



THE SITE: Remnants of Villa de Branciforte — one of the three oldest secular communities in California — have been discovered at a small housing construction site in Santa Cruz. Developer Bill Brooks, Santa Cruz officials and preservationists disagree about the significance of what's being dug up.

LEN VAUGHN-LAHMAN — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

Buried pueblo unearths rift

GROUP WANTS MORE TIME TO DIG UP REMNANTS OF 200-YEAR-OLD TOWN

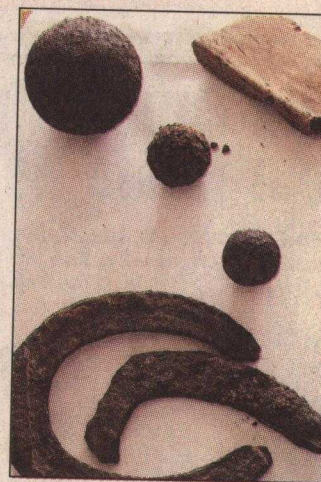
By Jeff Thomas
Mercury News

A small construction project at the end of a dead-end street in Santa Cruz has uncovered remnants of a little-known chapter of the area's history, a time — more than 200 years ago — when a neighborhood known for horse racing, gambling and general rowdiness vied with the more sober-minded Franciscan mission on the bluff across the river.

But the project has also revealed a rift among the city, the developer and preservationists, who disagree about the significance of what's being dug up — mainly portions of adobe walls and roof tiles — at the site near the corner of Branciforte and Water streets.

In an area already rich in American Indian, Spanish, Mexican and Gold Rush-era history, members of a preservation group formed to protect the find are worried that the four-unit housing project going up at the site has been rushed forward, despite the discovery of the 200-year-old remnants. The latest discovery — part of a previously unknown adobe wall — was found less than a month ago during trenching for water lines to the project.

"The way this has been handled has been totally disrespectful," said Ed Silveira, founder of the Villa de Branciforte Preservation Society.



ARTIFACTS: Small cannonballs and horseshoes, top, and floor tiles, above, are among the remnants of the secular enclave of Spaniards dating back to 1797 unearthed at the Villa de Branciforte site.



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— ED SILVEIRA, VILLA DE BRANCIFORTE PRESERVATION SOCIETY FOUNDER

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It's been known for years that the bluffs on the east side of the river were part of the area known as Villa de Branciforte, one of the three oldest secular communities in California. (The others were San Jose and Los Angeles.)

The pueblo was established by the Spanish in 1797, about six years after missionaries affiliated with Father Junipero Serra set up Mission Santa Cruz across the river. While the string of missions along the coast were meant to be religious outposts, converting American Indians, the villa was conceived as a secular community. The Spanish hoped to attract ex-soldiers and craftsmen with the promise of free adobes and yearly stipends.

In perhaps a portent of future ill feelings between the pueblo and the mission, the first public works project in Villa de Branciforte was a mile-long horse race track (now North Branciforte Avenue) along which the original settlement was arrayed. And what's a horse race without gambling? And a bordello or two? And how about grizzly bears vs. bulls in fights to the death? Subject to wagering, of course.

All of this and more was available at Villa de Branciforte, much to the chagrin of the fathers across the river. But despite it being a colorful and lively place, the villa never thrived. The free adobes and the yearly payments didn't come, and the population never stabilized. Even so, when the missions were secularized in the early 1830s, the neighborhood maintained a separate political entity until about 1850, and as a township for around 55 years. It was called "Spanish Town" by old time Santa Cruzans, and in 1905 was annexed to the city of Santa Cruz.

Remnants discovered

Several adobes from that Spanish Colonial era have been preserved in what is now East Santa Cruz. But it wasn't until November 2003 that traces of an adobe wall were uncovered at the Branciforte and Water streets site during excavation



LEN VAUGHN-LAHMAN — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

THE PRESERVATIONIST: Ed Silveira has collected pieces of roof and floor tiles, and foundation stones of the 1797 enclave.

for a sidewalk adjacent to the current housing project.

Silveira, who lives in a 19th century farmhouse down the street from the project, called the city about the find, and an archaeologist was sent out to have a look. The archaeologist reported that any future construction would probably unearth additional historically significant finds.

