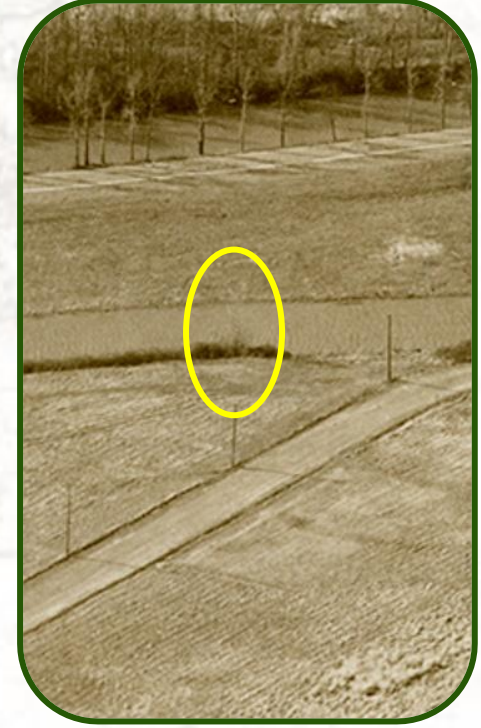
**Comments:** Mostly dead, only foliage on 3 or 4 branches, basal decay likely, declining, growing on slope of bank of Mud slough, more difficult access, lots of blackberries.



1940



1945



1968



1971



1990



2022

Due to its location relative to geographic features and availability of aerial photographs, cottonwood #3 is a strong candidate for a tree that survived the flood





# Cottonwood #4

**Cottonwood #4 growing along Mud Slough adjacent to a swim platform that appears to be installed between 1971 and 1990.**

This tree is growing next to a very distinctive infrastructure feature that is a natural gathering place for people and is in the best condition of any of the cottonwoods.

