



Petaluma River History

A traveling narrative for your boat trip down river

At the Turning Basin

Balshaw Pedestrian Bridge – This well-traveled footbridge was constructed in 1989 and named for river proponent and councilman, John Balshaw who is still living. Jericho Products company brought the bridge up by barge and two cranes were used to set it up. The span was built by a truss company in Santa Rosa. It came to Pomeroy's yard in three pieces that were towed up river and set in place. A large crowd gathered to watch the bridge opening. This bridge became the present day head of navigation and brought the Golden Eagle Center into the downtown area.

Washington Street Bridge – Upstream at Washington Street is where the head of navigation was prior to the Balshaw bridge installation. The bridge was formerly a double leaf bascule draw bridge. The old bridge was removed and relocated somewhere in South America. While the Washington Street Bridge was a draw bridge, the head of navigation was up river at the railroad bridge, not visible from the Turning Basin. The present concrete bridge was built in 1970.



Water Street and Levee Street areas – Water Street borders the turning basin on the south, and the Golden Eagle milling company occupied the area where the

shopping center now stands on the north bank. Hence the name Golden Eagle Shopping Center.

Turning Basin - The channel of the original river course is visible on the north (shopping center) bank. This bend was straightened out by digging a cut-off in front of the yacht club. The resulting island was excavated and the turning basin was thus created. Every winter the river dumps silt in the middle of the basin where the island once stood.

The purpose of the basin made Petaluma what it is. Barges, even double barges with tugs, hay schooners (among them the Alma) and paddlewheel steam boats came up, unloaded and then turned around here to head back down river. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers typically dredges the river every four years with the most recent effort completed in December last year.

City Docks - Clubs and boating groups wishing to visit Petaluma by boat make contact with the Petaluma Visitors Bureau. They coordinate docking reservations at the City-managed Turning Basin Docks. Boaters also contact the Visitors Bureau also arranges for the D Street Bridge to open.

Petaluma & Santa Rosa Railroad trestle – Once a key component of freight movement at the turning basin, the abandoned trestle is now in serious disrepair. The Petaluma Trolley project hopes to operate using this right of way. It is in the community planning stage which is a mandatory step in qualifying the museum for government grants. The railroad has given permission to proceed with a historic resource evaluation.

Alma - With her unique square hull, the Alma is the last of her kind. This type of vessel was common in the pre-bridge era, when scow schooners plied the Bay and Delta hauling cargo along the most efficient highways of the time – the waterways. Able to navigate shallow waters, the flat-bottomed scows rested securely on the muddy bottom while loading and unloading cargo. They were the delivery trucks of the turn-of-the-century. The Alma has visited Petaluma annually for almost 20 years – most recently during last year's Butter & Egg Days festival.

Cruising - In 1999, American Safari Cruises began offering wine country cruises bringing passengers to Petaluma from San Francisco.

Petaluma Yacht Club – The clubhouse was designed by a local architect, the late Don Quaresma, and was built by volunteer members in 1986. The club now has about 70 members. The club was founded in the late 1970's and celebrated its 25th anniversary last year.

PYC is part of the Pacific Inter-Club Yacht Association which now has 100 member organizations in northern California - all of whom can enjoy reciprocal privileges at our club. Bay area club members are very enthusiastic about

visiting PYC and enjoy the easy, walking distance access to downtown shops and restaurants.

PYC members are active boaters and river enthusiasts, many of whom are very knowledgeable about river history and conditions. Members contribute their time and effort to running and maintaining the clubhouse.

Victorians at the Turning Basin - The yellow restored Victorian next door was moved to its current site and houses Mahoney Architects.

The Girl and the Fig restaurant across the basin occupies a beautiful Queen Anne Victorian which was the old Farrell home owned by a mayor of the town in the 1880's. It was moved in 1977 from Washington Street where Wendy's now stands. Additions have been added to south end of building.

The small yellow building next to it was the passenger terminal of the Petaluma & Santa Rosa Railway Company. Originally it was located closer to the tracks. Currently, it's rented as a commercial building. The new commercial/residential building next to the clubhouse replaced corrugated, metal feed company warehouses.

