James Lawrence “Breck” Breckenridge

First Chief Administrative Officer of the Port of Hood River, 1950-1956

James Lawrence Breckenridge spent most of his professional life educating young people. Then, at an age when many of his contemporaries were retiring, he began an unexpected second career helping build the administrative foundation of the Port of Hood River. After leaving the Port, he returned to public service yet again as Hood River municipal judge.[1]

Known as “Breck” during his college years, Breckenridge was a Pennsylvania native, an Oberlin College graduate and a career public-school administrator. His work took him from Spokane, Washington, through a succession of northern Idaho school systems before he arrived in Hood River in 1927. He then led Hood River School District 3 for 23 years.[2]

In 1950, at age 65, Breckenridge retired from the school system under state age provisions. Before the year ended, however, he was working at the recently acquired Hood River-White Salmon Interstate Bridge. On Dec. 19, 1950, the Port Commission appointed him bridge manager. Within months, commissioners acknowledged that his responsibilities had expanded well beyond bridge operations and designated him executive secretary for the Port and bridge.[3]

Pennsylvania and Oberlin

Breckenridge was born Dec. 24, 1884, in Mercer, Pennsylvania, the son of Joseph Calvin Breckenridge and Elizabeth Agnes Kilgore Breckenridge.[4]

He grew up in a family with strong connections to higher education. His older brother, William K. Breckenridge, studied music at Oberlin College and became a longtime member of the Oberlin Conservatory faculty. Oberlin College Archives identifies James Lawrence Breckenridge, 1884-1976, among William’s siblings and reports that several members of the family attended Oberlin.[5]

James’s own secondary education remains uncertain. A family genealogy identifies him as a student at Oberlin and identifies his younger sister, Ruth Adelaide, with “High School, Mercer, Pa.” Mercer High School is therefore a plausible possibility, as is Mercer Academy, but no record located to date establishes where James prepared for college.[6]

At Oberlin, the record is much clearer. The college yearbook identifies “James Laurence Breckenridge,” using an alternate spelling of his middle name, and gives his nickname as “Breck.” His senior profile recalls class activities, junior baseball and drawing illustrations for the annual. Contemporary commencement records establish that he received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Oberlin’s College of Arts and Sciences in 1908.[7]

Breckenridge married Mabel Anna Riland in 1909; his marriage record still listed his residence as Oberlin, Ohio. The couple remained in Ohio in 1910.[8]

His continuing education is more complicated than the later summaries suggest. When Hood River hired him in April 1927, a contemporary profile stated that he had completed postgraduate work at the University of Idaho, Washington State College and Teachers College, Columbia University. His 1976 obituary and a 1958 newspaper account later credited additional or postgraduate study at Columbia, Washington State College and Stanford University. None of the sources identifies an additional degree.[9]

A 2026 search by Washington State University archivist Mark O'English found no Breckenridge transcript, admissions card, faculty record, yearbook reference, student-newspaper reference or other evidence of formal enrollment at Washington State College. O'English concluded that Breckenridge was probably never an "official" WSC student, while noting that noncredit summer institutes, extension work or other education-professional programming could explain the contemporary references to postgraduate work. The surviving record therefore supports additional study at WSC, but not conventional degree enrollment.[9]

A young educator heads west

Breckenridge's 1976 obituary fills what had been one of the largest gaps in his early career. Before coming to Oregon, it reports, he taught in the Spokane schools from 1912 to 1916. His son, John Ryland Breckenridge, was born in Washington on Nov. 27, 1914, consistent with the family's residence there.[10]

The obituary then places Breckenridge in northern Idaho, saying he served as superintendent of Spirit Lake, Sandpoint and Coeur d'Alene schools at various times between 1917 and 1927.[11]

A contemporary hiring profile now sharpens that chronology. The Hood River Glacier reported April 21, 1927, that Breckenridge had been superintendent at Coeur d'Alene for four years and had just been reelected for a fifth. Before Coeur d'Alene, it said, he had served four years as superintendent at Sandpoint. That places Sandpoint at approximately 1919-23 and Coeur d'Alene at approximately 1923-27, leaving the earlier portion of the 1917-27 Idaho period for Spirit Lake and other service. The dates remain approximate because the article describes years of service rather than exact appointment dates.[12]

