

Editors note 2023: This report is part of "Berkeley Water: Issues and Resources," a compilation of reports by seniors in the UC Berkeley 1983 senior seminar for Environmental Sciences group majors, taught by Doris Sloan with assistance from graduate student instructor Scott Stine. As of March 2023, It is online here: <https://nature.berkeley.edu/classes/es196/projects/1983final/index.html>

Chapter 1

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF AQUATIC PARK

Carolyn L. Ferlin

In a waterfront community, all facets of water use and management are important. Berkeley's Aquatic Park is an example of successful recreational use of water in an urban environment. Urban parks offer an escape from the pressures of city life. For over forty-five years, Aquatic Park has provided such a place to the residents of Berkeley. The western portion of the city, with its factories, warehouses and freeways, seems an unlikely place for a refuge such as Aquatic Park. If one sits along the east shore of the park and looks out over the lagoon, however, the factories to the east and the busy highway to the west seem almost unnoticeable. Perhaps it is this oasis-like quality of Aquatic Park that makes it so special, and so beneficial in a part of the city where there is little remaining open space to be enjoyed.

Aquatic Park's boundaries are defined by the Eastshore Freeway to the west, the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks to the east, and University and Ashby Avenues to the north and south (see map, p. viii). The park covers ninety-seven acres, of which approximately sixty-three acres are covered by a shallow, salt-water, tidal lagoon (Berkeley, 1962). Directly south of the main lagoon lies another, smaller body of water, the model-yacht basin. Beyond the yacht basin, at the southernmost end of the park, is a small pond adjacent to the property of radio station KRE; it is consequently referred to as the KRE pond.

The main lagoon is surrounded by lawns, shrubs, and trees that serve as barriers to both persistent bay winds and to the constant noise of the freeway. Most of the area that is landscaped for picnicking and other non-water-oriented activities is found in the southeast portion of the park (see map, p. 124, this report).

Aquatic Park is the largest and one of the most valuable recreational areas in Berkeley. The following pages contain a discussion of the history of Aquatic Park from the time of its inception in the 1930's to the present.

Alteration of Berkeley's Shoreline and the Establishment of Aquatic Park

For over a century, the margins of San Francisco Bay have been modified by dredging, filling, road construction, and other development (Kunkel, 1980). The bay shoreline of today bears little

resemblance to that which existed at the turn of the century. Almost all of Berkeley's original shoreline lies east of the Eastshore Freeway, and has been altered by landfill. Aquatic Park lies adjacent to part of that original shoreline.

The plans for Aquatic Park came as a result of the construction of the Eastshore Freeway in the early 1930's. At that time, the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge was under construction, and the freeway was planned to serve as a main artery to the bridge. The roadbed of the freeway was built approximately 1,000 feet west of the bay margin, and most of the area to the east of it was filled in. The muddy, debris-covered area of what was to become Aquatic Park, however, was not filled (Kunkel, 1980).

The Berkeley City Council felt that this unsightly morass presented a poor image of Berkeley to the tourists and commuters using the highway. The Council decided, therefore, that construction of a park would:

"1) create an attractive setting for Berkeley that would advertise it to the passing thousands as a good place to live; 2) capitalize on Berkeley's priceless recreational asset, the shoreline of San Francisco Bay, by providing boating and fishing and other aquatic sports; 3) give Berkeley a large intown park comparable to a regional park in its facilities" (Berkeley, 1945).

In the development of Aquatic Park, no cash was ever provided by the city budget. In 1936, Berkeley acquired the land for the park site from the Santa Fe Land Development Company in exchange for city-owned fill land west of the freeway (Berkeley, 1962). The value of the city's newly acquired land was then used as the sponsor's contribution in the federal project under which construction began. The project was undertaken as part of the Federal Works Project Administration (WPA) of the Depression Era, and a federal grant of \$1,000,000 was used to fund the purchase of all materials and labor (Berkeley, 1945).

