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Notes on the History of Santa Cruz Wharves

Compiled by Frank Perry, Barry Brown, Rick Hyman, and Stanley D. Stevens



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Several wharves were constructed in Santa Cruz during the second half of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century, of which only one remains. It has often been written that the Railroad Wharf, used by the Santa Cruz and Felton Railroad starting in the middle 1870s, was originally the wharf built by David Gharky in the 1850s. The evidence presented here shows that the Railroad Wharf was an entirely new wharf and not a conversion of the Gharky Wharf.

Editor's Note: This article was first published in 2012 on a website that no longer exists. It has been reformatted with minor revisions.

Introduction

New research is rewriting part of Santa Cruz's wharf history. Five different wharves have graced the Santa Cruz shoreline over the years: the Cowell Wharf, Gharky Wharf, Railroad Wharf, Municipal Wharf, and Pleasure Pier. There was also, briefly, the Connecting Wharf, which linked the Gharky and Railroad Wharves. Some of the wharves have gone by several different names, making their history rather confusing. Other names that have been used include "Powder Mill Wharf" and "Steamship Wharf" for the Gharky Wharf; "Davis and Jordan Wharf," "Davis and Cowell Wharf," and "Lime Kiln Wharf" for the Cowell Wharf; "Cross Wharf" for the Connecting Wharf; and "Fishermen's Wharf" for both the Railroad Wharf and Municipal Wharf.

It is not the intent of this essay to provide a detailed history of all the wharves, but primarily to clarify the relationship between the Gharky Wharf and the Railroad Wharf. Since the middle 1900s, most Santa Cruz area historians have written that the Gharky Wharf, built by David Gharky in 1857, later became the Railroad Wharf. In fact, the Gharky Wharf became the Powder Mill Wharf, and

the Railroad Wharf was newly built in 1875 for the Santa Cruz and Felton Railroad. How did this confusion begin? We may never know for sure, but the chronology presented below (mostly contemporary accounts from old newspapers and other primary sources) documents the building sequence of the wharves and the beginnings of the error.

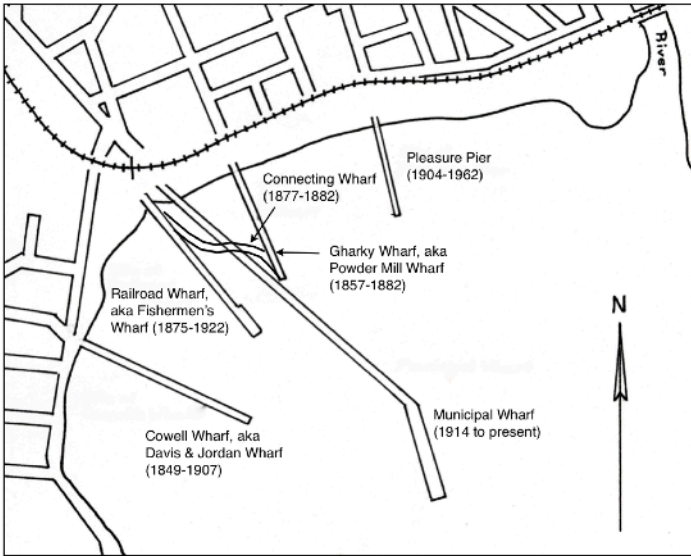
Background

To better understand this history, it helps to have some background on a few key players.

The **California Powder Works** located its explosives manufacturing plant on the San Lorenzo River north of Santa Cruz in 1863. It operated until 1914 and was located where Paradise Park is today.

Isaac E. Davis and Albion P. Jordan were major lime manufacturers in Santa Cruz from 1853 to 1865 and operated a wharf at the foot of Bay Street for shipping their product. This wharf was the first one built in Santa Cruz (in 1849). After Henry Cowell bought Jordan's half of the business in 1865, it became known as the Davis and Cowell Wharf, and, still later, as the Cowell Wharf. For a history of that wharf, see the book, *Lime Kiln Legacies*, published by the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, 2007 (p. 139).

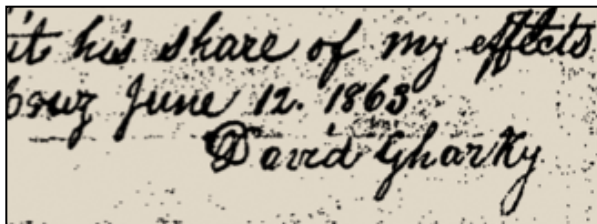
David Gharky was born around 1800 and arrived in Santa Cruz during the winter of



Map showing locations of Santa Cruz wharves.

