

## Institutions in Santa Cruz County—1850–1950

*By Susan Lehmann*

### OVERVIEW

In the development of the West, the transition from frontier outpost to city or town was said to have taken place when schools and churches outnumbered saloons and brothels. Santa Cruz started early in its history to reach that goal and from the first days of its existence as a mission settlement, provisions were made for both religious worship and the education of children.

Beginning in 1866 with the construction of the first county courthouse, and through the turn of the century, a number of public buildings were erected in the City of Santa Cruz. With the exception of the smallest, the 1882 octagon-shaped Hall of Records, all of them are gone—having fallen to the ravages of fire, earthquake, and demolition. Those built between 1930 and 1950 have fared better and can still be seen in the city core. These include City Hall, the civic auditorium and the old jail which has been remodeled for use as the arts and history museum.

### HISTORY

#### Schools and Libraries

The first educational institution in the County was Santa Cruz Mission where Native Americans were forced to learn the Catholic religion and children of Spanish settlers learned to read, write, and keep accounts. By 1847, a small contingent of English speaking families has come to Santa Cruz and, although Spanish was still the official language, they wanted their children to learn reading and writing in English. One such settler, Mary Amney Case, who arrived with her husband and child in 1847, held classes in her home in 1848 and 1849, thus becoming the first English school of record in Santa Cruz County. Following California statehood in 1850, more families with school-age children came to the area and local churches were pressed into service as school buildings. Methodist churches in the city of Santa Cruz and Watsonville served this purpose until 1857 with teachers being paid by collecting funds from the parents of students. With an ever increasing number of children, residents of the county soon campaigned for a public school with its own school house. According to the history of the Santa Cruz County school system written by Margaret Koch in 1978 and published by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education, the first one room school house in the city was built in 1857 when a \$400 lot was purchased by community subscription on Mission Hill.

Other accounts, including those by researcher Phil Reader and University of California Santa Cruz librarian Donald Clark, credit the opening of the first school to Loudon (or London) Nelson, a Black former slave who came to the area in 1842 (Clark) or 1856 (Reader). He bought land on the San Lorenzo River where he made his living as a farmer. Although he reportedly could neither read nor write, he appreciated education and enjoyed watching the children tramping to school which was located, according to Clark's account, in a private house on the hill above Nelson's property. He willed his estate to the school children of Santa Cruz to be used for their education and following his death in 1860, the money

was used, according to Clark, to purchase land on Mission Hill to build the first school. In 1979, the former Laurel School, built in 1930 and used as a community center was renamed the Loudon Nelson Community Center in his honor.

The site of the Mission Hill school was moved to King Street in 1931, when a new school was built, and it now serves as a junior high school. In 1860, Branciforte School was built on Soquel Avenue and was replaced by the present building constructed in 1915 and located on Branciforte Avenue. Bayview School was added in 1865 at Mission and Bay Streets where the original building was demolished to make way for the modern structure presently on the site.

Being a teacher in Santa Cruz County in the 1860s was not an easy life. According to a report issued by the superintendent of schools in 1861: "It does not pay very well in this county to teach School, and those who have followed no other occupation do not intend to continue teaching any longer than they can help." The superintendent's suggestions for improvement in those early years included: uniformity of textbooks, the grading of all schools, libraries available to all schools and the adoption of a plan that would, "compel the attendance of children who are idling their time around the streets, without occupation." In spite of the problems of too little funding, the number of schools in the County continued to increase. By 1865 there were sixteen and by 1870 there were twenty-five.

By the late 1880s, Santa Cruz County had over 50 schools scattered through the area, most of which were one room or shared space with churches or other buildings. Within the city, high school classes were originally conducted on the fourth floor of the Mission Hill Grammar School. The first Santa Cruz High School was constructed on Walnut Avenue in 1895. It burned to the ground on October 1, 1913 and was replaced on the same site by the present building in 1915. Garfield Park had its own school, constructed in 1915. It was closed, however, in 1965 and the building no longer exists. It is indeed fortunate that a number of the large, elegant schools built in the early to middle part of the 20th century including the High School, Branciforte School and Gault School are still used for their original purpose. Another, Laurel School, has been put to use as a community center.

The original libraries have not fared as well. The main library, an imposing edifice designed by architect William Weeks, was demolished to make way for a modern building as were several branch libraries. Only the Garfield Park Library, built in 1914, and the Seabright library, which now serves as the Natural History museum, are still in existence.

## **Churches**

The first church in the county was Mission Santa Cruz established in 1791. The church was used until 1857 when part of it collapsed during an earthquake. A replacement was dedicated in 1858 which served the needs of the Catholic community until 1889 when a new church was built. Constructed of brick at a cost of \$35,000, the new church was designed by San Francisco architect Thomas J. Welch and served about 1,500 parishioners. The church, considered a city landmark, was heavily damaged in the Loma Prieta earthquake and extensive repairs were needed to make it usable again.