**Species:** *Populus trichocarpa*

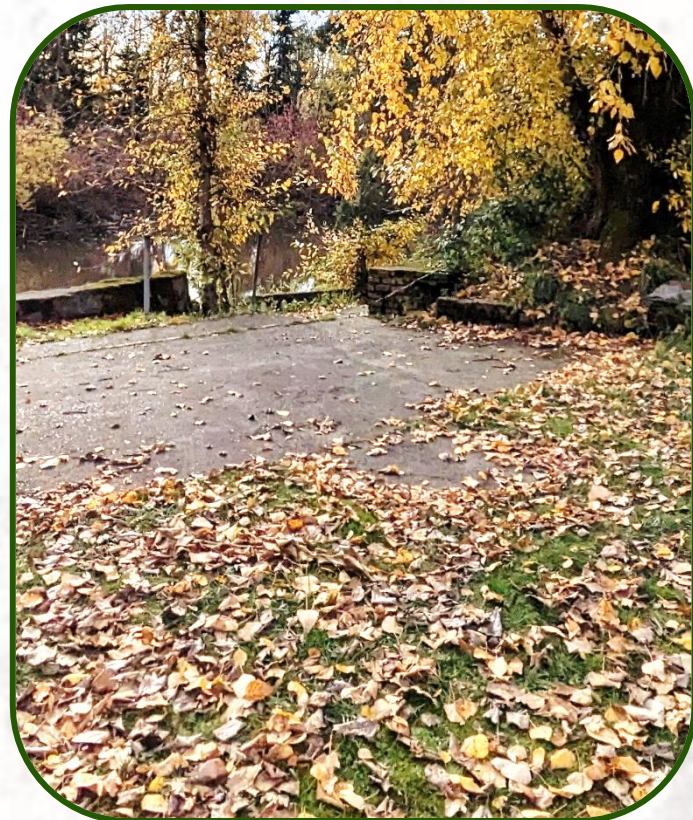
**DBH:** 48 inches

**Height:** ~100 feet

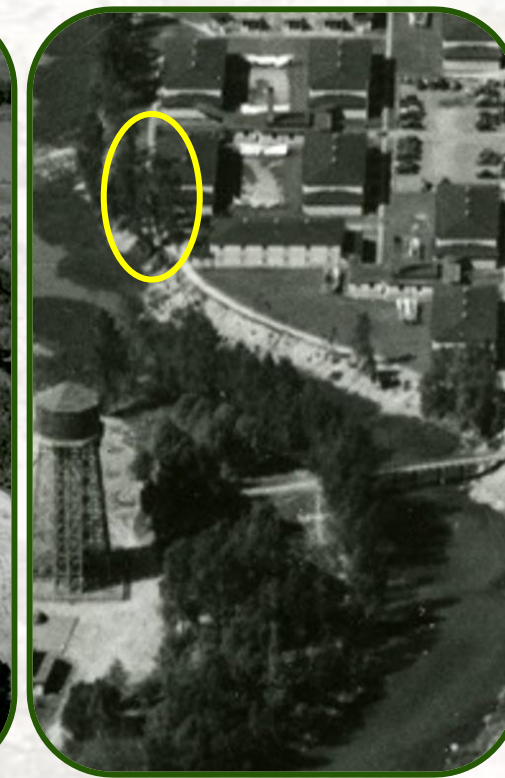
**Avg. Crown Spread:** ~45 feet

**Condition:** Fair

**Comments:** Growing in a broken brick and concrete planter near swim platform, decaying cavity at ~6 feet, single trunk divides into two stems at ~30 feet, minor branch dieback, dense crown.



1940



1945



1968



1971



1990



2022

If we can find a photo of the swim platform being installed next to a semi-mature cottonwood, this tree may be a strong candidate.





# Cottonwood #5

Cottonwood #4 is growing in a wet area at the northwest corner of the golf course.

It is difficult to access and not a natural meeting place for people.

Species: *Populus trichocarpa*

DBH: ?

Height: ?

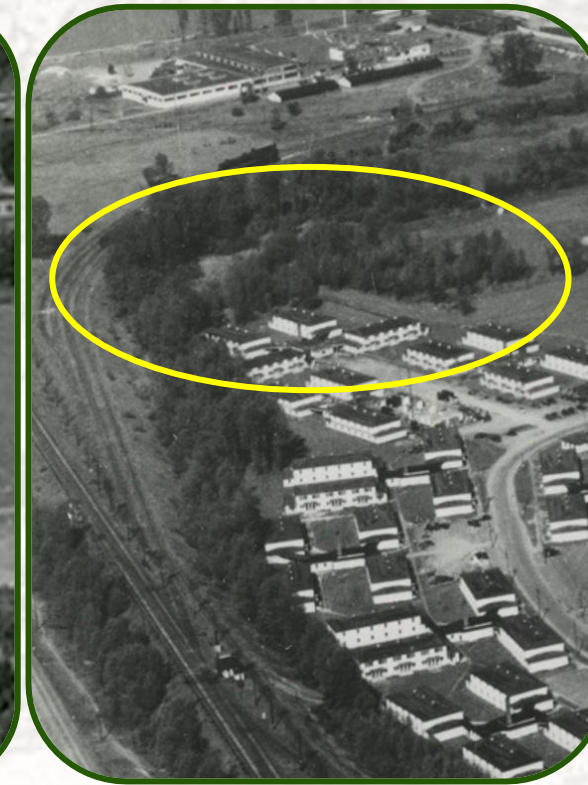
Avg. Crown Spread: ?

Condition: Very Poor or Dead

Comments: -



1940



194X



1964



1971



1990



2022

The photo documentation and health of this tree is likely the worst of any of the cottonwoods.





# Cottonwood Grove A

Grove A is a stand of cottonwoods growing southeast of the small pond that pumps water into the Columbia Slough.

While it doesn't have great public access, it has very good views from atop the levee along the Columbia Slough trail which could be a natural meeting spot.



