

Albany Hill and Cerrito Creek – History and Future

by Susan Schwartz, Friends of Five Creeks, for King Tides walk 2020

Geology: Albany Hill, shaggy with trees, rises gently from the south to 338 feet elevation, dropping steeply on its other three sides. It seems to stand alone on the waterfront, but looks are a misleading. The hill is part of an “alien terrane” –Jurassic shale and sandstone – rock that formed in the age of dinosaurs and much later was scraped from the sea bottom and caught on the edge of North America as ocean floor was forced beneath the continent. Eons later, this same titanic clash of plates heaved the rock upwards as part of a range of hills trending northwest. Now called the Novato Terrane, this remnant of the age of dinosaurs includes what are now Fleming Point, Point Isabel, a smaller summit northwest of Albany Hill (all now dynamited), Brooks Island, the Potrero San Pablo of West Richmond, and the hills of the China Camp area across San Pablo Strait.

Quite recently, perhaps 3 million to 1 million years ago, the continued clash of ocean and continent warped this area downward, forming a valley, while a younger range of hills, today’s Berkeley Hills, tilted upward farther east. Humans, arriving thousands of years ago, before the end of the last Ice Age, found Albany Hill and the other hills of the Novato Terrane edging a valley. The ocean shore was well to the west, near the Farallon Islands. As the distant Ice Age glaciers melted, sea level rose. By some 5000 years ago the valley had flooded, forming San Francisco Bay. For a time, Albany Hill was an isolated sea stack. But silt and sand brought by alongshore currents and youthful creeks flowing from the rising hills joined the hill to the shore and created marshes to the north and south.



U.S. Coastal Survey map of north end of Albany Hill, Cerrito Creek, and Pt. Isabel, 1851. Road is San Pablo Ave. Note winding creek is marsh, and small hill at northwest end of Albany Hill.



1850s photo looking east to Albany Hill (right), then El Cerrito de San Antonio, and Fleming Point (left), then El Cerrito del Sur. Note absence of trees except on north slopes.

Early history: The north side of the hill was home to Native Americans, who lived in small groups around the Bay. A fan of small creeks flowed together into a brackish marsh rich in birds and shellfish. A willow marsh edging the southernmost creeklet, Middle Creek, provided food, medicine, and materials. On the cool north side of the hills, oaks supplied acorns, which were ground into flour along with seeds from the grasslands that dominated the landscape. The grinding wore deep holes in exposed rocks still visible in the meadow between hill and creek. The area was by no means wilderness. Native Americans burned to keep grasslands open, cultivated and harvested to encourage useful plants, and built up midden mounds that stayed above coastal floods.

Albany Hill, a prominent landmark, appears on early European mariners' maps. The first overland explorers, Pedro Fages and Fr. Juan Crespi in 1772, named it El Cerrito de San Antonio, the little hill of St. Anthony. (By that time, the Native Americans who had lived at the foot of the hill may have been all but wiped out by European diseases. If not, they were soon herded into missions.)

The Native American trail that ran north-south near the Bay edge became the road linking huge land-grant ranches. Cerrito Creek two grants, both to soldiers who had risen to become leaders at San Jose: The Peralta rancho, stretching south to San Leandro, was the Spanish crown's gift to Luis Maria Peralta, who divided the land among his sons. Domingo Peralta received what is now Berkeley and Albany, including Albany Hill. The Castro ranch to the north was a later Mexican grant to Vincente Castro. His son Victor Castro built his adobe northeast of the hill and near the creek, where El Cerrito Plaza is now.

With the coming of the Gold Rush, Domingo Peralta lost his land to squatters and rapacious lawyers. He died penniless. Castro, in a less settled area that fewer Yankees coveted, remained prosperous. He leased land to tenant farmers and built a landing for wheat and other goods on a point named for one of his daughters, Punta Isabel. But the Castro rancho, too, was divided and sold off amid inheritance disputes.

Ranchos to cities: Cerrito Creek, the former rancho boundary, became the line between relatively settled Alameda County and less populous Contra Costa County. In addition to a blacksmith shop opened in the 1880s by a German, Wilhelm Rust, a collection of roadhouses and less savory businesses grew up north of the line and lingered, prospering especially during Prohibition. Victor Castro's two-story adobe

eventually became a casino. Today's Pastime Hardware was Pastime Ballroom. Sally Rand fan-danced where Wells Fargo bank is now. The area that is now El Cerrito Plaza housed a dog track. Chinese gambling houses straggled west along the creek.

