

Chapter 5
THE HISTORY OF BERKELEY BEACH
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Introduction

Most of the people who live in Berkeley today do not know that there once existed a sandy beach stretching from University Avenue to Fleming's Point (the present site of Golden Gate Fields) called the Berkeley Beach (Figure 1). This beach no longer exists, having been slowly eaten away and polluted by people who were more interested and involved in the physical and economic development of their town than in the preservation of their beach. Yet it would be unrealistic to expect the early colonists of Berkeley not to exploit the available natural resources for their own uses. This story of Berkeley Beach is being told not necessarily to find fault with the early settlers' actions, but rather to enlighten people today about the irreversible damage that may be done to areas of natural beauty when development is left unchecked.

In the late 1800s there was enough of the San Francisco Bay waterfront left undisturbed so that the disappearance of one beach was not of great significance. Currently we are not so fortunate to have many of these natural areas remaining along the Bay shoreline and, therefore, we should be more careful to protect the few remaining waterfronts from any further detrimental development.

Past Studies

Curt and Stephanie Manning have both done research on the Berkeley Beach, much of it in conjunction with the Berkeley Historical Society. In addition, Curt Manning was head of The Berkeley Beach Committee for several years, during which time the Committee printed two papers (Manning, 1979, 1981) regarding the proposed reconstruction of the beach. Newspaper articles have been written about Berkeley Beach, and historical books refer to it on occasion, but there does not exist one comprehensive account of the beach's use and misuse. In my own search, I have found the Berkeley Public Library to be a fine source of easily-accessible information on the history of Berkeley and also a source of numerous newspaper clippings on the beach itself.

The Early History

In 1853 Captain James Jacobs built a wharf, later known as Jacobs' Landing, at the mouth of Strawberry Creek, near the present University Avenue. A year later, Captain William J. Bowen established an inn and a small grocery shop near Jacobs' Landing, and in a few years Bowen's Inn became a stage stop. The town that developed around this stop was Ocean View, and it covered what is now west Berkeley (Manning, 1983).

