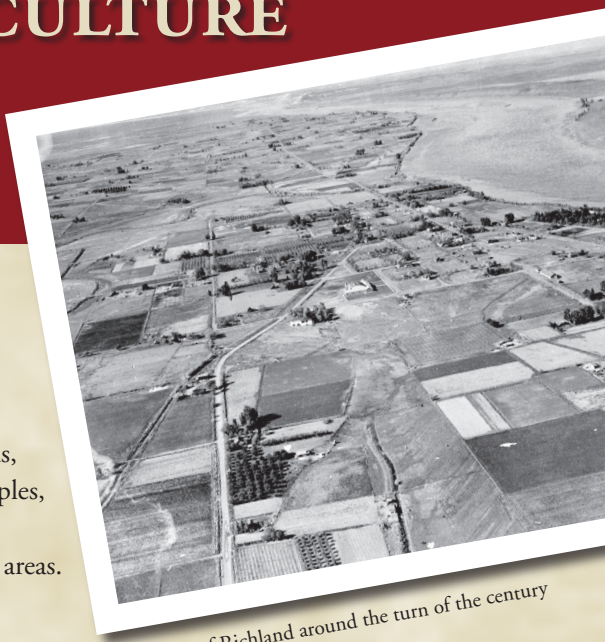
Richland Canal Made Early Agriculture Possible



Aerial view of Richland around the turn of the century

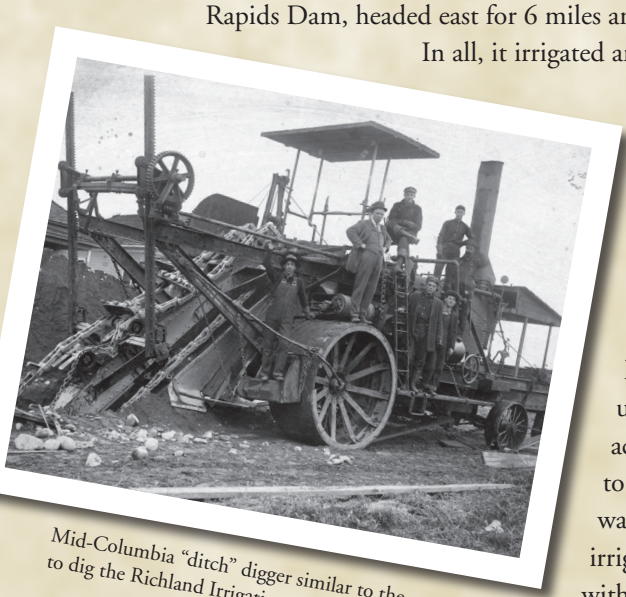
In 1922, the Fruitvale School District, located where north Richland is now, was a thriving agricultural community. The hot desert sun and warm days made the area ideal for crops ranging from asparagus, potatoes and corn to cherries, peaches, apples, grapes and strawberries—with fruit often maturing two weeks ahead of comparable areas.

The only thing missing from the natural environment was water, and this was available from the nearby Columbia and Yakima rivers. Even though the Columbia River was closer and carried an almost limitless supply of water, the slight grade from the Columbia would have required longer and more expensive canals and pumping equipment to deliver the water so early residents drew all their water from the Yakima River.

Canal History

Constructed in segments between the late 1890s and the early 1900s by the Lower Yakima Irrigation Company to promote agricultural development around the young community of Richland, the Richland Irrigation Canal was used as a selling point in early land advertisements for the area.

The irrigation system consisted of a main canal, several lateral canals, and at least one drainage ditch. The main canal began on the north side of the Yakima River's Horn Rapids Dam, headed east for 6 miles and then forked north, south and east. In all, it irrigated an area about 13 miles long and 9 miles wide. Irrigation water provided through the Richland Irrigation Canal system made farming in the Mid-Columbia not only possible, but successful.



Mid-Columbia "ditch" digger similar to the one used to dig the Richland Irrigation Canal

As with most early 20th century irrigation projects, the canal changed hands several times and had its financial ups and downs. By 1927, cultivated acreage, within what was then referred to as the Richland Irrigation District, was about 5,100 acres. At one time, the irrigation district covered 14,900 acres with 10,000 irrigable acres.

Tribute to the canal

Because of the significant role that the Richland Irrigation Canal played in Richland's history, segments of the canal were added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1994. The branch of the canal that ran through the Fruitvale School District, part of which is now the Port of Benton Manufacturing Mall and formerly referred to as the Hanford Site 1100 Area, was one such segment.

Portions of this section of the canal were lined with cement to minimize leakage. Inscriptions found in the concrete liner contain the name "Ed Jones" and the year "1922."

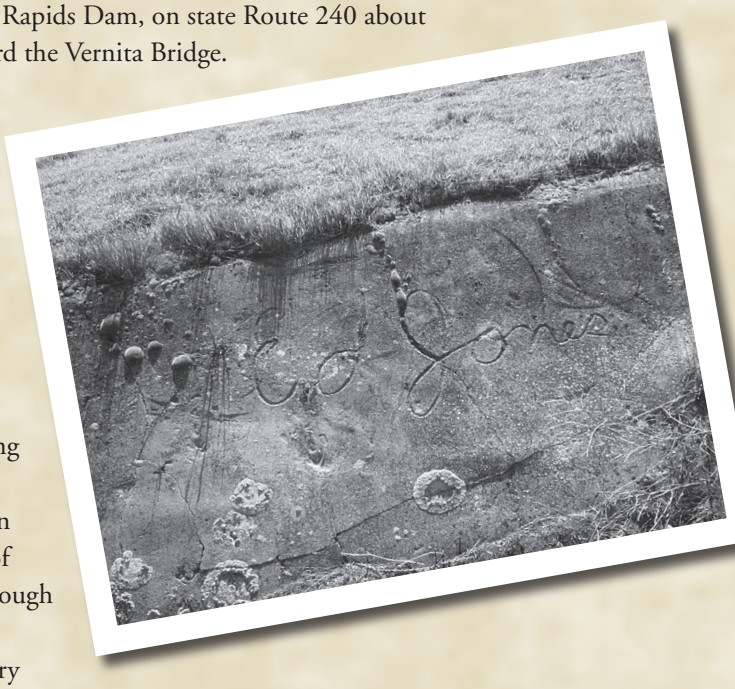
"Just put on the market—sixteen thousand acres! Finest irrigation project in the Northwest—The last gravity system on the famous Yakima River with the oldest water rights—The Lower Yakima Irrigation Company and the Benton Water Company have consolidated their interest. They now have 4,000 acres, including the town site of Richland, under irrigation, and the immense canal now under construction…will provide plenty of water for 12,000 acres more."

- Local newspaper advertisement from the early 1900s

The pre-Hanford agricultural period of the Port of Benton Manufacturing Mall was a time of transition to mechanized equipment. By 1923, tractors were more readily available and farm size peaked in 1925. Land values plummeted during the depression in the 1930s; however, by the time the government took over the area in 1943 for the Manhattan Project, land values and commodity prices were beginning to improve.

Today's canal

Remains of the canal are scattered throughout north Richland and are still visible at the canal's starting point at Horn Rapids Dam, on state Route 240 about 10 miles from Richland toward the Vernita Bridge.



This flier is the result of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the U.S. Department of Energy, Pacific Northwest Site Office, and the Washington Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation. The MOA addresses the effects of building new laboratories north of the city of Richland. Construction will destroy a small segment of the canal system that runs through the PNNL site. This flier was prepared to preserve the history of the canal.

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PNNL thanks the East Benton County Historical Museum for the photos.

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