

# Albany Hill and Cerrito Creek – History and Future

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*This is a work in progress. Comments and corrections are welcome at [f5creeks@aol.com](mailto:f5creeks@aol.com).*

Albany Hill, shaggy with trees and apparently alone on the East Bay waterfront, rises gently from the south to over 300 feet elevation, dropping steeply on its other three sides. The apparent solitude is misleading. The hill is Jurassic shale and sandstone, formed in the age of dinosaurs from sediments scraped and jumbled as ocean floor was forced beneath the North American continent. Eons later, this same titanic clash of plates forced the rock upwards. Albany Hill was one of a range of hills trending northwest and including 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 forced this area downward, forming a valley, while a younger range of hills, today's Berkeley Hills, tilted upward farther east.

Humans, who arrived in this area some time before the end of the last Ice Age, thus found Albany Hill and the other hills edging a valley, with the ocean well to the west, near the Farallon Islands. As the ice 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 youthful creeks flowing from the rising hills to the east, aided by sand-bearing alongshore currents joined the hill to the shore in the course of creating flatlands with 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 from the east of Albany Hill (right), then El Cerrito de San Antonio, and Fleming Point (left), then El Cerrito del Sur. Note absence of trees.*

The Native Americans, living in small groups around the Bay, found the north side of the hill especially attractive. There, a fan of small creeks flowed together into a salt marsh, rich in birds and shellfish. A willow marsh edging the southernmost creeklet, Middle Creek, provided food, medicine, and materials. Nearly all the East Bay was open grassland, where women flailed abundant seeds into baskets to form nutritious cakes called pinole. The north side of the hill had a relatively rare resource -- scrubby oaks that supplied acorns. Acorns had to be ground into flour and then leached of tannins. The grinding wore deep holes in exposed rocks – you can still see these mortar rocks in the meadow between hill and creek. “Soil” in this area often contains as much native oyster shell as dirt, remains of seafood harvests. These Native Americans changed the landscape. For example, they burned to keep grasslands open and built up midden mounds with their garbage. But their hand on the landscape was light. With the coming of Europeans, humankind’s effects became more like bulldozers and steam shovels.

Albany Hill, a prominent landmark, was noted on early mariners’ maps. The first overland exploring expedition, of 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 Indians who had lived at the foot of the hill may have already been decimated by European diseases. If not, they were soon forced into missions.)

The Indian trail that ran north-south near the Bay edge became the road linking Spanish and Mexican ranches whose common boundary was Cerrito Creek. The Peralta rancho to the south, reaching through San Leandro, was the Spanish crown’s gift to the military commander of San Jose. He never lived on the ranch, dividing it among his sons instead. Domingo Peralta received what is now Berkeley and Albany, including Albany Hill. The Castro ranch to the north was a Mexican grant. Vincente 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 and died penniless. Castro, in a less settled area that fewer Yankees coveted, remained prosperous. He leased his land to tenant farmers and built a landing for wheat and other goods on a point named for one of his daughters, Punta Isabel. Gradually, though, his land too was divided and sold.

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 for more than 50 years. Vincente 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 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. Two moved to the northwest corner of Albany Hill, where they planted the eucalyptus trees to muffle the sound of their explosions. About 1903, however, one factory exploded and set the other on fire. Dynamite manufacturing was driven north. (Its last refuge was Pt. Pinole.) Left behind were the abandoned Nobel railroad station (site of a later train robbery) and a shantytown of the Chinese laborers. The area became and remained a hobo jungle, a tradition that lingers.



*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. Interestingly, 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.

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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. It has never changed that designation, except for a strip along the summit reserved as open space.

North of the hill, tides had always backed up water in the marsh and flood-prone meadows. As land uphill was covered with roofs and asphalt, the fan of creeks carried more storm runoff to this area, and faster. Flooding when high tides coincided with storms got worse just as grazing, slaughterhouse, and shanties gave way to homes. In 1969, El Cerrito forced the creek into a straight concrete channel against the hill, with concrete ponds for storm overflow in a new Creekside Park. At the same time, Richmond had allowed higher fill to the west to create a new shopping center that housed a White Front appliance store (later Breuners, now Pacific East Mall). The winter of 1969-70 saw the worst floods yet. Flooding has continued, and seems likely to get worse in the face of rising sea levels due to global warming.

Meanwhile, up on the hill, the rise of the environmental movement in the 1970s led to formation of Friends of Albany Hill along with 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. As condominiums rose along the west side of the hill, the City of Albany accepted a creekside trail easement that was unusable because it lay on cliff-like creek bank, and failed to get in writing a promise that basketball courts would be kept for community recreation – the condos recently fenced the area and made it private.

Although Albany citizens in 1996 passed a special assessment to acquire Albany Hill land, Measure R, most of the remaining open space remains zoned for high-density housing in the city's outdated General Plan. And with all Bay Area cities under pressure to create more housing units to avoid sprawl, Albany may find it more politically palatable to sacrifice open space on the hill rather than place multi-story buildings on arteries like San Pablo and Solano, in the face of opposition from "back fence" neighbors.

Other decisions, too, will need to be taken. Albany has \$376,000 in its Fiscal Year 2008 Capital Budget for Creekside Park. This is enough for a pedestrian bridge that would make the park much easier to reach, and link its wild areas with El Cerrito's more urban creekside trail and playground. The question is not so much opposition as whether the project can get the city's attention.

Then there is the long-term question of Cerrito Creek. Because boundary lines were straightened, most of both sides of Cerrito Creek are actually in Contra Costa County. In an odd twist, Bayside Commons owns a long, narrow Contra Costa parcel that extends from Pierce Street surprisingly far east, almost to the broad meadow. The three cities edging the creek and the private landowner have no effective program for creek maintenance – in particular, for controlling the invasive thornless blackberries that can quickly grow across the creek, block it, and cause floods in El Cerrito and Richmond.

For the past seven years, Friends of Five Creeks have done backbreaking work removing the blackberries and restoring natives along the creek. But hundreds of feet remain to be cleared and planted. If the volunteers quit, though, under present circumstances the area would revert to weeds and floods.

Please enjoy these wonderful city wilds – and take an interest in their future.

**Join Friends of Five Creeks in restoring creeks** – [www.fivecreeks.org](http://www.fivecreeks.org), [f5creeks@aol.com](mailto:f5creeks@aol.com), 848 9358.  
Monthly work parties and meetings, Tuesday am "weekday weed warriors."

**SUGGESTED WALK:** Walk east on the creekside walkway to Adams Street, where now-buried creeks come together. Read the signs. Return, cross at the ford, and walk east of the willow grove. Look for round holes worn in the rocks by centuries of grinding seeds and acorns, and bits of shell in the soil.