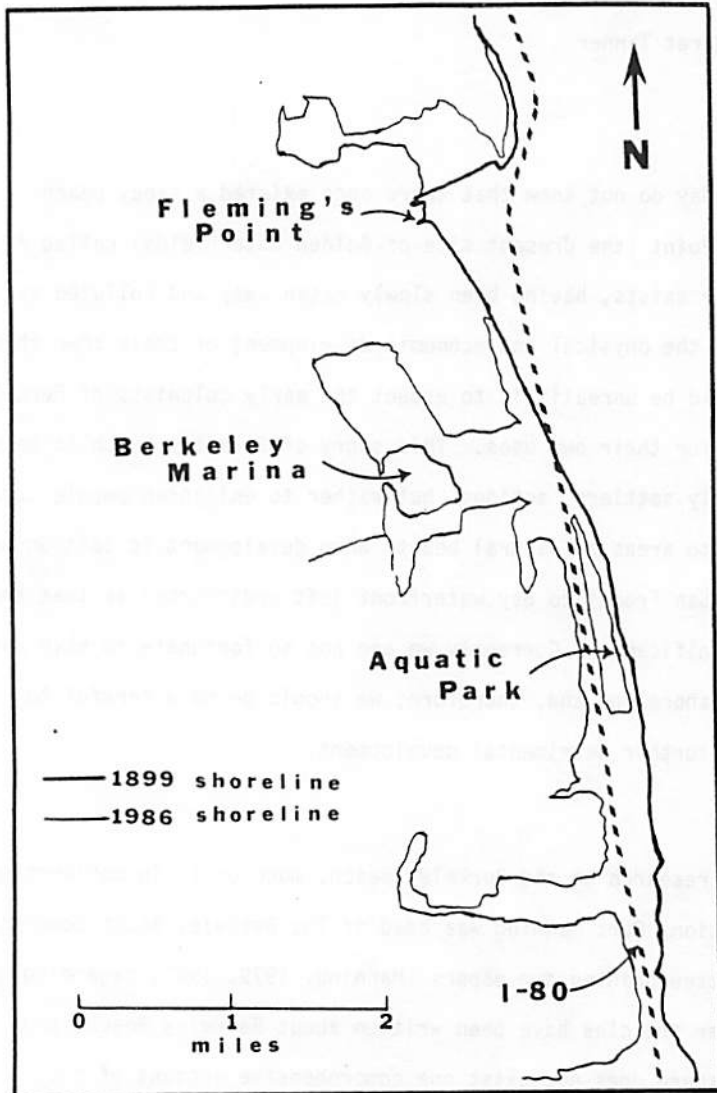


Figure 1. Original East Bay Shoreline from 1899 Compared to Current (1986) Shoreline.
Source: Nichols and Wright, 1971.

(Manning, 1981). Today, all that remains of the original shoreline is Fleming's Point, the rest having been altered by landfill (Figure 1).

In 1873 the University of California at Berkeley was established, causing an increase in both population and businesses, and in this same year the Berkeley Land and Town Improvement Association was formed to develop the waterfront and build a commercial wharf and ferry (Pettitt, 1973). Ocean View continued to grow, its favorable waterfront sites attracting commercial and industrial enterprises which were discouraged in San Francisco by the lack of good water, the wind-driven sand, and the high cost of land. In comparison, Ocean View had a good supply of freshwater from its many creeks, the shoreline was

The Berkeley Beach served as the western border of Ocean View, stretching for nearly a mile and averaging 75 feet wide at high tide. In the early 1870s, this dark sandy beach, reported to be "one of the finest beaches on the Bay," was used as a thoroughfare for horse-drawn vehicles, and at low tide, town residents could walk out 250 feet and dig up numerous clams in little time (Chase, 1937).

The beach was created by waves, which came through the Golden Gate Bridge, carrying sand onto the shore, which originally was shaped like a bowl that extended from University Avenue to Fleming's Point. Tidal action and north-westerly winds caused the sand to collect in this natural bowl, and the tidal action also cleaned the sand by carrying away lighter material from the beach's surface

relatively calm, and the price of land was relatively cheap. As a result, Ocean View's shoreline development soon consisted of the Standard Soap Company, the Pioneer Starch and Grist Mill, the Jacobs and Heywood Lumberyard, the Berkeley wharf, and the Berkeley-San Francisco Ferry (Pettitt, 1973; Mahaffey, 1981).

In 1876 the Southern Pacific Railroad established a rail line near what is now San Pablo Avenue, and in the same spirit, Santa Fe Railroad established a line, close to the shore, which then connected with both overland routes and deep water transportation (Centennial Committee, 1978). These rail lines connected to the transcontinental rail line, which alone increased California's population by more than 54 percent in the 1870s, and therefore also added to the already increasing population of Ocean View (Pettitt, 1973).

By 1876 the beach was an integral part of Ocean View, popular with both town residents and visitors. Resort hotels were built at the foot of University Avenue, within a block of the beach, and these offered tourists a splendid, scenic view of the Bay and of San Francisco (Manning, 1981). Many San Franciscans, escaping their cool, foggy summers, came by ferry to picnic at the beach and stroll through nearby Willow Grove Park on weekends (Doss, 1980; Manning, 1983). Until the late 1800s this beach was appreciated as the best beach for miles around (Doss, 1980). Various town members remember using the beach: Paul Spenger remembered hauling in good catches of fish from the shore; Gertrude Wilkes Burdick remembered taking walks on the beach; others remembered swimming offshore from the Berkeley Pier to Fleming's Point (Manning, 1983).