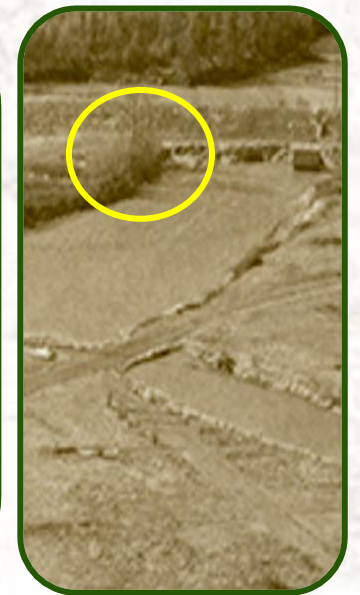
**Dominant species:** *Populus trichocarpa*  
**Largest DBH:** 47"  
**Tallest Height:** ~100 feet  
**Avg. Crown Spread:** ?  
**Condition:** Dead to Good  
**Comments:** -



1940



1945



1968



1971



1990



2022

We have strong photographic evidence that this stand has existing since Vanport was thriving, and likely an old dead/dying tree is 80+ years old.





# Mud Slough Grove B

**Grove B is growing east of Mud Slough near the bend in the track at PIR.**

This area has difficult public access and a variety of tree species that were unlikely to be growing together in the 1940s.



