

A Working Landscape: The History of Camas, the Mill, and the Community

Camas Before the Mill

Early History and Encounters with Europeans

The land where the town of Camas and the mill now sit has been used extensively by the people who lived there since time immemorial. The region supported diverse communities from multiple tribes and language groups. Many Chinook-speaking people and members of the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation used the area, while the Klickitat band maintained a winter village site in Camas and worked the land near present-day Fort Vancouver.

In 1792, the people who lived around Camas first encountered the British-led Vancouver exploration party. Contact with Europeans throughout the late eighteenth century remained sparse until the arrival of the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1805. William Clark's records describe hunting, fishing, and gathering at Lady Island, which is now directly across the Camas Slough from the mill. Wildlife there was so abundant that he referred to it as the "Island of the Fowls."



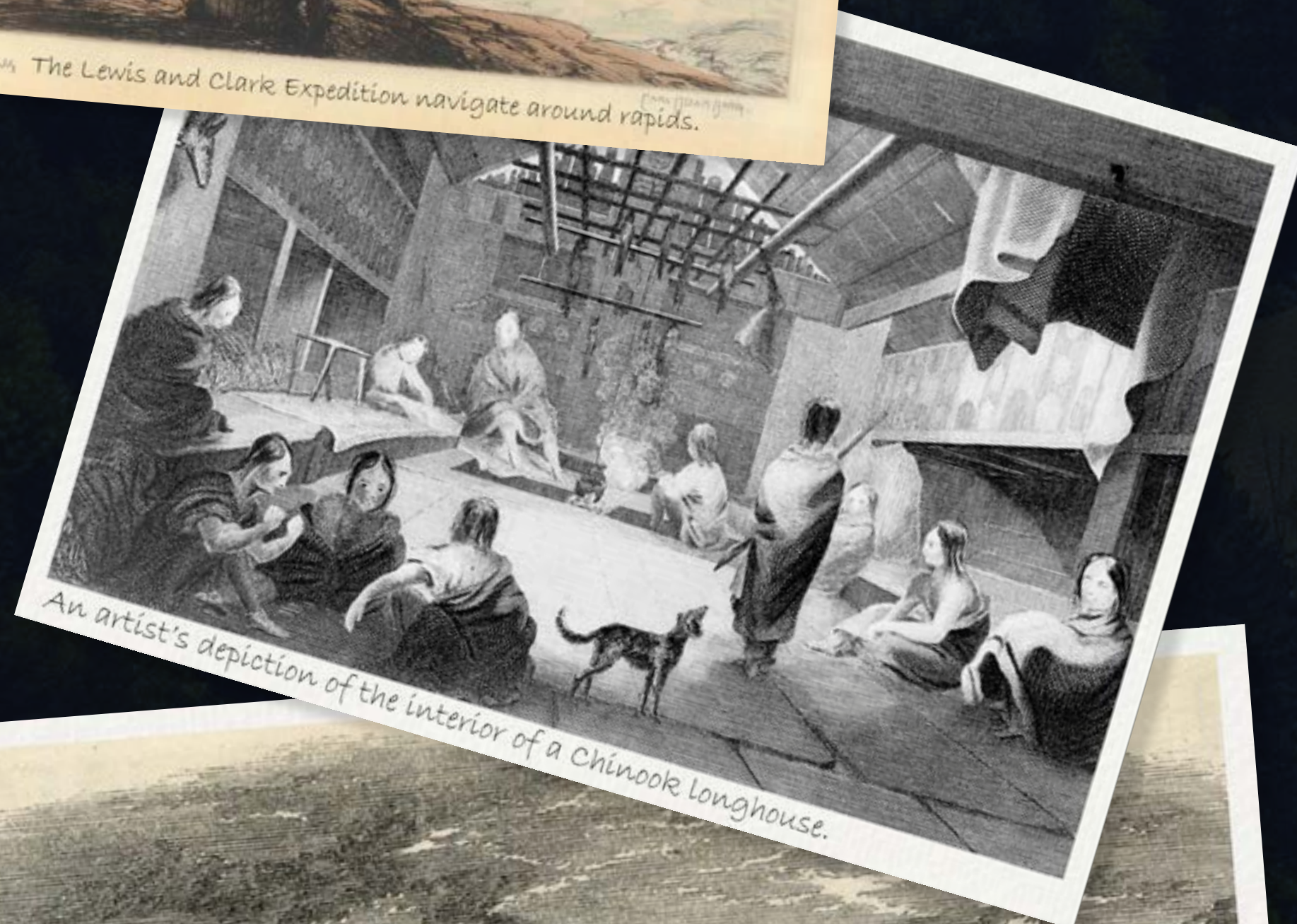
Henry Pittock, a key figure in the founding and early development of the Camas Mill.

