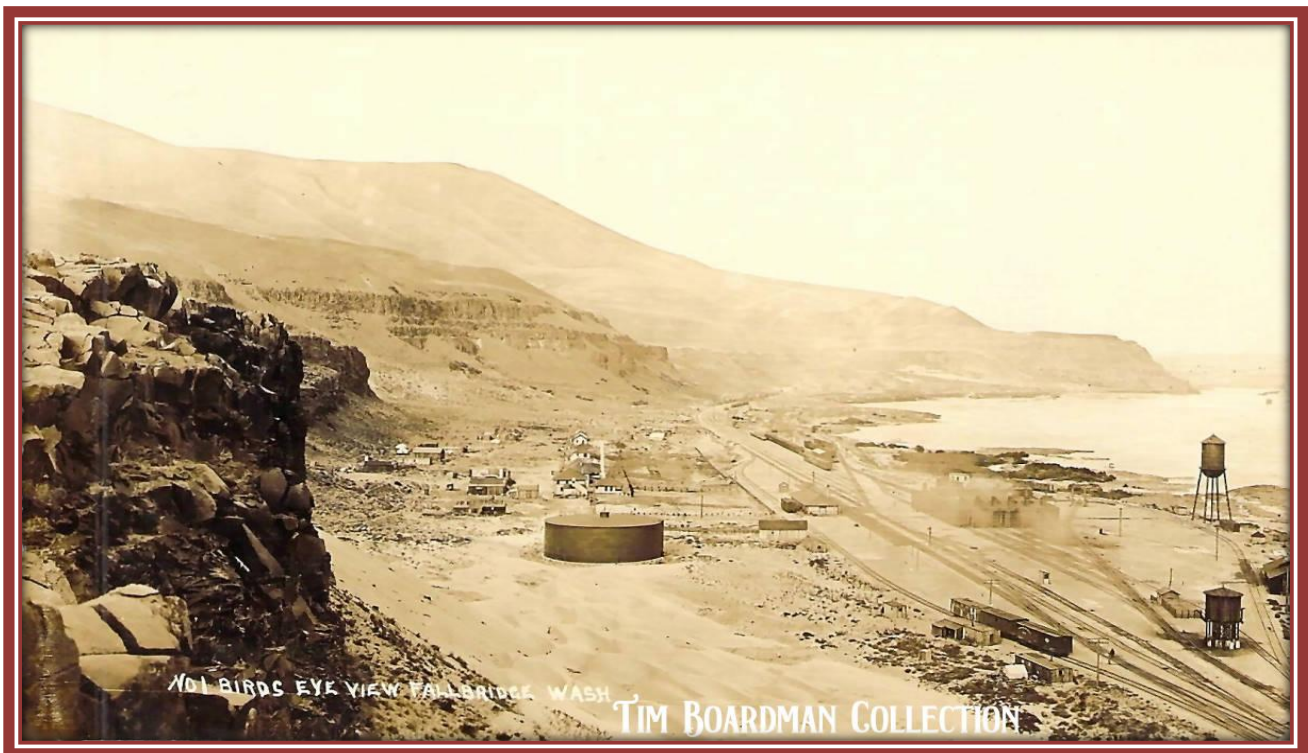




# WEBFOOTER EXTRA

## SEPTEMBER 2025

### FALLBRIDGE BECOMES THE RAILROAD TOWN OF WISHRAM BY DAN SIMMERING



Patton real photo birdseye view postcard of Fallbridge, Washington circa 1914.  
Postally unused.



Real photo postcard of Celilo Falls on the Columbia River with the Fallbridge in the background circa 1935. Postally unused.

After the southern extension of the Spokane, Portland and Seattle Railway (SP&S) was made possible with the construction of the Oregon Trunk Rail Bridge on the basalt rock at Celilo Falls, George Bunn opened the area's first store in 1911. He filed a plat of the town in 1914, naming it Fallbridge, Washington.