In the 1850s and 1860s five Protestant church groups were organized in Santa Cruz County. A Methodist church was the first, organized by Elihu Anthony in 1848. The group actually built a church, a 20 by 30 foot wooden structure in 1850. The first Congregational church was begun in the city of Santa Cruz in 1852. Others followed, including the church in Soquel which was built in 1870. It was also the Congregational Church that took on the mission of converting the area's Chinese population to Christianity. The Chinese Sunday School begun in 1869, was the oldest recorded Christian institution dedicated to that purpose in the Monterey Bay Region. The Sunday school, conducted in English, was taught by a woman member. Emphasis was on learning the reading, writing and speaking of English and the original twelve students were reported to be industrious and "eager to learn."

In 1881 a full-fledged Chinese mission was organized in Santa Cruz. Adult members of the mission were expected to attend classes, which featured English lessons and Bible study, every week day evening until 9 o'clock. The ability of the congregation to recruit members was aided by the fact that a Chinese minister, Wong Ock, was assigned to the mission from its founding until 1883. Located in the City's Chinatown, the mission held yearly recitals to showcase the progress

of its students and to collect funds to defray expenses. The mission remained an active part of the community into the 20th century until the declining Chinese population in Santa Cruz resulted in its eventual closing.

Other denominations followed the Congregationalists to the County including the Baptists in 1858 and the Unity Church in 1866. In 1862, an Episcopal congregation was formed in the city although it had no building of its own. Moving from the Hugo Hihn building to the Temperance Hall on Mission Street and on to a converted school house that had formerly been used by the Methodists, the church finally acquired a permanent home when land was donated for that purpose in 1864. The church building, which was constructed for \$3000 used a modified plan taken from *Upjohn's Rural Architecture* by New York architect Richard Upjohn. Simple in its Gothic style, the main structure is still intact with a belfry that was added in 1874 and a number of additions made in the 20th century. By 1890 there were over 20 Protestant churches in the County representing the Presbyterian, Christian, Adventist and Universalist denominations as well as those previously mentioned. At the turn of the century, Protestants in the County numbered about 2,500.

Besides the normal facilities provided by churches, religious groups made an additional contribution to the County by establishing a number of religious retreats and camps, some of which still operate at various locations in the Santa Cruz mountains. Within the city, the most notable was a Garfield Park which was begun in the late 1880s. Built by the Northern California Convention of the Disciples of Christ, its most prominent structure was a large tabernacle dedicated on Aug. 31, 1890 that was large enough for 2000 people. The development around it, planned for a number of cottages and larger "villas" was constructed on streets laid out in a series of circles. Lots were offered at auction within the tabernacle at \$105 to \$135 each. Although not as successful as other religious communities such as Mount Hermon, a number of cottages were built at the time and can still be seen in the area known today as "the Circles." The tabernacle has been torn down and a new church, built in 1958, stands on the site.

## **Civic and Community Buildings**

As the county seat and primary population center in the county, the City of Santa Cruz saw the construction of a number of impressive public buildings between 1865 and the turn of the century. The first City Hall was built in 1877 on Cooper and Front Street followed by a jail constructed in 1889. Both were torn down in 1937. A new jail, built in 1936 in Moderne style by San Francisco architect Albert Rolle has been remodeled and is now used as a city museum.

The County Courthouse, later known as the Cooper House was built in 1894 to replace the 1866 courthouse which burned in the downtown fire of that year. The diminutive, octagon-shaped Hall of Records, designed by Oakland architect J. W. Newcum, was built in 1882 and is the only government building from the 19th century to survive. It became a historical museum in 1972 and presently serves as the museum gift shop.

Three twentieth century government buildings still survive, after earthquake repairs: the Santa Cruz City Hall located at 809 Center Street, the Civic Auditorium and the Santa Cruz Firehouse at Church and Center Street. City Hall was designed and built in 1937-38 by Monterey architect C. J. Ryland in the Monterey Colonial Revival Style. It occupies the site of F. A. Hihn's mansion built in 1872 which was used as the city hall beginning in 1920. The Hihn house [was] torn down when the present city hall was constructed. Another building lost to demolition was the opera house which opened to great fanfare in 1877. Located at Union and Center Streets, it was moved to Capitola in 1921 and eventually torn down in 1961. The Civic Auditorium and Santa Cruz Fire station #1, designed by San Francisco architect Mark Daniels were built in 1939 and are both still used for their original purposes.

## Sources

- *From: Fully Developed Context Statement for the City of Santa Cruz. Prepared for City of Santa Cruz Planning and Development Department. Prepared by Susan Lehmann, October 20, 2000. Chapter 5, Context III: Institutions in Santa Cruz County—1850-1950, pp. 45–47*

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