Other contemporary records independently confirm Sandpoint. A U.S. Bureau of Education directory for 1921-22 lists J.L. Breckenridge as superintendent there. When daughter Ada May Breckenridge was born in Sandpoint on Nov. 13, 1922, her birth certificate recorded her father's occupation as "City Sup't Schools."[13]

The April 1927 Hood River profile also said Breckenridge had been selected from about 100 applicants. It described a 42-year-old administrator with an Oberlin degree, extensive superintendent experience and postgraduate work at three institutions. He had been expected to remain in Coeur d'Alene for a fifth year, but instead accepted the Hood River position and planned to arrive with his family about July 1.[14]

Twenty-three years in Hood River schools

The beginning of Breckenridge's Hood River career can now be dated precisely. On July 1, 1927, the Hood River News reported that Superintendent A.M. Cannon was closing his seven-year administration and "will be succeeded at once" by J.L. Breckenridge of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Breckenridge and his family had already arrived and were living on Oak Street. The article reported that he would temporarily retain the downtown superintendent's office while the new high school was completed and equipped.[15]

Within months, a student-written account captured something of the new superintendent's temperament. Breckenridge told a student reporter in September 1927 that he intended to move cautiously: "I'm going to be slow about changing things," because "it's better to be slow and be right." The student described him as an "impressive person" who dominated his sparsely furnished office, but also noted that "Mr. Breckenridge has a very quiet smile."[16]

His first months also placed him at the center of a major transition in Hood River education. The new $175,000 high school opened for classes Sept. 6, 1927, and was formally dedicated later that month, with Breckenridge giving concluding remarks. As the old junior-high property became surplus, the district assigned Breckenridge to show the building to prospective purchasers.[17]

J.L. Breckenridge at his desk as superintendent of Hood River schools. Hood River High School, The Dragon, 1950.

What followed was an unusually long period of administrative stability. School yearbooks identify and picture Breckenridge as superintendent through the ensuing decades. Census, draft-registration and newspaper records likewise document his continued leadership of School District 3.[18]

His professional reach extended beyond the district. In 1929, he served on the District 3 Board of Control of the Oregon High School Athletic Association and filed a formal eligibility protest involving a former Hood River student. The record shows him participating in statewide school governance only a little more than two years after arriving in Oregon.[19]

His civic role also deepened. Hood River Rotary records list Breckenridge as club president in 1934-35. His 1976 obituary records service as a trustee of the Oregon State Teachers Association, elected in 1938 and reelected in 1940, and as a charter member of the Hood River County War Finance Committee. In 1945, a Hood River newspaper reported his selection as president of the Oregon State School Superintendents Association and credited him with a leading role in the advancement of education in the state.[20]

The 1950 Hood River High School Dragon was dedicated to Breckenridge. Its tribute recalled that he had been superintendent in Coeur d'Alene before coming to Oregon, had served Hood River for 23 years and would not be returning the following year. The dedication described his tenure as one of the longest superintendent service records in Oregon.[21]

A contemporary newspaper editorial gives an even more precise account of his departure. On March 10, 1950, the Hood River News reported that Breckenridge was "retiring under the age provisions of the state school system after serving 23 years as superintendent of school district 3." The editorial praised the school system's financial condition and educational results and quoted a state

Department of Education evaluation commending cooperation among the board, superintendent, principal and teaching staff.[22]

Breckenridge therefore completed a continuous 23-year Hood River superintendency from 1927 to 1950. He was 65 when he retired from education.[22]

An unexpected second career

Retirement from the schools did not end Breckenridge's public career. In 1950, the Port of Hood River acquired the Hood River-White Salmon Interstate Bridge from the Oregon-Washington Bridge Company. A Dec. 22, 1950, Hood River News account reported that the bridge had been purchased recently through the Port Commission for $800,000.[23]

Breckenridge appears in Port records later in 1950 as head toll collector. The exact date of his first Port employment remains to be established, but the chronology suggests that he moved rapidly from school retirement into work associated with the Port's new bridge operation.[24]

On Dec. 19, 1950, the Port Commission formally appointed Breckenridge bridge manager at a salary of $200 per month, with responsibility for the bridge books and general administration. A Jan. 23, 1951, Port letter bearing his signature confirms the title "Bridge Manager."[25]

