

United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

AUG 12 1987

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

NATIONAL REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Northern Pacific Depot other names/site number Lester Depot (preferred)

2. Location

street & number NA city, town Lester (unincorporated) state Washington code 053 (WA) county King code 033 zip code 98022

3. Classification

Ownership of Property: private (checked), public-local, public-State, public-Federal. Category of Property: building(s) (checked), district, site, structure, object. Number of Resources within Property: Contributing 1, Noncontributing 0, Total 1.

Name of related multiple property listing: N.A. Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets (checked) does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet. Signature of certifying official: Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation. Date: 7/30/87.

In my opinion, the property meets (checked) does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet. Signature of commenting or other official: State or Federal agency and bureau: Date:

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is: entered in the National Register (checked). Entered in the National Register (checked) 9-10-87. Signature of the Keeper: Date of Action:

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**6. Function or Use**

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Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Transportation: rail-related

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Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Not in use

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**7. Description**

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Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Other: depot design, 19th century

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Materials (enter categories from instructions)

wood

foundation

walls wood: weatherboard

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roof

wood: shingle

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other

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**Describe present and historic physical appearance.**

Lester Depot stands in the isolated mountain town of Lester, Washington, along the Cascade Branch of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Built in 1886 from standard Northern Pacific designs, the wood-framed depot represents the visual and economic focus of a community that is rapidly dying. The termination of railroad activity and City of Tacoma closed watershed policies have reduced the community to a virtual ghost town. Though deteriorated and forlorn, the depot itself still conveys a strong sense of function, style, and ambiance.

The depot is situated in the Green River Watershed in the heart of the Cascade Mountains approximately 75 miles east of Tacoma. Nestled in a flat bed of the upper Green River Valley, the town of Lester is walled by high hills on the north and south. The trans-mountain high voltage lines of the Bonneville Power master grid border the valley to the north., About 14 miles further east is Stampede Pass at an elevation of 2,670 feet, and just before it the famous Stampede tunnels of the Northern Pacific Railroad (listed in the National Register of Historic Places.) Lester stretches along U.S. Forest Service Road #54 and along either side of what is now Burlington Northern's 400 foot right-of-way through the valley.

Once a bustling railroad town which boasted hotels and businesses, today Lester is a ghost town--a victim of its eroded economic base and the policies of the City of Tacoma Watershed. Nearly all the town's buildings were demolished or seriously decayed in recent years. A focal point of the community in the past, the Lester Depot stands at the center of town in the middle of Burlington Northern's right-of-way. Around the depot to the north, east, and west are expanses of open space overgrown with grasses and shrubs. Here was the center of train activity--the roundhouse, turntable, oil tank and water tower, all now demolished. The only signs of the former level of activity here are the multiple lines of trackage that run parallel to the south side of the depot.

The depot is a two-story, wood frame third class combination type built in 1886 from standard Northern Pacific designs of the decade. These plans were similar to those designated as S-26-28 and S-26-18 for the following two decades. A comparison of the depot as built with the latter of these drawings indicates that floor plans, facade configurations, and detailing were altered very little. The major discrepancy between these designs and actual construction at Lester is the full two-story bay window and the variation that this produces in the roof design. The interior spaces of the depot included a freight room, ticket room and waiting room on the ground floor, and a central staircase leading to the station master's apartment on the second floor. The original exterior colors were specified as "Indian Red" with dark green trim. By 1914, this scheme appears to have been changed to a monochromatic one.

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A number of changes to the depot have occurred over the years, though none of these has radically altered the exterior appearance of the building or its integrity as a whole. The original plank platform was removed in about 1947 and replaced at that time with a platform of concrete. Sometime after 1914, when a spur track was laid to the rear of the depot, the roofline on the north side was changed. The knee braces were removed along the full length of the depot and the roof overhang reduced to about one-quarter of its original size. Transom windows have been removed and there has been some alteration of window and door openings. After 1914, a small room was added to the second floor near the intermediate landing of the staircase. This addition has somewhat altered the original roof configuration on the north side. On its exterior, the depot has also lost its main roof finial, corbelled chimney caps, and "Lester" sign, although the latter does not appear in a 1914 photograph. The interior of the building has received considerable alteration with regard to finish materials. It retains its original spaces and layout, however, and enough original fabric to make a restoration achievable.

