
SECTION 3: CONTEXTUAL SETTING

3.1 REGIONAL SETTING

San Francisquito Creek is the last open-channel urban creek in the area and is a vital natural resource to the communities that border it and to the larger ecology.

The deeply incised creek flows through both natural and urban settings. The area of focus for this study is an approximately 6.5-mile reach of San Francisquito Creek, top of bank to top of bank, from Junipero Serra Boulevard to Highway 101. The creek and adjacent lands are both publicly and privately owned and development exists, or is planned, on all borders within the study area.

The San Francisquito Creek watershed area is approximately 45 square miles extending from Skyline Boulevard to the San Francisco Bay. The watershed contains three manmade lakes (Searsville, Lagunita, and Felt) and creeks including San Francisquito, Los Trancos, West Union, Alambique, Bear, and Corte Madera, as well as many smaller tributaries that drain into the creeks. San Francisquito Creek drains into Searsville Lake in Upper Portola Valley and resumes as a dam overflow, flowing through communities from Portola Valley to the San Francisco Bay.

San Francisquito Creek establishes the boundary between Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties within the study area. It is located within the Santa Clara Valley Water District's Northwest Flood Control Zone and San Mateo County's San Francisquito Creek Flood Control Zone. In the study area, the City of Palo Alto and Stanford University border the creek on the southeast; to the northwest are the Cities of Menlo Park and East Palo Alto.

3.2 LOCAL SETTING

San Francisquito Creek provides a lush backdrop to residences, businesses, and institutions. The creek in the 6.5-mile study area flows through the Stanford Golf Course, through developed Stanford lands, into the urban center, and low-rise commercial and residential communities. Roadway crossings occur at Junipero Serra Boulevard, Sand Hill Road, El Camino Real, Middlefield Road, Chaucer Street, University Avenue, Newell Road, and Highway 101.

The creek edge is defined in most cases by public streets and parking easements, commercial development, backyards, paths, parks or fences, walls, and levees. Its steeply sloping banks limit access into the creek with few formal accessible routes to the water. Erosion continues to jeopardize top-of-bank access. Several small public parks adjoin the