It soon became apparent that commissioners had hired more than a bridge supervisor. In July 1951, the commission observed that Breckenridge's duties had "expanded greatly over what was first proposed." Commissioners increased his compensation and designated him executive secretary for the Port and bridge.[26]

The Port's first professional administrator

The Port of Hood River did not use the modern title "executive director" for Breckenridge, nor did it initially hire him to manage the entire organization. His responsibilities evolved into that role. The progression is visible in the contemporary records: head toll collector, bridge manager and then executive secretary for the Port and bridge.[27]

TWO SECTIONS—SIXTEEN PAGES HOOD RIVER, OREGON, FRIDAY, MARCH 20,

Hood River port commissioners this Monday were hosts to distinguished guests, including Col. Ralph Tudor, the newly-appointed under secretary of interior. Pictured above, seated, left to right, are: Harold J. McIsaac, port president; Charles Fuller, treasurer; and Dr. Harold Keir, commissioner; standing, Kenneth M. Abraham, port attorney; Admiral Carl A. Trexel, of the Tudor Engineering company; Col. Tudor; Howard Getchell, vice-president of the port; J. L. Breckenridge, manager of the port's inter-state bridge; and T. T. Mackenzie of the Tudor company. Absent from the picture was Les Sherwood, port secretary and past president, who is on a trip east.

J.L. Breckenridge, standing second from right, with Port commissioners and visiting officials. The Hood River News, Friday, March 20, 1953. The caption identifies him as "manager of the port's inter-state bridge."

By 1954, the Commission itself was using the combined heading "Executive Secretary-Bridge Manager." On Oct. 12, commissioners increased the monthly salary from $275 to $300, retroactive to July 1, after the manager reported that "considerable over-time" was being given to the job each month. Port financial records confirm that the manager position had been budgeted at $3,300 annually, or $275 a month, before the increase and at $3,600, or $300 a month, in the 1955-56 bridge budget.[28]

Those records also show the scale of the enterprise. The bridge operation carried a separate toll-collector payroll, insurance, utilities, maintenance and repairs, office costs, engineering services and contingencies. In FY1954, unusual work included painting the entire bridge, installing new power cable, rewiring lift-span controls and improving both approaches. The manager was therefore overseeing a transportation operation with its own employees, operating budget and major maintenance program.[29]

Breckenridge's responsibilities were not confined to the bridge. In April 1955, commissioners appointed Breckenridge and two commissioners to make a preliminary study of the next Port budget; he was again assigned preliminary budget work in spring 1956. In February 1955, the Commission expressly authorized the manager to attend occasional Chamber of Commerce and Rotary meetings in White Salmon-Bingen so he could become better acquainted with leading citizens across the river. He also handled promotional details, including bridge postcards, and brought practical toll-policy questions to the Commission for resolution.[30]

The beginnings of the Hood River boat basin

One of the clearest examples of Breckenridge's Port-wide role involved the early Hood River boat-basin project. Congress had authorized a basin at Hood River in the River and Harbor Act of July 24, 1946, but by 1955 had not appropriated money for detailed planning or construction. On July 7, 1955, the Portland District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers asked the Port whether it was willing to serve as the responsible local agency if federal funds became available.[31]

The federal plan called for a basin about 500 feet by 1,300 feet and 10 feet deep at normal Bonneville pool, with a connecting channel to deep water and a protective breakwater. Local obligations would include providing rights-of-way, maintaining basin depths, constructing and operating mooring facilities and providing a public wharf on equal terms.[31]

Breckenridge helped coordinate the Port's response. On July 12, he forwarded the Corps request to consulting engineer Ralph Tudor. Tudor's July 15 reply was addressed to "Mr. J. L. Breckenridge, Executive Secretary, Port of Hood River Commission" and opened "Dear Breck." Tudor advised that the basic policy decision belonged to the Commission, supplied draft language for the Port's response, recommended legal review by Port attorney Kenneth Abraham and discussed recovering capital and operating costs through user fees. The exchange is direct evidence that Breckenridge was administering a substantial non-bridge Port development initiative during the formative federal-local work on Hood River's boat basin.[32]