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally     statewide     locally

Applicable National Register Criteria     A     B     C     D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)     A     B     C     D     E     F     G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Transportation  
Architecture  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Period of Significance

1886-1937  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Dates

N.A.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Affiliation

N.A.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Person

N.A.  
\_\_\_\_\_

Architect/Builder

Northern Pacific design  
\_\_\_\_\_

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The Lester Depot in the mountain town of Lester, Washington, is closely associated with the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad's Cascade Branch. Opened in 1887, the Cascades Branch from Pasco to Tacoma completed the railroad's direct line from St. Paul and points east to the Puget Sound. The construction of this line opened up the Puget Sound region for the first time to direct eastern trade and immigration. The event had tremendous economic impact upon the cities of Seattle and Tacoma, increasing their trade and substantially cutting into the established commerce of Portland to the south.

The town of Lester is located some 14 miles west of Stampede Pass at the base of a 2.2 percent grade. With the opening of the Stampede Tunnels in 1887, Lester became, along with Easton on the east side of the pass, a helper station with its own six-stall roundhouse. The community prospered and grew to a peak population of over 1000 in the 1920s. Now engulfed by the City of Tacoma's Green River Watershed, the town is virtually dead. The depot remains in solitary, mute testimony to the important role of the Northern Pacific's Cascade Branch in the settlement of both King and Pierce counties. Deteriorated but relatively unaltered on its exterior, the Lester Depot is also significant as a rare remnant of early railroad history and station design. It is the only Northern Pacific depot contemporary with the construction of the Cascade Branch that remains standing west of the Cascades as well as one of the few surviving examples of the Northern Pacific's 1880s frame depot design in western Washington.

Plans for building a trans-mountain branch from the coal mines of the western Cascades to the main line in Pasco were seriously begun by the Northern Pacific in 1881. Northern Pacific president Henry Villard sent Virgil Bogue, assistant engineer of the Northern Pacific, to locate a suitable tunnel site in the mountains. The route chosen became known as Stampede Pass in reference to a mass mutiny of trailcutters working under an overly severe foreman. Villard's successor, President Robert Harris, made the decision to expedite construction of a direct line across the Cascades. The reasons for this decision rested upon the promising growth of the Puget Sound economy--logging, coal mining, farming, and fishing-- and also upon the questionable wisdom of continuing to rely upon the 214-mile line of the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company between Walla Walla and Portland. The time was ripe to complete the Northern Pacific's own direct route to the Sound, and Harris lost no time in proceeding with construction up the Yakima Valley. On the west side of the mountains, a rail line was built from Palmer Junction to Eagle Gorge in 1885 and from Eagle Gorge to Weston in 1886.

See continuation sheet

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

See continuation sheet

See continuation sheet

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository:

King County Historic Preservation Office  
1115 Smith Tower, Seattle, WA 98104

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreeage of property less than one

USGS Quad: Lester, WA (15') Scale: 1: 62,500

UTM References

A 

1	0
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6	1	4	0	5	0
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5	2	2	9	2	5	0
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Zone      Easting      Northing

B 

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Zone      Easting      Northing

C 

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D 

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

See continuation sheet.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The nominated property includes the parcel of land historically associated with the depot.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Ms. Flo Lentz,  
organization King County Historic Preservation Office date Revised May, 1987 (April, 1984)  
street & number 1115 Smith Tower telephone (206) 340-4782  
city or town Seattle state Washington zip code 98104

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Engineer Bogue's crews located a 1.8 mile summit tunnel site in 1882 and several more possibilities before final selection of a site was made in 1885. Successful bidders for the tunnel construction were Sidney and Nelson Bennett, contractors who had already built the line from Pasco as far as Ellensburg. The Bennett Brothers won the contract with a low bid of \$837,250 and a 28-month completion deadline. Sid Bennett left Yakima in February, 1886, with men and equipment on wagons, sleds, and mules. In the dead of winter, hand drilling began simultaneously on the east and west portals of the tunnel nine mountain-miles away. The going was tortuously slow. The Bennetts soon purchased air-operated drills and built an electrical generating plant, speeding up the boring to 14-feet per day by spring.

While the tunnel was being built, Northern Pacific bypassed the route with a temporary switchback system that elevated trains to the summit level. Eight miles of track were built over the 12.8 mile tunnel route with grades of up to an amazing 5.6 percent. Thousands of Chinese workers shovelled snow while tracklayers followed at their heels all through the winter of 1886-1887. In June, the switchbacks were completed. Trains with a five-car limit, operated over the switchback by two "decapod" engines with ten coupled drivers, reached Tacoma amid joyous celebrations.

