

# The Evolving Identity of Cheney

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Overlooking the Eastern Washington University farmland in spring.

Photo courtesy of Emily Tracy, 2019.

The origins of the city of Cheney are rooted in three things: railroad expansion, agriculture, and education. Yet in the 138 years since the Northern Pacific Railroad first rumbled into town, Cheney's identity has experienced tremendous change. In the early days of Western development, Cheney served as a regional transportation hub. The agricultural boom brought prosperity to the local farmsteads. After initial strife, the educational scene matured into the establishment of what is now Eastern Washington University. And through all these times of expansion and decline, prosperity and hardship, the land continues to provide. It will always be the foundation of the community, the thread which ties together the people of the past, present, and future.

## How did the railroad shape the development of Cheney?

As early as 1877, homesteads began popping up in "Section 13" of Washington Territory. Six years later, in 1883, this section was officially incorporated as the City of Cheney. Its name honors Northern Pacific Railway Company director, Benjamin P. Cheney, whom graciously granted the town the funding to start its first educational institution. The young settlement soon boasted a Post Office, the Benjamin P. Cheney Academy, and the Cheney Northern Pacific Railway Depot.

The Railway Depot is perhaps the defining component of the city. It has come to symbolize the importance of the railroad in the expansion of the region. Situated high in the Palouse prairie hills, Cheney served as a convenient midpoint for trains delivering cargo to Spokane and beyond. And with the goods came the influx of people. In fact, the railroad is potentially *the* factor that named Cheney as a prosperous agricultural and educational destination at the turn of the twentieth century.



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Northern Pacific Railway Train leaving Cheney in 1912.

Photo courtesy of EWU Archives & Special Collections, 1912.

## How was Cheney impacted by agricultural development?

Rolling hills stretch across the landscape, dotted with wildflowers, grasses, and the occasional patch of trees. At low spots, seasonal ponds shimmer in the spring sunshine. This is the scene the first settlers undoubtedly witnessed upon arriving in the area. The fertile land sprawled around them in all directions; they found themselves at the center of possibility. By the end of the 1800s, farming plots had been established; farmhouses were going up. The age of agriculture had begun.

Seeking flat land, farmers turned to the seasonal ponds and wetlands. They drained some of these low spots, exposing semi-flat land with rich soil.

Other farmers took to conquering the hills. They used horse-drawn (later gas-powered) combines to harvest crops, namely wheat. The hillside combines with levelers proved extremely efficient on the hilly terrain of the region. These machines adjusted to match the slope of the hill while keeping the main body of the combine level—an innovative way to maximize access to the region's fertile soil.

In the early 1900s, wheat production in eastern Washington soared. Agriculture became a region-defining industry, and Cheney grew into a prosperous farming community.



A combine working the side of a steep hill on a Palouse wheat field.

Photo courtesy of the Spokane Public Library, 1924.

The legacy of this agricultural era is still evident today. Numerous farmhouses dot the hills surrounding the town, holding on to the industry of the past. In the greater Spokane County, the number of farms is declining, ushering in a new era of urban development. However, this decline in agriculture allows for greater appreciation of other aspects of the community, including educational, recreational, and technological growth.

## What is the connection between agriculture & education in Cheney?

Cheney's identity shifted from agricultural to educational in the years following World War II. Between the 1950s and 1970s, EWU experienced rapid growth in both student population and available degree programs. By 1977, Eastern was an accredited university with many graduate and undergraduate degree programs.

Much of the current EWU campus constitutes land formerly owned by the Sutton family (William J. Sutton was the school's first principal). And it was not until 1969 that the college purchased the land—nearly 82 years after the Cheney Academy's opening. The acres of proposed prairie land were originally designated for campus expansion. However, the hilly landscape proved too costly to develop, was instead leased as campus farmland. In 2019, the Prairie Restoration Project was officially launched, commencing the repurposing of the land to its natural habitat.



William J. Sutton, first principal of the Cheney State Normal School.

Photo courtesy of EWU Archives & Special Collections, 1892 – 1987.

In restoring the EWU farmland to prairie land, Cheney's rich history will not be forgotten. The restoration work commemorates the natural land. It honors the indigenous tribes who first used and appreciated this land for its abundant resources. It celebrates the diverse heritage of the region. And it unites the many people who call this place home.

### Additional Resources to Explore

Cheney Historical Museum - <https://www.cheneymuseum.org/history/cheney/>

The Spokane Historical - <https://spokanehistorical.org/>

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