1852-1853. He built and, for a few years, operated Santa Cruz's second wharf. He was primarily a farmer and died in 1877.

It should be noted that "Gharky" has been spelled at least seven different ways. The present-day street is spelled "Gharkey," which was a common spelling in the 1800s. The 1865 deed recording the sale of his wharf to the California Powder Works spelled it "Gharkey," "Gharky," and "Girkey" within this one document. Spellings in old newspapers include "Gherky" and "Ghearkey," while the 1860 census spelled it "Yerkey"—possibly a clue to its pronunciation. The State Legislature, in issuing a wharf franchise in 1856, spelled it "Ghirky." The strongest evidence, however, points to "Gharky" as the correct spelling. It is spelled that way in the 1854 poll list, on an 1866 parcel map, in the 1867 *Great Register of Voters*, in the 1870 census, in his obituary (*Sentinel*, Sept. 25, 1877, p. 2), and on his tombstone at Evergreen Cemetery. Most significantly, he signed it that way in his will. Given this evidence, we have adopted that spelling here, except when quoting others.



Part of David Gharky's will, dated November 3, 1853, and amended June 12, 1863, showing his last name spelled "Gharky." (Courtesy of Stanley D. Stevens)

The **Santa Cruz and Felton Railroad** ran a narrow gauge line between Felton and Santa Cruz beginning in 1875.

The **South Pacific Coast Railroad** operated a narrow gauge line through the Santa Cruz Mountains (linking Santa Cruz with the San Francisco Bay area) starting in 1880. The railroad was purchased by the Southern Pacific in 1887.

Chronology of Evidence

- *Sentinel*, May 23, 1857, p. 2. "A New Dock—is about to be erected by Mr. David Ghearkey, about half a mile north-east of Davis & Jordan's long wharf, the length of which, we are told, is to be one thousand feet from the water's edge." The Gharky Wharf was about 0.25 miles northeast of the Davis and Jordan wharf. So the "half a mile" statement is not very accurate. The "Railroad Wharf" was only a little over 0.1 miles northeast of the Davis and Jordan wharf.
- *Sentinel*, June 26, 1858, p. 2. "Mr. Gherky intends extending his wharf several hundred feet farther into the bay."
- *Sentinel*, November 18, 1865, p. 2. "Wharf Sale. —We learn that the California Powder Works Company have purchased Gharky's wharf, and will hereafter transact all their business, and ship from that well-known landing." The transfer was recorded in the Santa Cruz County Book of Deeds, Volume 7, pages 773-775, November 10, 1865. The deed also lists personal property sold by Gharky: "One Pile Driver and Hammer belonging to said Pile Driver and 3 trucks now used for the transportation of Powder."
- *Sentinel*, June 5, 1869, p. 2. "The California Powder Company's wharf is being considerably extended."
- *Sentinel*, March 20, 1869, p. 2. "Samuel Adams sold to California Powder Works 3/8 interest in land and Gharkey's wharf, for \$2,500."
- *Sentinel*, November 5, 1870, p. 1. "C. B. Gifford of San Jose, who visited us some weeks ago to take a lithographic view of Santa Cruz, has shown us his proof. It is in every respect an excellent picture, giving a fine view of the beach, town, and mountains in the background. To all who wish to preserve a perfect picture of Santa Cruz, or who wish to send one to their friend in the East to



“The Sandy Bluff and Beach, Santa Cruz,” The Lawrence & Houseworth Albums, image # 39.

The Gharky/Powder Mill Wharf (foot of Main Street on Beach Hill) in 1866. The camera was at the top of the Cowell Wharf, looking northeast. Note that there is no third wharf between the two. The third or Railroad Wharf was later constructed just the other side of the point in the middle of the picture. The Dream Inn is now located above the cliffs to the left. (Courtesy Society of California Pioneers)



Bird's-eye view of Santa Cruz, 1870, by C. B. Gifford. The Cowell Wharf is on the left and the Powder Mill (formerly Gharky) Wharf is on the right. Note lack of the middle or "Railroad Wharf." (Cropped from original lithograph in the collection of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History.)

give them some idea of what a beautiful place Santa Cruz is, we recommend this fine work of art.”

