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## **Pacific-Cooper-Front** **How the Heart of Downtown Santa Cruz Has Evolved**

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# Pacific-Cooper-Front

## How the Heart of Downtown Santa Cruz Has Evolved

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The half-block area to the south of one-block-long Cooper Street, bounded east and west by Front Street and Pacific Avenue respectively, has been the heart of downtown Santa Cruz, California, beginning in 1866. Since that time, the area has undergone many changes.

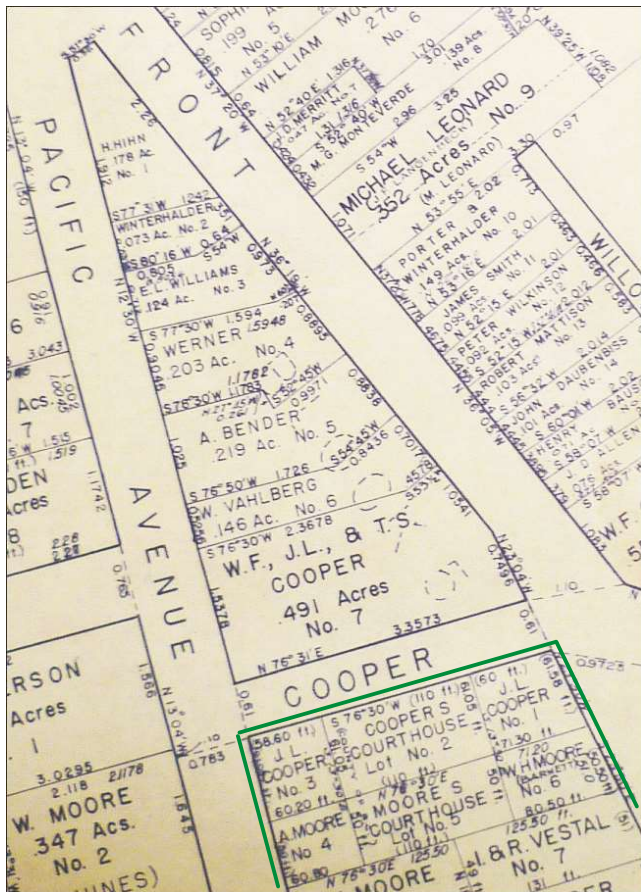


Figure 1. Detail from the 1866 Santa Cruz map, showing the two courthouse lots within the study area (outlined in green).  
(Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History)

If a single small area can be described as the heart of downtown Santa Cruz, it has to be the half-block area to the south of one-block-long Cooper Street, and bounded east and west by Front Street and Pacific Avenue respectively. Figure 1 shows the study area (outlined in green) on the first Santa Cruz street map, created in 1866.

To understand the evolution of this small area, we can begin with three unprecedented things that happened in June of 1866:

1. Santa Cruz became an incorporated town, with an elected Board of Trustees<sup>1</sup>
2. The new town trustees, together with the already-existing Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors, voted to build a courthouse on Cooper Street
3. Surveyors Foreman and Wright were commissioned to create the first map showing streets, parcels, and owners in Santa Cruz.

Those events began the evolution of the Pacific-Cooper-Front area from raw land into a city/county civic center. Since about 1920, that evolution has moved in a different direction. No longer home to any government functions, the Front-Cooper-Pacific area has become a city cultural center while also integrating more closely with the downtown commercial core.

### Background

Santa Cruz was home to the region's Indigenous People for thousands of years prior to the arrival of the first Spanish exploration (by land) in 1769. The subsequent establishment of Mission Santa Cruz in 1791 overlaid the existing native land uses with a mission-standard pattern of development. Mission Plaza, Holy Cross Church, and the Armas-Rodriguez adobes preserve the old Mission layout (after the 1792-94 move of the main mission functions up from the floodplain).<sup>2</sup>

The San Lorenzo River floodplain area south of the mission (now downtown Santa Cruz) was farmland, while the floodplain land north of the mission was given to orchards, vineyards, and stock-raising. On the east side of the river, a secular village (*pueblo*) called *Villa de Branciforte* was established in 1797. Its highest civil authority was the *alcalde*, whose powers combined those of mayor and judge.

Secularization of the California missions after 1833 privatized most of the extensive mission land holdings. The original directive of the missions—to hold the land in trust for the Native Americans—was abandoned. Instead, many large grants of land went to the colonizers, and control of the remaining land (near the mission complex) was delegated to secular administrators and/or local alcaldes. Most of that mission agricultural land was granted or sold, in smaller parcels, by these officials.

