Our Ocean Backyard

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Elihu Anthony- A Local Hero

In a book written on the history of Santa Cruz County in 1892, it was reported that “No man is more prominently and closely identified with the history of Santa Cruz than is Elihu Anthony”. Another description was that he was “a man of affairs, making things stir around him”. He was also known as a “strict man”, but with all of his success and money making, a man who refused to compromise his high ideals and principles.

Following his arrival here in 1848 and the establishment of the first local foundry, Anthony was soon involved in trade and real estate transactions. He laid out the city’s first two subdivisions of rectangular plots up on Mission Hill, which for a while was known as Anthony’s Bluff. He also opened a general store in partnership with Adna Hecox that was located about where the Town Clock sits today. It was the first structure built down on what became known as the flats. The land here is flat because it’s the flood plain of the San Lorenzo River, as the city was to learn repeatedly in subsequent years.

In my friend Stan Stevens’ writings about Elihu there is an interesting anecdote regarding his honesty. During the winter of 1849 many of the California gold miners chose to winter in Santa Cruz, and Anthony’s store was where they conducted their business. Their gold dust was stored in buckskin bags with only their names and weight marked on tags for security, or to guarantee a safe return to each owner. The records show that not a single mistake was made of the many deposits received, and not an ounce of gold was ever lost to the owners.

Elihu, with a mercantile business partner, Edwin Penfield, realized that the town needed a wharf in order to enable loading and unloading freight from ships. Prior to this, passengers and produce had to be ferried out through the surf at Cowells Beach in small rowboats and lumber was actually floated out to waiting vessels.

Anthony, along with another early Santa Cruz pioneer, Henry Cowell, built the first wharf in 1849, which was actually just a plank chute. It was built at the end of Bay Street on an incline from the bluff top near the present Sea and Sand to the level of small boats or ships anchored offshore. The chute initially was used to load potatoes onto ships. Bay Street became the primary access to the chute so that all of the lumber, lime and other cargo didn’t have to be transported through downtown.

In 1852, Elihu Anthony was elected to the first County Board of Supervisors along with some other familiar local names, Meder, Moore, Hames and Daubenbiss, who all had streets or roads named after them as well. In 1880 he was elected to the stage legislature where he worked to revise the states codes. Elihu was also appointed as the first postmaster of Santa Cruz, a position he held for 14 years.

Anthony decided in 1856 that the small but growing city needed a better water system than the individual wells that early residents were using. He partnered with another early community leader, Frederick Hihn, to dig reservoirs up on Mission Hill. They connected hollowed out redwood logs for pipes to convey the water down to the flats. Even today, when water or other utility pipes are being replaced downtown, workers occasionally will uncover an old section of redwood water pipe.

Elihu managed to build or obtain a pile driver and initiated a project to drive piles along the edge of the river in order to help divert the river away from the bluffs, trap sediment and reclaim land on the flats, likely in the vicinity of Bulkhead Street near the town clock.

This was a man of many talents and interests who was always looking out for ways to improve Santa Cruz. He was part of a small group who planned one of the first roads across the Santa Cruz Mountains, and while postmaster worked to get the first telegraph connection to the young city.

The first wharf, a water system, streets and roads, the post office, and a representative for the city both locally and at the state level. Think a few minutes about this dedicated and very accomplished early resident as you drive across Anthony Street the next time. Maybe they should have named the entire town after Elihu Anthony.