This bird’s-eye view of Santa Cruz done by artist Charles B. Gifford shows the Cowell Wharf (at the foot of Bay Street) and the Powder Mill Wharf (at foot of Main Street), but **NO** Railroad Wharf. This dramatically shows that the Railroad Wharf was entirely new and post 1870. A reproduction of Gifford’s lithograph appears in the book *Lime Kiln Legacies*, p. 134, and *The Birth of California Narrow Gauge*, front end papers. The latter book shows another aerial view, done in the late 1870s or early 1880s, with three wharves (printed on the back end papers and on page 314). By this time the third (railroad) wharf had been built between the other two. These images are also reproduced below.

Some people have argued that the artist must have left out the third wharf in the 1870 illustration. The above article, however, says that the rendering was very accurate, and it seems most unlikely the artist would omit something as important as a wharf. The wharves are very prominent in the drawing, and Santa Cruzans were very proud of their shipping facilities at that time. Furthermore, Gifford provided a key to the lithograph in which he numbered and identified important features such as Bay Street (#1), Davis & Cowell’s Wharf (#3), and the Powder Mill Wharf (#6). For those who still don’t trust drawings, however, compare with the 1866 photograph.

- *Sentinel*, April 17, 1875, p. 3. “The [railroad] wharf contract was let to the Pacific Bridge Co. of San Francisco, work to be completed on or before June 15, 1875. The wharf will be 1,278 feet long and will be extended as soon as the company can bring their own piles and lumber on the road and flume. It is to be the most complete and substantial structure of the kind ever erected outside of San Francisco.” The term “extended” could be interpreted as meaning that either an old wharf was being lengthened or simply that a wharf was being built out into the water. Elsewhere, however, it is called the “new” wharf (see next four entries).
- *Sentinel*, April 24, 1875, p. 3. “The Pacific Bridge Co. commenced driving piles this week for the new wharf for the Felton railroad. . . .”



Railroad Wharf under construction, 1875. Powder Mill Wharf in distance. (Harold van Gorder collection)

- *Sentinel*, December 11, 1875, p. 3. “A large number of workmen are engaged in giving the finishing strokes to the new wharf. . . .”
- *The Local Item*, January 14, 1876, p. 1. “The harbor has three wharves. The middle one is new, commodious, and complete, now recently finished, and belongs to the Santa Cruz and San Lorenzo [sic] Railroad Company.”
- Fowler Pope diary, Saturday, January 8, 1876. “This AM I went down on our new wharf for the first time.” Pope worked for the railroad. The diary is in the collection of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History.
- *Santa Cruz Local Item*, August 10, 1877, p. 3. “At a meeting of the Common Council, held last Wednesday morning, an animated discussion ensued relative to a petition presented by the Felton Railroad Company asking the privilege of connecting the Powder Mill and Railroad wharves by a narrow wharf, sufficiently wide, however, to build a track upon and run cars over. . . . The object of connecting the two wharves is safety. When powder is to be shipped, which ever wharf is clear of shipping at the time is to be the shipping point, and all danger can thus be avoided.” This and the next few articles document the planning and construction of the Connecting Wharf.
- *Sentinel*, August 11, 1877, p. 3. “C. H. Gorrill, President of the Felton Railroad Co. presented to



The Powder Mill Wharf (in distance) and Railroad Wharf with Connecting Wharf between the two. Photo taken from top of Cowell Wharf between 1877 and 1882. (Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History)

the Council a map, showing the plan for the construction of a wharf to connect the Felton Railroad wharf with the Powder Company's wharf, intending to ship all powder over the wharf and do away with the powder magazine now in use, and storing of powder in the city limits."

- Trustees Meeting, Office of the California Powder Works, San Francisco, August 16, 1877. These minutes include the text of the agreement between the California Powder Works (CPW) and the Santa Cruz and Felton Railroad (SC&FRR) to be entered into the next day. The CPW agreed to lease its wharf to the SC&FRR for eight years, beginning November 1, 1877. "Said first party [CPW] also agrees to build and construct or cause to be built and constructed within a reasonable time a connection between said wharves as authorized by ordinance of the city Council of Santa Cruz suitable for running the railroad cars and engine of the second party [SC&FRR] over the same said connection to be built in a manner indicated by the second party provided that the same shall not cost the first party to exceed twenty-five-hundred dollars gold coin." This shows that the Connecting Wharf was to be a railroad link and was to be paid for by the powder works.
- *Sentinel*, September 22, 1877 p. 3. "Work connecting the Powder Mill and Felton Railroad Company wharves was commenced Thursday."