With the arrival of Elihu Anthony in late 1847, things began to change. Looking for land to build himself a blacksmith/metalworking shop, Anthony found that the only parcel available lay mostly in the lowlands, land considered by most locals to be worthless. Anthony saw opportunity there, however, and began to build.<sup>3</sup> His shop/store anchored the "lower plaza," becoming the nexus where the later converging roads met. His subdivision (see Figure 2) created the northernmost block of Main Street (today's Front Street).

Figure 2 is a detail from Anthony's 1854 subdivision map, rotated so that up is north, and annotated (in green) to point out important features. The map shows how the pre-existing Mission Santa Cruz farm and road layout affected Anthony's development planning, which in turn established the triangular block that still exists today (pointed at the Town Clock).

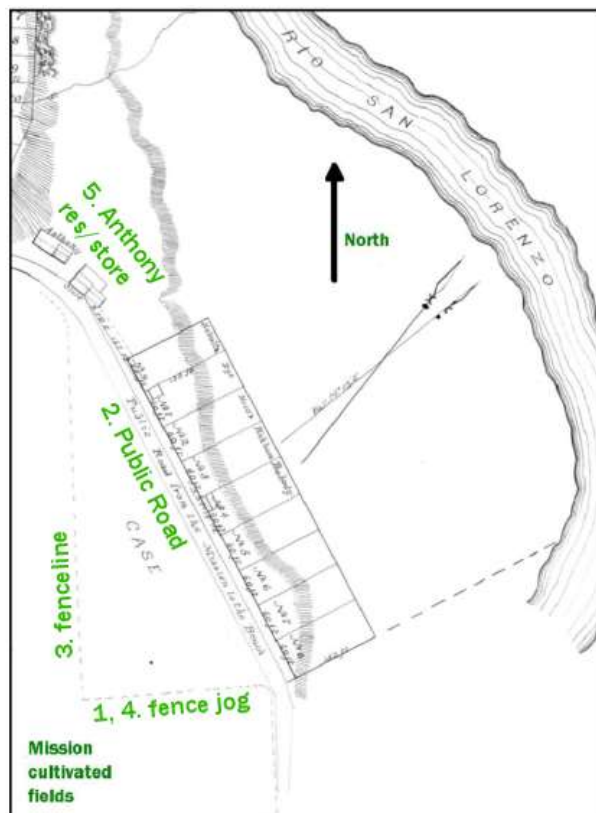


Figure 2. Detail from Elihu Anthony 1854 map, annotated.  
(Santa Cruz County Surveyor)

**Key to Figure 2 annotation numbers:**

1. The map shows a jog in the dashed line (fenceline) marking the edge of the mission's cultivated fields.
2. "Public Road from the Mission to the Beach" that became Main/Front Street angles across that jog, creating a triangle. On the map, that triangle is shown as a single parcel labeled "CASE" (likely Benjamin Case, another early resident). The same triangle can be seen on the Figure 1 map.
3. The dashed line before the jog later became Willow Street/Pacific Avenue, extending straight on to the beach, while Main Street was cut off. Anthony's shop/store was located at the northern point of the triangle (to the left in Figure 1).
4. The short southern side of the triangle (labeled "fence jog" in Fig. 2) became Cooper Street.
5. Anthony's residence and store (where the Town Clock is today) are labeled.

On the north side of the short end of the triangle, William and John Cooper (two of four Pennsylvania brothers who came to Santa Cruz County) built a general store in the early 1850s.<sup>4</sup> A short street, created next to the store to connect the end of Main Street to Willow Street, became known as Cooper Street. Across Cooper Street from the store was the land that became the area of this study.

The first map showing most of Santa Cruz (areas as far inland as the Mission) was surveyed and drafted by the United States Coast Survey in 1853.<sup>4</sup> The survey was done before Anthony's subdivision, but his shop/store are shown. Also, the future Willow Street/Pacific Avenue and Cooper Street are shown, where Anthony's map shows only dashed lines. A detail from the 1853 map, rotated so that "up" is north, is shown in Figure 3. Numbers added (in green boxes) to indicate features.