The Beach's Demise

As the town of Ocean View grew larger and larger, the beach became important for uses other than just recreation. In 1875, Captain James Jacobs stated that there was a great quantity of sand at the Berkeley Beach and therefore no danger of running out of it (Manning, 1981). At that time, Samuel Heywood was selling the sand at 50 cents a load, regardless of whether the load was a cupful, a wheelbarrowful, or a wagonful (Manning, 1981). The sand was being used in making mortar, which was then used for house foundations, chimneys, street work, and general construction. In 1878 Ocean View was incorporated into the City of Berkeley and referred to as "West Berkeley." A house-building boom began, causing large-scale use of the sand. From 1880 to 1890 the population of West Berkeley alone grew from 668 to 1544, more than doubling its size, and growing at a rate faster than the whole city of Berkeley (Pettitt, 1973). In addition, the earthquake and fire that destroyed much of San Francisco in 1906 resulted in many people moving to the East Bay areas, and the City of Berkeley saw an increase in population again, from 13,214 people in 1900 to 40,434 people in 1910 (Centennial Committee, 1978).

Large-scale filling of the East Bay tidelands between Oakland and Richmond began in 1903 and continued for the next 30 years (Temko, 1985). At the time, people favored the development of their harbor facilities and docks, and consequently, developers met with little or no opposition. A 1918 newspaper article reflects the attitude of the times with the statements, "Here in Berkeley we have a

different viewpoint. We earnestly and consistently favor any development which increases any part of our splendid harbor" (Waterfront clippings file, 1985). As early as 1892, Santa Fe Railroad began large-scale acquisition of east shore properties (Waterfront clippings file, 1985). West Berkeley was becoming more and more important as an industrial center, and things that were at first only aesthetically pleasing were soon converted into moneymaking enterprises (Manning, 1983).

As the city grew and industry flourished, the problems of garbage and human waste disposal also developed. Around 1907, after the influx of people from San Francisco in 1906, the citizens of Berkeley decided to dump their untreated waste directly into the Bay, and this practice continued until 1951, when the East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD) started operating the first sewage treatment plant (Fisher, 1980; Centennial Committee, 1978). Discharges, including those from the oil refineries located around the Bay's shores, were also piped directly into the water, killing off the various clams which previously existed along the shoreline, and adversely affecting other shellfish and fish in the Bay (Chase, 1937). Berkeley Beach was one of the many points along the shoreline that was affected by this pollution. Other wastes were channeled down the many creeks in Berkeley, some of which emptied into the Berkeley Beach, and soon the beach was polluted, barren of shellfish, and generally unpleasant to visit (Starn, 1983).

In 1908 the City of Berkeley began dumping its garbage in West Berkeley. Then in 1913 a solid waste incinerator was built at Fleming's Point, but this was abandoned in 1923 in favor of the land-fill, or "fill and cover," method of disposal. After voting in favor of land-fill dumping, the Berkeley City Council began filling on a 5-square-block-area of marshy tidelands located in west and northwest Berkeley (Centennial Committee, 1978; Manning, 1981).

During the 1930s, Berkeley's growth was directly influenced by the San Francisco Bay area's regional development, and many projects which occurred in the East Bay required large amounts of fill. Consequently, sand from the Berkeley Beach was hauled away for use in various projects, until eventually all the sand was either sold, dumped, or covered by landfill.

Starting in 1933, under the Works Projects Administration (WPA), a dam was constructed across the Berkeley tidelands, sand from the Berkeley Beach was used to build a road running north-south along the shore, and a lake was created on the inland side of the road; Aquatic Park was born (Waterfront clippings file, unknown year). During the construction of the Bay Bridge in the 1930s, sand from the beach was used in creating the Eastshore Highway, the approach to the Bay Bridge, and the surrounding area which is now Oakland Army Base (Temko, 1985). In the 1940s, sand was used to build the foundation of Treasure Island, a naval base, and between 1953 and 1960 the remaining sand went into expanding the four-lane Eastshore Highway into a fully developed freeway, which is presently Interstate 80 (Temko, 1985). In addition, the Department of Transportation paid \$100,000 for offshore Berkeley sand to fill the tidelands where mud had been removed for freeway construction purposes (Manning, 1983). The late Paul Spenger once said, "There was so much sand we thought it would never give out" (Doss, 1980). Unfortunately, he, like many others, was wrong.