Early Settlement at Camas

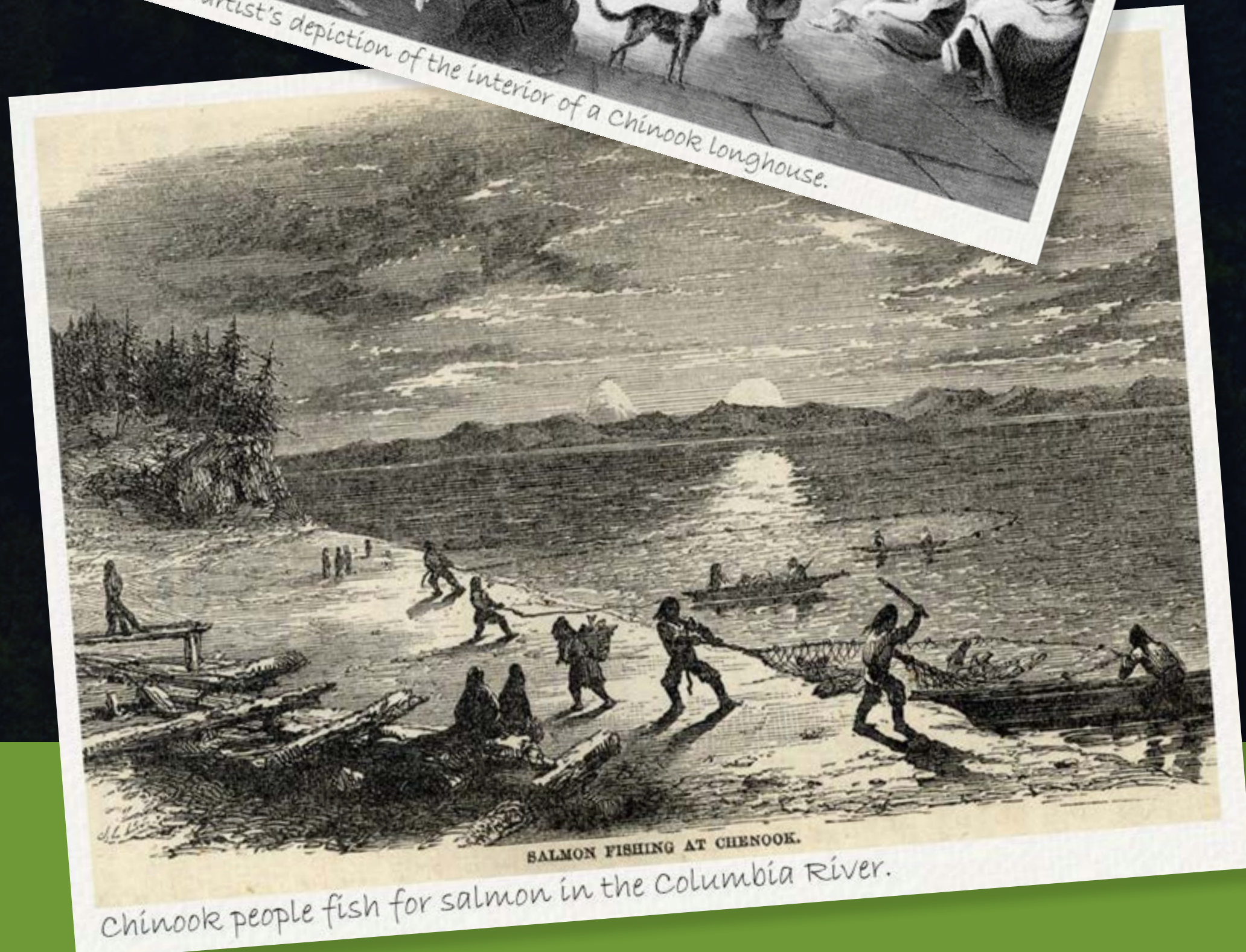
By the mid- to late-19th century, early non-Native settlement in the area was scattered, and white settlers lived in relative isolation in dense forests along the Columbia River. Even so, early efforts to establish industry began. Over the course of the late 1800s, there were several attempts to establish sawmills, but each one was destroyed by fire before they could get fully up and running.



