

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Director, Institute of Marine Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

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The Wharves of Santa Cruz



A blow up of George Lawrence's 1906 Santa Cruz photos shows three wharves existed at that time.

The Santa Cruz waterfront has seen a number of piers or wharves come and go over the past 160 years. Before the construction of the first structure in 1849, passengers and produce had to be ferried out through the surf in small rowboats and lumber was floated out to ships waiting offshore.

The first wharf, which was really a ramp, was built in 1849 at the end of Bay Street by Elihu Anthony and used as a chute to load potatoes onto ships. Bay Street was the primary access to the chute so that all of the lumber, lime and other cargo didn't have to be transported through downtown. Anthony also built the first bridge in the county to provide access to his wharf off West Cliff Drive. The last Howe strut bridge in Northern California now occupies the old bridge site just behind the new Sanctuary Exploration Center.

A few years later in 1853, Jordan and Davis Limeworks took over the chute. Henry Cowell bought out Jordan and Davis in 1867 and the wharf became known as Cowell's wharf. The photograph that George Lawrence took from the kites in

1906, and enlarged in this article, shows Cowell's wharf and also the Henry Cowell Limeworks warehouse at the end of Bay Street, where lime was stored prior to shipping. Cowell's Beach probably originally received its name from the wharf.

The photograph also shows a second wharf, a little to the west of the present Municipal wharf, which was built by David Gharkey in 1856. The South Coast Railroad bought this wharf twenty years later and it soon became known as the Railroad Wharf. Tracks were extended to the end and freight and passengers could then be transferred directly to or from ships.

During the Civil War, another wharf was built a short distance to the east. This wharf was built to serve the California Powder Works and started on Beach Hill at the intersection of Second and Main streets. The Powder Works, located on the San Lorenzo River two miles upstream from the city, was the only blasting and gunpowder manufacturing plant west of the Mississippi River. They shipped in nitrate from South America and then shipped blasting and gunpowder out. What isn't clear is whether the powder was shipped to the Union or the Confederate armies, both, or neither.

This structure became known as the Powder Company Wharf. Between 1877 and 1882 it was connected to the Railroad Wharf by a cross wharf. In 1883, however, both the Powder Company Wharf and the cross wharf were demolished as most of the gunpowder was now shipped out by rail.

In the George Lawrence photograph, a short pier is shown directly in front of the Boardwalk. This was built in 1904, in part to carry a pipe for seawater to fill the new plunge pool with fresh salt water every day. It was initially known locally as the Electric Pier because of its night lighting, and then later as the Pleasure Pier. Small boats took people from the pier to an amusement ship, the Balboa, anchored just offshore. When the saltwater plunge was replaced by a miniature golf course in the mid-1960s, this pier was demolished.

In 1907, a year after Lawrence took this early aerial photograph, large winter waves destroyed Cowell's wharf. All of these early wharfs were relatively short, however, which limited the water depths they reached, and therefore the size of the vessels that could be accommodated. In order to serve larger and deeper draft vessels, the first Municipal Wharf, 3000 feet long, was constructed in 1914. This is essentially the same structure that exists today, although lots of pilings have been replaced over the years.

The outer end of the new Municipal Wharf was turned slightly to the west, presumably to meet the North Pacific swells more head on. Some 2000 70-foot long Douglas fir pilings were driven about 20 feet into the seafloor to support the wharf, the railway line, which was moved from the Railroad Wharf, and a freight warehouse. The old Railroad Wharf was used to support a sardine cannery before being torn down in 1922.

There is a rich local history of the Italian fishing community that started on the Railroad Wharf in the 1870s and then relocated to the Municipal Wharf in the 1920s. Their unique fishing boats, the davits for lifting them out of the bay, and the fishermen working on their nets and cleaning their fish added much to the city's cultural environment.

The fishermen would occasionally display unusual animals brought up in their nets, and there was even an early aquarium on the wharf for visitors to enjoy. When the small craft harbor was constructed in the mid-1960s, this all changed as the fishermen and their boats were relocated. What remains on the Municipal Wharf today are the fish markets and restaurants, bearing the names of the original Italian fishing families, Stagnaro, Castagnola and Carniglia.

Some of the information on the history of the wharfs in Santa Cruz is drawn from the writing of local historian Ross Gibson. Peter Nurkse originally brought George Lawrence's photographs to my attention and has done an interesting study and explanation of the original 1906 photograph:

<http://www.santacruzpl.org/history/articles/182/>