

Bridges Span Santa Cruz's Past: From Felton's Covered Redwood Span to West Cliff Drive's Iron Landmark

By Ross Eric Gibson



Felton's Covered Bridge

The early evolution of bridge construction in Santa Cruz shows a progression of problem-solving and building techniques.

Bridge structures once common throughout the state are rare today. Felton's covered bridge was one of the last bridges built of redwood. The county once had 10 covered bridges, and today 10 are left in the state.

The West Cliff Drive Howe Truss Bridge is the last of its kind in the state highway system. It stands where the county's first wagon bridge was constructed, between today's Dream Inn and Ramada Inn. The original was built by town founder Elihu Anthony in 1849, so loaded wagons could climb the bluff to use his wharf at the end

of Bay Street. This was reached from Washington and Second streets.

In 1876, railroad tracks were built going under the bridge. Then in 1918, Southern Pacific moved the bridge's north entrance to a one-lane driveway on Blackburn Terrace, into which two lanes were later squeezed. The span was replaced with a Howe Truss bridge from the 1840 patent introducing wrought iron into what had been primarily timber design. Not until after the Civil War was a second county wagon bridge built.

High-wheeled wagons easily forded the San Lorenzo River most of the year, with boats for winter use. Merchant A.P. Menseve raised money in 1866 to install a footbridge at the Water Street ford. It washed away two years in a row from winter high water. But the bridge's value had been proven from the surge in downtown business.

In 1868 funds for a wagon bridge were raised through public and private donations. The \$10,900 bridge, constructed by Thomas Beck, was 100 feet long, 20 feet wide, and 14 feet above the water to avoid another washout. Constructed like a wharf with 18 sets of pilings, the bridge caught logs and debris until it collapsed in an 1871 flood. It was rebuilt in 1872, then replaced in 1882 by a wide-spanning arch truss.

In 1874 a \$14,800 covered bridge was constructed at the Soquel Avenue ford. Since horses balk at crossing high bridges, this structure, rising 24 feet above the water, was the only city bridge to be covered. Its 800-foot length made it one of the state's longest covered bridges, with 18-foot-tall entry arches. Redwood piles were driven 20 feet into the riverbed. These footings were protected by fortress-like timber "drift breaks" to prevent logjams from forming.



Covered Bridge at Soquel Avenue



The Cut Bias Bridge

The 1880s Eastside building boom made beach access a crucial selling point. But no bridges crossed the San Lorenzo River below Soquel Avenue, except seasonal footbridges, dismantled each autumn. Yet everything below Barson Street was Fred Barson's Riverside Hotel grounds and orchards. To reach the city's bridge site, Barson deeded land through his orchard for a road named Riverside Avenue. An ironwork bridge was favored, as it could span the bank's 150 feet without intervening piers. The \$4,769 bridge opened in 1888 and was named the Cut Bias Bridge, because it crossed the river at an angle.

In 1908, a neoclassical concrete trolley bridge was built parallel to the Water Street Bridge. The lantern-bedecked structure was so beautiful that when the Water Street Bridge was demolished in 1914, the trolley bridge was expanded to include a two-lane carriage road for \$15,175. When the trolley company went out of business in 1926, its bridge tracks were removed for another traffic lane.

The Soquel Avenue Covered Bridge was replaced by a similar concrete span in 1921. But as the old structure's shingles and walls came off, the framework appeared "as fresh as the day it was constructed." A concrete bridge also replaced the Cut-Bias in 1930.

Today, at the site of the county's first bridge, the Howe Truss is being considered for rehabilitation, or a concrete replacement eliminating bike access. Already listed as a local landmark, it was included in Caltrans' "Historic Highway Bridges of California," named eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. It is specified in the 1993 General Plan as an important cultural resource worthy of rehabilitation. This is the preference of the State Office of Historic Preservation, for which federal funds have been made available.

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