As the settlement around Rust's blacksmith shop was developing, frequent explosions led to dynamite manufacturing being driven out of Fleming Point, the smaller hill southwest of Albany Hill, now Golden Gate Fields racetrack. Manufacturing moved to the northwest corner of Albany Hill – planting eucalyptus trees to muffle the sound of their explosions and catch debris. In 1905, however, one factory exploded and set the other on fire. Dynamite manufacturing was driven north again. Left behind were the abandoned Nobel railroad station (site of a later train robbery) and the Chinese workers' shantytown. The area became a hobo jungle.



Dynamite company explosion, NW corner of Albany Hill, 1905 (smoke upper left). Later, part of the NW slope was quarried, and the small summit in the foreground was leveled for fill.

Cerrito Creek flood challenge: As commerce and homes spread along the corridor that is now San Pablo Avenue, a garbage dump and slaughterhouse began filling the marsh to the west, where Cerrito Creek wound its way to the Bay. A typhoid scare that closed this dump led to a housewives' revolt and the incorporation of Albany, but that is a story for Codornices Creek. As pavement and roofs covered land upstream, and feeder creeks were straightened or piped underground, rain runoff rushed more quickly to the shrinking marsh, where the creek was eventually forced into a straight channel up against Albany Hill. To the west, the shallow Bay was being filled, with only small pipes and channels left to carry runoff. A small summit northwest of Albany Hill was dynamited, with the rubble creating fill including a site for stores, now Pacific East Mall, in Richmond. So that businesses would not flood, this commercial strip was filled higher than land to its east – which thus became a bowl with higher land on all sides.

El Cerrito eventually annexed this residential area of former marsh. In the 1960s, the city tore down shanties and created Creekside Park, with flood control ponds also intended to serve as a summer swimming hole. Severe floods the winter after they were built were a reminder that the ponds are not a cure, though they undoubtedly lessen flooding. The summer dam intended to create a swimming hole



went unused due to liability issues. The neighborhood remains designated as a FEMA flood-risk zone with occasional local flooding when storms and high tides coincide. In the early 2000s, Friends of Five Creeks' removal of evergreen thornless blackberry and other choking invasives widened the channel, reducing flooding. But the threat remains. Ordinary high tides back water up to the ford at

Creekside Park (*above, choked channel before F5C began*). Rising sea levels and stronger storms will increase the likelihood of flooding. This is not the only place where sea-level rise threatens to cause floods well inland.

Albany Hill: Although houses gradually marched up the gentle south slope, steep Albany Hill itself remained relatively untouched as long as other areas were more easily developed. The dynamite companies had revived the Native American practice of annual controlled burns on the hill to avoid larger fires. Burning continued through 1968, contributing to the survival of native grasses and wildflowers. This, and the relative cool and elevation, have made Albany Hill an important ecological island. It harbors a surprising numbers of native plant species, some not found for hundreds of miles.

From the beginning, Albany residents enjoyed the hill. Adults held wildflower-seeding parties. Children sledded on the grass slopes and hung rope swings from trees, as they do today. Toward the middle of the 20th Century, though, Albany Hill's open space began to attract developers' restless eyes. In the 1930s and 40s, quarrying levelled the small summit northwest of the hill (now part of the mall) and gouged the scars still visible behind today's condominiums. Proposals included gas-storage tanks west of the hill, World War II defense installations on the summit, blasting off the top for an EB MUD reservoir and using the rock for Bay fill, a high-rise summit hotel, and covering the hill with apartments. Citizen protest or sheer impracticability halted these plans, but Albany zoned the hill for high-density housing.

The rise of the environmental movement in the 1970s led to citizen demands to preserve open space. Albany created its own Creekside Park, from Cerrito Creek up the north slope, as well as a small hilltop park. A band along the summit was designated as open space, and condominium builders on the west side of the hill agreed to keep significant areas of slope undeveloped. Citizens voted in 1994 to cut allowed zoning density in half, to nine units per acre, and to let the city cut it more. But there have been no further reductions. In 1996, citizens voted to sell bonds to acquire land on the hill. The city did acquire small parcels totaling six acres, 10.7 acres, from Pierce Street at the southwest foot of the hill up over the summit and down to Taft Street on the east, remains privately owned and zoned for high-density housing. As this is written, in early 2020, the tract is for sale for \$10 million.

For now, Cerrito Creek and Albany Hill remain a rare island of habitat in the city, with a rare variety of habitats including brackish tidal slough, freshwater creek, willow and oak woodlands, eucalyptus forest, and grasslands. Deer, coyotes, hawks, owls, herons, egrets, ducks, many songbirds, and Pacific chorus frogs are among the wildlife. Trails on both sides of the creek and up and over the hill from north, south, east, and west, and benches near the creek and on the hill, invite exploring and lingering.

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