Bond Fishing Pier – This popular local fishing spot was dedicated to the late Roland Bond, river advocate and former councilman, in 1987 by the Petaluma Kiwanis Club.

D Street Bridge – This draw bridge is the second bridge on this site. It is a single 80 foot leaf bascule bridge designed by Joseph Strauss who designed the Golden Gate Bridge. It was installed in 1937. Strauss-type bascule bridges use a system of counterweights, gears and motors to rotate the leaf of the bridge up and down. An operator situated in the control room handles the traffic gates and signals and all the mechanisms for raising and lowering the span. We understand that our D Street Bridge was a used bridge. Earthquake retrofit, new gears and motors were installed in 2000.

Jericho Products – The company is located on the south side of the D Street Bridge. Jericho dredges ancient oyster shell in south San Francisco Bay for calcium for animal feeds and has been barging it up to this location for about 80 years. Hans Beck started it as Pioneer Shell Company. The oyster shell used to be unloaded onto the ground, but in 1947 the company built a processing plant.

Corrugated buildings - Poultry producers Hunt & Behren's used this as a storage facility. Each producer had storage facilities on the river. Docks were located where you can still see derelict pilings. When the docks were in use, many schooners and barges could be seen unloading and loading cargo down the entire length of this section of the river starting at the turning basin.

McNear Peninsula – A good portion of this area is now owned by the city. The tip is not yet owned by the city. There are plans to make it a park with small docks for canoes and various walking trails. The area is to be preserved as open space. The peninsula was created when the 3,000 foot McNear Channel you see starting at the Pomeroy facility was dredged. The docks of the Petaluma & Santa Rosa Railroad were at the end of the McNear Channel. This was the home port of the steamers Gold and Petaluma.

Steamers - Many craft plied these river waters, navigating the twists and turns of the river's original course - paying close attention to the ebb and flow of the tides in what is actually a tidal slough or estuary of San Pablo Bay. In the 1800's, schooners, sloops, paddlewheelers and other steamers were making Petaluma the third busiest inland port in the state. Three separate steamboats were christened "Petaluma" - each of which sunk, exploded or burned. The remnants of one of the Petalumas is still visible along the river at low tide, as well as the first sternwheeler "Gold," which burned in 1920. Boats used to transport eggs down river to the city were of a special design with the smokestack in the stern instead of towards the bow, so heat from the engines wouldn't poach the eggs before they got down the river.

The Creek becomes a River - The fourteen mile long Petaluma Creek was upgraded to a River by an Act of Congress signed by President Eisenhower in 1959. This designation authorized periodic dredging by the Corps of Engineers to remove sediment from the river bottom that accumulates due to runoff from surrounding hillsides. Removal of this sediment maintains the navigability of the river and is important to the economic health of the city. Commercial traffic has been joined today by recreational use, but river tonnage is still vital to the economic health of the city. Oil products, oyster shell, grain and concrete manufacturing keep the river busy today. During the peak of the river boat period there was more tonnage and dollar value hauled on the Petaluma River than on any other river in California.

Foundry Wharf – This was the site of heavy industrial activity in earlier days. The current building retains the flavor of the wharf's industrial heritage. Next to it is the site of Corliss Gas Engine factory which was well known for its marine engines. War ships and naval vessels came up here for service. The WWI torpedo boat destroyer USS Farragut came up here and had its engines removed. She was the largest vessel to navigate the river at the time (she was towed!). Later, in 1945, the Kresky Manufacturing Company took over the buildings.

North Bay Rowing Club - The club was founded in 1988 and is located on the corner of Van Berbber Bros. property next to Foundry Wharf. The club offers instruction in sculling and sweep rowing. The club has nearly 100 master members, a juniors program for local high school students, and is also the home of the new Sonoma State crew. A number of the NBRC Junior Alumni have

received college scholarships and master members have competed successfully at the national and international level. The club is actively seeking a permanent location on the Petaluma River for a desperately needed boathouse.