Construction of the long tunnel itself proceeded on schedule. On May 3, 1888, a final blast connected the east and west bores. By the end of the month, timbering had been completed and the first train rolled through the tunnel. Tacoma, Seattle, and Yakima danced in the streets to celebrate the first direct rail link between Lake Superior and the Puget Sound. The picturesque but hair-raising switchbacks were retired from service and eventually a dirt road was built over the old grade. The finished tunnel was 9,850 feet in length, second largest in the nation, and famous for the speed and precision with which it had been built. Over 2,000 men had worked on its construction. For some years, smoke, gas, and fume conditions in the tunnel made it the most dreaded bore on the railroad. Until 1912, when a ventilation system was installed, it was fondly known by train crews as "Stampede Hell".

Trains reached Palmer Junction from Tacoma via Puyallup, Sumner, Orting, Carbonado, Wilkeson, Enumclaw and Cumberland. By 1900, rail service between Tacoma and Palmer Junction via Auburn and Kanaskat had begun and this became the main route into Tacoma.

In the town of Lester (originally known as Deans), a depot was built in 1886. With the completion of Stampede Tunnel, the town and the depot assumed new importance. Lester's new role as a helper station increased its significance to the entire line. Lester was first named Deans for the owner of the early sawmill at the townsite, but the name was changed in 1891 to Lester in honor of Lester Hansacker, the local Northern Pacific telegraph operator. The railroad yards at Lester included a six-stall brick roundhouse and a turntable where helpers were coupled to eastbound trains for the 12 mile trip to the west portal of the Stampede Tunnel. Helper engines were serviced here and rotary steam plows and work trains were based here. The Lester Depot itself housed both freight and passenger functions as well as a station master's apartment upstairs.

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Because the Northern Pacific resisted electrification of its lines over the Cascades, Lester survived as a helper station until the arrival of diesel locomotives in the 1950s. Maintenance crews were housed in the town through the 1960s. Lester also served as the base of a unique communications maintenance program for Western Union, Bell Telephone, and the Northern Pacific. All three shared a well-maintained pole line across the mountains. Five major logging camps have operated out of Lester, but the last one pulled out in 1978. Now a part of the City of Tacoma's Green River Watershed, the townsite of Lester is largely owned by Tacoma and Burlington Northern. The population dwindled rapidly and the Forest Service vacated the Lester Guard Station in 1983. The same year, Burlington shut down its operations and through line. Slowly but surely, the houses and public structures of the town have been lost to decay or demolition since that time.

At its peak, Lester was a thriving, bustling railroad community with hotels, a restaurant and store, a school and gymnasium, and section houses and residences aligned on either side of the tracks. The Lester Depot was the heart and soul of the town. It was the focal point of the community's economic activity and it remains today a visual symbol of the town's reason for being. The depot was built in 1886, its design based upon standard Northern Pacific designs of the decade for a two-story, third class combination depot. Still relatively intact on its exterior, the depot reflects a physical sense of time and place that is unmistakably linked to early-day railroading in the Pacific Northwest. It clearly symbolizes the opening of Puget Sound country by rail, as well as the history of the community of Lester.

The Lester Depot is a designated King County Landmark.

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Headley, Thomas Jr. "The Stampede Pass Tunnel and the Northern Pacific Railroad Depot at Lester, Washington: A Theme Project in Historic Preservation." Paper prepared for Architecture 498G, University of Washington, December 1979.

Hedges, Jane B. Henry Villard and the Railways of the Northwest.  
New Haven: 1930.

Northern Pacific Railway Company. Official Northern Pacific Guide,  
no location, no date (1890?).

Northern Pacific Railway Company Valuation Department. Description of the Depot at Lester,  
Washington.

"The Switchback and Tunnel," The West Shore, September, 1887.

Wood, Charles R. The Northern Pacific: Main Street of the Northwest. Superior Publishers:  
Seattle, 1968.

Personal interviews with author, July, 1983

Don Lockhart, Lester  
Joan Magee, Lester  
Gertrude Murphy, Lester  
Ellen Rainey, Lester



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Verbal Boundary Description

To reach point of beginning: Start at the intersection of U.S. Forest Service Route 212 and Route 206; proceed easterly along route 212 approximately 1.8 miles to a point parallel with the west wall of the nominated building; proceed southerly across the first (northern) set of tracks. At the south edge of this tracks is the point of beginning. From the point of beginning, proceed approximately 70 feet east along the tracks parallel to the north facade of the building; proceed south to the northern edge of the southern set of tracks; proceed westerly along this set of tracks approximately 75 feet; proceed northerly along the west wall of the building to the southern edge of the northern set of tracks; proceed east to the point of beginning. Said property is located on the Burlington Northern right-of-way in the Green River Watershed of the City of Tacoma, in the southwest quarter of the northeast quarter of Section 23, Township 20 N, Range 10 East, in King County, State of Washington.