**Key to Figure 3 annotation numbers:**

1. The Mission adobe that remains today
2. Unnamed road (now Rincon/Chestnut Street)
3. Mission field boundary road (later Willow Street until 1866, then Pacific Avenue)
4. Unnamed road (now Water Street)
5. Unnamed road (now Soquel Avenue)
6. Unnamed road (no modern equivalent)
7. Fenceline jog (today's Cooper Street)
8. Unnamed road (now Soquel Avenue)
9. Anthony's residence and store.

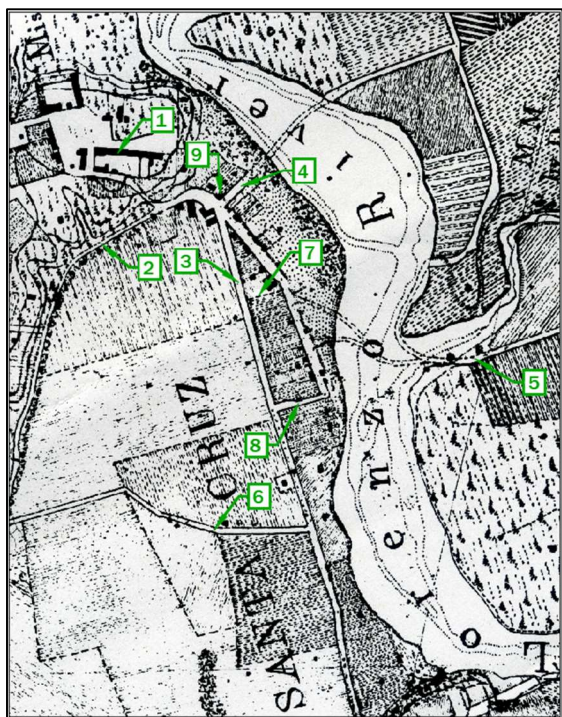


Figure 3. Detail from the 1853 Coast Survey map.  
(NOAA Office of Coast Survey)

### The town, the map, and the courthouse

The next downtown map we have (Figure 1 is a detail) is the one commissioned by the Santa Cruz Board of Trustees, soon after incorporation as a town in 1866.<sup>5</sup> Much more detailed than the Coast Survey map, it shows that many more streets had been created since 1853, and also shows the parcel boundaries and the names of parcel owners (a valuable resource for local history researchers.) The *Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel* published a numbered supplemental list of owners for parcels too small for the owner names to fit on the map.<sup>6</sup>

The 1866 map, announced on June 23, made another big change: street names. Among many new and/or changed names, two relate to this study: Main Street became Front Street, and Willow Street became Pacific Avenue. Figure 1 is a detail from the 1866 map, with the new street names, and also showing parcel ownership on both sides of Cooper Street.

Another change shown on the new map was that Santa Cruz County had acquired land across from the Coopers' store, on the south side of Cooper Street (down on the map), for a courthouse. The lots acquired were owned by two families; the Coopers and the William Moore family. The families donated some of that land to become the site of the first purpose-built county courthouse. The gift of land was apparently made before the 1866 map was published; on the Figure 1 map, the adjacent donated lots are labeled as "COOPER S COURTHOUSE" and "MOORE S COURTHOUSE."

Before 1866, the location of the county court changed several times. Following the creation of Santa Cruz County in 1850, first elected judge William Blackburn continued to convene his court in the old adobe Spanish/Mexican-era *juzgado* (housing both judicial and administrative functions) on Mission Plaza, which Blackburn had bought and converted into the Eagle Hotel.<sup>7</sup>

In 1852, Thomas Fallon sold his two-story building across School Street to the county, and the court moved there.<sup>8</sup> In 1860, the court moved to the upper floor of the new brick "Flatiron" building at the head of Main (now Front)<sup>9</sup>. That property is labeled "H. Hihn" on the map in Figure 1.

In 1866-67, the county got its first courthouse built for that purpose. It seems, however, that the Cooper Street courthouse location almost didn't happen. County Supervisor F. A. Hihn (one of three supervisors) preferred a location on Mission Hill. Tannery owner Richard C. Kirby agreed, going so far as to purchase a large lot between two others already owned by Santa Cruz County, and offering to sell it to the county at a reduced price for combination into a courthouse/jail site.<sup>10</sup>

Both of those former county lots are now owned by the Catholic diocese. One (the former Fallon lot) is now the site of the mission chapel replica. The other (now a Holy Cross church parking lot) contained a small stone county jail that was built in 1864. The Hihn/Kirby plan apparently did not convince the other two county supervisors, however, and the Cooper Street site emerged as the final choice. Construction began in the fall of 1866 and was completed in 1867, beginning the area's transformation into a civic center.

