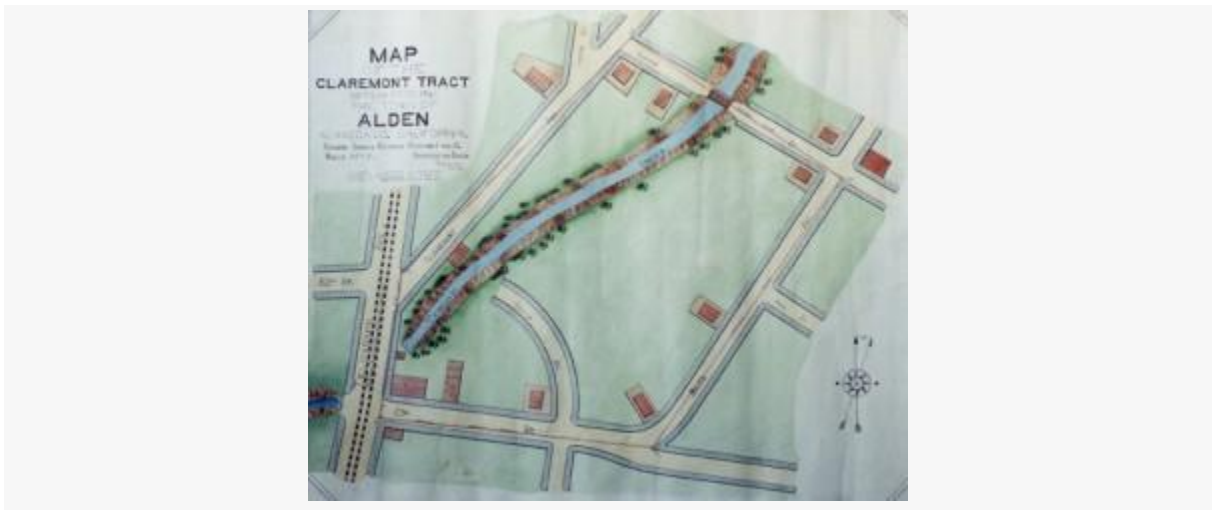




## A creek ran through it

Ryan Phillips on February 20, 2012



A map of the Claremont Tract, situated in the town of Alden, Alameda County, California, Temescal district in 1906. Map shows stretch of Temescal Creek, from Cavour, cutting across Redondo (Maple), then passing into a culvert under Telegraph Ave. The long, narrow, middle building on 51st St. is fire station (Engine 8), constructed in 1901. The small structure on Telegraph near the creek culvert is the Alden Reading Room. Courtesy of Ed Clausen.

The physical evidence today is scarce, but Temescal began with the creek.

Most of the section of Temescal Creek that runs through the Temescal district has been covered up. Over the years, the creek was gradually culverted through the flat lands of North Oakland, and many younger residents of the area today may not know that it even exists.

But where the bustling intersection of 51<sup>st</sup> Street and Telegraph Avenue is located today was once a popular relaxation destination for early Temescal residents known as “Humboldt Park.” Families gathered there on the weekends in the late 1800s for picnics, and men and boys fished for trout from the bridge that crossed the creek.

“Beginning with the people that first lived in this area, the creek has played a role in sustaining those communities,” said Temescal historian Jeff Norman, the author of the book “Temescal Legacies.”

The name “Temescal” comes from the Aztec word for “sweathouse” and may have been one of the first structures in the area. The first residents, the Ohlone people, fished and lived next to Temescal Creek. The man who controlled and developed the land with orchards and adobes, Vicente Peralta, who was really the founder of Temescal, built his first adobe close to the creek in 1836 and is buried near it.

The creek, one of 15 in Oakland, played a central role in the early days of Temescal, both in work and play. The Lusk Cannery, the largest employer in the area in the late 1800s, was located on its banks.

In 1868, the creek was dammed by Anthony Chabot, which produced the first water source for the City of Oakland. Chabot dammed near where two tributaries of the creek come together, and built distribution lines. The damming of the creek happened at the same time as the Temescal town was being developed, and the streetcar line was extended from Broadway down Telegraph Avenue to the creek. “(Lake Temescal) was providing some of the water needs for a much larger area,” Norman said.



Temescal Creek in the flatlands of North Oakland in 1971. Courtesy of Shared Ground and the Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District.