Construction and Development

Work on the Aquatic Park project by the Office of the City Engineer began late in 1935 with the dredging of the lagoon and modification of the shoreline with land fill. The general layout of the park, as well as the landscaping and all subsequent plans, were drawn up in the Park Department Office (Berkeley, 1945).

In June of 1936, the Berkeley Park Bureau officially took charge of the operation. Since the project was scheduled to be completed in only twelve months, reclamation of the salt-impregnated mud,

on which only a limited number of plants can grow, had to begin immediately. The area was dredged and gypsum was added to the bottom of the dredged trench in order to help neutralize the salt and improve drainage. The area was watered heavily and left to dry twice. Usually the process of leaching salt from the soil takes two years, after which eight to ten feet of topsoil is added before planting is done. At the Aquatic Park site, the mud dried very quickly and the landscaping was able to be done after only a few months; furthermore, it was decided that the surface would be improved with only eight inches, not many feet, of topsoil for lawn areas and only small pockets of topsoil for flowers, shrubs, and trees. In October, just five months after the beginning of park construction, 3,000 square feet of experimental lawn was seeded. It was reportedly doing well two years later (Cresswell, 1938).

All of Aquatic Park lies over water; salt water seepage, as well as sea breezes and salt spray is therefore a continual threat to plant life. A two-mile watermain was installed for irrigation and to help alleviate the problem of salt rising back up to the topsoil (Cresswell, 1938). Plant species with a natural tolerance to such conditions were used as much as possible, especially along the western edge of the park where the influence of the bay is most strongly felt.

The lagoon was reconnected to the bay with seven tidegates, each two feet in diameter, that pass under the freeway. The lagoon's water supply, therefore, is the San Francisco Bay, and, as with the bay, is affected by the daily changes of the tides.

Most of the initial landscaping of Aquatic Park was done along the west shore of the lake. Picnic areas with firepits, tables, and drinking fountains were set up to accommodate groups of varying sizes. One year after work had begun at the park, seven acres had been landscaped with one and one-half acres of lawn, hundreds of trees, and thousands of shrubs and flowering plants. Aquatic Park was ready to be opened to the citizens of Berkeley.

In May of 1937, the park was officially opened with a city-wide celebration called "The Pageant of Land Sea" (Berkeley, 1945). A dedication ceremony was held on the second day, at which time seventy-one local groups planted trees on the west side of the park. Aquatic Park was soon to become a favorite gathering place for picnicking families, model-yacht enthusiasts, bird watchers, and sailors.

Early Recreational Activity at Aquatic Park

Aquatic Park became the center of many recreational activities in the 1930's and 1940's. In 1939, the city sponsored a "Water Sports Carnival" at which outboard motor races, sailing races, speed-boat races, and model-yacht races were all part of the day's events. Many model-yacht championships were held at the park in the years that followed. The park was also the focal point of the city's 4th of July and Memorial Day celebrations, which included fireworks displays in addition to boat races on the lagoon.

Perhaps the sport best suited to the lagoon is small-boat sailing. Aquatic Park is more protected than the bay waters to the west due to the many trees which serve as a wind barrier. This milder climat

coupled with the fact that the average depth of water is only three to six feet, makes conditions in Aquatic Park ideal for novice sailors. Over the years, the park has also served as home base for local crew teams, including the women's team from the University of California. Swimming in the lake is prohibited; the only contact sport allowed is water skiing. Despite the size constraints, this site has been host to many water skiing competitions. The skiers have a clubhouse on the west side of the park and they continue to use the park today. There are, however, many rules that govern when they can and cannot ski. The most important of these, perhaps, is that no skiing is allowed during the time when migratory birds gather along the shore of the lagoon.