The Lewis and Clark Expedition navigate around rapids.



An artist's depiction of the interior of a Chinook longhouse.



SALMON FISHING AT CHENOOK.

Chinook people fish for salmon in the Columbia River.

Did You Know?



Camas' Namesake

"Camas" is derived from a Chinook term, "quamash," for the Camas Lily, a blue-flowered lily that grew abundantly on the banks of the Washougal River. Camas bulbs are a staple of the diets of indigenous communities from the Great Plains to the Pacific Northwest. French Canadian fur trappers, who noted the plant's abundance, named the area "La Camas," a name that endures today.

Camas and the Mill

Building the Mill, Building Camas

In 1883, Henry Pittock, a wealthy entrepreneur and publisher of *The Oregonian*, and other investors, formed the LaCamas Colony Company. His company purchased 2,600 acres of land—part of what is now Camas—from Hamilton J.G. Maxon, an early settler who had received the land in a donation land claim by President Abraham Lincoln. The company set out to construct a paper mill along the Columbia River to supply newsprint for *The Oregonian* and other regional newspapers.



The Camas mill at the beginning, pictured here in the late 1800s.

The following years saw rapid development. Shops, housing, and services grew around the mill to support the workers there, and in 1885, the mill began full operations. The Columbia River Paper Company produced the first wood pulp ever manufactured in the Northwest to be made into newsprint for *The Oregonian*.

The mill was not in operation for long, however. In 1886, a fire partially destroyed the mill—continuing a pattern that had affected earlier industrial efforts in the area. Despite significant losses, plans to rebuild moved forward.

Business in a Boom Town

Growth continued into the early 1900s. The mill was rebuilt and the local economy was strong. In 1906 the town of LaCamas was incorporated, and by 1908, rail was laid into town with regular freight and passenger service along the Columbia.

As the town grew, so did businesses to support those who worked at the mill. The town soon included sawmills, a cannery, stores, food service, a local newspaper, hotels and opera houses. The paper mill expanded its capacity, too. In the 1910s, the mill invested \$200,000 in new papermaking equipment, including one of the largest machines in the world at the time.

Even more businesses were established throughout the 1910s. T.S. Woolson built a movie theater in town; a creamery was founded, and Camas High School was established. In 1913, the population had exploded to 1,659 people from just 417 in 1890.

Working at the mill, however, could be dangerous. After an unsuccessful strike in 1917, workers formed the Paper Workers Union to improve safety and conditions. Early efforts were unsuccessful, and the mill's workforce did not permanently unionize until the 1930s. Those organizations continued, eventually becoming the Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers, Local 5 in 1964, still representing Camas workers today.



Mill workers gather around a lathe at the mill's machine shop.

In the late 1930s, the mill established a research center in Camas which led to the development of hundreds of patents related to paper production. Chemists and engineers flocked to Camas to work at the mill, and the community was instilled with a legacy of innovation and education.

With the outbreak of World War II, the mill scaled up production to meet demands brought on by the war effort. Rather than only producing paper, the mill's machine shops were converted to provide parts for warships produced in Vancouver.

