



## Old Riverview Avenue Historic District of Capitola

### Methods

#### Previous Studies

In 1986, the consulting company of Rowe & Associates conducted a thematic study of historic resources in the City of Capitola. Subsequent studies and evaluations conducted within the city limits for the purposes of satisfying national, state, and county regulations largely have been based on information provided in the 1986 survey.

In 1986, the City sponsored a city-wide survey of 107 buildings and structures for the purposes of streamlining development planning, highlighting tangible links to the past, and facilitating the preparation of future historical resource reports, most importantly NRHP nominations. Rowe & Associates team members conducted a street-by-street canvas of the city's building stock and took notes and photographs of structures "of architectural interest." The field survey listed structures more than 50 years old (as of 1986) that had "retained their architectural integrity over time." After "a broad, representative list emerged," the results were plotted on maps and "potential historic districts defined." "Significant" individual structures were also recorded as buildings of local interest. (Rowe & Associates 1986.)

The results of the survey determined that there were "about 240 structures that best represent traditional architectural styles locally or the community's vernacular architecture"; these structures were listed in the survey. The survey also identified "several" buildings of local interest that "are eligible for inclusion on the California Historic Resources Inventory and eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places."

Along with the list of 12 individual buildings and structures "considered to be of local interest," the report listed three historic districts, including the "Old Riverview Avenue area," "Six Sisters-Lawn Way area," and the "Venetian Court area." (Rowe & Associates 1986.) These districts were identified as eligible resources following consultation with the State Office of Historic Preservation. The districts were considered areas with a common historical "theme" and architecture that "convey[s] a sense of the past and [is] significant in the community's development." The three districts were listed within the National Register between April 1987 and January 1988 (National Park Service 2001).

The body of the Rowe & Associates survey report consisted of a list of addresses and locations for all surveyed buildings and structures, photographs (taken in 1986) of each, along with approximate dates of construction and brief descriptions (including styles, materials, and ownership information when it was available). ...

Concurrent with the completion of the 1986 Rowe & Associates survey, Charles Rowe and Roger Hathaway prepared an NRHP Inventory-Nomination Form for the Old Riverview Avenue Historic District. The district described in the nomination form consisted of 57 properties, 46 (81%) of which were contributing (i.e., they contributed to the historic character of the district). The district's buildings included modest one and two-family, wood-frame homes of summer cottages constructed between approximately 1935 and 1930. Architectural styles notes were an informal mix of "Bungalow, Craftsman, and vernacular styles; several buildings also show influences of the Spanish Colonial Style." Integrity was noted as high, with modifications witnessed primarily with regards to doors and windows. The noncontributing infill was described as "compatible with the 'beach-cottage' style of architecture which predominates." (National Park Service 1986.)

The Old Riverview Avenue district's boundaries were described as bounded on the west by Soquel Creek, on the east by Riverview Drive, on the south by Stockton Avenue, and on the north by a point just north of the intersection of Riverview Drive and Oak Drive. This point was characterized as the place where "the district's early twentieth-century colony [is distinguished from] altered and modern dwellings." The railroad trestle and the narrow creek-side walkway are also noted feature of the district. (National Park Service 1986.) Addresses included in the district extend the western boundary to a point west of the west bank of Soquel Creek (to include 1720 and 1720A Wharf Road); the district also incorporates nine buildings between Bluegum Avenue and Capitola Avenue.

## **Affected Environment**

### **Historic Setting**

The incorporated City of Capitola is located along the Pacific coast of Santa Cruz County. One of the original 27 California counties established in 1850, the boundaries of Santa Cruz County (initially named Branciforte County, but changed that year) were altered only once in 1868 when the northern limit was moved south (Coy 1973). Capitola is located midway up the coast of the county, approximately 5 miles from Santa Cruz. Soquel Creek creates a dividing line between two portions of Capitola, with residences to the north of the creek and a mixture of business, entertainment, and residences along the south side of the creek.

### **Early Exploration: 1769-1797**

In July 1769, the Spanish explorer Gaspar de Portola, accompanied by Father Juan Crespi, left San Diego to find and settle Monterey Bay. After being forced inland by the Santa Lucia Mountains, the expedition followed the Salinas River to Monterey Bay. However, confusion in the description of a previous expedition misled the explorers to believe they had not reached their destination, and they proceeded north along the coast. This route sent the team through areas now known as Watsonville, Capitola, and Santa Cruz. The path they took from San Diego became part of El Camino Real, and the Franciscan missionaries subsequently established Mission Santa Cruz in 1791 and nearby Villa de Branciforte (a pueblo or town) in 1797 (Beck and Haase 1974).