With the beginning of World War II in the 1940s came massive dumping of garbage, rubble, and occasional toxic wastes (Temko, 1985). It was also during the 1940s that Santa Fe Railroad bought large tracts of land, made out of landfill, at the Berkeley waterfront. Continuing in the 1950s, garbage was dumped into the Bay on a regular basis, the first dump being located at the Santa Fe meadow. This created the first, and at the time, the largest man-made marina in America: the Berkeley marina (Waterfront clippings file, unknown year). In similar spirit, the tidal flats surrounding Fleming's Point was filled, as small hills and rocky outcroppings were fully or partially leveled. This newly flattened area then became the site of a naval ordnance station, and later, the Golden Gate Fields race-track (Temko, 1985).

During this era of rampant landfilling, the shoreline was drastically changed by the creation of the Berkeley marina, and this altered the Bay currents in such a way that sand, which previously would have reached the Berkeley Beach, now was deposited offshore (Waterfront clippings file, "Grassroots," 1981). First the Beach was stripped of its original sand, and then the waves were changed so as to break farther from the shore, which meant no more sand could replenish the beach.

Reconstruction Proposals for the Beach

It was not until 1955 that the City of Berkeley adopted a City Master Plan, which attempted to limit the city's population through a planning guide, and not until 1959 that improvements of the waterfront began (Centennial Committee, 1978). In 1961 the Save the San Francisco Bay Association was founded, and in 1965 the Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC) was established as a direct reaction to Santa Fe Railroad's 1963 proposal to build an offshore "city" of man-made islands in the Bay (Temko, 1985). People's attitudes were changing towards preserving the Bay instead of developing on it, and in regards to the Berkeley Beach, one person in particular, Curt Manning, took his concern a step farther and wrote a proposal for the reconstruction of the beach (Manning, 1981).

In his proposal, Mr. Manning suggested creating a beach in Berkeley, but not at the original Berkeley Beach location, as the Berkeley marina prevents waves, which are critical in beach formation, from reaching the shore in this area. Instead, he chose the mile-long stretch of shoreline located between University Avenue and Ashby Avenue (Figure 2). Currently, the beach that exists at this waterfront strip is only about 65 feet long and 30 feet wide at low tide, but because the Berkeley marina blocks waves from reaching this area, it is clogged with debris and garbage (Manning, 1981). Emptying onto the beach at the University Avenue end is Strawberry Creek, and at the Ashby Avenue end, Potter Creek. Each creek brings with it a small supply of new sand to the beach.

Mr. Manning presents five main provisions that must be met to create an enjoyable beach here. First, because there is very little original sand, a one-time importation of sand is needed to build the width of the beach. Whether this sand is to be dredged from the Ashby Shoal, or to be trucked in from elsewhere, would be decided by the cost and by the characteristics of the shoal sand. Second, in order to anchor this sand in place, an underwater wall of sand, or "groin," must be built at the Potter Creek end