Fallbridge, which is in the southern section of Klickitat County, was located one-half mile above the head of the great Celilo Falls on the Columbia River. The fertile Deschutes River Valley was just to the south of the falls and the bridge opened the route for rail access.

The town's importance was enhanced by two nearby geological features: the Celilo Falls on the Columbia River, and the access to the Central Oregon Plateau via the Deschutes River, just across the falls from Fallbridge. The falls not only provided early inhabitants with a reliable source of food, but it later provided a convenient location for an easily constructed railroad bridge crossing the Columbia.

Native Americans gathered for thousands of years at Celilo to fish and exchange goods. They built wooden platforms out over the water and caught salmon with dipnets and long spears on poles as the fish swam up through the rapids and jumped over the falls.

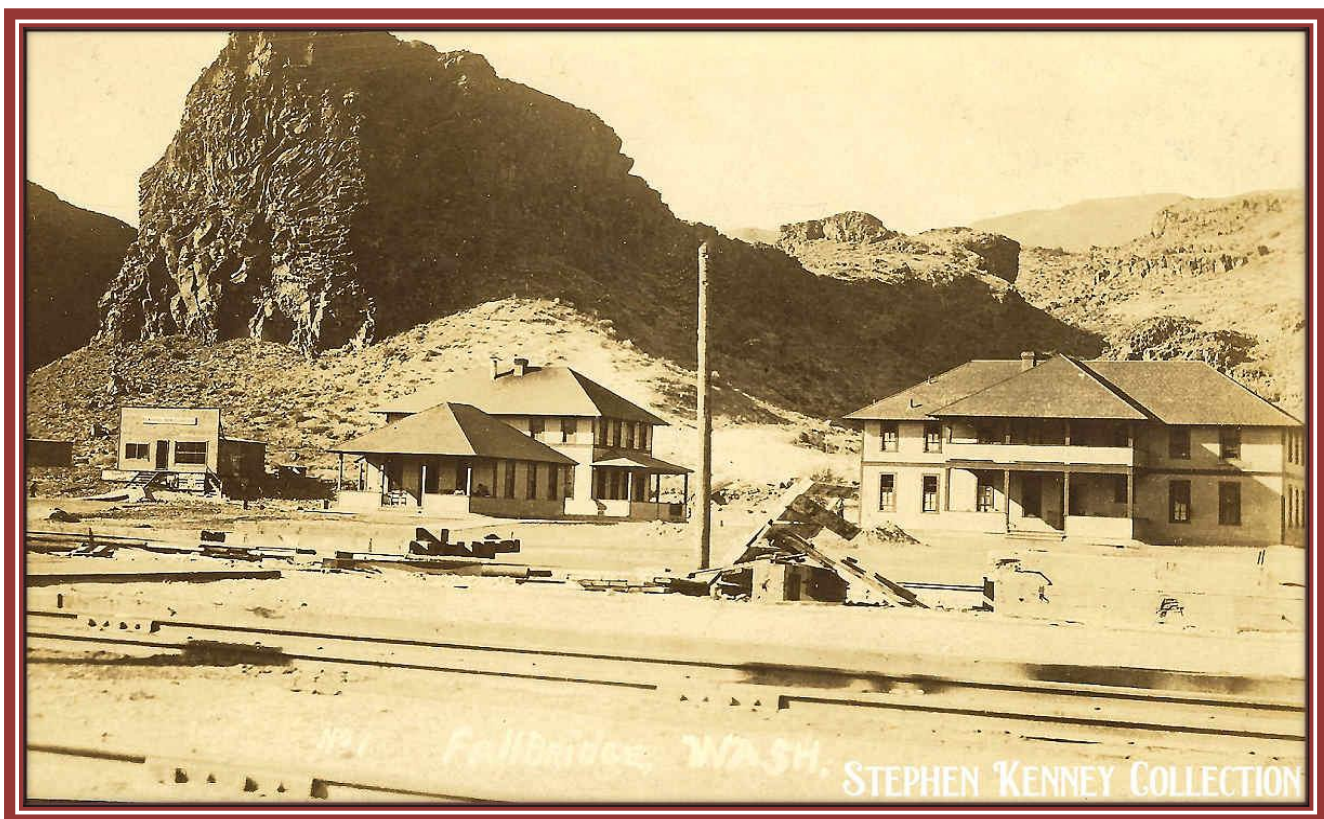




Real photo postcard of the first train crossing Celilo Falls at Fallbridge in 1912. Postally unused.