**Species:** *Fraxinus latifolia*, *Callitropsis nootkatensis*, *Populus trichocarpa*

**Maximum DBH:** ?

**Height:** ?

**Avg. Crown Spread:** ?

**Condition:** Dead to Good

**Comments:** -



1940



1945



1968A



1971



1990

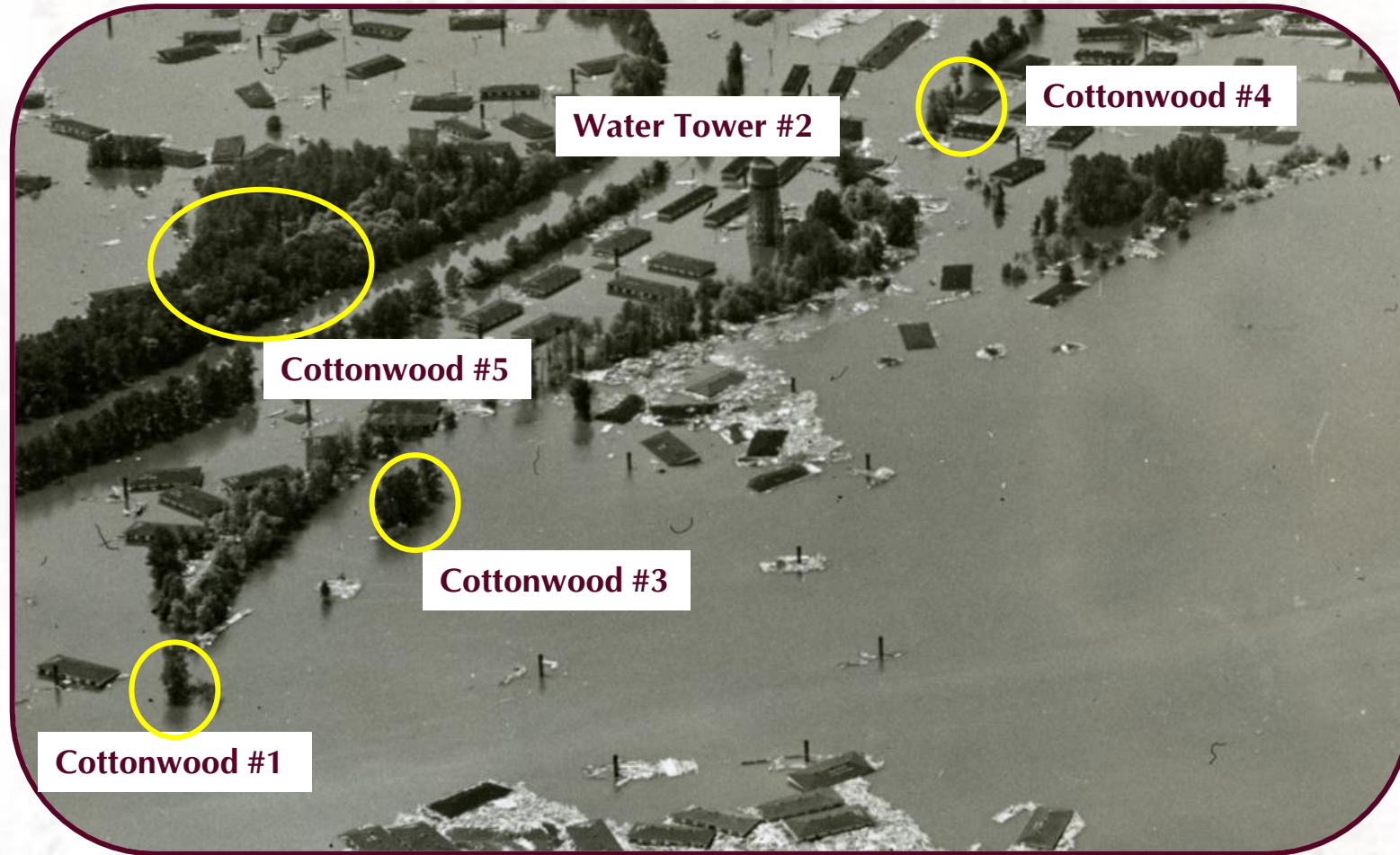


2022

Based on aerial photographs, it appears that a grove of trees has existed in this area since the 1940's; it is not totally clear whether any of these trees were alive 80 years ago.



# Analysis



June 15, 1948

We are relatively confident that some of these trees survived the Vanport Flood in 1948.

Through visual assessment of trees in the field and historical photo interpretation, we believe that we have enough evidence to be reasonably confident that some of these trees survived the Vanport Flood. The photo documentation is particularly strong for cottonwood #1.

In walking around the site in 2023 evaluating trees, we made two observations.

1. Cottonwoods seemed to be the largest, oldest trees.