But as the area's population grew, they increasingly built structures around the creek. A car and horse barn were built at the streetcar line stop at 51<sup>st</sup> Street, across from the park. People moving into the area built their homes on the banks of the creek, and used the water for their gardens. By the 1920s, the district had been built out, and most of the creek had been directed underground.

Pollution was also rampant near the creek in the late 1800s, both from business like the factory and a brewery located downstream near Shattuck Avenue, but also from residents living on the banks or people who traveled to it to dispose waste. "People are protecting their properties, and they're also exploiting their properties by building up to and sometimes over the creek," Norman said. "And because it's no longer a source of drinking water, it becomes an easy place for people to throw their garbage."

The winter rains were also becoming increasingly problematic for those that lived on the banks of the creek. Norman said floods caused many of the residents in the area to increasingly see the creek, "not as a resource to be used and protected, but kind of as a detriment."

"The creek became a public health nuisance and was perceived as being dangerous by parents whose kids were drawn to the creek to play in," Norman said.

At the same time, Norman said, there were early environmental advocates who "saw the creek as an important resource, and had this ethic of taking care of the creek."

Some of these people were Italian immigrant families that lived on the creek and loved to use it for swimming and fishing, and pumped water from the creek up to their gardens. These people fought the first efforts to culvert the creek, beginning in the late 1800s.

Those efforts, of course, were for naught. By the late 1890s, the bridge at Telegraph and 51st Street that had been such a popular destination for fishing, had been culverted. By the early 1900s, upstream and downstream of the area directly around Telegraph Avenue had been culverted by individual landowners. Bridges over major thoroughfares like Market Street and San Pablo Avenue were replaced by culverts, sending the creek below ground.

“Culverting the creek was a way of gaining more ground for people to build on,” Norman said. “Imagine someone buying a parcel of land in 1904 and they want to build something on it. They’ll culvert it. That was a main reason I think the creek was increasing culverted.”



Temescal Creek in the flatlands of North Oakland in 1971. Courtesy of Shared Ground and the Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District.

Norman said it took a major storm in the 1960s that flooded near San Pablo Avenue for the Alameda County Flood Control to take action in culverting open sections of the creek in the flatlands. The county then undertook major culverting projects in the 1970s that covered up a four-block stretch from Hardy Street Park south to Redondo. The last

major culverting project by the flood control agency was completed in 1986 that covered from Martin Luther King, Jr. Way to Adeline.

Norman said that the early development along the creek's banks played an important role in the later floods that caused people to think it should be directed underground. "As development intensified and the creek banks were reinforced to prevent erosion, the creeks became narrower and therefore whenever there was a major winter storm event the creek was actually more vulnerable to flooding," Norman said. "So it was this vicious cycle, which property owners would combat by trying to shore up the creek even more."

As the creek was culverted over the years, there was also large groups of people opposed who tried to stop it. Norman said the battle over culverting the creek in the 1970s led to the Rockridge Temescal Greenbelt, a four-block park area near the DMV. Norman said efforts by the recently-formed Ecology Center in Berkeley and a coalition of neighbors that organized an anti-culverting effort which delayed culverting and created the open space. There is now an artificial creek that flows above ground near the DMV above where Temescal Creek flows underground.

There also have been recent efforts to restore the creek in Temescal. A community organization called the Friends of Temescal Creek formed in the late 1990s. The group's long-range plan is to have an urban trail running through Temescal Creek.

Norman has also done some work with Friends of Temescal Creek to bring awareness to the creek. Norman worked on a public art project in the late 90s to create a series of markers on Temescal Creek that were put in the area of Telegraph and 51<sup>st</sup> Street. When the last phase of the development on that block that includes a Walgreens was being discussed, a public art component was included at the new post office that shows the path of the creek.



Temescal Creek, at 4701 Grove St. (on left) in 1982. This culvert was probably completed in the mid-1960s in conjunction with the BART and Grove-Shafter Freeway construction projects. (Jeff Norman note). Courtesy of Shared Ground and the Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District.

Norman said that though it's hard to find a place where the creek can be seen in the flat lands of Oakland now, it's important to raise awareness about its existence so more people will be encouraged to protect it.

"It serves as a reminder that even though we're living in a highly urbanized place that has been significantly engineered to, in many ways to deal with, conceal and control the natural processes," Norman said, "we're living in a place where these natural processes continue. And the creek is one way for us to all be reminded that we're living in natural places that require our care."

*Lead image: Temescal Creek, high flow, just above Cavour St. circa 1970. Courtesy of Dan DeGrassi and Shared Ground.*

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