

# Davenport left his stamp on North Coast

## Trader turned whaler later tried hand at wharf building

**D**AVENPORT RESIDENTS are lucky their community is named for a whaler instead of its developer. He was William J. Dingee, probably pronounced — or mispronounced — “dinghy” or “dingy.”

For a company town, to have been dubbed either one would no doubt inspire an endless stream of annoying wise-cracks.

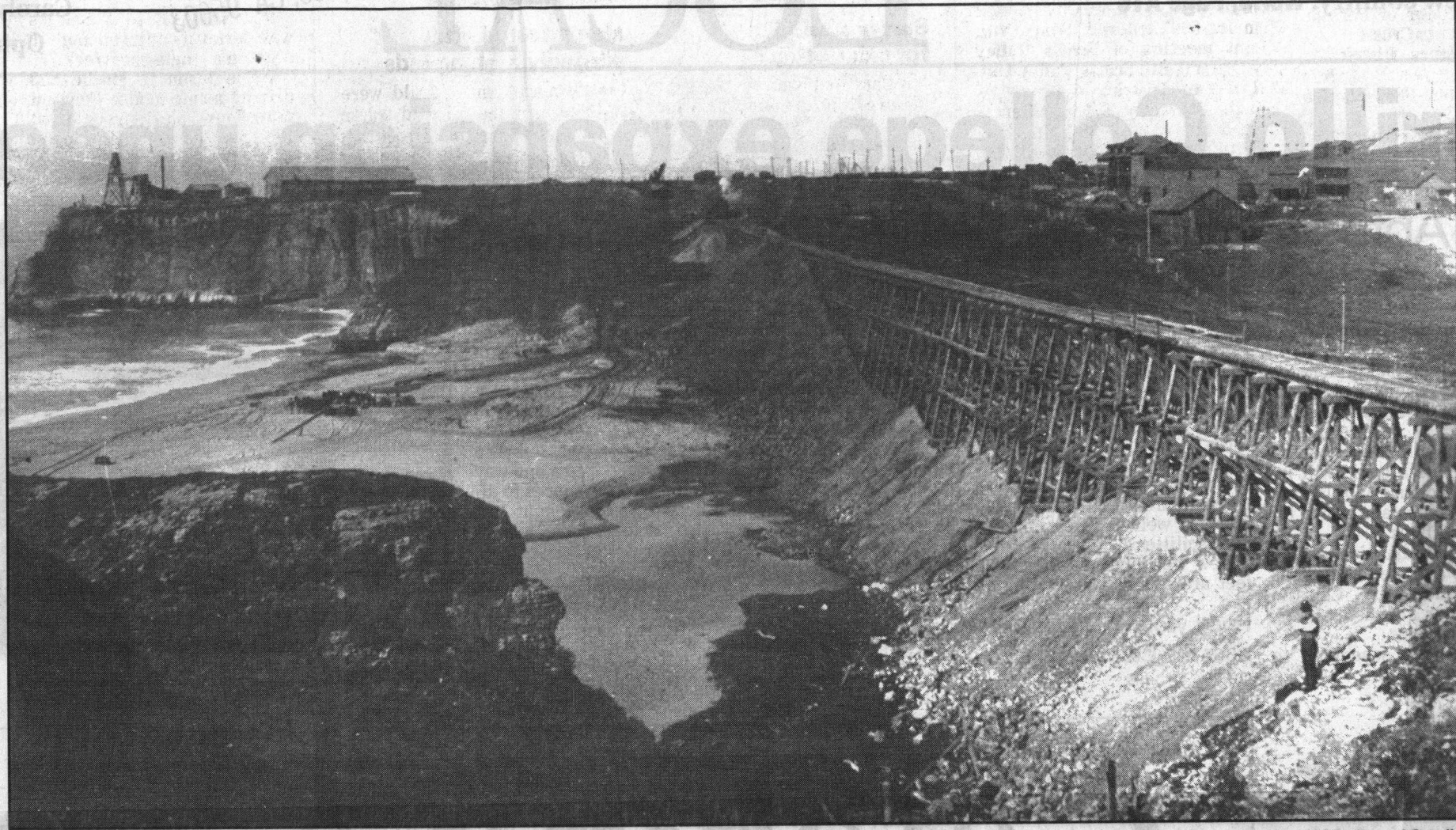


Dingee, the “cement king” of the Standard Portland Cement

Company, was the one who introduced this industry to the coast, 12 miles northwest of Santa Cruz, in 1905. From then until cement-production improvements were made in recent history, the word dingy adhered to Davenport, a place where the wind could set the teeth on edge and the grit sandblasted wood and metal to a uniformly dull gray.

