

History and Future of the Berkeley Waterfront

Susan Schwartz, Friends of Five Creeks

As the glaciers of the last Ice Age melted, some 8000 years ago, the rising Pacific gradually drowned a huge river that had poured through the Golden Gate toward the Farallons. With Native Americans there to watch, valleys were drowned, becoming San Francisco, San Pablo, and Suisun Bays.

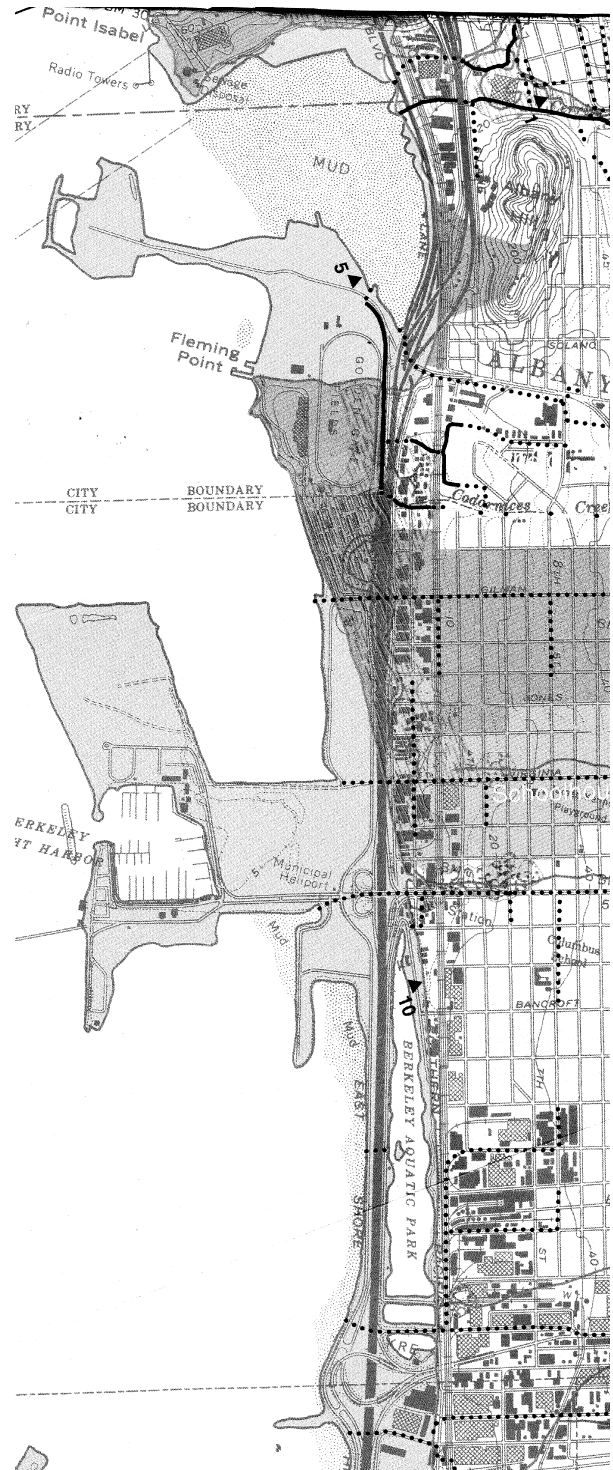
Peaks of a range of hills older and west of today's East Bay hills were left as islands – Albany Hill, Fleming Point, Pt. Isabel, Brooks Island, the Potrero Hills. From the still-rising hills of today, creeks carried soil and eroding rock to changing shoreline, while currents swept sand and mud from the Sacramento River along the shore. Together, these formed today's "flatlands" as wet, grassy meadows.

Opposite the Golden Gate, strong tidal currents swept away mud, leaving the heavier sand particles. A beach and low dunes thus formed a golden crescent along the shore from about today's Virginia Street to the sandstone bluff at Fleming Point. North of that, a shallow inlet lapped the west edge of Albany Hill.

Behind the sandy beach, Schoolhouse, Codornices, and Marin Creeks flowed into a tidal slough that wandered north behind the hill at Fleming Point. Creek mouths north and south of these – Strawberry and Cerrito Creeks – reached the Bay. At those two creek outlets, debris from thousands of years of Indian habitation formed large shell mounds.