- *Sentinel*, September 25, 1877, p. 2. From the obituary for David Gharky: "He was continuously engaged in farming, and for a number of years was owner of the Powder Mill Wharf, a property he constructed about the year 1860." From the first article we know the wharf was actually built in 1857.
- *Sentinel*, October 13, 1877, p. 3. "The Railroad connection between the Felton and Powder Mill wharves is now a fixed fact." This would appear to document the completion of the Connecting Wharf.
- *Sentinel*, Feb. 2, 1879, p. 3. "Following is a statement of receipts and shipments of freight over the wharves of the Felton Railroad." With the construction of the Connecting Wharf, the railroad had access to two wharves, hence the use of the plural.



Bird's eye view showing (L. to R) the Cowell, Railroad, Connecting, and Powder Mill Wharves. (*Sentinel*, June 24, 1882)



Aerial photo taken in 1906 showing Cowell Wharf (left), Railroad Wharf (middle), and Pleasure Pier (right). Photo by George R. Lawrence from the Library of Congress collection. Restoration by Barry Brown.

engage to give us free wharfage with all our goods that we may choose to export or import, foreign or coast wise. The agreement is for 10 years. This enables us to deliver powder in San Francisco at the cost of 3 1/2 cents per keg against 5 1/2 cents by the sea route without counting wharfage or insurance, and is besides very much more convenient. The old wharf was not a source of profit to us.” This and the following article help explain why the Powder Mill Wharf was demolished by the railroad.

- *Sentinel*, December 30, 1882, p. 2. “The work of demolishing the Powder mill wharf will probably require from six weeks to two months time. It was not built so quickly, its owner, David Gharkey, and David, Jr., hauling the piles from the then near woods. . . . It fell into the hands of the Powder Co. several years ago and served them a good purpose till the era of the Felton R. R. Co. This company leased it for a long term of years, and when the company gave up the ghost, it fell into the hands of their successors, the S.P.C.R.R. [South Pacific Coast Railroad]. The company holding the lease have no use for it. It is not to their interest to ship goods by water. That is not what railroads are built for. . . . Why the expense, \$500, of putting down the Powder mill wharf is incurred, we do not distinctly know, but are informed that to keep the wharf in repair would

incur an annual expense of \$1,000, as its planking is worn out and its piles, the older ones, ready to fall.”

- *Santa Cruz Evening News*, October 5, 1922, p. 4. “The [railroad] wharf was built in 1875 and contrary to general opinion, the franchise to erect it was not given under the power of a special act of the legislature but under the provision of a local ordinance adopted and known as No. 85, which was granted to the Santa Cruz and Felton railroad. . . .” This article was written as demolition of the old Railroad Wharf commenced. With regard to City Ordinance No. 85, the only mention of any wharf refers to the one the railroad will build at the foot of Pacific Avenue. The rest of the ordinance describes what the railroad company can do in and on city streets.
- Leon Rowland card file, Special Collections, McHenry Library, UCSC. Undated. File titled, Gharkey Wharf. “Franchise granted by legislature in 1856. It later was the railroad wharf and its franchise was renewed for 20 years by the supervisors in 1876. Gharkey’s construction was in 1857. (The *Sentinel* referred to it as ‘the new wharf’). The South Pacific Coast Railroad apparently bought the Gharkey wharf and replaced it.”

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The word “apparently” suggests Rowland was uncertain about this statement. Rowland’s files represented ongoing research used for his newspaper column and books of the 1940s. He died in 1952. The file is available online: <http://library.ucsc.edu/speccoll/rowland-collection>

