

Lower Codornices Creek

By Susan Schwartz, President, Friends of Five Creeks

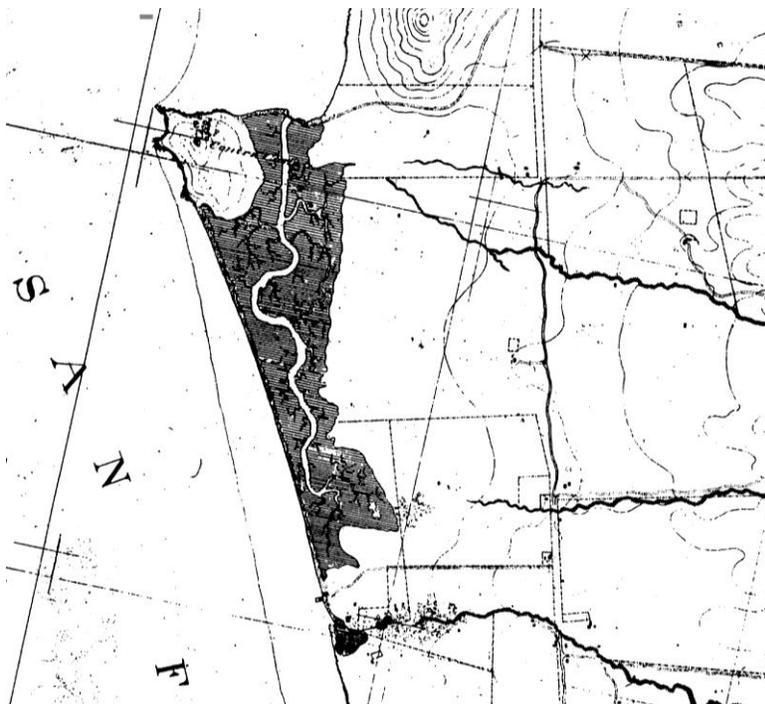
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(Revised for BPWA spring walk, led by Susan Schwartz; Mary Pearsall, landscape designer specializing in drought-tolerant native plantings; and Keith Skinner of Berkeley Path Wanderers.)

Before settlement: Lower Codornices and Village Creeks flow through young land. The Pacific Ocean plate, grinding along the edge of western North American, began to force today's Berkeley Hills upward only about 1-2 million years ago – a blink in geologic time. The young hills, fracturing as they were pushed upward, eroded quickly. Rain seeping into fissures gushed out as springs, or flowed overland in rills, and coalesced into streams that carried (and still carry) eroded rock and soil to the valley to the west.

A mere 8000 – 5000 years ago, as Ice Age glaciers melted, the Pacific Ocean rose and flooded the valley, forming San Francisco Bay. The sediments washing from the hills joined sand and silt carried by tides and alongshore currents. Together they formed an alluvial plain – today's flatlands. Thus the “flatlands” can be looked at as the outwash plains of creeks flowing from the hills – creeks like Strawberry, Schoolhouse, Codornices, Village/Marin, Blackberry/Middle, and Cerrito. In winter, these creeks flooded the plain, depositing silt that formed low natural levees that can still be felt as slight rises as you walk north and south.

Many of the small creeks, including Codornices, petered out in the wet flatlands before they reached the Bay. Flow continued underground, in Codornices' case to a tidal slough that meandered north-northwest through a large salt marsh. The slough began at Schoolhouse Creek, about at today's Virginia Street. Its mouth was an embayment north of Fleming Point, a low sandstone hills that is the site of today's Golden Gate Fields racetrack. South of Fleming Point, the marsh was edged on the west by low dunes and a sandy crescent of beach. Although the sand was hauled off for construction and the area filled by garbage, the slough is still there – a narrow engineered channel between the freeway and racetrack, emptying into the Bay in Albany.



1856 U.S. Coastal Survey map showing, from top, Marin, Codornices, Schoolhouse, and Strawberry Creeks. Only Strawberry reaches the Bay. The others peter out before reaching the salt marsh (dark area) and tidal slough.