Because Aquatic Park is an important stop along the Pacific Flyway, it is a popular place for birdwatching. During winter months, mallards, pintails, teals, grebes, loons, egrets, gulls and many other species can be found here. The entire park was declared a gamebird refuge in its early years by the City Council. The Cooper Ornithological Society of the University of California pointed out that "while Lake Merritt and Golden Gate Park refuges attract land birds, wood ducks, etc., the Aquatic Park refuge is unique in this region because it provides sanctuary for salt water and ocean-shore birds" (Berkeley, 1945).

Despite the fact that this park has so much to offer, there was a period of time when the future of Aquatic Park was uncertain. The following section examines that period of time when the popularity of the park fell drastically.

Park Neglect, Renewed Public Interest, and Restoration

During the 1950's, Aquatic Park fell into neglect. The tidegates that allow salt water from the bay to flush the lagoon were stuck shut and the lagoon became stagnant and overgrown with duckweed and algae (Cardwell, 1983, pers. comm.). Nearby industries began dumping their waste water into the lagoon; this, together with the flow from the city storm drains, hastened the deterioration of the water quality. Visitor use of the park declined markedly. Fourth of July celebrations were shifted to the Marina, which supplanted Aquatic Park as the showpiece of the Berkeley bay margin.

Being in such a derelict state, Aquatic Park became a perfect target for city developers. Hoping to broaden the tax base, the city planners launched a huge bayfront development plan that called for extensive filling of the bay. In 1956, the Tudor Engineering Company of San Francisco completed a preliminary study of waterfront development. They found it "feasible and desirable" to convert Aquatic Park to industrial use (Berkeley, 1962). The director of the Parks and Recreation Department began making plans to sell Aquatic Park, fill the lagoon and turn the site over to industry.

In order to do this, the City of Berkeley had first to deal with various legal agreements to which they were bound. The original purchase agreement between the city and the Santa Fe Land Development Company contains a proviso which states that if the site were to be used for anything other than municipal purposes, Santa Fe would have the right to reacquire the land. Other legal agreements

included those with Colgate Palmolive Peet Company and the Philadelphia Quartz Co., both of which had been granted licenses to build various pipelines and pumphouses on park property (Berkeley, 1962).

None of these legal complications, however, thwarted the city's development plans. It was instead a woman named Florence Minard who championed the cause of Aquatic Park. When Minard heard of the City's plan in the late 1950's she was angered, and set out to stop it. She enlisted the support of other interested individuals and organizations that shared her enthusiasm concerning the importance of maintaining open space in a city as intensely developed as Berkeley. In 1962, Minard founded Friends of Aquatic Park, an organization dedicated to the maintenance and future improvement of the park.

In 1962 and 1963, the City Council was forced to focus attention on the situation at Aquatic Park. They examined the current value of the park, the proposals to sell it, and possible rehabilitation costs. Mary Cardwell, the current Secretary/Treasurer of Friends of Aquatic Park, describes Minard's reasons for opposing the plan as "very sound" (Cardwell, 1982). The park was public trust, Minard reasoned, built with Federal funds as a WPA project, and the city did not have the right to sell such public lands. Minard also pointed out that the park provided protected water for aquatic sports, as well as open space for the nearby residential neighborhoods (Cardwell, 1982). Her first victory came in 1963, when the City Council issued a statement declaring "Aquatic Park a city park for water-oriented activities" (Alvarado, 1982). Prior to this resolution, the status of the park had never actually been defined. Aquatic Park was on its way to being restored.

Restoration began soon after the Council issued its statement. By October of 1963, all seven of the tidegates had been repaired at costs much below those expected by the people of the Parks and Recreation Department (Bartlett, 1963). Dredging was done to combat the overwhelming growth of duckweed that was choking the waters of the lagoon. Although progress was slow, improvements at Aquatic Park were soon apparent. Many Berkeley citizens voiced their appreciation to the City Council by way of letters written to the local papers. The people of Berkeley did not want to lose such a valuable recreational resource.