The two-story structure had wood framing within brick exterior walls, and sat mid-way between the newly-named Front Street and Pacific Avenue. Designed by Thomas Beck, the building had very modest dimensions by today's standards (65 feet wide by 55 feet deep). Construction was by local contractors Lynch & Gragg.<sup>11</sup>

In 1876, Santa Cruz became a charter city, with a city council replacing the town corporation's board of trustees.<sup>12</sup> This expanded city government led to the next piece of the emerging civic center; a city hall was built in 1877 on Front Street, around the corner from the courthouse.<sup>13</sup> Figure 4 shows the courthouse (center), and city hall (far left).



Figure 4. Corner of Front and Cooper, 1880.  
(Covello & Covello Photography)

The next issue confronting the county government was where to safely store the official records that rapidly began to accumulate as the county grew, such as court, marriage, birth, death, and land title records. County officials decided to build a separate Hall of Records.

The little brick building we now know as the Octagon, was constructed in 1882 on the previously-empty corner of Front and Cooper, designed by noted Oakland architect J. W. Newcum.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 5 shows the Hall of Records flanked by the city hall (left) and the courthouse (right).



Figure 5. L to R: City Hall, Hall of Records, Courthouse.  
(Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History)

After the city hall, the most prominent addition to the city property was a tall wooden tower supporting a large fire alarm bell, built sometime between 1882 and 1894. Telephones were not yet common, and radios non-existent, so the bell served to summon firefighters. The photo in Figure 7, taken from the interior courtyard behind the city hall, shows the tower while it was still under construction. The city hall is to the left of the tower.

The detail from a 1905 Sanborn map<sup>15</sup> in Figure 6 shows that the city had made a few other modest additions (or repurposed already-existing structures) to its little campus. A small structure next to the tower is labeled “HORSE SHED.” Another small building is labeled “STORAGE.” Both of those can be seen in Figure 5. The open horse shed is right next to the tower, and part of the storage building is visible at far right. A third small structure, not visible in the Figure 7 photo, is labeled “LOCK-UP” on the Figure 6 floor plan. This was a jail operated by the city, separate from the county jail next door.

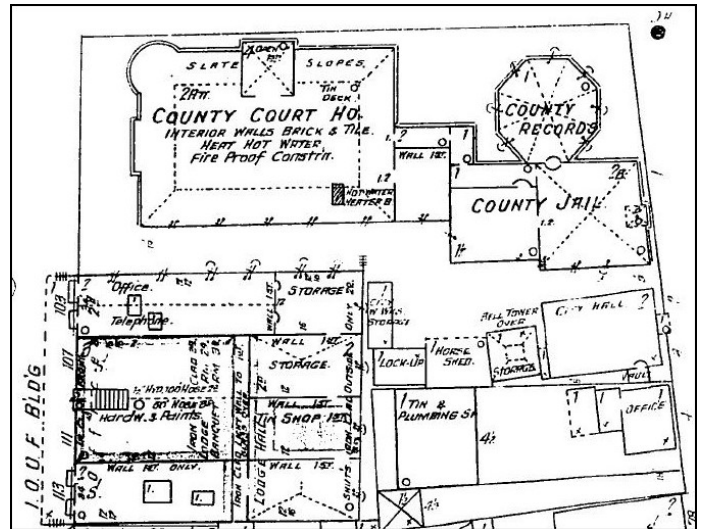


Figure 6. Layout of the civic center buildings in 1905.  
(Sanborn Map Company)

