

San Antonio Park

Pavilion at the top of San Antonio Park occupies the site long used as a lookout for shipping on the estuary. (Oakland History Room)



One of the earliest settlements in present day Oakland began at the Embarcadero San Antonio near what is now the intersection of East 12th Street and 14th Avenue in the Brooklyn section of East Oakland. The village of San Antonio started as an embarkation point for cattle, hides and other products of Rancho San Antonio, and its nearby public square, San Antonio Plaza, served as a gathering point for entertainments and festivities. The twelve acre plaza, now known as San Antonio Park, is a gently sloping greensward at Foothill Boulevard and 16th Avenue. It is the oldest park in the city, dating back to Spanish times.

From the rancho period through the early Anglo settlement years, the plaza served for recreation, law enforcement and commerce, and it is closely associated with the Peralta family and James LaRue, an early settler. Its development in the early part of the 20th century is an example of the extensive public improvements program, following the precepts of the nationwide

City Beautiful movement, which was instituted in Oakland by Mayor Frank Mott.

In 1820, Don Luis Maria Peralta was granted 11 leagues, or about 44,800 acres, by the Spanish government in recognition of his 40 years of military service, and his work in establishing the missions of Santa Clara, Santa Cruz and San Jose. The Rancho San Antonio grant, which included all of the land between San Leandro Creek and El Cerrito, from the water to the crest of the hills, was confirmed to Peralta by Mexico in 1822, and again by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1846. Peralta, who resided in San Jose, divided the rancho between his four sons in 1842, and the portion in which the park is located was given to Antonio Maria Peralta, whose home was in Fruitvale at what is now Peralta Hacienda Park.

In common with other landed Californios, Antonio Peralta used his portion of the rancho for cattle grazing and some farming. The period from 1833 to 1850 has been described as the Golden Age of rancho life:



"The country was lovely, the climate delightful; the valleys were filled with horses and cattle; wants were few, and no one dreaded dearth." The small population, though scattered, relied on each other for company, and long visits and celebrations were commonplace. Church days, bull-fights and displays of horsemanship were occasions of festivity, and history has it that the park, San Antonio Plaza, was the scene of many such amusements and celebrations. For the more bloodthirsty there were bull and bear fights with grizzly bears captured in the nearby hills.

About 1840 Anglos began to arrive to harvest the redwoods on the rancho. Located in what is now Montclair, the stand was the only one of its kind in the county and was used for navigation by ships in the bay in the early days of exploration. The forest was divided roughly into the San Antonio, or "first," redwoods on the skyline and western slope of the hills, which probably included what is now Joaquin Miller Park, the middle, or "second," redwoods in Mill Canyon, which runs through the present day Redwood Regional Park, and the Moraga redwoods on the Contra Costa side of the hills near the community of Canyon.

The settlement of San Antonio grew to provide transportation for the lumber, and

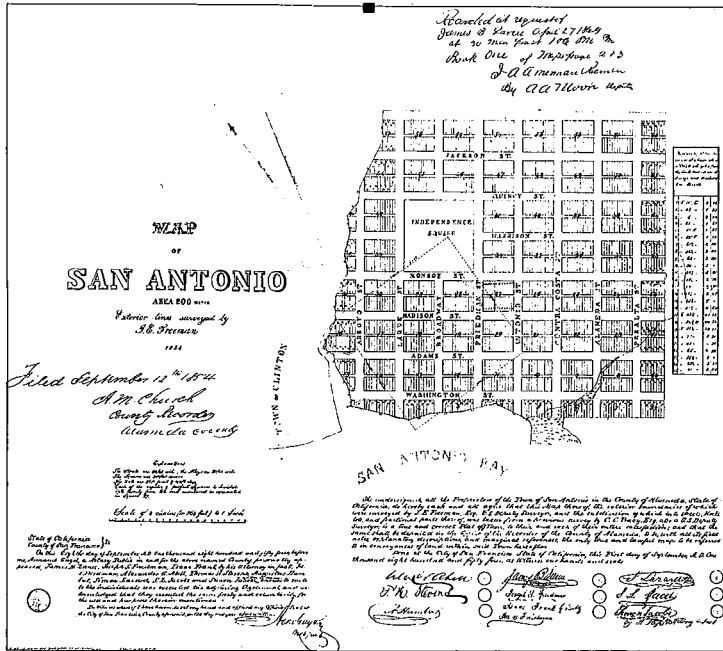
services for the lumbermen. The lumber was brought down what is now Park Boulevard and 13th Avenue and shipped to towns throughout the Bay Area, including Benicia, San Francisco, San Jose and Martinez.