Native Americans – Early 20th Century: Perhaps because it did not reach the Bay, Codornices does not seem to have been edged by the long-term Native American settlements that built thick shell deposits at Strawberry Creek to the south and Cerrito Creek to the north. The creek was part of Rancho San Antonio, granted to retired soldier Luis Maria Peralta by the Spanish crown in 1820. Peralta's grant stretched from San Leandro to Cerrito Creek (today's Alameda-Contra Costa line, and the Albany/El Cerrito border). His sons named the creek Codornices for quail eggs they found nearby. Luis Peralta divided his lands among these sons. Jose Domingo Peralta, who received today's Berkeley, was given today's Albany and Berkeley, and built his home on the creek banks near today's Albina Street.

The 1849 Gold Rush brought floods of new immigrants. The low hill by the Bay was virtually an island at high tide; John Fleming, a San Francisco butcher, bought it from Domingo Peralta as pasture for cattle in 1853, for \$2,200. Fleming seems to have been one of the few who dealt honestly with Peralta, who died a pauper in 1865. In any case, the name Fleming Point replaced El Cerrito del Sur (the southern little hill; today's Albany Hill was El Cerrito de San Antonio). Early maps show a house on the hill and a warehouse at the creek mouth.

The Transcontinental Railroad reached Oakland via Niles Canyon in 1869. By 1878, though, rails were running north along the Bay through Berkeley. It seems likely that Codornices was ditched through to the slough about this time, for drainage.

Rails brought industry. Canning, tanning, soap making, paint, cigars, lumber, beer, and other manufactures edged the tracks. Fleming Point was taken over by Giant Powder, dynamite makers driven out of their first location in San Francisco's Glen Canyon by explosions, and by the related Judson & Sheppard acid works. Explosions continued to wrack the plants – in 1880, 1883 (with many fatalities among the Chinese workers), and finally 1892. This final blast all but destroyed both factories and blew out windows in San Francisco. Dynamite manufacturing was forced northward into less settled areas, first to Albany Hill and finally to Pt. Pinole. Judson & Sheppard stayed longer on Fleming Point, manufacturing chemicals and paint.

The area of the slough was generally set aside for “noxious industries,” such as tanneries and slaughterhouses. In the 1920s, despite citizen objections, Berkeley built an incinerator on the Albany boundary at Second Street and began filling the salt marsh. Berkeley's transfer station for garbage is still across the street, next to the tracks. East of the tracks, the creek ran underneath a steel plant up to Fifth Street, and, between 8th and 6th, alongside Linde Air Products, later Union Carbide. Other creek neighbors over the years included scrap metals and an aluminum plant.

North of the creek and west of San Pablo, horticulturalist Edward Gill bought 104 acres about 1890. Gill built a large Victorian home and established the Gill Nursery, specializing in roses. This area was drained mostly by Marin Creek, a small seasonal drainage that fed a cattle pond in the low spot that today is Marin School. The original creek is almost entirely buried under Marin Street, which followed its curves. But a remnant, now called Village Creek, remains, zig-zagged oddly due to ditching and “restoration” that about 2000 created and entirely new channel between University Village and Oceanview School. Another remnant surfaces in the Target parking lot.

In Berkeley's early 20th Century growth spurt, fierce competition between the Southern Pacific and Key System street railways did much to shape the city. In 1912 the SP's Interurban Electric Railway route 5 began service along Ninth Street, through the Gill fields, and up Marin (later Solano) to Thousand Oaks. The University of California Berkeley bought the Gill land in 1928, but left it almost entirely unused through most of the Great Depression – a period in which Albany grew rapidly with construction of McGregor's economical bungalows.



Albany Hill and Fleming Point from the east, in the 1850s

Mid 20th Century – Present: The year 1939 began a period of rapid change. In 1939, the United States Department of Agriculture acquired 20 acres of the former Gill Tract for its Western Regional Research Center. That same year, UC Regents gave the UC Berkeley College of Agriculture use of 36 acres of the northern Gill Tract. Construction of Golden Gate Fields racetrack also began in 1939 at Fleming Point, on land owned by Santa Fe Railroad. Dynamite leveled the hilltop, the grandstand was built on the flattened summit, and the rubble was used to fill the salt marsh and create parking lots. The slough, now draining only Codornices and Village Creeks (Schoolhouse had been diverted to carry Berkeley sewage to the Bay) remained as a narrow engineered channel between the track and Eastshore Highway (now I-880/580). (Albany Hill narrowly escaped similar flattening in 1942, when property owners objected to Albany's approval of blasting off the hilltop.)