B.C. Markham real photo postcard of the Fallbridge, circa 1930. Postally unused.



Real photo postcard of the newly-built Fallbridge Hotel (right), circa 1914. A barber shop was located in the center building in front of a house. Postally unused.

The Spokane, Portland and Seattle Railway was chartered in 1905 by James J. Hill for the purpose of connecting Portland, Oregon to Pasco, Washington. Construction began in 1906 under the name Portland & Seattle Railway and proceeded eastward from Vancouver, Washington and west from Pasco.

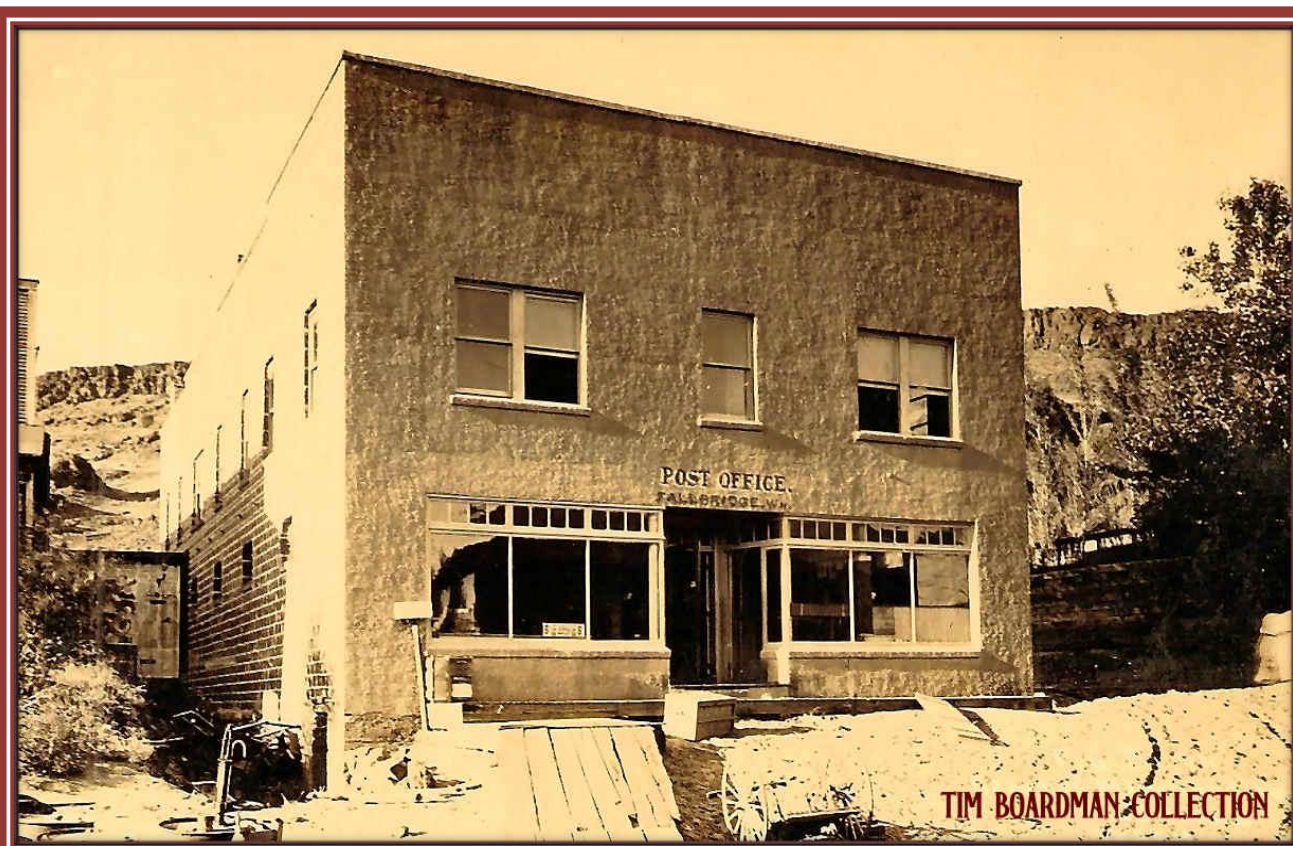
Within a year the line had been nearly completed along the Columbia River as far as Pasco, Washington, where there was a connection with the Northern Pacific line. On December 15, 1907, the first section to open was from Pasco west through Fallbridge to Maryhill, a length of 112 miles. Crews extended the line west to Lyle on January 15, 1908, for a total of 145 miles, as final construction continued on the 56-mile section from there to Vancouver.