Originally the settlement, created for employees of the Santa Cruz Portland Cement Company, was called San Vicente.

**CAROLYN SWIFT**  
FLASHBACKS



**Left:** Davenport, as it appeared before the turn of the century.

Photo courtesy of Covello and Covello

The village of Davenport Landing, two miles down the road, was once an active shipping point that had faded by the 1890s. The re-established Davenport Post Office inspired San Vicente to assume the old name as its own.

Historian Alverda Orlando has traced the life of the man who gave his name initially to the landing. He was the dashing handsome Capt. John Pope Davenport, a New England whaler who was a trader in the South Pacific when he entered San Francisco Bay for the first time in 1851. Amazed by the immense number of whales in the harbor, the captain made a decision that changed the course of his life.

Returning home, Davenport sold his ship and pulled together the equipment he would need to outfit a whaler to work off the California coast. Then, in early June 1852, the 33-year-old bachelor married Ellen Clark Smith.

His bride joined him on the voy-

age West, but the trip was hardly a honeymoon. The newlywed Davenports had to endure two shipwrecks and "Panama Fever" before reaching San Francisco.

Regaining his strength after the ordeal, the captain chartered a vessel and attempted to find a crew that could master the art of harpooning.

Since most able-bodied seamen had gone to the mines, his task was seemingly impossible. The sailors were so lubberly that Davenport gave up and headed south to Monterey Bay.

In the town of Monterey, he outfitted boats for shore whaling and is

credited with establishing the first shore whaling station on the Pacific Coast. By 1858, the Monterey Whaling Company had crews equipped

with both bombs and harpoon guns, hunting California gray and humpback whales.

After 13 seasons in

and around Monterey, the captain left in 1865 and set up his try-pots, used to render whale oil from blubber, at a new location on the beach near the wharf at Soquel Landing. Davenport remained with his family at the place that is now Capitola for two years, resettling up the coast

north of Santa Cruz in 1867. Here at a sheltered cove, he and another resident, John King, built the first wharf.

Davenport continued shore whaling, and his try-pots remain at the landing as a landmark; however, historians emphasize that it was never an "official" whaling station.

For more than a decade, Davenport's wharf was a successful shipping point for transporting lumber, tanbark, posts, cordwood and other local products to schooners anchored off shore.

"Business is quite brisk, two schooners were loading, and many lumber, bark and wood teams were arriving and departing hourly," noted a Sentinel Weekly item in September 1872, counting 15 coasting schooners that had taken on full cargoes.

Orlando has also listed four ships constructed at Davenport Landing during that time. The Jennie Thelin was completed by Hans, Olaf and

Leonard Reed in 1869, followed by the Undaunted, finished in 1873 by Lorenz Lorenzen; the R.B. Handy, also made by Lorenzen in 1876; and the Julia Brown, built by the Brown brothers of Davenport Landing in 1879.

Yet the bustling activity of shipping ended when supplies dwindled and profits dropped. Although it was judged at the time to be the best landing between Santa Cruz and San Francisco, by 1880 Davenport could no longer maintain it.

While the wharf was abandoned, the village stores and hotels continued to serve the farming and dairy community in the surrounding foothills.

The Davenports eventually moved to Santa Cruz, where the captain served as a justice of the peace in his later years.

He was living with family in San Francisco when he died of consumption in February 1892, at the age of 74 years.

Davenport's story is one of hundreds about North Coast history that have been compiled by Orlando, recently named "researcher-of-the-year" by the Santa Cruz County Museum of Art and History. Along with Mark Wennberg of the Davenport Resource Center, she has lately been active with the North Coast Oral History Group, gathering and filming stories that are shown on Community TV Channel 73 at 6 p.m. Saturdays.

Orlando and Wennberg are seeking stories, artifacts, photographs and other memorabilia of the North Coast for a MAH exhibit to open in February 2001. Those with contributions may contact Wennberg at 425-8115, or Orlando, 475-0808.

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Capt. John Davenport and his wife Ellen. The one-time trader turned whaler built a wharf at Davenport that turned in to a successful shipping point between Santa Cruz and San Francisco.