The high point of San Antonio Plaza served the settlement as a lookout for ships coming up San Antonio Creek (now the estuary). As it does today, the park afforded a clear view of the bay and estuary from its crest on 17th Avenue and East 19th Street. A watchtower at the top of the hill, now the site of the pavilion, was used to monitor the arrival of ships at the Embarcadero and a flag was raised to signal the arrivals.

Pioneer James LaRue arrived in 1851 and established a wharf and store to serve the needs of the lumbermen. The store, a large tent constructed of bull hides stretched over whipsawed lumber, was soon replaced by a wooden structure. In 1858 LaRue started ferry service from the wharf to Oakland and San Francisco which, by 1863, offered service five times a day. In addition to his mercantile and transportation ventures, LaRue was involved in real estate and civic affairs, and was one of the richest men assessed in Alameda County in 1859.

Early caption on this Oakland History Room photo reads "San Antonio, 1868. Taken from Independence Square showing landing at foot of 13th Avenue where ferry boat to SF departed."





1854 San Antonio town map dedicates Independence Square. North-south streets are named for presidents, east-west for local namesakes including map signers LaRue and Friedman.

As one of the more entrepreneurial of these early settlers, LaRue purchased a large tract of land from Antonio Peralta which was subdivided in 1854 as San Antonio. It was by that subdivision that the plaza became officially dedicated as a public space, rechristened Independence Square.

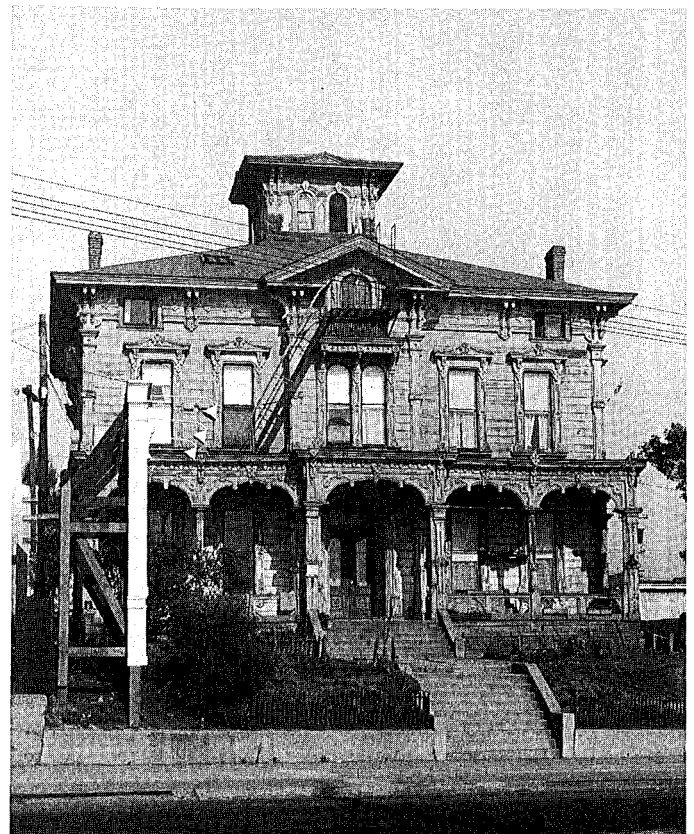
When Independence Square was dedicated in 1854, Alameda County was one year old, the State of California four, and the City of Oakland two. In 1856 the settlement at San Antonio, and its neighbor across 14th Avenue, subdivided in 1854 as Clinton Park, became part of the large township of Brooklyn which included all the land from Lake Merritt to San Leandro, bounded on the northeast by the crest of the hills along the county line.