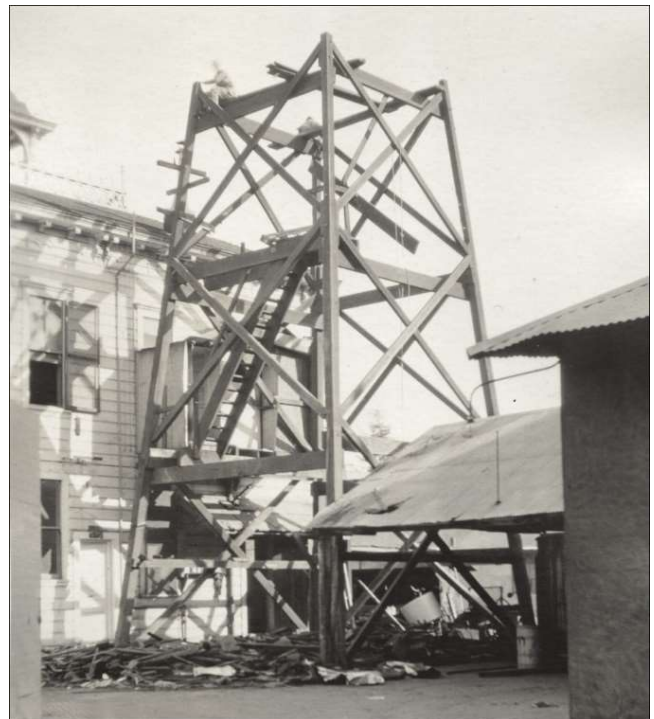


Figure 7. The fire bell tower under construction.  
(UCSC Digital Collections)

As the 1880s proceeded, the county faced another growth-related problem; the inadequacy of its tiny 1864 jail, which had only four holding cells. A new jail building went up in 1890, on Front Street between the Octagon and the city hall (Figure 11).

In 1894, a major fire destroyed the 1866-67 courthouse, along with a commercial building (known as Ely Block No. 1, next door to the west), and all of the buildings on the opposite side of Cooper Street. The undamaged city hall and fire-bell tower can be seen in the Figure 8 photograph, rising behind the burned-out courthouse shell.



Figure 8. After the fire, the burned-out shell of the courthouse can be seen in the middle distance. *(Santa Cruz Public Library)*

The Hall of Records, jail, and city hall survived the fire, and a new larger courthouse soon arose from the ashes. The county acquired the site of the burned Ely Block, allowing the new courthouse to front both on Cooper Street and on Pacific Avenue. Figure 9 shows the original appearance of the 1894 courthouse, as seen from Pacific Avenue.



Figure 9. The 1894 courthouse; Hall of Records at left. *(UCSC Digital Collections)*

The jail built in 1890 adjoined the rear of the Hall of Records, and the Figure 6 floor plan shows that a door connected the two buildings. Soon after construction of the new courthouse (or maybe at the same time), the three buildings were connected by an annex, as shown on the Figure 6 floor plan. The room on the left side of the building labelled “County Jail” (under the word “County”), is actually part of the annex.

Another building shown in Figure 6 (lower left) is labeled as “I.O.O.F. B’LD’G.” The proximity of the Odd Fellows building to the courthouse led to several functions locating there because they were related to conducting government business. The post office was there for a time, before it built its own permanent building in 1911. Also in the Odd Fellows building were attorneys’ offices and the fledgling local telephone company.

The 1873 Odd Fellows building suffered serious fire damage in 1899, after which its clock tower was rebuilt in brick. That rebuilt tower is the top half of today’s stand-alone Town Clock.<sup>16</sup> Figure 10 shows the aftermath of the fire that destroyed the original clock tower. The courthouse (left) and the fire-bell tower (right), both apparently undamaged, can be seen beyond.



Figure 10. The Odd Fellows building after the 1899 fire. *(Santa Cruz Public Libraries)*

In 1906, an earthquake and subsequent fires leveled much of San Francisco. The earthquake also caused damage in Santa Cruz. Repairs to the courthouse included removing the top level of the tower above the Cooper Street main entrance, and that configuration remained for the rest of the building’s lifetime. The post-1906 courthouse with its lowered entrance tower can be seen in Figure 11.

### City government moves out

The era of the combined city-county civic center ended around 1920, when city government moved to the former Hihn mansion on Church Street. The county acquired the Front Street property and built an upper-floor connecting bridge to the jail building, with a drive-through passage below. Also during this time period, a blocky addition was attached to the Front Street side of the Hall of Records. Figure 11 shows those changes as seen from Front Street.

Figure 12 is a view from the interior courtyard, showing the connecting bridge and drive-through passage more clearly.



Figure 11. The county complex in 1930.  
(UCSC Digital Collections)



Figure 12. A view from the interior courtyard in ~1930. Features seen are the courthouse (left), annex (center), bridge/drive-through (center-right), converted city hall (right), and Odd Fellows building (far right).  
(UCSC Digital Collections)

In the 1930s, the county again faced a shortage of space. In 1934, supervisors proposed a new building on Front Street, adjacent to the conjoined former city hall building.<sup>17</sup> That idea never came to fruition, although the county went so far as to acquire the land and clear the existing buildings from it (it became a parking lot).