## **Rancho Soquel: 1833-1860**

By 1833, Mexico had assumed control of the area. The early steps of secularization, as authorized by Mexican Governor Jose Figueroa, freed all mission landholdings, as well as several large tracts of land, and authorized land ownership by private persons (Rawls and Bean 1993). Granting of the large "ranchos," some of which contained over 32,000 acres in (modern) Santa Cruz County, was intended to encourage settlement of the area by Mexican citizens, who primarily raised cattle (Rawls and Bean 1993, State Lands Commissions 1982).

Martina Castro (daughter of Mexican governor of California [1835-1836] Jose Castro) obtained a grant to Rancho Shoquel (more commonly known as "Soquel" and referred to hereafter as such) from Governor Figueroa in November 1833. After the United States annexation of California in 1848, and as stipulated under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Castro applied for a patent to her land in April 1852. Eight years later, after a formal survey of the land was conducted and confirmed by the Land Commission in 1854, Castro was issued a formal patent to the 1,668.03-acre Rancho Soquel. This rancho was roughly bounded by Soquel Creek to the west, Borregas Creek to the east, and a northern boundary line approximately 1 mile north of the beach. Also in 1854, Castro acquired a patent to the much larger 32,702.41-acre "Shoquel Augmentation" rancho located directly north of Rancho Soquel (Hart 1978, Hoffman 1862, Perez 1996, U.S. Geological Survey 1954, R 1994).

During Mexican tenure, the (modern) Capitola beach area was referred to as La Playa de Soquel and remained virtually undeveloped during the ranch period (1834-1846). Following the Gold Rush of 1848, large tracts of former ranchos were divided into smaller parcels that eventually provided land for newcomers to the state. During this period, Soquel Landing developed into a more formal schooner landing that serviced ships delivering San Francisco goods to local markets (Kyle 1990).

## **Early Development of Capitola: 1869-1913**

Capitola's early development is directly associated with Frederick A. Hihn, an entrepreneur and gold-seeker born in Germany. Having amassed a small fortune in gold, Hihn settled in the Soquel region by 1869 and established Camp Capitola on the La Playa de Soquel property 7 years later. Hihn had quickly realized the possible demand for a beach tourist stop along the Santa Cruz Railroad Company route established through the area in 1887 (Gudde 1969, Robertson 1998); Camp Capitola was Hihn's response to the anticipated demand. Hihn's name for the new camp was an apparent play on the term "capitol." Hihn likely saw an opportunity to suggest locating the state capitol at Camp Capitola. By 1876, the Santa Cruz Railroad Company line extended to Pajaro, and the Camp Capitola resort grew and quickly became a leading summer vacation spot for numerous central California residents (Robertson 1998, Rowe & Associates 1986).

In the years between 1876 and his death in 1913, Hihn continued to acquire holdings and guide the development of Capitola. Acting as a land speculator, Hihn bought and sold lots and oversaw the construction of numerous hotels and other recreation facilities (Lydon & Swift 1978). Like many seaside resorts of the time, Capitola quickly gained a reputation as a prime tourist and recreation destination. However, unlike many southern California beach communities, such as Pismo Beach, with more temperate climates, Capitola transformed from the popular "Tent City" format to more a [sic] permanent resort early on (JRP Historical Consulting Services 1999, Lydon & Swift 1978, Sanborn 1892). At the turn of the 20th century, the two-lane road between the Santa Clara County town of Los Gatos and the coastal town of Soquel was the primary route taken over the Santa Cruz Mountains by affluent Bay Area residents to cities such as Santa Cruz. The road thus

earned the name "Old Santa Cruz Highway," which is still used today. Capitola's proximity to Soquel (in addition to its easy access via railroad) made Capitola a prime stop for tourists at that time (Beal 1991).

### **Development of Capitola under Henry Rispin: 1914-1930s**

After Hihn's death from pneumonia, his daughter Katherine Cope Henderson sold the Camp Capitola lands in 1919 to Henry Allen Rispin, a Canadian oil millionaire who had relocated to San Francisco. Rispin planned to transform Capitola into the "Riviera of the New World" and promptly renamed the resort town "Capitola-by-the-Sea." By 1920, Rispin owned the entire waterfront; Hotel Capitola; cottage and bathhouse buildings; resort concessions; and 30 acres along Soquel Creek, where he built his personal 8-acre estate (Rowe & Associates 1986).