Recent Developments

Despite continued efforts to rid the City of Berkeley of Aquatic Park in order to promote industrial growth, reclamation of the park continued. In the early seventies, further landscaping was done as well as work on the roads, shoreline, and duckweed problem. In 1971, an interceptor sewer, ordered by the Water Quality Control Board, was installed to collect the wastes from factories that were adjacent to Aquatic Park, thereby halting industrial dumping in the lagoon (Cardwell, 1972).

The most recent project was done in 1979 and 1980 on the southeast portion of the park. The rolling hills, lawns, trees, paths, and bridges of this area were all part of this latest project (Wolfe, 1983, pers. comm.). Part of the funding for this work came from a State Land and Water

Conservation Grant. Berkeley qualified for this grant because it had a water-oriented park in a densely populated urban area (Cardwell, 1974). The Land and Water Conservation Fund, administered by the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation of the U.S. Department of the Interior, supplied half of the funding and the City of Berkeley supplied the other half. This amounted to \$109,836 each (sign posted at Aquatic Park).

While sailing, rowing, waterskiing, and birdwatching have remained popular activities at Aquatic Park, there are also new forms of recreation being pursued. The most recent additions to the park are the par course and the Frisbee golf course; the park is also becoming popular among kayakers.

By 1977, the City's stand on the status of Aquatic Park was quite different than it had been twenty years earlier. This difference can be noted by comparing the Master Plans of 1955 and 1977. In the former, development and landfill were major parts of the City's plans; in Berkeley's 1977 Master Plan, however, emphasis was being placed on the importance of parks and recreation at the waterfront, with Aquatic Park being described as a "unique, close-at-hand resource, which should be retained and improved" (Berkeley, 1977, p. 52).

Summary

Aquatic Park is one of Berkeley's major recreational areas. Since activity at the park centers around the use of the sixty-three-acre lagoon, the inclusion of Aquatic Park in a discussion of the water situation in Berkeley is important. Oftentimes, the essential and economic uses of water are given the greatest amount of attention; however, the benefits that water-oriented recreation offer the community should not be forgotten.

REFERENCES CITED

1. Alvarado, Donna, May 7, 1982. One Woman's Legacy to Berkeley Residents: The Berkeley Gazette, v. 105, no. 226, pp. 1-2.
2. Bartlett, Eleanor, October 2, 1963. Letter in The Open Forum: The Berkeley Gazette, p. 4
3. Berkeley, City of, 1977. Master Plan.
4. Berkeley Jr. Chamber of Commerce, March 19, 1939. Water Sports Carnival program: (available at Berkeley Parks and Recreation Marina Office).
5. Berkeley Parks and Recreation Department, 1945. Report on Aquatic Park, 4pp. (available at Marina office).
6. _____, 1946. Program for Berkeley's 4th of July Celebration (available at Marina office).
7. _____, 1962. Aquatic Park, Berkeley, California, Report Examining Potential Development at Aquatic Park site: 5pp. (available at Marina office).
8. Berkeley, CA - Planning Department, 1964. Berkeley Facts: Berkeley, CA.
9. Cardwell, Mary, Secretary/Treasurer of Friends of Aquatic Park. Personal communication, February and March, 1983.

REFERENCES CITED

(continued)

10. Cardwell, Mary, Secretary/Treasurer of Friends of Aquatic Park, March, 1972. Tenth Anniversary Letter - Friends of Aquatic Park: Berkeley, CA.
11. _____, 1974. Twelfth Annual Report of Friends of Aquatic Park.
12. Cresswell, C.W., Director of Parks, 1938. Report on the Aquatic Park: Berkeley, CA, 4pp. (available at Marina office).
13. Kunkel, Erika, 1980. A day at the Berkeley Bayfront - An Environmental Guide: Berkeley, CA, Hillview Press, 30pp.
14. Wolfe, Doug, Landscape Architect, City of Berkeley. Personal communication, May 1983.