For that reason, Breckenridge is best understood as the first identifiable professional chief administrative officer of the Port of Hood River. The distinction is an interpretation of the surviving organizational record rather than a title bestowed on him by commissioners. His Port work encompassed bridge operations, budgets, toll policy, engineering coordination, public relations and development of other Port facilities.[33]

Leaving the Port - and another public role

The end of Breckenridge's Port career is less precisely documented than its beginning. On April 10, 1956, he was still performing substantive senior administrative work, including preparing the preliminary Port budget with Commissioner Charles Fuller. Port bill sheets carry small reimbursements to Breckenridge in May and June, but those amounts are plainly separate from his $300 monthly salary and do not establish his final day as manager.[34]

The surviving regular minutes for June 12, 1956, contain no resignation or personnel action. By July 10, however, Breckenridge was absent, George D. Bartch was present and Bartch signed the minutes. Because the records from the intervening period have been reviewed without locating a formal separation action, the most defensible description is that Breckenridge remained active through spring 1956 and had been succeeded administratively by Bartch by July. The exact date and circumstances of the transition remain unresolved.[34]

Breckenridge nevertheless had another chapter of public service ahead of him. A 1958 newspaper article, "City Judge Steps Down," reported that he had been appointed Hood River municipal judge to replace retiring Judge William Sylvester after a month-long search. The article described Breckenridge as a longtime Hood River resident, "former port commission official and superintendent of schools," and noted his Rotary and other civic activities.[35]

The duration of Breckenridge's service as municipal judge has not yet been established. The appointment is important, however, because it links the three major phases of his Hood River public career: education, Port administration and municipal government.

Legacy

James Lawrence Breckenridge died Saturday, Jan. 17, 1976, at his Hood River home. He was 91. Funeral services were held Jan. 19 at Riverside Community Church.[36]

His Hood River News obituary remembered a long career in education: Spokane teacher, Idaho superintendent, 23-year Hood River superintendent, statewide education leader and civic volunteer. Curiously, it did not mention either his Port career or his later appointment as municipal judge. Those omissions make the surviving Port records and the 1958 judgeship article especially important to reconstructing the full breadth of his public service.[36]

Mabel survived him until Feb. 7, 1980. Her obituary reported that she had moved to Hood River in 1927 and had been a member of Riverside Community Church and the PEO Sisterhood for 50 years. Their children included Ada May Arens of Hood River, Clara Ottaway of Dallas, Oregon, and John R. Breckenridge of Seattle.[37]

Breckenridge's life presents an unusual combination of continuity and reinvention. He spent decades building a career in public education, including 23 years leading Hood River schools. At 65, he retired from education and almost immediately began helping the Port build the administrative structure needed to operate its newly acquired interstate bridge. As executive secretary, he also worked on broader Port matters, including budgeting, regional relations and the early boat-basin project. After leaving the Port, he accepted appointment as municipal judge.

His importance to Port history therefore rests less on the particular title he held than on the institution he helped establish. Later Port managers and executive directors would lead a larger and more complex organization, but the documentary record presently available points to James Lawrence "Breck" Breckenridge as the person with whom professional administration of the Port of Hood River began.

Annotations

[1] Career overview. The municipal judgeship is documented by the 1958 clipping "City Judge Steps Down." Its exact newspaper, date and page remain to be identified; the clipping itself carries a handwritten "1958."

[2] Early western career and Hood River tenure. "School Leader Dies Saturday," Hood River News, Jan. 22, 1976, p. 3, states that Breckenridge taught in Spokane from 1912 to 1916, served as superintendent at Spirit Lake, Sandpoint and Coeur d'Alene between 1917 and 1927, and was Hood River superintendent from 1927 to 1950.

[3] School retirement and Port transition. "A Tribute To Departing Educators," Hood River News, March 10, 1950, p. 2, establishes retirement under state age provisions after 23 years. Port Commission records establish the Dec. 19 bridge-manager appointment and July 1951 executive-secretary designation.

[4] Birth and parentage. The Dec. 24, 1884, Mercer birth is confirmed by the 1976 obituary and 1942 World War II draft registration. Parentage is supported by Breckenridge family genealogy and the Oberlin College Archives.

[5] Breckenridge family and Oberlin. Oberlin College Archives, William K. Breckenridge Papers, RG 30/078.