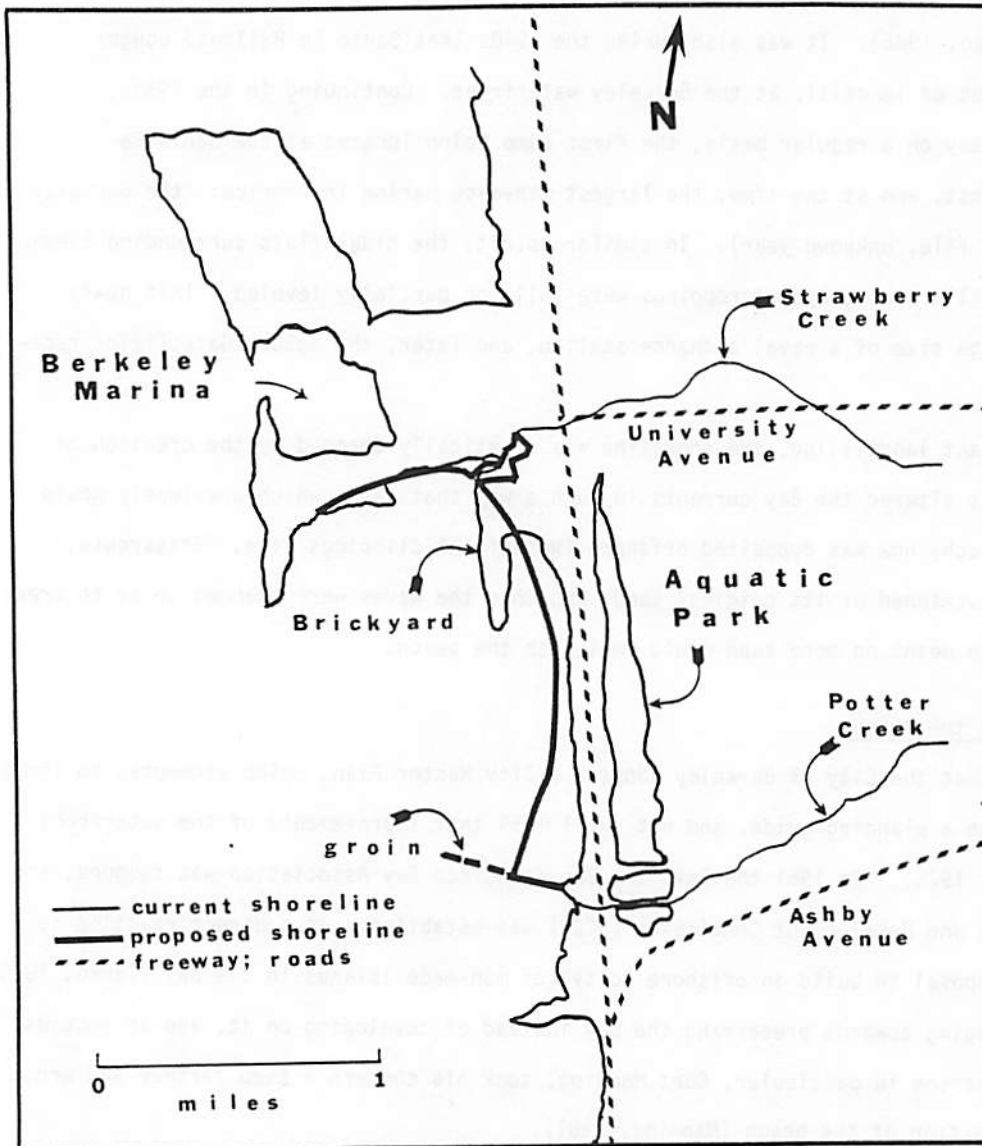


Figure 2. Curt Manning's proposal for a Berkeley Beach.

Source: Manning, 1981.

of the beach. This groin would trap sand that normally would be washed behind a sand bar, yet it would also allow lighter silt and floating debris to be washed away by the wind and waves. After this is done, it is hoped that the natural forces of the creeks, wave action, and the shoreline itself would maintain the beach's width and cleanliness.

The third provision would be to change the shape of the jutting piece of landfill called the Brickyard so as to give the beach a smooth, bowl-like profile, such as the original Berkeley Beach had. Strawberry Creek could then flow unobstructed onto the beach, bringing with it replenishing sand. To keep the beach clean of litter and waste, Mr. Manning also suggested putting a sort of filter or rotating screen on the storm drains which contain the two creeks for the last several yards down to the beach. His fourth requirement was to construct a masonry wall between the beach and the freeway to keep out

freeway noise and to prevent blowing sand. The wall should be low enough to allow freeway drivers a clear view of the Bay, but high enough to protect beachgoers from direct traffic noises. Lastly, to improve public access, Mr. Manning proposes a pedestrian bridge that would connect Aquatic Park to the beach. As he points out, the current pedestrian walkway on the University Avenue overpass is poorly planned and hardly accessible, as one must cross at least one freeway entrance or exit to reach the waterfront. Unfortunately, construction of a pedestrian bridge by Caltrans has been put on hold for many years now, pending a proposed widening of the freeway.