Rispin made many public improvements to the town and began to subdivide and sell residential and commercial lots marketed mostly to people of well-heeled communities such as San Francisco. Under various company names located in larger Bay Area communities, Rispin distributed literature espousing the virtues of coastal living in an attempt to gain clients (Capitola Properties 1922). His subdivisions under the parent company, named Bay Head Land Company, led to the development of many new cottages, a deeper community interest in Capitola activities and business, and the foundation for the eventual incorporation of the city. Driven by the economic prosperity of the coast region and booming cities such as San Francisco and San Jose in the 1920s, Capitola-by-the-Sea became a thriving resort community, like many of the coastal resorts of the time, attracting thousands of summer visitors.

The timing of Capitola's development during the early 1920s worked to Rispin's advantage. Tourism to the area, and thus access to distant wealthy clients, was facilitated by a number of factors, including the oil boom of the Los Angeles area, the subsequent rise in the use of the automobile in California, and improvements of highways by the federal government. The latter phenomenon occurred nationwide and opened up a significant number of coastal (both Atlantic and Pacific) towns to tourism (Rawls & Bean 1993).

During the early 1920s, the Bay Head Land Company sold numerous lots in subdivisions along the beach and Soquel Creek. Economic troubles forced the Bay Head Land Company to cease operations in the area by 1924, and the company conveyed all interest to its landholding in order to focus on its San Jose branch. After the Bay Head Land Company had left the region, others, such as the Blanchard Company owned by San Francisco resident C. E. Blanchard, took up the majority of new subdivisions in northern Capitola (Hoag 1928; Lydon & Swift 1978). However, because of the seasonal nature of the tourist trade and competition with nearby Santa Cruz, Capitola remained a small town. By 1927, the year-round population was reported to be only 500 (Lydon & Swift 1978; Rowe & Associates 1986).

In December 1929, Hotel Capitola burned to the ground, symbolically ending the success of the 1920s and introducing the disastrous depression of the 1930s. Rispin, like many financiers nationwide, went bankrupt when the stock market crashed, and many of his holdings were auctioned off in an attempt to pay creditors. With an economy based largely upon the tourist market, Capitola languished through the Great Depression and the war years and experienced little development (Rowe & Associates 1986). The 1890s improvement of Capitola (from a simple tent resort to a slightly upper-class permanent resort) later may have become an obstacle to attracting large numbers of tourists; during the depression, railroad tourism declined substantially,

and lower- to middle-class "automobile" vacationers returned to the more economical tent camps (Belasco 1979).

### **Modern Development: 1949-Present**

The residents of Capitola succeeded in their campaign to incorporate in 1949; the new city supported a population of less than 2,000 at that time. Despite the major expansion and growth witnessed throughout the state after the conclusion of World War II, Capitola's growth and development remained slow. Although three routes over the summit of the Santa Cruz Mountains (the Los Gatos-Soquel route, a road along Bear Creek, and the "Glenwood" route) existed before the 1940 completion of modern Highway 17, all were considered winding and arduous by travelers reliant on automobiles. Whereas the Los Gatos-Soquel route was heavily traveled up to the early 20th century, the construction of Highway 17 in 1940 brought the largest number of automobiles to the south side of the mountains (Beal 1991). The construction of this conduit to San Jose, and the subsequent improvement to Route 1 between Santa Cruz and Watsonville, served to concentrate development in these two areas, and left the towns in between, such as Capitola, to languish (Beal 1991).

In the 1970s, Capitola began to urbanize once again through accelerated residential growth and the annexation of surrounding lands. One example of annexation included the 41st Avenue area west of Soquel Creek. This region was historically part of the James Brown dairy ranch. The annexed area became the county's regional shopping center and modern business district (Lydon & Swift 1978).

Despite development beyond the original Camp Capitola tract, the village area and beach continue to thrive and attract tourists as they did when Hihn and Rispin controlled the beach-front land and recreational activities. Today, Capitola remains a popular tourist stop, as well as bedroom community, for many of the surrounding urban areas. In addition, over the last 30 years, Capitola has continued to experience a considerable amount of growth, particularly in its outlying area beyond the limits of the original town.

### **Source**

Excerpted from: *Draft Environmental Impact Report: 505, 505 1/2, and 505A Riverview Drive, City of Capitola*, August 2001; Appendix A. Historical Resource Design Review for 505, 505 1/2 and 505A Riverview Drive, prepared June 2001, Jones and Stokes, pp. 1-9.

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