In January 1908, "Spokane" was added to the railroad's name, making it the Spokane, Portland & Seattle Railway. By 1909, the railroad had completed construction of its line up to Spokane along the Snake River.

A post office was opened in Fallbridge on May 9, 1911 and it closed on February 27, 1926. The post office was renamed to Wishram when it opened on March 1, 1926.

On May 3, 1915, the US government completed a set of locks to bypass Celilo Falls on the southern shore. Built at a cost of \$5,000,000, these locks saw limited service as much of the freight in and out of the Pacific Northwest began to travel by rail.





Real photo postcard of Fallbridge, Washington Post Office, circa 1915. Postally unused.



Patton real photo postcard of the Fallbridge Depot, circa 1914. Postally unused.





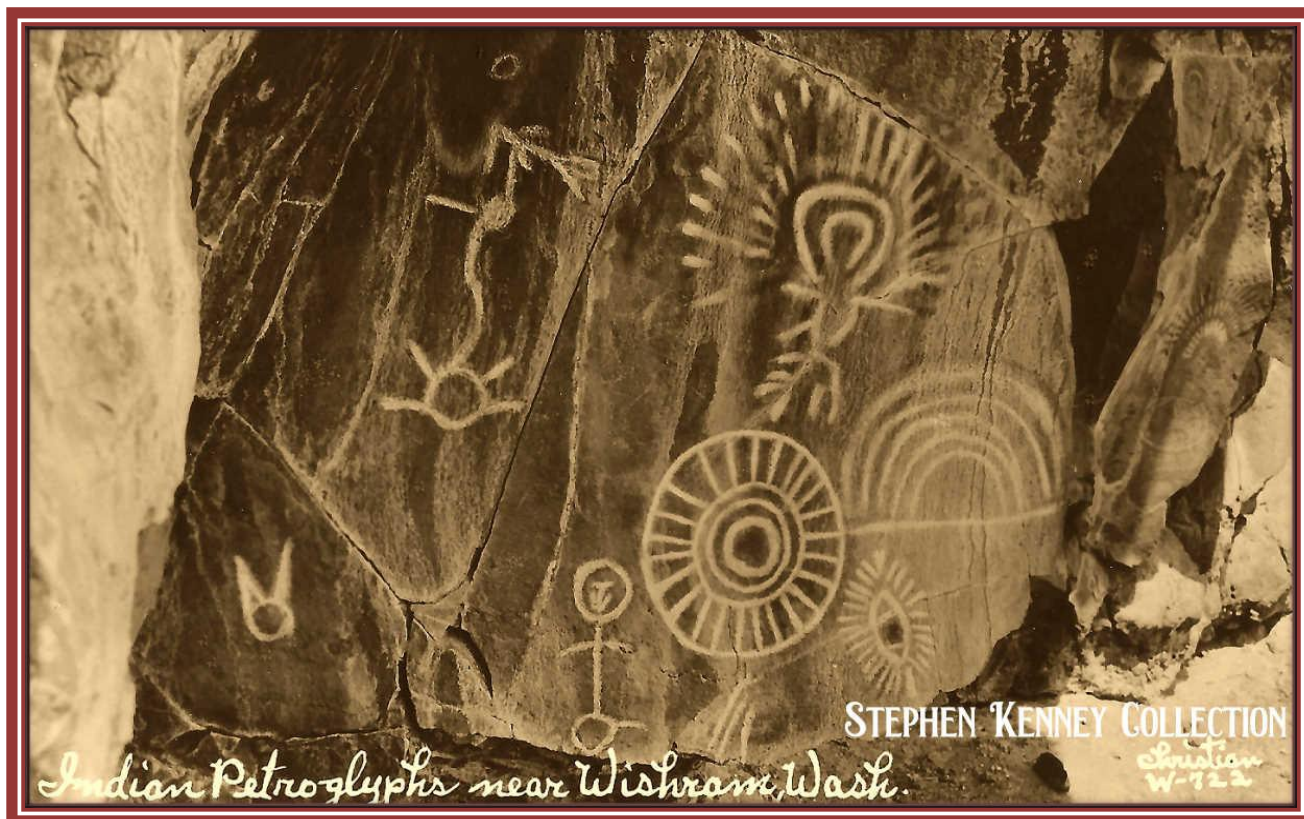
O. Hedlund real photo postcard of a train bound for Portland at Fallbridge, Washington circa 1916. Postally unused.