[6] Early education. Mercer High School and Mercer Academy remain possibilities only. No source located establishes Breckenridge's preparatory school.

[7] "Breck" and Oberlin degree. Oberlin Hi-O-Hi material identifies "James Laurence Breckenridge" and the nickname "Breck." The 1908 commencement program establishes his A.B./Bachelor of Arts from the College of Arts and Sciences. "Laurence" is an Oberlin-era spelling variant; later records consistently support Lawrence.

[8] Marriage and Ohio. 1909 marriage return and 1910 U.S. census.

[9] Postgraduate study. "J. L. Breckenridge, Newly Elected City School Superintendent," Hood River Glacier, April 21, 1927, reports postgraduate work at the University of Idaho, Washington State College and Teachers College, Columbia University. The Jan. 22, 1976, obituary and the 1958 judgeship article instead list Columbia, Washington

State College and Stanford. Mark O'English, University Archivist at Washington State University, reported Sept. 1, 2026, that extensive archival searches found no evidence of formal WSC enrollment and suggested noncredit education-professional programming as a plausible explanation.

[10] Spokane. The Jan. 22, 1976, obituary states that Breckenridge taught in Spokane schools from 1912 to 1916. John's 1914 Washington birth corroborates the family's presence in the state but does not identify Spokane.

[11] Idaho chronology. The 1976 obituary establishes superintendent service at Spirit Lake, Sandpoint and Coeur d'Alene between 1917 and 1927 but does not assign exact dates to each post.

[12] Sandpoint and Coeur d'Alene sequence. The April 21, 1927, Hood River Glacier profile says Breckenridge served four years as Sandpoint superintendent and four years at Coeur d'Alene and had been reelected for a fifth Coeur d'Alene year. Approximate 1919-23 and 1923-27 ranges are inferred from that description.

[13] Sandpoint. U.S. Bureau of Education, Educational Directory, 1921-22, lists J.L. Breckenridge as Sandpoint superintendent; Ada May's Nov. 13, 1922, birth certificate records "City Sup't Schools."

[14] Hood River selection. "J. L. Breckenridge, Newly Elected City School Superintendent," Hood River Glacier, April 21, 1927. The article reports about 100 applicants, summarizes his prior service and education, and says he expected to arrive about July 1.

[15] Hood River arrival. "Changes Now On in Schools Control," Hood River News, July 1, 1927, p. 1, says Breckenridge and his family had arrived and he would succeed A.M. Cannon at once.

[16] Management philosophy and personality. Student-produced material reprinted in the Hood River Glacier, Sept. 29, 1927, records Breckenridge's statement that he would be "slow about changing things" and describes him as impressive but possessing "a very quiet smile."

[17] New high school and surplus property. Hood River Glacier, Sept. 29, 1927, reports the high-school dedication and identifies Breckenridge as the person responsible for showing the old junior-high building to prospective purchasers.

[18] Continuing school service. Hood River yearbooks, census schedules, 1942 draft registration and contemporary newspaper references document Breckenridge throughout his Hood River tenure.

[19] Athletic governance. "Protest Filed Against Jarvis," The Capital Journal, Salem, Nov. 30, 1929, p. 8, identifies J.L. Breckenridge of Hood River on the Oregon High School Athletic Association District 3 Board of Control.

[20] Civic and statewide leadership. Hood River Rotary Club 2025-26 directory lists J.L. Breckenridge as president in 1934-35. The museum vertical file contains "Supt. J.L. Breckenridge Is Honored In State," c. 1945, documenting his presidency of the Oregon State School Superintendents Association. The 1976 obituary adds Oregon State Teachers Association trusteeship and War Finance Committee service.

[21] 1950 yearbook dedication. Hood River High School, The Dragon, 1950, dedication to J.L. Breckenridge.

[22] Retirement from schools. "A Tribute To Departing Educators," Hood River News, March 10, 1950, p. 2. The article mistakenly calls him "John L. Breckenridge," but the 23-year superintendency and context make identification certain.

[23] Bridge acquisition. "Payment Of Bridge Stock Announced," Hood River News, Dec. 22, 1950, reports that the bridge "was purchased recently through the Hood River Port commission for $800,000." The exact closing/takeover date remains to be established.

