

# Cathlamet

A historic community overlooking the Columbia River, this small Washington town is infused with history



Built in 1907 by timber mogul Henry Armstrong, Bradley House is now a bed and breakfast in Cathlamet, Washington.

Looking for a pleasant drive and a bit of history? Cross the Astoria Bridge, turn right, and take Washington State Routes 401 and then 4 east to the village of Cathlamet. The town, which has had a population of 500, more or less, for well over a century, still looks much as it did in the 19th century. A historic community built on the steep slopes rising above the Columbia River, the life of the town centers on the river, as it always has; a lot of history has flowed by and through Cathlamet.

On Nov. 11, 1805 the wind was, “very high from the S.W., with most tremendous waves breaking with great violence against the shores. Rain falling in torrents, we are all wet as usual and our situation is truly a disagreeable one.” Welcome to Cathlamet, Capt. Clark.

One of the largest native settlements on the Columbia west of the Cascades was on the site of what is now Cathlamet. There, Lewis and Clark met a canoe with five Wahkiakum natives, whom Clark called, “the best canoe navigators I ever saw.” It was not the first contact of these indigenous peoples with Europeans; Clark noted that, “One of those men had on a sailor’s jacket and pantaloons.”

Further contact was not advantageous to the Wahkiakum people, bringing as it did disease and alcohol. The last speakers of the language they shared with the Kathlamet people across the river died in the 1930s.

In 1846 James Birnie, a retired Hudson Bay Company employee, was the first non-native to settle in what is now Cathlamet. His wife, Charlotte, had Kootenai and French Canadian ancestry, and the couple had 12 children. Birnie established a trading post called Birnie’s Retreat, and the family became a part of the village of several hundred natives. Birnie’s Retreat soon became a thriving business,

## If you visit

Bradley House,  
61 Main St., 360-795-3030

Julia Butler Hansen Heritage Center, 35 Butler St.

River Rat Tap, 90 Broadway  
Wahkiakum Historical Museum,  
65 River St.

River Mile 38 Brewery,  
285 Third St., by Elochoman Marina,  
open 4 to 8 p.m. Friday & Saturday



Outside the Wahkiakum County Historical Museum sits the 70-ton “Six Spot” logging locomotive.



Today Bradley House is a bed and breakfast owned by Paige and Steven Lake.

trading furs, fish and other foods to the river travelers on their way to Astoria; soon others began to settle in Cathlamet.

James Birnie’s sister became Wahkiakum County’s first schoolteacher. She married a former Hudson Bay clerk, George Roberts, and in 1857 they built a home. Now the Julia Butler Hansen Heritage Center, it is the oldest building in Cathlamet.

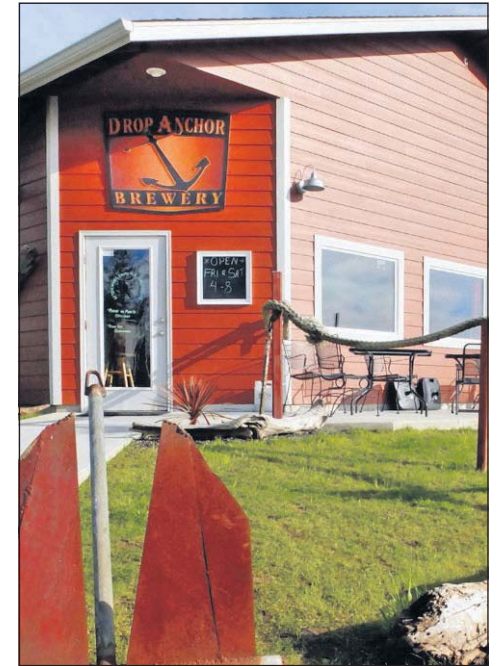
Shortly after Birnie arrived, the first of a series of lumber mills was built in the area, followed by fishing and canning. Due to the town’s isolation, farming was a necessary, if very difficult enterprise. As logging camps dwindled, the need for farms diminished, and few remain today.

What does remain is a picturesque town out of time. The docks once used by commercial fishermen are now use by tugboats and recreational boaters. On Main Street you’ll find an antique shop, restaurants, and all the other small town offerings. You’ll also find historic homes.

Timber mogul Henry Armstrong built one of these in 1907. This large Craftsman eventually became the home of Blanche Heron Bradley, who donated it to the city to become a library. Today Bradley House is a bed and breakfast owned by Steven and Paige Lake. The house is a prominent downtown landmark, and the interior has hardly changed since Armstrong built it. Even the original heavy curtains survived the 14 years that the house served as a public library.

The most infamous waterfront landmark was, until 2010, the River Rat Tap tavern. The building and the sign remain, but the building currently houses a food bank. Once used for scenes in the movies “Man of Honor” and “Snow Falling on Cedars,” the River Rat is for sale (\$125,000), waiting for a lover of waterfront taverns to revive it again.

In the meantime, Cathlamet has the Drop Anchor Brewery — or the brewery that was once known as Drop Anchor. Seems that Anchor Brewing of San Francisco thought that this small craft brewery was infringing on its trademark. So Drop Anchor is now known as River Mile 38 Brewery.



Cathlamet’s small craft brewery changed its name from Drop Anchor Brewery to River Mile 38 Brewery after Anchor Brewing of San Francisco contacted it about trademark infringement concerns.

Same beer. Try the coffee porter or pale ale, and have a taco from the stand outside.

Five minutes from River Mile 38 you’ll find the Wahkiakum County Historical Museum, where the collection contains stone tools used by the Chinooks, horse seining equipment, and a lot of other historical displays and information. Outside the museum is the 70-ton “Six Spot” logging locomotive used where other engines couldn’t be: up steep grades, around tight curves, and across trestles bridging forest canyons.

From Cathlamet, take the bridge to Puget Island and spend some time among its misty farms before crossing on the new Oscar B ferry to Westport, and then driving U.S. Highway 30 back to the coast.

# travel

Story and photos by DWIGHT CASWELL

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