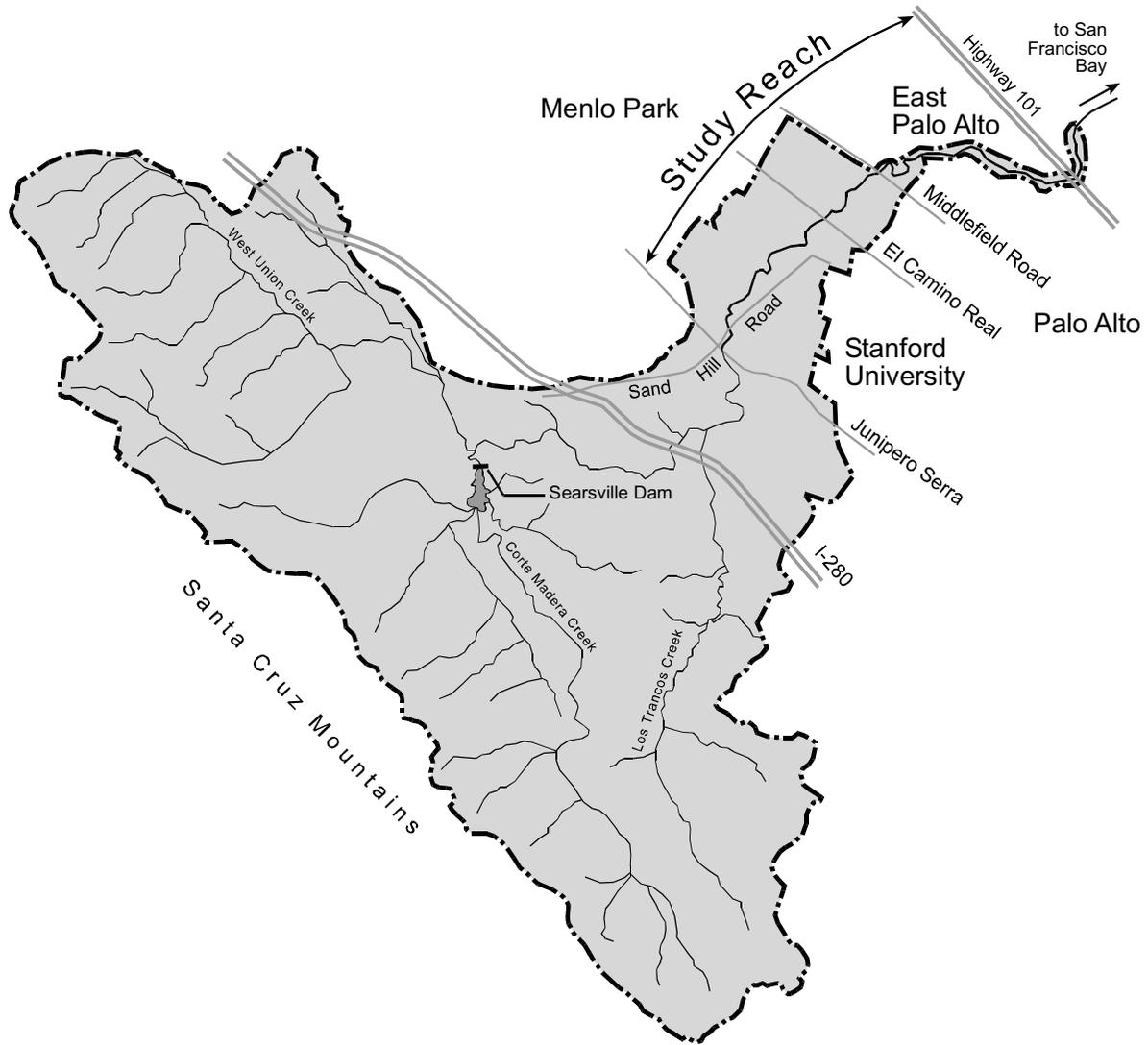


Figure 3A Map of San Francisquito Creek watershed . Not to scale.

creek including El Palo Alto Park, Timothy Hopkins Creekside Park, and a City of Palo Alto Community Garden.

The heavily wooded edge consists of a diverse group of plant types, including a significant presence of non-native species. The character of the creek has evolved over time in part due to human intervention and associated land use pressures. Pesticide and roadway runoff, homeless encampments, vandalism, graffiti, and litter adversely affect the creek.

3.3 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The entire length of San Francisquito Creek is rich with historical significance. The following is an abridged look at activity along San Francisquito Creek having historical and/or cultural impact, presented chronologically.

3.3.1 PREHISTORIC CULTURE (PRE-1750)

Remains of the native Ohlone Indian culture in the San Francisquito Watershed have been radiocarbon dated at more than 5000 years old (Jones, 1998). With an abundant food source and year-round water flow, numerous Ohlone villages populated the banks of the San Francisquito Creek and adjacent meadows until Spaniard settlement in the mid-1700s. Grasses, bulbs and legumes such as red maids (*Calandrinia ciliata*), miner's lettuce (*Claytonia perfoliata*), goosefoot (*Chenopodium* spp.), and sunflower (*Helianthus* spp.) seeds as well as fruit from the holly-leaved cherry (*Prunus ilicifolia*), hazlenut (*Corylus cornuta*), and buckeye (*Aesculus californica*) were all a part of the Ohlone diet and the rich botanical context of the study area (Reese, 1995A). Historical records of native vegetation are helpful in selecting native species as part of the habitat restoration plan.

3.3.2 EARLY SETTLERS (1769 TO 1876)

Spaniard Don Gaspar de Portolá came to the area in 1769, searching for the Monterey harbor in an attempt to establish the first California Missions (Spector, 1994). Modern lore tells of his party camping under El Palo Alto, the renowned redwood tree and Palo Alto City icon, located near the banks of San Francisquito Creek. While his expedition did not achieve its goal, by 1777 Mission Dolores and Mission Santa Clara were established with the creek forming the boundary between the two properties (PCC, 1994).

In the 1830s, lands surrounding the creek were divided into large Ranchos, including Rincon de San Francisquito, Rinconanda del Arroyo de San Francisquito and San Francisquito (Spector, 1994), and granted by the Mexican government to Don Rafael Soto, and Don Antonio Buelna. Buelna's Rancho San Francisquito land tract was located on the southwest side of San Francisquito Creek and extended upstream from "El

Palo Alto” and today comprises much of the Stanford University campus (Wood & Cawston, 1939). The Buelna adobe and grounds (later the Buelna/Rodrigues adobes) were established along the northern end of the study area, near what is now the Stanford Golf Course and Oak Creek Apartments. The Buelna Adobe survived into the 1890s, with ruins of the adobe still visible in the creek well into the 20th Century (Johnson, 2000).

A creek ford still present at the site of the present Middlefield Road bridge was a popular oxcart crossing (Johnson, 2000). A crossing near present-day Sand Hill Road was used as a “doubling-up station.” Teams of oxen, hauling redwood logs from the mountain, could take on a double load for the easy stretch southward to San Jose and north to Redwood City (Wood & Cawston, 1939).

By the early 1850s squatters had settled on many choice portions of Rancho San Francisquito hoping that the U.S. Government would open the land to homesteaders. Five Gold Rush-era squatters settled near the creek during the 1850s: Mr. Julian, William Little, Thomas Bevins, Jerry Eastin, and Thomas “Sandy” Wilson (Reese, 1995A). At this time, San Francisquito Creek was navigable by small boat, during winter, approximately to where Newell Road is today (Spector, 1994).

3.3.3 GOVERNER LELAND STANFORD'S INFLUENCE (1876 TO EARLY 1900)

Former Governor Leland Stanford expanded his influence on this area in 1876 when he acquired 8,800 acres to make up his stock farm and later the University. His property spanned approximately from El Camino Real to Junipero Serra with San Francisquito Creek as the border (Jones, Reese, & Rick, 1996).