During the period of Anglo settlement, Independence Square continued to serve as a public gathering place. According to early accounts, the bull ring was located at the corner of 16th Avenue and Foothill. Bull fighting was a regular Sunday amusement, drawing crowds from both sides of the bay, and a special excursion ferry was used to bring spectators from San Francisco. According to an 1876 history, in the 1850s San Antonio, along with San Jose and Oakland, was the scene of "considerable debauchery. Gambling flourished; fandangos were in favor; drinking, bull and bear-fighting, horse-racing... were regular Sunday amuse-

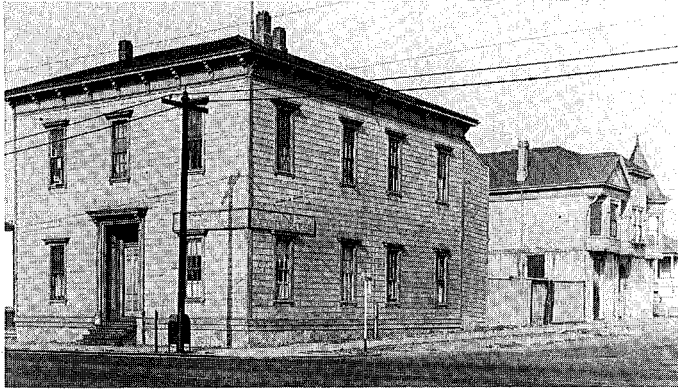
ments; and the ceremony of 'hanging Judas' on Good Friday, never failed to draw people together... Indians, Californians, Mexicans, Portuguese, and even Americans." The sport of bull and bear fighting was outlawed, but at least one man, Miguel Marquis, was fined \$150 in 1858 for the practice.

The settlement at San Antonio was also the scene of a number of lynchings in the 1850s. Thieves and cattle rustlers received this summary form of justice at the hands of the loggers, variously called the redwood boys, redwoodites or redwood rangers, who came down from their rough camps in the hills especially for the purpose. Then, as now, the San Francisco papers made much of violence in Oakland. Headlines proclaimed "Lynch Law in San Antonio!! Two Men Hung!!!", "The Excitement in Oakland! Attack Upon the Jail!! One of the Horse Thieves Hung!!!", "Another Lynching in San Antonio. More of the 'Redwood Rangers.'"

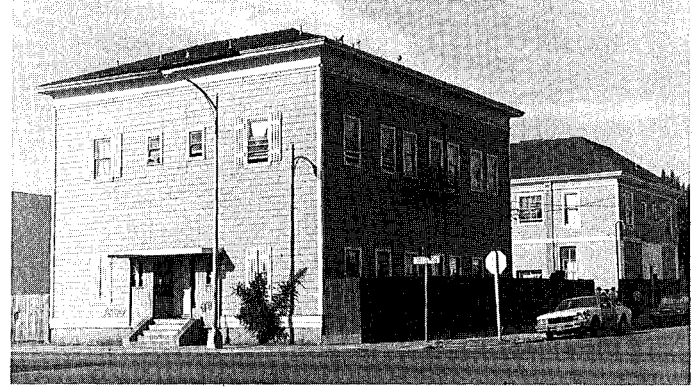
By 1860 the first growth redwoods had been logged out, and the character of the settlement at San Antonio began to change. With the completion of the terminus of the transcontinental railroad in Oakland in 1869, the future growth of the East Bay was assured



James LaRue's Italianate villa at 1318 East 12th Street was built in 1870-72; LaRue did not live to occupy it. It stood as a rooming house until about 1960. (Oakland History Room)



The first Alameda County courthouse at 20th Avenue and East 14th Street, around the 1930s when it was a broom warehouse, and today, several remodelings later. (O.H.R.; Phil Bellman)



construction of Oakland City Hall, acquisition and improvement of Lakeside Park, and landscaping and improvements to Independence Square. The greensward effect which is now seen is largely the result of the landscaping which began in 1906.