2. Cottonwoods that were clearly not present in 1948 appeared to be large and old (note stand of cottonwoods in upper right photo that are clearly not present in lower right photo).

While we wouldn't rule out more upland species surviving the flood, the photo above is dated June 15, 1948, more than 2 weeks after the flood. We assume that soils were saturated for at least a month which would be difficult for most non-riparian trees. It should not be a surprise that we mostly found candidates that are riparian species, cottonwood and ash. Unfortunately, these species tend not to be long lived and are not particularly well-studied compared to (for example) Doug fir or Oregon white oak.

Ultimately, we are presenting our observations and ask our project partners and the general public to draw their own conclusions.



2023



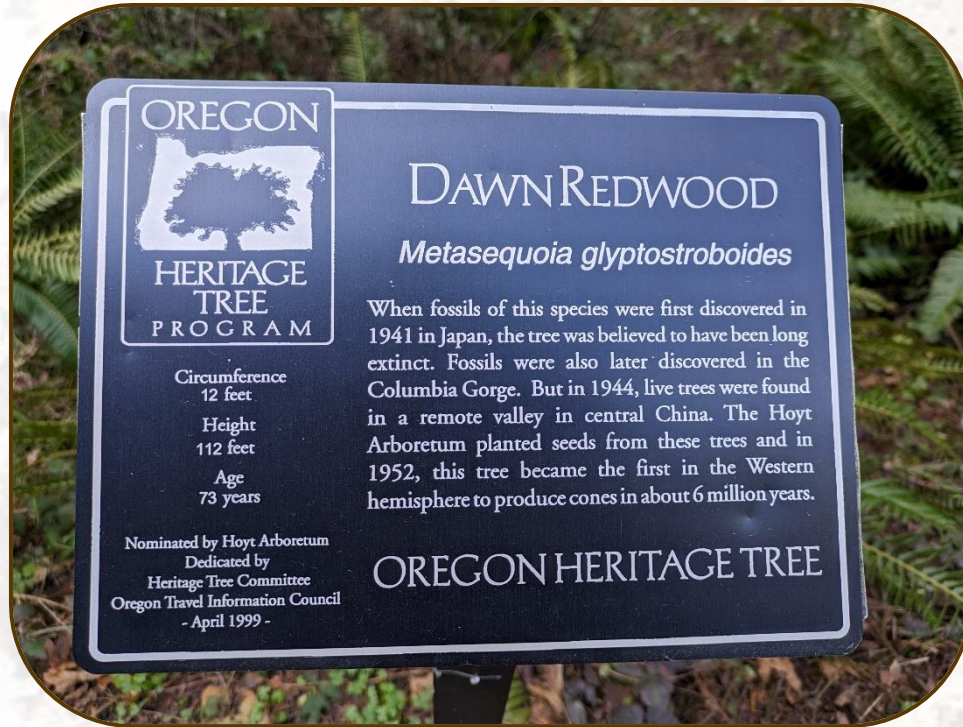
194X

We are relatively confident that some of these trees survived the Vanport Flood.