Stanford’s stately Palo Alto Home, built around 1863, was located near the present-day Stanford Shopping Center. Land on which the home sat, acquired from squatter William Little, was called Mayfield Grange. Converted in the 1920s for use as the Stanford Convalescent Home for children, it was torn down in the 1960s to make way for the modern Children’s Health Council complex. Remnants of the building structure and the Stanford’s life were unearthed in a 1995 dig (Jones, Reese, & Rick, 1996).

Stanford’s Old Carriage House, constructed between 1878 and 1879, is still located approximately 700 feet west of the Children’s Health Council buildings. This is the last remaining outbuilding of the Stanford’s stately Palo Alto residence, and probably moved to its present location from a site at Mayfield Grange (Reese, 1995B). Another significant structure located adjacent to the creek was the Cedro Cottage, formerly the Country Home of Leland Stanford’s brother Ariel and his family. Cedro Cottage and gardens, constructed in the 1870s, were located on 24 acres

of land bordering the creek and fronted by Vine Avenue in Menlo Park. Stanford faculty occupied the quaint cottage until it was bulldozed in 1952 to make way for Oak Knoll Elementary School.

3.3.4 SEARSVILLE DAM AND TOWN GROWTH (1877 TO 1930)

In 1887, the Manzanita Water Company (later the Crystal Springs Water Company) constructed Searsville Dam on San Francisquito Creek, located near the west end of Stanford University property in Woodside (PCC, 1994). The dam, completed in 1891, was intended to supply water to Stanford University. Due to fine suspended sediment and odor, the water was non-potable and used for irrigation only (Johnson, 2000).

In the early 1900s, gravel and rocks left in the creek after the winter rains were excavated the following summers to be used for roads, sidewalks, etc. (Palo Alto Historical Association, 1993). After the 1906 earthquake, fragments of the destroyed architecture of Memorial Church were dumped into the creek, portions of which still can still be found after floods recede (Johnson, 2000). Menlo Park was a railroad stop that eventually developed into a small town and, along with newly formed Palo Alto, continued to grow and prosper in the 20th century.

3.3.5 MODERN INFLUENCES ON SAN FRANCISQUITO CREEK (1930 TO PRESENT)

Presently there are a variety of land uses along the creek: single- and multi-family residences, commercial buildings, recreation, Stanford University and its holdings, among others.

Several parks have been established along the creek including El Camino Park and El Palo Alto Park, which honors the redwood ‘El Palo Alto’ and the historic significance of the site. In the 1960s, the Native Sons of the Golden West deeded land surrounding El Palo Alto to the City of Palo Alto. By the late 1980s, the redwood was in poor health, but recent restorative efforts have improved the tree’s new growth (Johnson, 2000).

Timothy Hopkins Creekside Park is a collection of small parks and pathways extending along the Palo Alto edge between El Camino Park and Chaucer Street. Much of the streamside portion of the linear park has been lost to bank erosion. A City of Palo Alto community garden is also located adjacent to the creek. Refer to the map in Section 7 for an illustration of park locations.

Local residents struggle with management of flooding and erosion at their creek-fronting properties and have taken measures to preserve their property with a variety of bank stabilization techniques. Highly engineered solutions are apparent throughout the reach.

In 1991, studies showed a hazardous level of human waste found in the

creek. In October of 1997, police evacuated a large homeless encampment under the El Camino bridge, after reports by the County Health Department that the encampment was a health hazard. Enforcement by the cities of new trespassing laws continues, and the amount of trash and debris in the creek continues to decrease.

In recent years, there has been significant public involvement in the preservation and rehabilitation of San Francisquito Creek. The community-based Friends of San Francisquito Creek was formed in 1989 by a group of citizens to clean, preserve, and enhance the creek's natural setting. The San Francisquito Creek Coordinated Resource Management and Planning group (CRMP) was formed in November 1993 by a group of concerned individuals, organizations, and local agencies, providing a forum for collaborative issues related to the creek. Sponsored by the Peninsula Conservation Center, CRMP published their 'Draft Watershed Management Plan' in 1997, which set forth watershed-planning goals and proposed implementation actions. Published in early 1998, their 'Reconnaissance Investigation Report of San Francisquito Creek' discussed flood-related issues.

3.4 ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESOURCES

Archaeological resources located in an urban setting are under constant threat. The volatile nature of this urban creek site, with constantly shifting and eroding soil, further endangers archaeological resources.

In a historically important setting such as this, it is difficult to prioritize the archaeological importance of individual sites. The entire length is of some archeological concern particularly since many areas have not yet been fully studied. The proximity of the creek to Stanford University increases the creek's importance as a learning tool. In the interest of preservation, archaeologically sensitive sites are not specifically identified or mapped in this Report. A general area of concern lies between El Camino Real and Chaucer Street.

The lowest impact method of stabilization within an area of archaeological sensitivity is preferred, with excavation avoided where possible. From an archaeological perspective, heavily engineered solutions are not preferred. Contrary to popular belief, it is considered better to allow the creek to behave naturally, where possible, rather than "cap" the bank's

archaeological resources with concrete. Additionally, debris removal should be limited (Jones, 2000).

3.5 REFERENCES

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