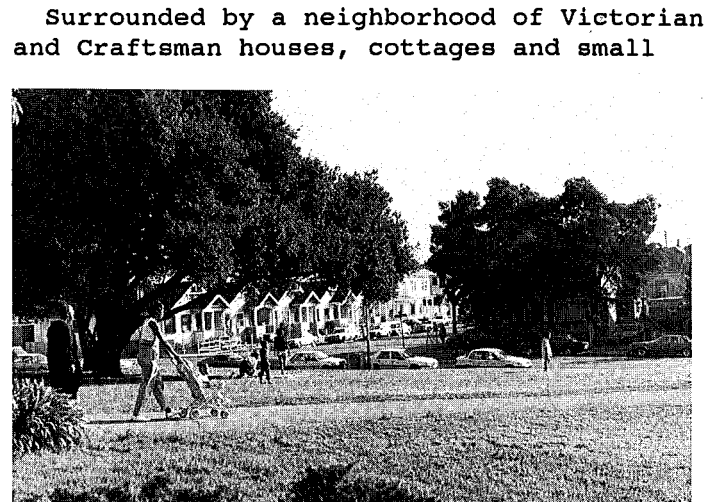
and in 1870 the town of Brooklyn, made up of Clinton Park, San Antonio, and the neighboring settlement of Lynn, was incorporated. Both ferry and train linked Brooklyn to San Francisco and Oakland and a horse car line to Oakland was established in 1873. In 1872, the newly formed municipality, nearly 3,000 in population, voted for annexation to Oakland. Part of the lure of annexation was the promise that the county seat, previously located in Alvarado, would be moved to Brooklyn, and Independence Square was offered as a possible site. After some wrangling, and a brief period where the county seat was located in San Antonio at East 14th and 20th Avenue, a site on Broadway and 5th Street in downtown Oakland won the honor.

In addition to the extensive lawns and plantings, a well and reservoir were put in in 1910, and a pavilion, designed by Oakland architect Walter Reed, of the firm Reed and Corlett, was erected on the site of the old watchtower. Reed and Corlett was a prominent Oakland firm, responsible for numerous downtown buildings, including the Financial Center Building at 14th and Franklin, as well as a number of schools.

From the period of annexation until 1905 there is little record of the park. While bull and bear were probably long gone, horse racing may have continued on the lower ground of the park. In 1890, a year in which the city paved a number of streets and installed sidewalks, some grading of Independence Square took place. In the late 1900s, a contract was let for a fence around the park, but otherwise the land was apparently left to the native grasses. In 1905 the perimeter of the park was planted with 48 elm trees, nineteen of which remain. Some were probably removed to widen Foothill Boulevard, and a number of trees along 16th Avenue succumbed to Dutch elm disease in the 1980s, replaced by little leaf lindens.

In 1958, a clubhouse, designed by Kolbeck and Peterson, was dedicated as part of a program to enhance use of the park. Tucked in beneath the pavilion, the clubhouse echoes the curve of the earlier structure. Built to accommodate 130 people, the roof of the building was designed as a viewing platform looking out over the bay. In 1991, an additional building was erected, to the east of the pavilion and clubhouse, for use as a child care center.

The year 1905 also saw the election of Frank Mott as Mayor of Oakland. The City Beautiful movement, which had grown out the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, came to Oakland under Mott's administration. Eight million dollars in bonds were approved for civic improvements, among which were



San Antonio Park today. (Phil Bellman)

Hilly topography of San Antonio neighborhood gives added interest to its fine Victorian houses. (Phil Bellman)

bungalows, the park today retains much of the character it must have had in the early 1900s. The hilly topography and naturalistic planting create a sense of openness and expanse much greater than the actual size of the park would suggest. The views of the estuary and bay range from the Golden Gate to the Santa Cruz mountains and provide a suggestion of what was to be seen in the early days of Alameda County.

Most recently, in 1991, San Antonio Park was the site of a Cinco de Mayo celebration. Following a parade from the Fruitvale BART Station along East 14th Street to the park, an estimated four to six thousand people gathered for the festivities, continuing the park's long tradition as a public gathering place. The Oakland Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board has recommended the park for designation as a City Landmark. The recommendation is scheduled to be heard by the Planning Commission in October, and then go to the City Council.

