

Albany Hill and Cerrito Creek – History and Future

by Susan Schwartz, Friends of Five Creeks

This is a work in progress. Comments and corrections are welcome at f5creeks@gmail.com.

Albany Hill, shaggy with trees, rises gently from the south to over 300 feet elevation, dropping steeply on its other three sides. It seems to stand alone on the waterfront, but looks are a bit misleading. The hill is part of an “alien terrane” – a band of Jurassic shale and sandstone – rock that formed in the age of dinosaurs. This band of rock was scraped from the sea floor, jumbled, 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. The band, which geologists now call the Novato Terrane, included 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 much more recently, but 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 but huge 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 alongshore currents and youthful creeks flowing from the rising hills to the east brought silt and sand. These eventually joined the hill to the shore and created salt marshes north and south of the hill.



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.

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 salt marsh, rich in birds and shellfish. Soil in this area is flecked with shells, remains of shellfish harvests. 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. These Native Americans changed the landscape, but with a fairly light hand. For example, they burned to keep grasslands open and built up midden mounds with their refuse.

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 Spanish and Mexican land-grant ranches. Cerrito Creek divided two land grants: The Peralta rancho, stretching south, to San Leandro, was the Spanish crown's gift to the military commander of San Jose, 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 Mexican grant. Victor Castro, son of the grantee, 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 among heirs and sold off.

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. Victor Castro's two-story adobe was eventually a casino. The area that is now El Cerrito Plaza at one time housed a dog-racing track. Chinese gambling houses straggled west along the creek.

A garbage dump and slaughterhouse began gradually filling the marsh west of San Pablo, at the foot of the hill. Just before the turn of the century, frequent explosions led to dynamite manufacturing being driven out of Fleming Point, the smaller hill southwest of Albany Hill. Dynamite makers moved to the northwest corner of Albany Hill – planting eucalyptus trees to muffle the sound of their explosions and catch debris. About 1903, 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.



Explosion at dynamite factory on Albany Hill, c. 1903, from north across marsh.

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, with 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 sledged 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 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.

North of the hill, filling of the marsh had left only two small channels, north and south. But flooding persisted, especially as the city grew. Cerrito Creek's many branches funnel runoff from a wide swath of the Berkeley Hills to the former marsh. As streets and roofs kept rain from soaking into soil, more water reached the remaining channels more quickly. The creek's level rises and falls with the tide as far east as Santa Clara. Thus flooding was, and is, worst when storms coincide with high tides. In 1953, the Stege Sanitary District's head wrote:

“As late as 1920, records show a small lake bordered by marsh south of ‘County Road No. 4’ now Central, near Belmont. Nothing appears to justify use of this area for dwellings; and, the character of construction permitted in the past has involved a succession of unwise buyers of homes in losses and disappointments only partly compensated by sale to some newer victim.”

In 1969, as part of renewal of this down-at-heel area, El Cerrito built a straight concrete channel for Cerrito Creek right up against the hill, with concrete ponds for storm overflow in a new Creekside Park. At the same time, Richmond had allowed higher fill in a new shopping center to the west (originally a White Front appliance store, later Breuners, now Pacific East Mall). The winter of 1969-70 saw the worst floods yet. Flooding seems likely to increase as global warming brings rising sea levels.

Meanwhile, up on the hill, the rise of the environmental movement in the 1970s led to citizen demands to preserve open space. Albany created its 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 condominiums on the west side of the hill agreed to keep significant areas of slope undeveloped. Despite two plebiscites -- a 1996 advisory vote favoring buying land on the hill, and 1998 passage of the Measure R levy to raise funds, the city has not made serious efforts to acquire the remaining 11 acres of open land south of the condominiums, which remains zoned for high-density housing.

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 enable people to enjoy nature here. Benches near the creek and on the summit invite lingering.

Two volunteer groups, Friends of Five Creeks and a recently reconstituted Friends of Albany Hill, work to protect and improve the area. Please join them for volunteer work parties and interpretive walks.