The map at right shows the original shoreline (dark and shaded) and the shoreline today. Settlers dredged the sand, bulldozed the shellmounds, and filled the Bay westward with garbage, construction debris, and mud from dredging projects. Draw a line connecting the three peninsulas (you can barely see the tip of Emeryville's at bottom). That is how much of the Bay we planned to fill. Our sparkling Bay would have been a narrow ship channel.

Led by Save the Bay, conservationists finally stopped Bay filling in the 1980s. Led by Citizens for Eastshore State Park, we have a new park along most of the shore of Emeryville, Berkeley, and Albany. The new Bay Trail invites us to see nature reclaiming our waste.



Modern and original shoreline, from Creek and Watershed Map of Oakland & Berkeley, by Janet M. Sowers, William Lettis & Assoc., & San Francisco Estuary Institute, published by Oakland Museum of California, www.museumca.org/creeks

Mouth of Strawberry Creek: Strawberry Creek is the reason there is a Berkeley. The year-round water supply led founders of the school that became UC Berkeley to choose it for their campus -- and for lots they could sell for financing. At the creek's mouth (south of the present outlet pipe), a rare piece of solid shore fairly near deep water became a Gold Rush landing, quickly followed by a hotel, grain mill, and other businesses. Berkeley's first park, Willow Grove Park, was on the creek, and a dance pavilion once spanned the channel.

As sewage polluted the creek; roofs and streets increased runoff, flooding, and erosion; and land became costly, this asset became a liability. Below the UC campus, the creek was almost entirely enclosed in pipes by the end of the 1930s.

Piped Strawberry Creek now reaches the Bay from beneath University west of Sea Breeze Market. The shallow cove here is attractive to birds, but plagued by refuse borne on eddies, and by invasive plants, particularly perennial pepperweed. Friends of Five Creeks volunteers are controlling the invasives along the shoreline all the way to Shorebird Park, at the west tip. Natives are filling in nicely.

The Berkeley Meadow: University Avenue is built on fill around the Berkeley Pier, which stretched much farther into the Bay in the days of streetcars and ferries. The bumps you feel while driving it are the old pier timbers, which do not sink with the rotting fill.

Pockets of subsiding garbage also led to formation of winter ponds in the Berkeley Meadow, the broad peninsula connecting the mainland to the Marina. Weeds, neglect, surprising garden escapees, and a few natives -- coyote brush, willows, elderberry, mugwort -- turned this into an urban wildlife refuge.

The varied wildlife that gathered in this refuge led to its being "restored," with new weed-free soil contoured into new ponds and gentle rises. Friends of Five Creeks volunteers help maintain this area.

Right: Strawberry Creek mouth at low tide.

Hérons, egrets, and ducks feed in the ponds. Rabbits and ground squirrels are prey for snakes, harriers, and the ghostly kite. Burrowing owls use abandoned squirrel tunnels, and with kestrels hunt smaller prey, while kingfishers plummet for small fish from the telephone wires on the north shoreline.

North Basin, Schoolhouse Creek: Rubble-edged, with square corners, fed by a former Berkeley sewer pipe, the North Basin is far from natural. But migrating and wintering waterfowl rest and feed here -- scaups are the most common species. Terns and pelicans hunt the small fish that fisherfolk say still try to run up the pipe. Egrets, herons, and many shorebirds frequent the mud flats when the tide is low.

The pipe is Schoolhouse Creek. Berkeley's first school was built on its banks, on land donated by Domingo Peralta, the ranchero who had owned all of Berkeley. Berkeley culverted almost all of this creek, and from the 1930s to 1950s used the pipe to carry sewage as well as creek to the Bay.

This is one of the few places where it is practical to re-establish the connection between creeks and Bay. Park plans call for bringing the creek back out of the pipe. Friends of Five Creeks used a grant from a private foundation for a preliminary study of possibilities; park plans call for considering it.

Friends of Five Creeks volunteers also are making the area north of the creek inviting to humans while still preserving habitat.

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