Original Petaluma Yacht Club building - The small building with the concrete ramp is the site of the original PYC. The docks were in front. The smaller building facing out to the river is the clubhouse which was opened in 1948. The building has wood paneling and a beautiful bar. You can just make out the sign on the side of the boathouse building which reads 'Petaluma Yacht Club.' Boats were launched from a rail beam that hung out from the building over the river. When you return to PYC after the cruise, take a look at the wall of pictures next to the fireplace. You'll see the original yacht club burgee and photos taken in front of this building.

Pomeroy Company - The materials for the Richmond San Rafael bridge retrofit project along with pre-stressed concrete and other products are built here and shipped from facilities on the east bank. This is the entrance to the McNear Canal. Originally, this was the Ben C. Gerwick Company.

Bellevue Mansion - On the west bank stands a housing development at the site of the McNear family's Bellevue mansion, which was torn down about 25 years ago. Bellevue was a large mansion befitting the city's most influential and wealthiest family.

Quarry - Now we're in another cut-off section of the river. The original river wasn't as wide as the current channel. On the west side of the river is the site of the Heim Brothers (currently Dutra) quarry which provided aggregate products for various Sonoma County projects including the original Richmond bridge built in the 50's. You can see the concrete footings of the old loading facilities on the west bank. The quarry was recently sold and will be developed into high end residential homes with historic themed apartments along the river's edge.

Fuel Depots - The cheapest transportation by far was the river. Each major fuel company had depots here. Associated 'Flying A' and Shell Oil were located on the west bank opposite Pomeroy. All fuel (gasoline and diesel) for northern California was first transported up river to these locations, then trucked on the highway to parts north. Union Oil and Texaco were located south of the bridge.

Highway 101 Overpass - The 101 freeway was diverted to a concrete bridge in the late '50s to bypass town. This was one of the first bridges to be retrofitted after the big earthquake of 1989. You can see the conical shaped abutments that were installed.

The Railroad Bridge - The current Northwestern Pacific railroad swing bridge was built in 1904 replacing the original 1876 structure that was claimed to be a menace to navigation. The mechanism of the swing bridge machinery uses leather belts and the structure is built on wooden pilings. The turntable is all

wood. There is no concrete on the bridge. It has been about four years since it was last operated. From time to time, someone at the marina office complex notices lights and a bell ringing as if the bridge is about to open or close. A spirit from the past?

Railroad spur – There used to be a spur line that ran under the freeway bridge through the quarry property. You can still see the right of way. The tracks of the Petaluma & Santa Rosa railroad that run in front of the yacht club ran up to the Foundry Wharf. These were two separate railroads.

Petaluma Marina – The opening stands at the site of a small boat launching ramp. It was called Shollenberger park named after a city councilman. The marina project went forward with the help of California department of Boating and Waterways. The marina opened on March 15, 1990. The new launch ramp provides a much better facility than the original ramp. The buildings have been built over time and the Sheraton hotel which opened a couple of years ago, is the latest addition.

Compass Rose - The Petaluma Sea Scouts, a coed affiliate of the Boy Scouts - have been on the Petaluma River since 1927. In Sea Scouts, teens learn all the standard knot-tying, radar-reading details of seamanship while serving as the crew on their very own boat. Currently its crew numbers about a dozen and operates a refurbished 1969 torpedo retriever at their disposal on permanent loan from the Navy. The Sea Scouts, skippered by Barry Thorsson, are vital to the success of the annual Lighted Boat Parade on the river – providing docking assistance to visiting skippers.

Cut 'D' – We're now traveling through a cut that was dredged by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1920. Look over in the high grass to the west and you'll see the original river channel which butts up to the railroad tracks. The original channel included a wharf and the remains of another steamer that blew up. The next several properties on the west bank housed other fuel depots.

Shollenberger Park - On the east side is a new walking trail – elevated to keep above the river's high tides. It starts at the marina and meanders through Shollenberger Park that encircles a dredge spoils site owned by the city. This is the most used park in the city of Petaluma. While the park's name remains, the park itself moved from where the marina is to its present site here.

Big sand piles – The former Union Oil Company property on the west bank is now leased by Shamrock Materials for its aggregate operations. Barges still carry materials up river and deliver to Shamrock.

Water ski club – In the 1950's the original Petaluma Yacht Club split into two factions – the water skiers and the boaters. The water skiers purchased the buildings here on the west bank and installed docks. You can see the old pilings

floating docks and a low grey building which was the clubhouse. Several famous water skiers came from the club. Look out for the old Army cannon pointed out at us!