The racetrack opened in 1941, but promptly closed and declared bankruptcy as horses became mired in the former marsh. Meanwhile, Albany extended Buchanan Street west and established its dump at the end. This left a large lagoon at the creek mouth, with tides moving back and forth across Buchanan in four pipes. The lagoon was gradually filled, becoming parking lots and service area for the track. However, salt marsh re-created itself in the remnant eastern portion. Thus, Codornices still ends at a tidal marsh, fingering channels edged by the area's characteristic cord grass, bands of pickleweed and jaumea, and bright-yellow-flowered gum plant.

World War II stepped up the transformation. The Army siezed the track, briefly used it as a camp, and abandoned it in 1942. The Navy took over in 1943, using the track for storage and refurbishing of landing craft and other equipment used to re-conquer Pacific Islands.

With tires and gasoline rationed, authorities faced the challenge of getting workers to and from the Richmond shipyards, which had begun building ships for the British war effort even before the attack on Pearl Harbor brought the U.S. into the war in December, 1941. Construction of the Richmond Shipyard Railway began in 1942. Despite wartime shortages, the rails were in service by January 1943, thanks to use of the 9th Street Interurban line, rail and cars requisitioned from abandoned street railways, and timbers from disused ferry piers -- the Bay Bridge had opened in 1939. The pilings supported an S-shaped bridge across the marshy western end of what is now University Village. More than 80 trains a day used the rails. The northern part of the route is today's Bay Trail along the Richmond waterfront.

In 1943, despite vociferous protests from “Albany Against Shacks” and the Mayor of Berkeley’s declaration that there was plenty of empty housing in Richmond, the federal government seized vacant land west of San Pablo from Camelia Street to Buchanan Street for wartime public housing. The first apartments in Codornices Village, now University Village, opened that May. The Children’s Center, Recreation Center, and Codornices elementary school followed in 1944. Residents were mostly shipyard workers, but included railroad employees and Navy families, especially after 1944, when the Navy built its own complexes, Kula Gulf in Albany and Savo Island in Berkeley. Somewhat remarkably for those days, Codornices Village was racially integrated.

The war ended in August 1945. By October, the shipyard railway had stopped operating and federal support for the Codornices Village child care and recreation had been cut off. But housing continued to be built for returning veterans and their families. In 1949, the Albany City Council, which had opposed the Village six years earlier, asked the federal government to keep it for returning GI students. UC bought the land and buildings back from the federal government in 1956 for about \$40,000.

Renamed University Village, the housing was offered to eager student families. Some housing in the marshy west end was removed, and in the early 1960s newer apartments were built between Fifth and Sixth. These and most of the World War II units remained in use until the University began to replace them with newer, more expensive units in 1998. The last World War II apartments were torn down in 2007, and the World War II Children’s Center was demolished in 2010. Only the Recreation Center dates from the war.

In the 1960s, the University bought former industrial land on both sides of the creek for possible Village expansion, and creek curves between Sixth and Eighth were straightened and shorn of trees. But UC re-sold the Berkeley land in the 1990s – to the U.S. Post Office (which built a sorting facility on the site of the former Union Carbide plant) and the City of Berkeley (now the Harrison Street ballfields).

By the post-industrial 1990s, lower Codornices Creek was largely an engineered ditch, where brush and trees had invaded abandoned industrial land. Ever-exploring steelhead at some point found they could reproduce in the shaded waters. What we call restoration began in 1994-5, when volunteers headed by Richard Register, then head of Ecocity Builders, dug a new channel north of the concrete pipe between 9th and 8th Streets. The “daylighting” was part of a deal allowing construction of the adjacent Body Time building. The Urban Creeks Council began work toward a revitalized creek with adjacent trail from San Pablo to the railroad tracks, with the twin goals of flood control and habitat. In 2000 Friends of Five Creeks established that the creek was home to rainbow trout/steelhead, adding this to the impetus. Friends of Five Creeks and others in Albany also seek restoration of more of the salt marsh land use changes at Golden Gate Fields race track.

Restoration projects were completed in 2004 (railroad to Fifth), 2006 (Fifth to Sixth), and 2011 (6th to 8th). Whether the restoration will be completed to San Pablo, or upstream at Kains, remains an open question.

I am indebted to many sources, particularly A Selective History of the Codornices-University Village, The City of Albany & Environs, by Warren F. and Catherine T. Lee. The responsibility for mistakes is of course my own -- SHS