A state-federal grant to the county<sup>18</sup> made possible a much larger building in 1936, replacing both the 1890 jail and the conjoined city hall building. Completed in 1937, the new building housed a number of county offices in addition to the jail. Also, the new structure was separated from the Hall of Records, removing the interior connection between the two buildings. Part of the connecting annex between courthouse and jail was retained and reconnected to the new jail building. Figure 13 shows the Front Street side of the building in 1940.



Figure 13. The jail/annex in 1940.  
(Covello & Covello Photography)

Continued population growth in Santa Cruz County after World War II increased strains on county infrastructure and administrative capacity, but it took a push from nature to overcome the inertia that resisted changes to the Pacific-Cooper-Front civic center. That push was a major flood that inundated much of downtown Santa Cruz in late December of 1955. The courthouse basement was almost completely underwater, destroying or damaging many county records.

The flood was the push that led to the creation of two major new entities: a flood control project, and a semi-independent local redevelopment agency that could access federal “urban renewal” funding.<sup>19</sup>

The flood-control project, designed by the Army Corps of Engineers, resulted in the levees that now constrain the San Lorenzo River, while at the same time the redevelopment agency designated a project area.

Within that area (bounded by Front Street, Water Street, Ocean Street, and Soquel Avenue) the agency had broad powers to acquire land, redraw property lines, and plan new development. As the process progressed, the county saw an opportunity to claim a big chunk of the project land. After much wrangling between county and city, today's County Governmental Center (CGC), was the result.

The new CGC and courthouse were completed by 1968, whereupon most county offices moved out of the Pacific-Cooper-Front buildings. The county put the now-empty Cooper Street courthouse up for sale, and local preservationist/developer Max Walden converted it into Cooper House,<sup>20</sup> which remade the Cooper-Pacific civic center corner into the social center of Santa Cruz for the next two decades.

Creation of Cooper House coincided with the reimagining of Pacific Avenue as the Pacific Garden Mall, driven by the energy of Chuck and Esther Abbott. Designed by a local team of architect Kermit Darrow and landscape architect Roy Rydell, the Avenue reopened in late 1969.<sup>21</sup> The Mall added pedestrian and outdoor spaces that included the outdoor area on Pacific Avenue where Don McCaslin's Warmth band held court.

Also upgraded was the outdoor space facing Cooper Street between Cooper House and the Octagon. Removal of the annex that formerly connected courthouse and jail deepened the space, and Roy Rydell did the landscape design that transformed what had been a functional but unattractive service access area into an inviting public space. To honor the visionary couple, it was named Abbott Square.

The next step in repurposing the civic center came in 1972, when the octagonal Hall of Records building became the first Santa Cruz County Historical Museum. The blocky addition (seen in Figure 11) was removed, restoring the building to its original appearance.

In 1981 the first phase of today's county jail opened, across Water Street from the courthouse, but it was not until mid-1986 that the Front Street jail closed for good.

### Civic Center to Cultural Center

Knowing that the jail would soon be closing, county leaders began to look at future uses for the building. The art community lobbied for an art museum, and the Historical Museum was already ensconced in the Octagon, so some sort of cultural center seemed to be the leading candidate.

The Loma Prieta earthquake interrupted that planning on October 17, 1989. The 1894 courthouse that had become Cooper House was fatally damaged and demolished. A new Pacific Avenue design replaced Rydell's Pacific Garden Mall and Abbott Square.

A silver lining to the earthquake disaster was that state and federal disaster funding became available, allowing expansion of museum planning to include a new building next to the old jail. When completed in 1993, it became the new home of separate art and history museums, while the old jail building space was repurposed into income-producing office and commercial space.

Aided by the disaster funds and many private donations (including \$1M dollars from the McPherson family), the new facility opened in 1993 as the McPherson Center for Art and History. In 1996 the two museums merged to become the Museum of Art & History, or MAH for short.<sup>22</sup>

With the McPherson Center opening, the double transformation of the Pacific-Cooper-Front area was nearly complete: from raw land to civic center, and then from civic center to cultural center. Within the 1993 spaces, the McPherson Center for Art and History evolved into today's McPherson Business Center and Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History (MAH).