Haystack Landing – This terminal on the west bank is where trains delivered Kaiser aggregates to be loaded into barges for work on the building of the foundations for the Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge. You can see remains of the spur tracks.

Home-made Tugboat – This unique structure sits on the Furber family property. The Furbers were one of the first winery families in Cloverdale.

Newtown – This is a cut-off oxbow on the east bank of the river where an early entrepreneur laid out the town site which was supposed to eclipse Petaluma itself by being the head of navigation. River improvements bypassed Newtown and it faded into history. Later it became the site of the city dump. The dump was filled over and is now the city dog park. The building in the trees is the old animal rendering plant which used to put out quite an odor and run-off into the river.

Flooded area where the levee breaks - the city and the county open space district is purchasing this site to restore. It will augment the water filtration plant operations by purification through restored marshes. Additional trails are planned up to Lakeville Highway. The levee was breached about 6 or 7 years ago due to heavy rain run-off.

'A' Cut – The channel heading off the cut is the original path of the river. In this area the river formed a double 'S' curve that was straightened by cutting through it. Of the four cuts proposed, only three were built – 'D', 'A' and 'C'. 'B' Cut was never dredged. The city is looking at acquiring property belonging to the Hill family which would be designated as open space. A duck club used to be on this site.

(Skipper's note - proceed at speed to Sewage treatment station)

Sewage treatment station – Notice the pilings with valves on the east bank. This is where Cut 'C' meets Cut 'A'. These cuts took a full mile off a trip on the river.

Antenna Site - On the west bank, two large pilings mark a former dock for fuel barges at the abandoned cold war secret antenna communications system. The fence and shack of this military operation is still visible.

Marker 5 - This is the site of the old echo board at the same location which bounced whistle or bell sounds back to the ship - in fog or at night - to establish its position. This is what the ships used to navigate by.

Cloudy Bend – In the old days, the river began its meandering course around this wide bend. Now it marks the start of the various cuts that made the trip safer and faster. Some of the area on either side of the river is federal land and occasionally you'll see hunters out here. One of the largest Indian shell mounds is out here and has been left undisturbed.

(Skipper, proceed at speed to....)

Lakeville Marina – Lakeville was the original port for Sonoma. These dilapidated shacks sit atop state land. During the late 40's & 50's this was known as Gilardi's Resort. It was a favorite vacation spot for folks in Petaluma. These shacks were vacation cottages run by Chick Gilardi. The restaurant has had different names over time. Back in the resort days, it boasted a bar, pool tables and served hamburgers. Many boaters remember Avery Burdick and the Lakeville Yacht Club. You'll notice the blue and yellow Petaluma Yacht Club burgee on the low wooden building. Early on in the PYC history, when the club didn't have a building, it briefly had possession of this building. The original town of Lakeville was a settlement with a social hall, post office and blacksmith shop. The new road follows the path of the old railroad tracks. Old Lakeville represents the original roadway. The current restaurant is called Papa's Taverna which serves Greek food. It is a stop over for many boaters. On Sunday afternoons, a large crowd gathers on the lower level for hours of Greek dancing.

The Red Barn - The red barn is on the Bodwell family property and it was used to host Edward, Prince of Wales on a state visit to the Bay area. The prince traveled by yacht up the river to this spot. Evidently, he attended Eton with the younger Bodwell. The Bodwell home is in the hills above the river. Where you see the tennis courts is the summer home of the Merrill family of Merrill Lynch fame. Local lore says a 1950's bomb shelter was built under the tennis court.

Donahue's Landing – Below the barn is the site of the town of Donahue's Landing which was established by an entrepreneur and railroad man named James Donahue. He established a railhead and ferry pier here for his railroad. The operation included a turntable and a 200 room hotel called the Sonoma House. You can see the two old houses on the hill and the pilings in the tules are all that remains today. The train shed was 400 plus feet long which could house an 8-car passenger train. The train's passengers and freight would be transferred onto the SS Antelope or the SS Donahue which ran to San Francisco. This operation was made redundant when the line was eventually extended to Tiburon. When that happened, they loaded up everything they could of the town including the hotel and brought it down to Tiburon.