# Potential Next Steps



### We could celebrate/recognize these trees

If we find the information enclosed compelling enough, we could nominate one or several of these trees as an Oregon or Portland Heritage Tree, host some public events, and/or put up plaque(s) or signage. Signage could include, for example, memories of Vanport survivors about their times spent playing among the cottonwoods as children in Vanport..

### We could try coring the trees

If we want more information, one option may be to try to extract a core and count rings showing more definitively how old some of these trees are. There are many barriers to this method, but it is a potential option especially for ash #2.



### We could try to gather more information from the archives

If we want more information, one option is to spend more time going through archival photos that may have more definitive information about whether trees were present or not in the 1940s. For example, many photos of people have trees in the background.



Portland Archives, A2001-025.724



### We could do nothing

While this may be interesting, maybe these trees are not healthy enough to celebrate or not compelling enough to do much with this information. Maybe we are already celebrating Vanport and trees in the best ways in Portland already.

If we find the information enclosed compelling enough, we could nominate one or several of these trees as an Oregon or Portland Heritage Tree, host some public events, and/or put up plaque(s) or signage.





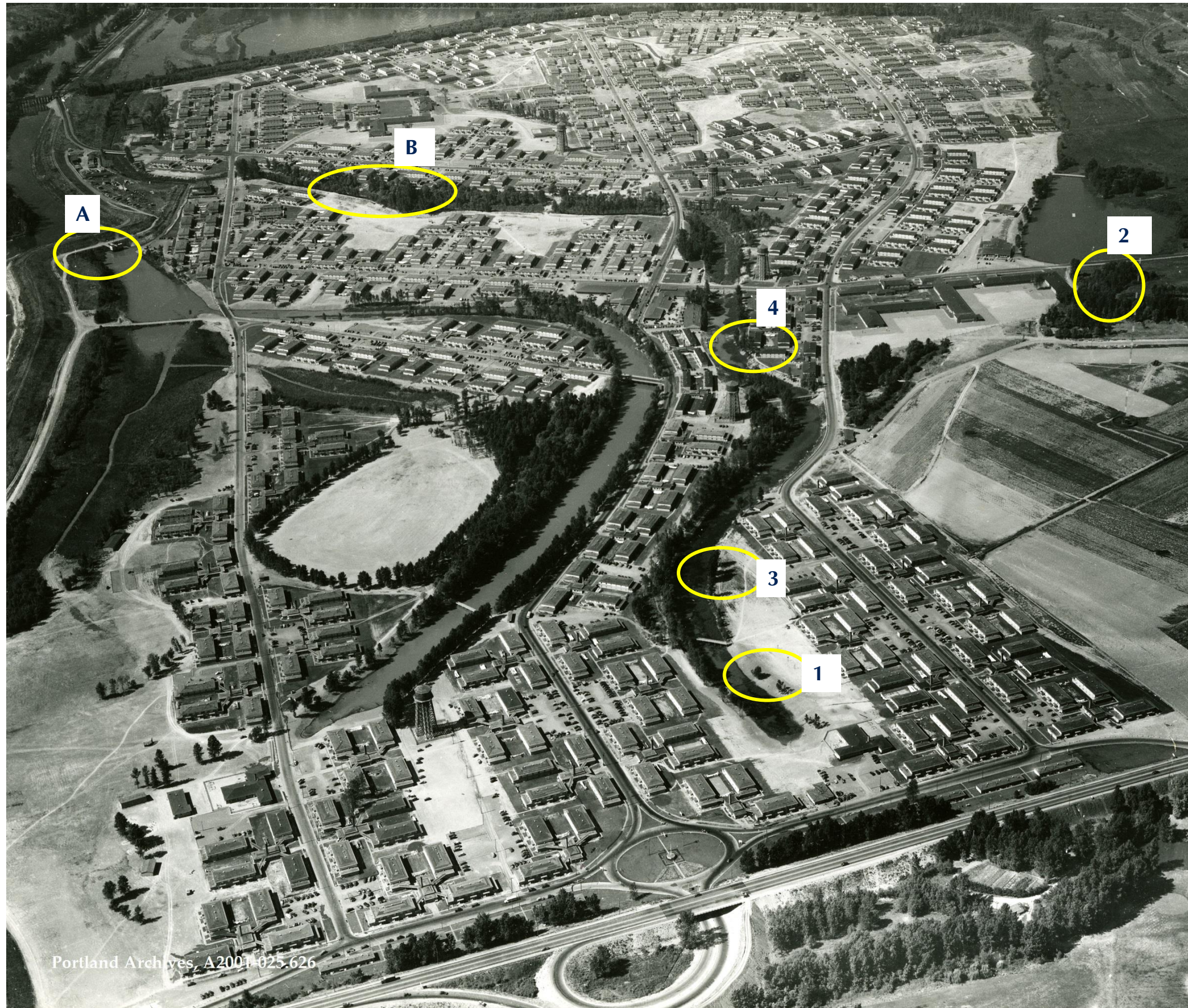
# 1940 Aerial Photo



City of Portland (OR) Archives, AP/46437

The 1940 aerial photograph shows the area of Vanport before construction started was agricultural fields and riparian area.







# 194X Aerial Photo



Portland Archives, A2001-025.798

The 194X aerial photograph showed Vanport, likely in the postwar period after some of its structures were removed.







# 1964 Aerial Photo



The 1964 aerial photograph shows the Vanport area many years after the flood, pre-development and with much of the original infrastructure in place.





# 1968A Aerial Photo



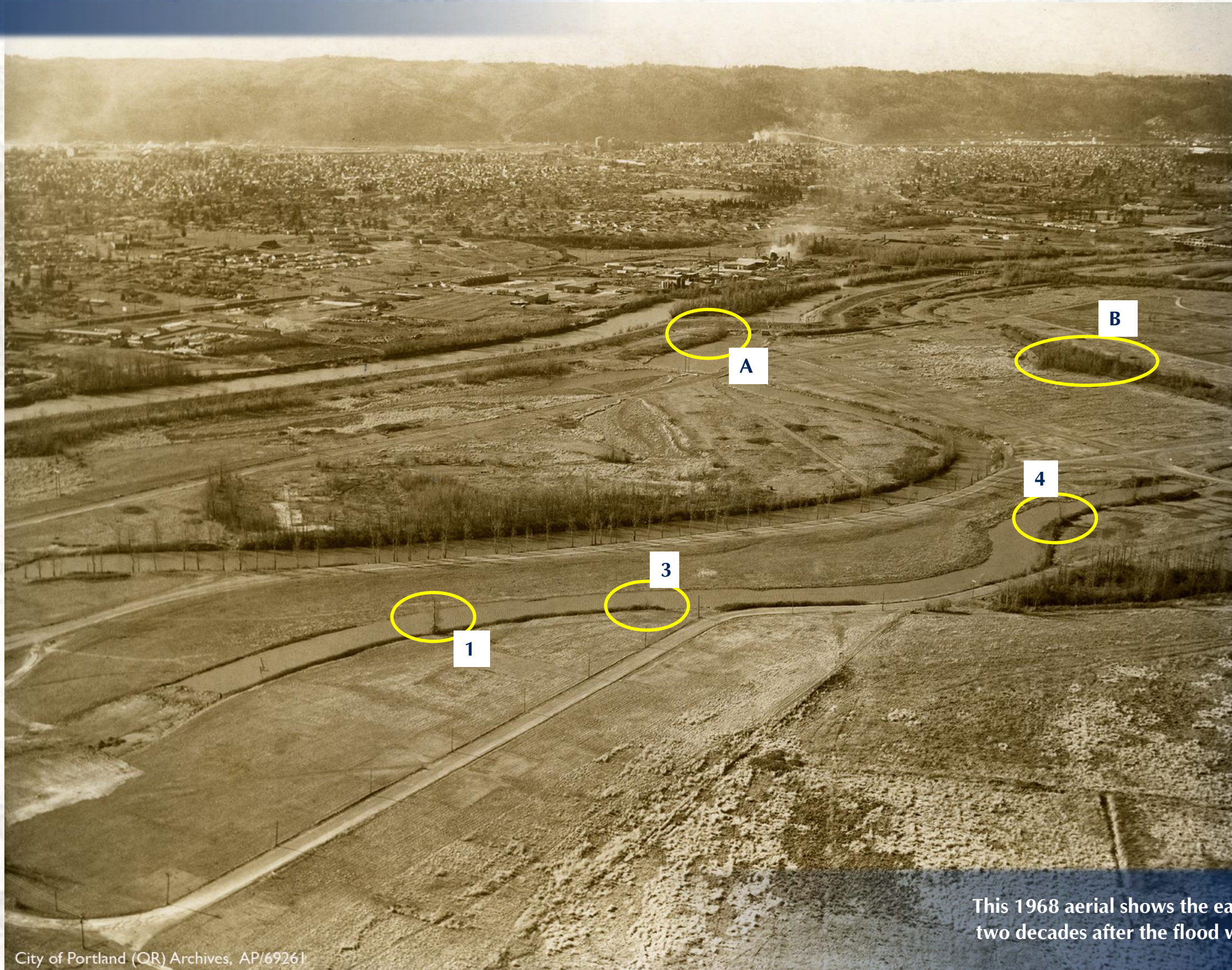
City of Portland (OR) Archives, AP/69260