Existing Problems

Though Mr. Manning's study would seem to address the physical and aesthetic problems of creating a beach, his solutions are still conjecture, and have yet to be tested and confirmed. In addition, there still exist the problems of acquiring the land and financing the project. A major stumbling block to his plan is that the land upon which the beach would be built is owned by Santa Fe, which wishes to develop their land and would not easily give or sell the land to the City of Berkeley without an exchange involving developing some other piece of land. Both parties have been in numerous court disputes regarding waterfront development projects since the 1960s, and presently there is a dispute between Santa Fe and a group of Berkeley citizens who wish to see a state park on the Berkeley waterfront.

The other major problem facing the beach proposal, assuming that the aforementioned problem is solved, is funding. In his report, Mr. Manning states that funding should rest with the branch of government which is responsible for the project, referring to such agencies as the East Bay Regional Park District, and Berkeley's Housing and Urban Development office. He also mentions a private, non-profit group, Urban Care of Berkeley, as another source of funding (Manning, 1981).

A factor yet to be decided is the actual cost of the reconstruction effort. Curt Manning believes the cost to be around \$3 million, but the State Department of Boats and Waterways gave an estimate of \$10 million (Starn, 1983). Mr. Manning argues that part of their estimate includes the cost of building a 70-foot parking strip to accommodate 3,000 cars, which, in any case, he finds in opposition to his idea of a natural beach (Starn, 1983).

In 1980, an East Bay Shoreline Park, which included a Berkeley Beach plan, was proposed, and in both 1980 and 1984, funding for this park was obtained through the passage of state park bond acts (Save San Francisco Bay Association, 1986). The Shoreline Park received positive recommendations from the State Parks Commission staff, the Sierra Club, BCDC, the Berkeley Bay Council, and several other groups present at a hearing held in San Francisco in January of 1981 (Digby, 1981). By 1983 the projected Shoreline Park was to receive \$4 million of funding, and beach advocates argued to the State Coastal Conservancy for the beach plan to be included in it (Starn, 1983). At the time, the East Bay Regional Park District was interested in the Berkeley Beach idea, yet had severe financial problems that limited their support (Starn, 1983).

The Future Outlook

Most groups and people concerned agree that the proposed plan for a beach in Berkeley is a good one, and perhaps even a feasible one if researched further, with the foremost barriers being money and acquiring the land rights. If a Berkeley Beach ever is to be created, it would be certain that the City of Berkeley could only benefit from it. Tom Wakeman, an oceanographer with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, predicted a beneficial environmental impact from the beach, with the stabilization of plant life and the probable revival of clam beds (Fisher, 1980). The beach would become a tourist attraction once again, resulting in increased income from the City of Berkeley, and people would be able to walk, jog, picnic, and swim at the new beach, especially if the creeks were treated as suggested. Water sports in general would be expected to increase as the water quality near the shore improved, and more bird life would be evident. If the entire East Bay Shoreline Park were completed, then Berkeley would also profit from the possible restoration of the salmon and steelhead industry by having a sport fishing industry develop again (Curiel, 1980).

Unfortunately, whether the beach will soon, or ever, become a reality is still questionable. First, the battle over the development of Berkeley's waterfront must be settled, and then improvements can be made from there. As part of that goal, this paper serves best by educating the public about what once was at our waterfront, and what could exist there once again. Curt Manning puts it succinctly when he states, "As one becomes aware of this [beach's] history, the magnitude of the loss becomes apparent" (Manning, 1981).

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