As the mill developed and the town followed, a strong community grew with an unshakeable belief in hard work, the value of education, and the bond of shared purpose.



Crown Willamette Paper Bag Co. Employees — March 23, 1931 — Camas, Washington

Mill workers assemble outside the mill's entrance in 1931. These employees worked making paper bags, one of the mill's main products.



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The mill, under construction as improvements were made in 1922.

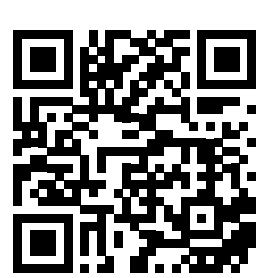
Timeline: Environmental Regulation and Responsibility at the Mill



The Camas Mill has been a central part of the region's life, culture, and economy since the 1880s, serving as a major economic driver for over 140 years. Alongside these benefits, more than a century of industrial activity has also resulted in potential contamination in soil, sediments, and groundwater in and around the mill. By the mid-20th century, growing public awareness and scientific understanding brought increased focus to the mill's operations and the need for improved environmental stewardship.

The passage of landmark federal laws such as the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act in the 1970s established new standards that shaped how the mill and similar industries manage air and water quality. The history of environmental progress is laid out in the timeline below.

- **1958:** The U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare identifies the Camas Paper Mill as a major source of organic pollution in the Lower Columbia River. The report identified bacteria growth in the Camas Slough and downstream areas.
- **1970:** The Clean Air Act is enacted, establishing national standards to control air pollution and requiring industries to reduce emissions. The mill and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) demonstrate successful burning of dewatered sludge, reducing waste from wastewater treatment.
- **1972:** The Clean Water Act is enacted, creating national regulations to limit pollution discharged into rivers and other waterways.
- **1975:** A Kraft recovery furnace and secondary wastewater treatment system begin operating, helping reduce air emissions and improve water treatment.
- **1992:** The mill invests \$80 million to modernize energy and recovery systems, improving efficiency and reducing emissions.
- **1997:** The mill invests \$37 million to reduce pollution—eliminating hypochlorite in bleaching, installing air scrubbers to reduce odor, and converting bleaching systems to chlorine-free processes.
- **2002:** Pulp mill upgrades and oxygen delignification reduce the need for chlorine in bleaching, and a steam stripper is installed to reduce odors.
- **2004–05:** \$30 million in environmental upgrades improve energy efficiency and further reduce emissions and odors.
- **2006–07:** A new chip unloading system reduces wood dust by 75%, improving air quality at the mill.
- **2010:** An Energy Team is established to continually identify ways to reduce energy use and improve environmental performance.
- **2018:** A large portion of the mill is shut down as Georgia Pacific (GP) seeks to scale down the mill's capacity, which reduces its impact on the environment. **The mill ceases its pulp-making operations, eliminating the odor associated with pulp production for downtown and the surrounding communities.**
- **2020:** Oversight of the GP Mill's Title V air permit is transferred from the Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology) to the Southwest Clean Air Agency. A Title V permit is a comprehensive operating permit for "major sources" of pollution, ensuring that operations are compliant with EPA standards. The GP Mill had held a Title V permit under Ecology's oversight since the 1990s, and in 2020 it was transferred following the shutdown of a large portion of the mill.
- **2021:** The startup of the new package boiler reduced the mill's energy use by about 400,000 MMBtu per year and was part of a \$15 million capital investment upgrade. Ecology and GP enter into an Agreed Order to investigate potential contamination in areas around the mill site that are no longer in use in order to develop and execute a site cleanup plan.
- **2022:** The GP Mill becomes the first paper mill in Washington State to achieve the ENERGY STAR Challenge for Industry acknowledgement for their 12.5% reduction in energy intensity.
- **2025:** The Camas Mill Revitalization Project is announced, which will include the removal of unused boiler structures and an \$8 million investment in equipment and infrastructure upgrades to support long-term mill operations.



Learn More

For more information and to sign up to receive updates on the Camas GP Mill cleanup process, scan the QR or visit: downtowncamas.com/camaswamillinfo

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