--Carolyn Douthat

San Antonio: A Contemporary Account

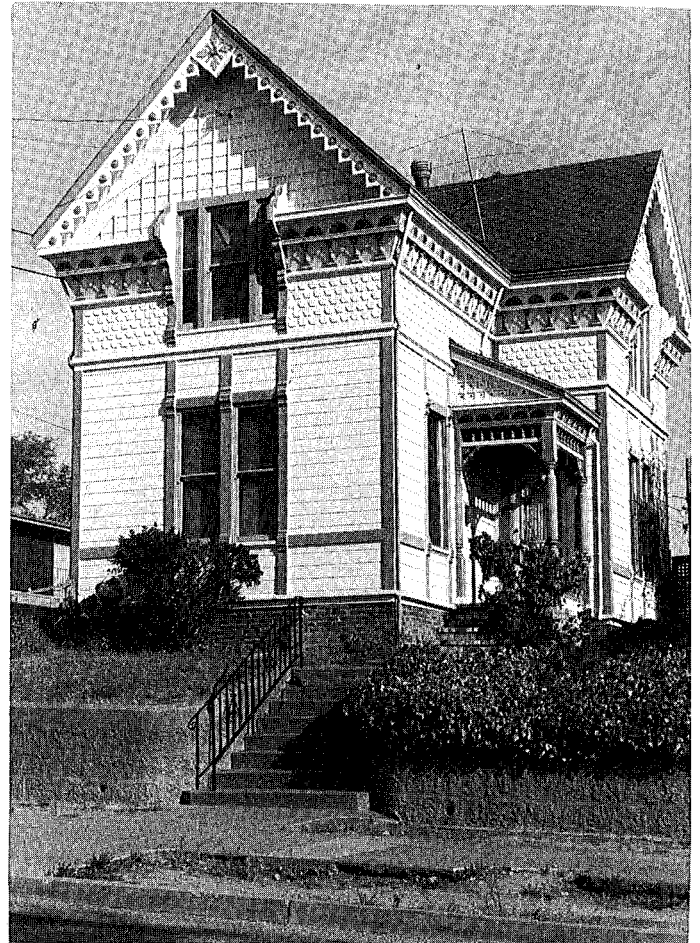
The following is an excerpt from Nine Years Adventures in California from September, 1852, to September, 1861, the journal of Joseph P. Lamson of Lubec, Maine, who wrote under the name of James Lamson and arrived in San Francisco aboard the barque James W. Paige on September 7, 1852. Lamson came to Mill Canyon (now part of Redwood Regional Park) in July, 1853, to operate a combination lodging house, liquor and grocery store, and stayed until about 1855.

Information on Lamson, the excerpt from his diary, and some of the material in the accompanying article are from A Yankee Trader in the California Redwoods, a publication of the East Bay Regional Park District by F.J. Monteagle.

August 14, 1853

I went to San Francisco today, it being Sunday. I found a considerable concourse of pleasure-seeking people, male and female, at San Antonio. Among them were a number of well-dressed Mexican girls on horseback accompanied by their brothers or gallants. They stopped at a large hotel for refreshments and attracted much attention from a crowd of idlers. They were richly dressed and wore a peculiar fur riding hat and veil. Their horses were handsomely caparisoned and the side saddles were of the most fashionable description.

Among the gentlemen was a handsome boy of about 16 who rode a young, spirited horse,



covered with a rich silvermounted black saddle--such a one as I would like to send home were I able--and with bridle and stirrups to correspond. When the ladies mounted their horses, they placed their foot in the gentleman's hand which he held down for the purpose, and then, with a nimble spring, bounded very gracefully into their saddles. This is an old Spanish custom and it was Delano, I think [Alonzo Delano, early California author and illustrator] who spoke of his awkwardness in trying to assist a lady to mount a horse in this manner...

When they were ready, the ladies, six or seven in number, started off at a brisk gallop in true Mexican style and it seemed to me that they intended to dispense with any further services from their gallants, but they better knew the speed of Mexican horses than I did. Presently, the handsome boy with the handsome and richly caparisoned horse started in chase and, giving loose rein to his steed, off he went with the fleetness of a bird and, no doubt, soon overtook the pretty brunettes. The other beaux, though in no apparent haste to start, went off at the same speed..."