Figure 14. Abbott Square Marketplace opening in 2017.  
*(Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History)*

One more major remodel, in 2017, made the cultural center into more of a social center as well: the expanded outdoor area became the Abbott Square Marketplace, while creating adjacent indoor spaces for many food and drink vendors. The photo in Figure 14 shows the opening ceremony in Abbott Square, with construction scaffolding still in place.



## Construction/deconstruction Timeline

- 1866-67: First courthouse
- 1877: City hall
- 1882: Hall of Records
- 1890: County jail and annex
- Before 1894: fire bell tower, city “lock-up”
- 1894: Second courthouse
- 1906: Courthouse tower reduced after earthquake
- 1920: County remodel of old city hall
- 1937: Second county jail/annex
- 1956: Redevelopment agency formed
- 1968: Court move to new courthouse across the river
- 1969-71: Abbott Square and Cooper House created
- 1972: Historical Museum moved into Octagon
- 1986: Front Street jail closed
- 1989: Loma Prieta earthquake
- 1993: New art and history museum building opens.
- 1996: History, art museums merge to become MAH.
- 2017: Abbott Square Marketplace

**Note:** more information on all of the sites and structures described in this article can be found in Chapter Five of *The Sidewalk Companion to Santa Cruz Architecture, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*, published in 2023 by Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History.

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### Notes

1. A California state law enacted in 1862 allowed communities desiring a higher level of organization to incorporate as a “township” within their counties. Among the requirements for state approval was election of a three-person Board of Trustees, which was accomplished on May 7, 1866. The state passed the necessary legislation, which was published as: “The Santa Cruz Incorporation Act,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Jun. 2, 1866, 4:3.  
 In 1876, Santa Cruz transitioned from a “town” to a “charter city.” The city charter is the first section of the Santa Cruz Municipal Code.  
 In contrast, the overall governmental structure of Santa Cruz County has remained basically constant since the counties were first established after statehood in 1850. Santa Cruz County has an elected Board of Supervisors (originally three supervisors; now five).
2. Melanie J. Mayer, *The Mission Santa Cruz Mystery: Seven Clues to Find the Site of the First Mission* (Santa Cruz, California: Friends of Santa Cruz State Parks, 2019), 1.

3. “Elihu Anthony,” *Santa Cruz County History Journal Number Four*, Stanley D. Stevens, editor (Santa Cruz, California: Museum of Art & History of Santa Cruz County, 1998), 31.
4. The first Sanborn map of Santa Cruz (1877) showed a structure labeled “Gen’l Mdse.”
5. A copy of the 1866 map is in Santa Cruz MAH archives.
6. “The Official Survey of Santa Cruz,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Jun. 23, 1866, 2:4.
7. John L. Chase, *The Sidewalk Companion to Santa Cruz Architecture*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, (Santa Cruz California, Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, 2023), 101 [entry (33)].
8. Chase, 100 [entry (32)].
9. Chase, 164 [entry (51)].
10. “Card from F. A. Hihn,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Aug. 31, 1867, 2:2.
11. “The New Court House,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Jun. 23, 1866, 2:3.
12. “City Charter,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Mar. 18, 1876, 1:2-9.
13. Chase, 171 [entry (61)].
14. Chase, 170 [entry (58)].
15. “Insurance Maps of Santa Cruz, Twin Lakes, and Capitola, California,” (New York: New York, Sanborn Map Company, 1905).
16. Chase, 166 [entry (52)], and 167 [photo].
17. “Supervisors Apply For Funds For Structure: Site Selected on Front Street County Property,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Oct. 23, 1934, 7:1.
18. “Civic Buildings Assured At Once As Government Allows \$110,637 Aid,” *Santa Cruz Evening News*, Nov. 23, 1936, 1:7-8.
19. Carey Casey, “Down by the Riverside: How Santa Cruz Lost and Re-found Its Connection to the San Lorenzo River,” *Santa Cruz County History Journal, Issue Number 9* (titled “LandScapes,”) page 20.
20. Chase, 156-57 [entry (41)].
21. “Pacific Garden Mall Dedicated,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Nov. 23, 1969, 1:1-6, cont. on 2:6-8.
22. For more museum history, see “History and Historians: A Short History of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History,” (Santa Cruz, California: Researchers Anonymous), <https://researchersanonymous.weebly.com/history-historians.html>, accessed June 21, 2024.