The lay of the land near Celilo made bridging the Columbia River relatively easy. During low water periods of the river, it was possible to construct a bridge that had piers resting on exposed basalt rock at the waterfall. During periods of high water, when this stretch of the Columbia River became raging rapids, the piers supported a bridge spanning the entire falls. This bridge over Celilo Falls became known as the Oregon Trunk Rail Bridge or the "Fallbridge."

The single-track railroad bridge opened in 1912 and it consisted of eight steel truss spans and several deck girder spans. The location of this bridge also facilitated construction of a rail line on south through the Deschutes River canyon, allowing access to eastern Oregon's high desert plateau, the eastern side of the Cascade Range and eventually to California.

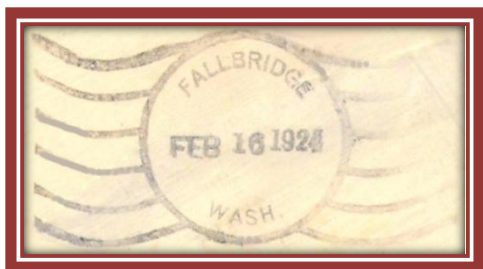
The rail yard in Fallbridge served as a passenger terminal, roundhouse and freight switch yard for traffic, particularly that destined for Bend, Oregon. Recognizing its central location on the SP&S, a 300-ton automatic coaling station was erected at Fallbridge in 1920. The name was officially changed to "Wishram" in 1926 to honor the Wishram tribe of Native Americans.

When The Dalles Dam began operating, it caused the water to engulf Celilo Falls on March 10, 1957, when its gates closed, raising the Columbia River's level and submerging the falls and ancient fishing sites in a matter of hours. This event marked the silencing of the falls' roar and disrupted the lives of the Indigenous people who had relied on them for millennia. Also in 1957, a vertical-lift section was added to the Fallbridge to allow the passage of barges beneath on the waterway.



Christian real photo postcard of Native American petroglyphs near Wishram, circa 1950. Postally unused.

Today, the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad rolls through Wishram, and the railroad station was replaced. It sits on the same site as the original depot. Many of the buildings are still around, including the hotel, although it has been altered significantly.



Fallbridge Roller Registered Postmark 1924 Reverse  
Tim Boardman Collection

#### Sources for this article:

The Columbian Newspaper, Post Offices of Washington by Tim Boardman, Wikipedia

**Editor's Note:** Thanks to postcard collector and Northwest Rail Historian Dan Simmering for authoring this article. Thanks also to Tim Boardman and Steve Kenney for providing additional photos.

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