[24] Head toll collector. Port material identifies Breckenridge in this position later in 1950. The exact first employment date remains unresolved.

[25] Bridge manager. Port Commission record, Dec. 19, 1950; Port correspondence, Jan. 23, 1951.

[26] Executive secretary. July 1951 Port Commission records state that Breckenridge's duties had "expanded greatly over what was first proposed" and designate him executive secretary for the Port and bridge.

[27] First chief administrative officer. This is a historical interpretation, not Breckenridge's formal title. "First identifiable" should be retained unless earlier Port records establish a comparable professional administrative officer.

[28] Formal title and compensation. Port of Hood River Commission minutes, Oct. 12, 1954, use the heading "Executive Secretary-Bridge Manager" and increase monthly pay from $275 to $300 retroactive to July 1 because of considerable overtime. The 1955-56 bridge budget carries a $3,600 manager line.

[29] Scale of bridge operations. Port of Hood River, Oct. 15, 1954, pp. 7-8, compares FY1953 and FY1954 maintenance and operating costs and describes extraordinary FY1954 maintenance, including bridge painting, new power cable, lift-span-control rewiring and approach improvements.

[30] Budget, public relations and toll policy. Port Commission minutes, Feb. 8 and April 12, 1955, and April 10, 1956. The February minutes authorize civic-meeting attendance across the river; the April 1955 minutes assign Breckenridge budget work and record his presentation of toll-classification issues.

[31] Federal boat-basin authorization. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Portland District, letter to Port of Hood River, attention Harold McIsaac, president, July 7, 1955, File No. NPPGW-4. The letter cites the River and Harbor Act of July 24, 1946, and describes the authorized basin, channel, breakwater and local-cooperation requirements.

[32] Breckenridge and the boat basin. Ralph A. Tudor, Tudor Engineering Company, letter to J.L. Breckenridge, Executive Secretary, Port of Hood River Commission, July 15, 1955. Tudor states that he is responding to Breckenridge's July 12 letter forwarding the Corps request, suggests a response, recommends legal review and discusses financing through facility fees.

[33] Port-wide administrative role. The 1954-56 Port records cumulatively show Breckenridge handling bridge operations, budgeting, public relations, engineering coordination and non-bridge development work. The "chief administrative officer" characterization is interpretive rather than a historical title.

[34] End of Port tenure. April 10, 1956, is the last substantive senior administrative function located. The June 12 regular minutes contain no separation action; small May and June bill-sheet payments appear to be reimbursements. George D. Bartch was functioning administratively by July 10. The reviewed April-July 1956 records do not identify a precise departure date.

[35] Municipal judge. "City Judge Steps Down," unidentified newspaper clipping, 1958, History Museum of Hood River County, Breckenridge J.L. vertical file, object 2014.001.020. Exact issue date and page remain to be identified.

[36] Death and obituary. "School Leader Dies Saturday," Hood River News, Jan. 22, 1976, p. 3. The obituary is a major source for Breckenridge's early teaching and education career but omits both Port service and the municipal judgeship.

[37] Mabel. "Mabel R. Breckenridge," obituary, Hood River-area newspaper, February 1980; exact issue/date/page remain to be identified. It reports her Feb. 7 death, 1927 move to Hood River, church and PEO involvement, and surviving children.

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Unresolved research

- Breckenridge’s high school or preparatory school.
- Exact dates and nature of his additional education at the University of Idaho, Columbia University, Washington State College and Stanford University.
- His occupation and location between the 1910 Ohio census and the documented Spokane teaching period beginning in 1912.
- Exact dates of his Spirit Lake appointment and the precise transition dates among Spirit Lake, Sandpoint and Coeur d’Alene.
- Exact date he first became a Port employee/head toll collector in 1950.
- Exact closing/takeover date for the Port’s 1950 bridge acquisition.

- Breckenridge's July 12, 1955, letter to Ralph Tudor regarding the Hood River boat basin, if it survives.
- Exact date and circumstances of his 1956 departure from the Port.
- Exact newspaper/date/page for the 1958 municipal-judge appointment and the duration of his judicial service.
- Mabel Breckenridge obituary publication date/page and James and Mabel's burial or disposition location.

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