(Skipper – proceed at speed to

Wine House – You can still see the ivy covered brick walls of the old wine warehouse (put out of business by prohibition) into which a modern house has been built. The river men have long known this spot as 'Wine House'. Long ago,

grapes were grown here, then hay, and now grapes again. The small yellow house a little further down has an infamous past. There, a cattle broker and his wife opened the door one night to a stranger, and were subsequently discovered - murdered!

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Mira Monte – San Antonio Creek enters the river here and marks one of the deepest spots on the river at about 40 feet at high tide. This was a popular spot for waterskiing and boasted a water ski ramp. Ten-time World Champion, Mike Suyderhoud, began his ski school which was moved to Lake Shasta about 20 years ago. Mira Monte still has docks and was the site of a popular dock side restaurant in the mid 80's. The casino on the hill top of which only the foundation remains, hosted numerous parties in the old days. It was accessible only at low tides and out of reach of the law. Further up San Antonio Creek is a houseboat community which dates back to the 20's. Squatters came in and set up arks. In 1975, \$4,500 could buy waterfront property in this area – that's waterfront when the tide was in. No title, no deeds provided!

County Line – The Marin Sonoma county line runs up the center of the river to San Antonio Creek (Mira Monte). The county line follows the creek to its origin. Below here, if you stray west you're in Marin, east you're in Sonoma.

Hog Island – Hog Island is called False Bay. Opposite the entrance to San Antonio Creek, on the east bank is Hog Island and behind it, False Bay. This land was dyked and reclaimed as wheat fields years ago. The river generally ran in its present location, but the false bay was a shallow body of water that looked like it offered a direct route to Wine House. The unwary would soon run aground, hence the name False Bay.

(Skipper – proceed at speed to...)

Broadcast antennas - These two sets of tall antennas transmit signal for KCBS radio.

Black John Slough – A line of lash barges were brought down from its upper end and marked its entrance. They were very recently moved. There was a dredged channel that reached almost to Highway 1 that was a grain terminal for the Novato area. The current purpose of the barges is unknown, but rumor has it that this is a great spot for sturgeon fishing!

Bahia – This is a neighborhood that included keys and docks. It's a waterfront community that is silted in now and residents are trying to figure out a dredging plan. A lock was originally planned to stave off the silt, but it was never built.

Black Point cut-off – The concrete freeway bridge was built in 1958 and replaced the original 150 foot Strauss single leaf bascule bridge that opened up traffic to Vallejo in 1917. Ben C. Gerwick, one of the major contractors on the concrete span, was the resident engineer during construction on the original span. Supporters wanted it to be part of the Lincoln Highway. When the original draw bridge was constructed, barges brought water and aggregate from Petaluma to use in the construction.

Port Sonoma – Silt problems have plagued this development which was a very active and popular marina at one time.

Railroad Swing Bridge – The original railroad bridge was built in 1888. It was replaced in 1911 with the current span. Prior to 1888, rail freight and passenger traffic from Sonoma was delivered to Sonoma Landing, a railroad pier jutting into the bay near marker 18. Similar to Donahue's Landing, it became redundant when the creek was spanned and connected to Tiburon. The railroad built a bridge that favored the railroad at the expense of river traffic. The wind and current makes for a rather difficult passage for barges to this day. The last remaining semaphore signal on the entire Southern Pacific railroad system was operated here until recent mergers.

Grandview, Green Point & Black Point – All of these are names for parts of the Black Point area on the west bank of the river. Some arks remain at the edge of the tullies. This was a popular hunting and fishing resort and now a suburb of Novato.

Petaluma Point & Black Point - This marks the start of the Petaluma River and the end of our river journey.

We hope you enjoyed your river cruise and learned a little more about our fascinating river heritage. We hope to see you again soon on the Petaluma River!



Text as narrated and researched by Petaluma Yacht Club members Al Alys, Ted Lehmann and Mitch Lind aboard the 'Paige One,' owned by PYC Commodore, McKenzie Smith. Text compiled by Francesca Smith.

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Petaluma Yacht Club**