

Landmark: What Now?

Downtown's
Oldest Brick
Building

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Today, plaster hides its bricks...

But underneath the coats of plaster the bricks are there — and so is the bullet scar that dates from the day of bandits and wild horse-back forays through the main streets of what was then the village of Santa Cruz.

The Flatiron Building assumed its interesting shape, which resembles the old-fashioned flat iron, or "sad iron," because of the two streets which bordered it.

Pacific Avenue was originally Willow Street, named for the willow trees that bordered it and the ditch that marked a boundary of the Mission Santa Cruz vegetable gardens. Front Street was called Main Street and ran only a short distance south past where Cooper Street intersects it today.

The Flatiron was built about 1859-60 by Hugo Hihn, a brother of the county's first millionaire, Frederick A. Hihn. It is said to be the second oldest brick building in Santa Cruz. Oldest is probably the Leslie Building which stands at the top of Mission Hill, at the entrance to the city schools' administration building.

However, the Flatiron is said to be the oldest brick building in downtown Santa Cruz — the "hill" not being considered "downtown."

The lot on which it was built was sold by F.A. Hihn and his wife to brother Hugo Hihn and his partner Charles Kern for \$2600.

Willow Street was mainly residential in those early days, with Victorian-style homes set at wide intervals on both sides, surrounded by each family's vegetable plot and pasture lot. Families had cows as milk did not come in plastic containers in the grocery store. They also had a horse or two to pull the family transportation which consisted of wagons or buggies or tallyhos or similar vehicles.

Main Street (now Front) had most of the business establishments including blacksmith shops, the Santa Cruz House, a charming New England-looking story and a half which was one of the town's earliest hostleries. Next to the Santa Cruz House stood the Franklin House; the hotels were located about where the main Post Office is today.

What most people who frequent the Teacup in the Flatiron today do not know, is that they are sipping their tea and munching their fortune cookies where once the business of Santa Cruz County was conducted.

In 1860 the county leased the upper floor of Hugo Hihn's fine new brick building and moved its records down to it from "up on the hill" where it had done county business in a combination store, residence and hotel.

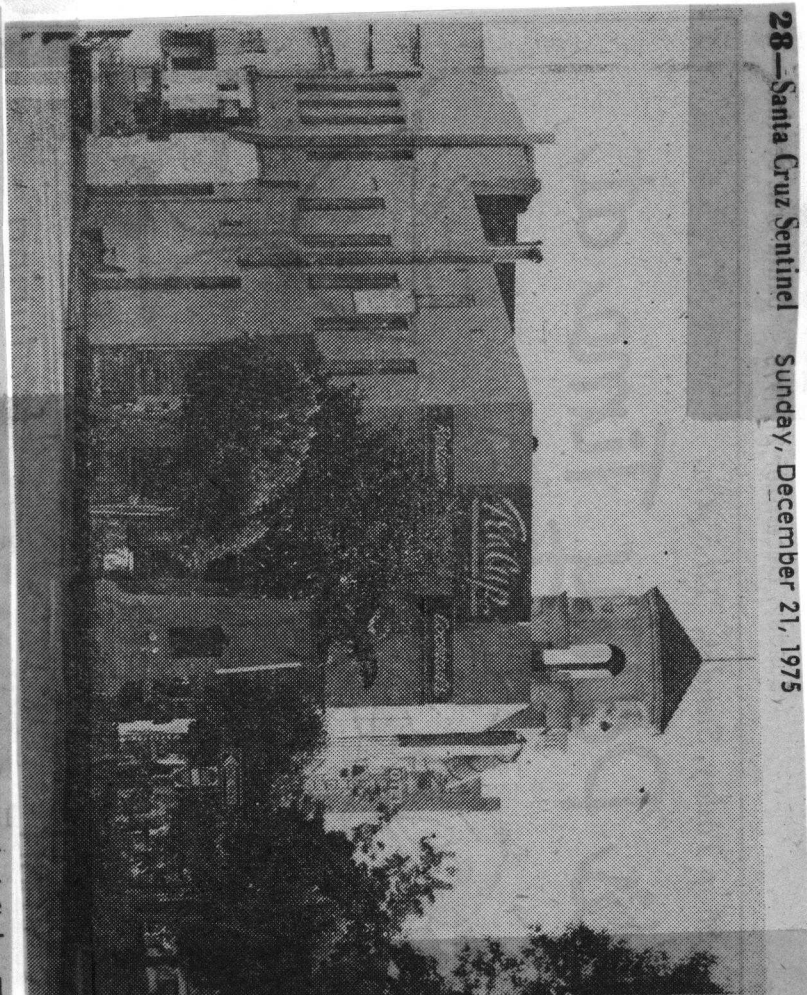
County business stayed in the Flatiron until about 1866-67 when the first "real" courthouse was built on the site of the present Cooper House.

The bullet scar in the bricks of the Flatiron came from the shooting encounter of the bandit Vasquez and Santa Cruz lawmen in 1871. Vasquez was the lively son of a respectable Spanish family and he had relatives in Santa Cruz county as well as friends who were willing to hide him out when the sheriff's posses were hot on his heels.

In 1871 he held up a stage near Hollister according to one old account, then compounded his escapade by robbing a personal acquaintance. After these profitable ventures he rode hell-for-leather into Santa Cruz, the story goes, and shot up the village in an excess of high spirits. During the caper, the noise attracted the attention of Sheriff Almus Rountree and Undersheriff Charles Lincoln — or a local marshal — the stories are conflicting, no doubt due to the excitement of the occasion.

In an exchange of shots, Vasquez escaped and a bullet ricocheted off the Flatiron Building, leaving a scar that delighted small boys of the town for years.

Ernest Otto, late Sentinel reporter and historian, wrote of his thrill as a small boy, in pointing out the bullet mark to visiting firemen.



Vasquez went the way of all banditos — although he had aces in the hole all over the State of California, meaning hiding places, of course. He was finally run to earth and captured in the Cahuenga Mountains of southern California where he had holed up following a double murder. The date was May 14, 1874, and about nine days later he was taken to San Jose to stand trial. He was hanged on March 18, 1875, still protesting his innocence. His last words were in Spanish — "Make it quick" — addressed to the hangman.

And so today the fragrance of Chinese cuisine wafts from the upper story of the building where the courthouse was once located, and the hearty bakery smells float from the ground floor where bread is baked and whipped cream cakes are put together — they melt in your mouth, by the way.

The ground floor was for many years, Tanner's Drugstore.

The bricks — made in Santa Cruz — and the bullet scar must still be there, under the plaster. Maybe some day they will be revealed again.



The Flatiron Building, left above in this old view of Pacific Avenue, had its portico and trim around the roof when this picture was taken in horsecar days. It was Tanner's Drugstore at the time and wood sidewalks and gaslights were in vogue. Large white building on right with long veranda was the Pacific Ocean House which was located where PG&E and several shops are today.