

Lower Codornices Creek

By Susan Schwartz, President, Friends of Five Creeks
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Lower Codornices flows 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 a million years ago – a blink in geologic time. The eons-long collision of ocean and continental plates had already mixed a bewildering variety of unrelated sediments, volcanic outpourings, and scrapings into area of the rising scarp. Fracturing still more as they were (and are) pushed upward, the young hills eroded quickly. Rain seeped into fissures to gush out as springs, or flowed overland in rills that coalesced into streams, carrying eroded rock and soil to the valley to the west.

A mere 8000 – 5000 years ago, as Ice Age glaciers melted, the Pacific rose and flooded the valley, forming San Francisco Bay. The sediments wasing from the hills joined sand and silt carried by tides and alongshore currents to form a loose alluvial plain – today's flatlands. In winter, the creeks flooded, depositing silt that formed low natural levees that can still be seen as slight contours as you walk north and south. The hilltops of an older range had punctuated the valley – Fleming Point, Albany Hill, Pt. Isabel, Brooks Island, the Potrero San Pablo. These became islands, near islands joined to the new shore by salt marshes, or isolated turtlebacks – ecological islands.

The wet, gravelly flatlands absorbed many of the small creeks, including Codornices, 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 just west of 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 Magna/Golden Gate Fields racetrack. South of Fleming Point, the marsh was edged on the west by low dunes and a sandy crescent of beach. The sand was used for construction and the area filled by garbage, but the slough is still there – a narrow engineered channel between the freeway and racetrack, emptying into the Bay in Albany.

Perhaps because it did not reach the Bay, Codornices does not seem to have had the long-term Native American settlements that built thick shell deposits at Strawberry Creek to the south and Cerrito Creek to the north. It is unlikely to have had salmon runs. It could have had rainbow trout, descended from steelhead that ventured upstream in flood years, when the creek might have broken through to the west.

Codornices was part of Rancho San Antonio, granted to retired soldier Luis Maria Peralta by the Spanish crown in 1820. The ranch stretched from San Leandro to Cerrito Creek (today's Alameda-Contra Costa line, and the Albany/El Cerrito border). Peralta's sons named the creek Codornices for quail eggs they found nearby. After Luis Peralta divided his lands among his children, Jose Domingo Peralta, who received today's Berkeley, built his home on the creek banks near today's Albina Street.

The 1849 Gold Rush brought floods of new immigrants. John Fleming, a San Francisco butcher, bought it from Domingo Peralta as pasture for cattle in 1853, for \$2,200 -- The salt marsh made the low hill by the Bay virtually an island. 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 – southern relative to El Cerrito de San Antonio, today's Albany Hill). 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 Berkeley some of the industry that built Oakland in this period. Canning, tanning, soap making, paint, cigars, lumber, beer, and other manufactures edged the Berkeley tracks. The tidal slough limited development in North Berkeley. Fleming Point, though, was taken over by Giant Powder, dynamite makers driven out of their first location in San Francisco's Glen Canyon by explosions, and the related Judson & Sheppard acid works. Explosions wracked 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.

By the time Berkeley began to pass zoning laws, in the early 1900s, the area of the slough was zoned for “noxious industries,” such as tanneries (just south of Gilman) and slaughterhouses. In the 1920s, despite citizen objections, the city built an incinerator on the Albany boundary at Second Street and began filling the salt marsh. The incinerator, now a historic landmark, failed and was soon closed, but the site became a stockyards and slaughterhouse instead. 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, whose production of oxygen cylinders variously caused the creek to run red or green. Other creek neighbors over the years included scrap metals and an aluminum plant, open lots where cows grazed, and wooden working-class houses.

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 creek fed a cattle pond in the low spot that today is Marin School, and then petered out just north of Codornices. 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. The year 1939, though, began a period of rapid change. In 1939 the United States Department of Agriculture acquired 20 acres for its Western Regional Research Center of the former Gill Tract by gift and sale. 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 carrying only Codornices and Village Creek waters (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 the same fate 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 placed 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 as parking lots and service area for the track. However, salt marsh re-created itself in the remnant eastern portion, so 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 seized 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 was begun 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 in 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. Albany, the Albany School District, and Berkeley and Albany Parks Departments took over some of the burden. Emphasis shifted to housing returning veterans and their families, and housing continued to be built, along with new playing fields and remodeled playgrounds. In 1949, the Albany Council, which had opposed the Village six years earlier, asked the federal government to keep it for returning GI students rather than demolish it. 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 1960s apartments have now been replaced by units scheduled to open in 2008, and the last of the two-story World War II apartments, along San Pablo, were torn down only this year. The World War II Children's and Recreation Centers remain in use.

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).

Codornices restoration began in 1994. Volunteers headed by Richard Register, then head of Ecocity Builders, began digging a new channel north of the concrete pipe that held Codornices Creek between 9th and 8th Streets. The "daylighting," completed the next year, was allowed as part of a deal allowing construction of the adjacent Body Time building. About the same time, the Urban Creeks Council began work toward a revitalized creek with adjacent trail from San Pablo to the railroad tracks. This project is ongoing -- Friends of Five Creeks is maintaining the block between 9th and 10th Streets pending major restoration, and helping with maintenance elsewhere. Please join us!



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



1856 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.

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