This 1968 aerial shows the west side of Vanport two decades after the flood, when the area was relatively unused.





# 1968B Aerial Photo



City of Portland (OR) Archives, AP/69261

This 1968 aerial shows the east side of Vanport two decades after the flood when the area was relatively unused.





# 1971 Aerial Photo

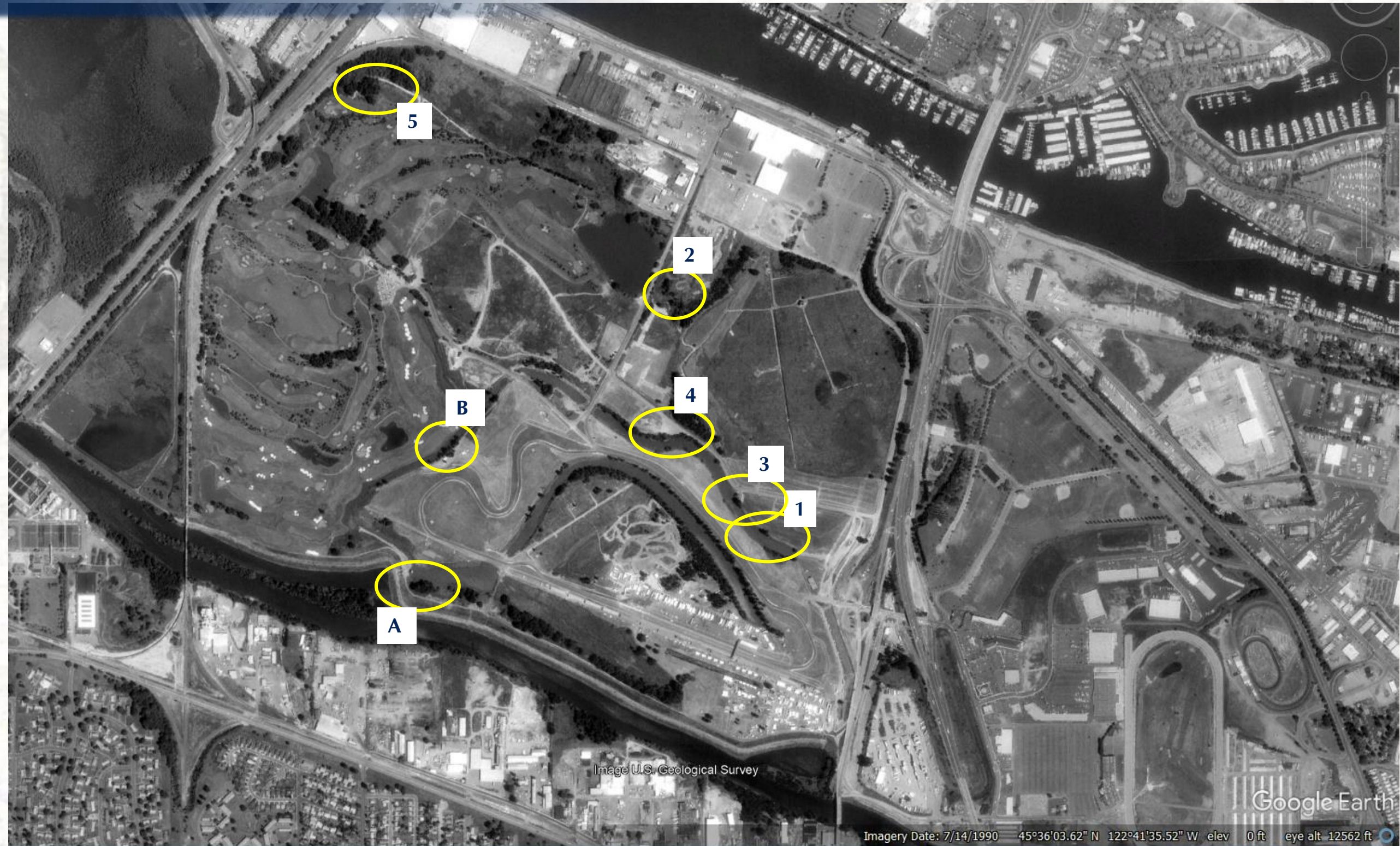


This 1971 aerial photo shows the Vanport site after construction of the Portland International Raceway and before the golf course.





# 1990 Aerial Photo



This 1990 Google Earth aerial image shows the Vanport area after construction of the golf course but before the creation of the wetland.





# 2022 Aerial Photo



imagery from 1985.

15

Imagery Date: 6/23/2022 45°36'03.62" N 122°41'35.52" W elev 0 ft eye alt 12562 ft

The 2022 Google Earth aerial photograph shows the Vanport area essentially as it is today.



# Methods

## In November of 2023, a collaborative field survey of trees that potentially predate the Vanport Flood of 1948 was first conducted by Ryan Gilpin, an ISA Certified Arborist with Nidus Consulting

Ryan took initial measurements, mapped, and inventoried the largest trees on the property at Heron Lakes Golf Course and the Portland International Raceway. Dave Hedberg, of Outdoor History Consulting, then conducted a preliminary archival investigation to locate any of the trees on historic aerials, photos, and maps of the site. His initial findings located several potential matches and a second field survey was conducted with Ryan, Dave, and Thomas Meinzen of the Vanport Placemarking Project in late November of 2023. This team mapped additional trees and recorded their sizes. A second archives investigation was completed in February of 2024, establishing a near-complete chronology of an isolated cottonwood tree photographed in the same location from the time of Vanport to the present. Most of the trees were revisited in the spring of 2024 to ensure they had survived the recent ice storm.

In this report each tree or cluster of trees has been mapped and measured and has multiple pieces of photographic evidence suggesting that it stood there since the time of Vanport. Although such evidence is not completely definitive, conducting a core sample or using tree ring analysis requires harming or cutting the tree down. In lieu of these destructive strategies, archival photographs and arboricultural knowledge makes very strong cases for several trees to have survived since the Vanport era and warrants their recognition as Heritage Trees representing Oregon's living past.

It is our hope that this report will help these trees gain recognition in future interpretation and historical documentation of the Vanport site.



City of Portland Archives A2001-025.627

## References

1. Carl Abbott, [Vanport](#) Oregon Encyclopedia, Sept. 26, 2023, accessed 7/1/2024.
2. McElderry, Stuart. [Vanport Conspiracy Rumors and Social Relations in Portland, 1940-1950](#). Oregon Historical Quarterly, vol. 99, no.2 (Summer 1998): 134-163.
3. Skovgaard, Dale. [Memories of the 1948 Vanport Flood](#). Oregon Historical Quarterly, vol. 108, no.1 (Spring 2007): 88-106.
4. [Google Earth Pro](#). Aerial Images 1990 and 2022, accessed June 15, 2023.
5. [City of Portland Archives](#), photo collections.
6. [Oregon Historical Society Research Library](#), photo collections.

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