

The Octagon

By Margaret Koch

On March 11, 1882, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors began advertising for plans for a "Hall of Records" building. On April 8 of the same year, drawings and specifications for an octagonal brick building were presented to the Board. The shape was said to have been taken from a \$50 octagonal-shaped gold piece minted in San Francisco in 1851–1852.

The cornerstone-laying took place on June 10, 1882, with Santa Cruz Masonic Lodge officiating and Governor George C. Perkins of California as the main guest of honor. Wood seats were hastily built to accommodate the crowds. The ceremony was followed by a dance with a five-piece orchestra playing such tunes as "Darling Nelly Gray" and "Listen to the Mocking Bird."

On October 7, 1882, the finished Octagon was turned over to the county and a warrant was drawn to pay for it. The unique building served Santa Cruz County as its Hall of Records for 86 years, although the last two or three decades were punctuated with cries for "more room." In the early 1920s an ugly brick appendage was added to the Front Street side in an attempt to provide needed space.

When the County began to build a new Governmental Center for itself, people who had passed the old octagon for years without really seeing it began to take a second look. The building's rarity and architectural importance had been taken for granted for years.

When demolition rumors began to fly about, a few people began to work for its preservation. The rumors even reached the historically tuned ears of Donald C. Biggs, director of the California Historical Society at that time. He had led the battle to save Portsmouth Plaza and the San Francisco Mint, and he was just as concerned about the impending loss of Santa Cruz's octagon.

In February 1968 the County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution preserving the brick octagon as a County Museum. With the aid of a historic preservation grant from HUD (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development), the restoration was carried out and the museum was dedicated on June 17, 1972.



The Octagon Building

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