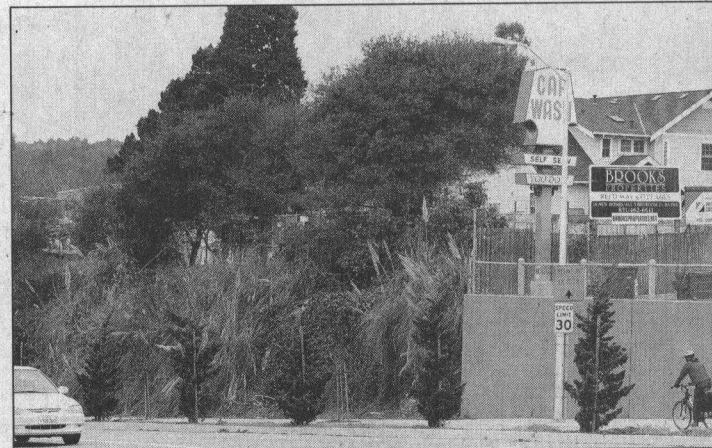
And, indeed, in February 2004, during excavation for utility lines in preparation for development of the current site, another adobe wall was uncovered. At that time the builder, longtime Santa Cruz developer Bill Brooks, put the project on hold while a city-required archaeologist surveyed the site. His surveys, using magnetic resonance imaging, uncovered no further walls, but test diggings turned up

broken Spanish roof tiles. The archaeology report reiterated, however, that there were probably other adobe walls in the vicinity. The city required that trenching and excavation be monitored by an archaeologist, and that construction be halted for further analysis if more walls were encountered.

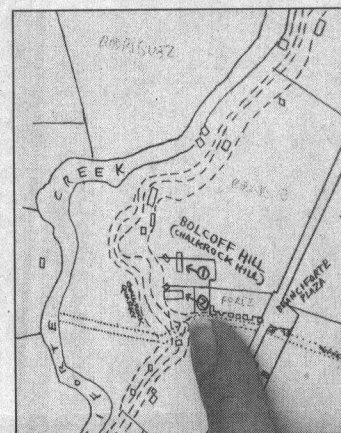
Such monitoring is required by the city in areas that are thought to be archaeologically sensitive. Santa Cruz is accredited by the state to handle such matters.

It is the city's position that everything that needs to be done to protect history at the site is being done.

"Whenever we think there is an area of archaeological significance, we evaluate," said Santa Cruz Planning Director Greg Larsen. "I'm not going to say everything has been done



OVERGROWN HILLSIDE: The small construction site where four homes are being built banks Water Street in Santa Cruz.



SCANT INFORMATION:

Preservationists say maps like these do not reveal much about what life was like in the poor pueblo of Villa de Branciforte.

said, "that we're not exactly sure which wall belongs to which adobe anymore. There's a whole spiderweb of walls up there."

Silveira and his group don't want to stop the project permanently, especially because two of the homes are part of a federally financed affordable-housing program. After Brooks lays the foundation, those two homes will be constructed by Habitat for Humanity.

"We know affordable housing is of special concern in Santa Cruz," said Caroline Alain-Rodman, a consultant for the preservation group. "We just want the building to stop long enough to find out exactly what is there."

It's unlikely anything would be found in the area to merit excavation and removal, such as an intact adobe or a cemetery, for instance, which would trigger more stringent requirements. Rather, preservationists want to be able to more precisely map the 200-year-old pueblo, and to preserve any artifacts unearthed for display in local museums.

As it stands now, the construction project continues. Brooks said all of the underground work has been completed, so it's unlikely they will encounter more adobe walls. Foundations then will be laid. Brooks said the 1,400-square-foot houses will probably be appraised around the median sale price of that neighborhood — the mid-\$700,000s.

perfectly, but we have paid attention" to the issues raised by the preservationists.

"We are following the rules to deal with whatever is found there," said Brooks, the builder. "We've done a really good job. ... The city's happy."

Brooks said that when the most recent wall was uncovered, work stopped and the crew dug around the adobe to lay their water lines before filling in the trench — and resealing the wall.

Piecemeal finds

But such stop-and-go procedures — although conforming to city and state requirements — are exactly what is getting in the way of knowing precisely what lies below the surface of the bluff area.

"There have been so many separate findings," Silveira

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