- *Annals of Santa Cruz*, 1947, by Leon Rowland. This book was reprinted in *Santa Cruz: The Early Years* in 1980, and that says on p. 129, “The Davis and Jordan wharf was used by the California Powder works when they began producing explosives in 1863, . . . but they soon began construction of a longer wharf off what is today Santa Cruz’ principal bathing beach, opposite Main street. . . .”
“When the little seven-mile narrow-gauge Santa Cruz and Felton railroad began operating on October 13, 1875, the Gharkey wharf became the ‘railroad wharf.’ It was bought by the South Pacific Coast railroad when that narrow gauge pushed its rails across the hills from Alameda.” Two key statements in this history are inconsistent with the evidence from the primary sources quoted earlier. The California Powder Works bought the Gharkey Wharf in 1865, and the SC&FRR built its own wharf in 1875.
- *Sentinel*, March 4, 1951 in ‘Santa Cruz Yesterdays’ feature. “Nearest to the camera is the old wharf started by David Gharkey which became known as the ‘railroad’ wharf. In 1875 it was sold to the original seven-mile Santa Cruz and Felton narrow gauge line.” The wording suggests the author used Rowland as a source.
- *News and Notes from the Santa Cruz Historical Society*, April, 1955. ‘Early Day Wharves,’ by Ernest Otto. “Cowell’s Wharf was always known as the first wharf in Santa Cruz, erected about 1849. Elihu Anthony was one of the main promoters and it was used mainly for the shipping of lumber and lime. It was followed by the erection of the Pacific Coast Steamship Company wharf, which ran out from Main street. Then came, in the late seventies, the Railroad wharf, from Pacific Avenue.”
Otto got it right. He was born in Santa Cruz in 1871, and his grandfather was a wharfinger. Otto often wrote from his own memory. The Powder Mill Wharf was also known in later years as the Steamship Wharf.

- *News and Notes from the Santa Cruz Historical Society*, June 1962. ‘Santa Cruz Wharves,’ by Skip Littlefield. “Wharf No. 2 — Commonly known as the Railroad wharf, was constructed by David Gharkey in 1857.”
- Wharf Notes, 1963, revised 1970, by Skip Littlefield (unpublished). “David Gharkey built the Railroad Wharf. . . . Gharkey Wharf became known as Railroad Wharf in 1875.”
- *Santa Cruz County: Parade of the Past, 1972*, by Margaret Koch, p. 56. “In 1875 when the narrow gauge Santa Cruz-Felton Railroad began operations, the Gharkey wharf became the Railroad Wharf.” While this sentence is not footnoted, she cites Littlefield and Rowland just before this.

There are dozens of more recent examples from newspaper articles, books, reports, exhibits, and websites that state (incorrectly) that the Gharkey Wharf became the Railroad Wharf. A public display on wharf history installed on the Municipal Wharf in 1984 made the same error.

Conclusions

The wharf built at the foot of Main Street by David Gharkey in 1857 was mostly acquired by the California Powder Works in 1865 and was demolished in 1882. The Santa Cruz and Felton Railroad had a new wharf built at the foot of Pacific Avenue in 1875. It was commonly known as the Railroad Wharf because it was fitted with tracks to accommodate railroad cars. This wharf stood until 1922.

The Railroad Wharf was entirely new and not a conversion of the Gharkey Wharf. In 1877, an S-shaped Connecting Wharf with railroad tracks was built between the two wharves. This enabled the railroad to ship from the former Gharkey Wharf (then called the Powder Mill Wharf) as well as from the Railroad Wharf. The connection eliminated the dangerous practice of hauling explosives through town by wagon and storing them on the Powder Mill Wharf while waiting to be shipped.

From the 1940s through 2000s, numerous writers stated that the Gharkey Wharf was converted to the Railroad Wharf. Authors during the latter part of this period commonly used the writings of Leon Rowland, Warren W. (Skip) Littlefield, and Margaret Koch as sources for this information. The

oldest example of this confusion discovered to date is from the 1940s and by Leon Rowland. Leon Rowland was a careful researcher, and his writings are fairly reliable sources of information. He was not, however, infallible.

Can this wharf myth ever be exterminated? Probably not. It has been put in print far too many times, but we hope that at least those who read this essay will not perpetuate the error.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the late Edna Kimbro for sharing the information on Charles B. Gifford and thanks to the Hagley Museum and Library in Wilmington, Delaware, for providing the letter by Bernard Peyton.

About the Authors

Frank Perry is the author of several books on Santa Cruz County history and from 2013 to 2021 served as curator of the Capitola Historical Museum. Barry Brown is the author of *The California Powder Works & San Lorenzo Paper Mill Self-Guided Tour*. Rick Hyman has written extensively on the history of the Carmelita Cottages on Beach Hill. Stanley D. Stevens served as Map Librarian at UCSC for nearly thirty years and has authored numerous publications on local history.