

Capitola Sunset

NEWS, EVENTS & INFORMATION

CAPITOLA HISTORICAL MUSEUM

SPRING 2021

Providing a future for our past.

Capitola Conundrum: How Did the Town Get Its Name?

How an incorporated city of 10,000 people got its name should be something easily researched. Santa Cruz, of course, means “Holy Cross,” which was the name of the mission. Soquel and Aptos are Indian names. Watsonville was named for Judge John H. Watson, Davenport for whaler John Pope Davenport, and so forth. But what about Capitola? It is a name whose origin has perplexed historians for decades. Originally called “Camp Capitola,” this name first shows up in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, June 13, 1874, but without a clue where the name came from.

There have been several theories. In the middle 1900s it was said that Soquelians were trying to get the State Legislature to relocate the capital of California here. There were a lot of problems with this theory, however, and it fell out of favor towards the end of the century. Instead, it was thought that the town was named for Capitola Black, the female protagonist in an 1859 novel called *The Hidden Hand*.

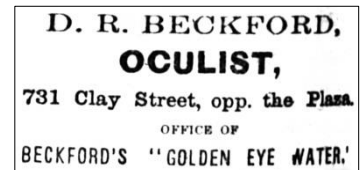


The main evidence that Capitola was named for the fictional Capitola Black is a sentence discovered in the *Santa Cruz Surf* newspaper dated May 1, 1889: “Capitola, like the heroine for whom it was named, has long made a place for itself in the hearts of many admirers.”

Recently, researcher Rex Walker began poking through some more old newspapers (now digitized and online) while sheltering at home during the pandemic. What he found adds a whole new twist to the story. According to a newly found newspaper article, Capitola was named in 1872—two years earlier than previously thought—and the name may be related to that of a Santa Clara County gold mine.

An article that Rex found in the *San Jose Daily Mercury* from July 15, 1873, tells about a group camping at the mouth of Soquel Creek: “Late in the afternoon we reached Camp Capitola, a pleasant sheltered spot by the sea, named last year by Dr. Beckford.” Another article he discovered (*Santa Cruz Sentinel* May 5, 1895), about former camp manager S. A. Hall, stated “the name [Capitola] was suggested to him by Dr. Beckford, of San Jose, who said the definition of the name was ‘good camp.’”

Rex sought to learn more about Dr. Beckford. Born in Massachusetts in about 1828, Daniel Rogers Beckford came to California during the Gold Rush. He held a variety of jobs in San Francisco, including working for a shirt company, a roofing company, selling insurance, and as an oculist. He supposedly “discovered an eye water that can strengthen weak eyes, and almost make the blind see...” Although referred to as “Dr. Beckford” in newspaper articles, he was in fact “D. R. Beckford,” that being his initials.



Rex discovered that in 1863 Beckford and several others formed the Capitola Gold, Silver, and Copper Mining Company in the Uvas District of Santa Clara County. Beckford also bought shares in several other mining companies in northern California and Nevada. Evidently none of these paid off. The Capitola company folded in 1866. In the early 1870s there was also a popular racehorse named Capitola.

There are still many mysteries about the origin of the name. Most likely, the racehorse, the mine, and the town names still trace back directly or indirectly to the girl in the novel. The name seems to have been unknown until author E. D. E. N. Southworth coined it for her *Hidden Hand* heroine. Soon it started popping up in all kinds of places. Women even started naming their girls Capitola.

Rex’s discoveries are intriguing additions to the puzzle about our town’s name. Unfortunately, it is a puzzle that may never be fully solved.

Reopening your museum: We are all looking forward to reopening the museum. The City of Capitola feels that it is safer for us to reopen when we reach the orange (moderate) tier rather than in the current tier. Given the declining number of cases and increasing number of vaccinations, we should be able to reopen sometime in the next couple of months or in early summer at the latest.

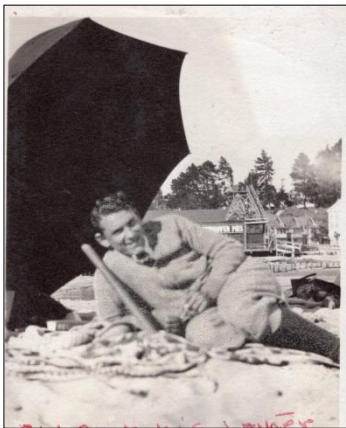
Rispin Mansion Centennial

The Rispin Mansion, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, was built between 1919 and 1921. It was completed sometime in the early part of 1921, and, according to a newspaper account at the time, the Rispin family moved in around June 1.



In commemoration of the centennial, the Museum created a special website about the mansion, the Rispin Family, and Capitola in the 1920s (commonly known as the "Rispin Era"). Mr. Rispin bought Capitola in 1919 and played a major role in shaping the town's history during the 1920s.

The website address is: <https://rispincapitola.weebly.com/>



The only child of Henry and Annette Rispin, son Alan Winfield Rispin enjoys a moment on Capitola Beach in the summer of 1927.

Alan's last residence was the YMCA in Watsonville. He died on January 14, 1946 at the County Hospital in Santa Cruz. His ashes are interred at Santa Cruz Memorial Park. *Teaser Alert:* This is a more-comfortable resting place than where his father ended up.

The website includes a slide show, timeline, self-guided walking tour, trivia questions, quiz, and videos. There are also floor plans for the mansion and a detailed biography. "It is the most detailed biography yet written about Rispin and the only one with the sources thoroughly documented," says Curator Frank Perry. "I think those who read it will come away with a much better understanding of Mr. Rispin, both his accomplishments and shortcomings. He was a complex character who for many years was poorly understood."



Today the Rispin Mansion stands historically preserved for an undetermined future use. Landscaping of the gardens will soon begin, creating a public park across the street from the new Capitola Library.

Inventorying the Art

By Frank Perry

One of the projects we have been working on during the pandemic is taking an inventory of the Museum's collection of framed art. The Museum has about 150 such works. They represent a wide range of sizes, media, and ages. Some are framed posters for Capitola festivals; others are originals done in pencil, ink, oil, or watercolors. They range in age from the Cipriano Dodero painting of Capitola done in 1889 to recent works by artists Karen Nevis and Ann Thiermann.

With the help of Kathleen Aston (who is collections manager at the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History) we have been measuring each painting and recording the condition, subject, media, and name of artist. We are also photographing each work. While the focus is on the Museum's collection, we are including other City-owned artwork such as pieces displayed at City Hall, the Capitola Community Center, and outdoor works of public art.

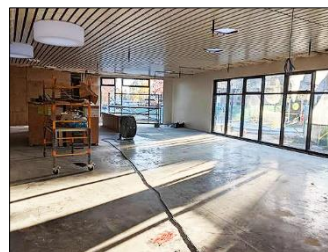


Kathleen Aston is photographing and cataloging the museum artwork. This is of the old St. Joseph's Church when it was located at the corner of Bay and Capitola Avenues.

We are also upgrading the storage system for the art works, which will protect them better and make them more accessible when needed for special exhibits, historical research, and other projects.

Capitola Museum's Library Display

It won't be long before our beautiful new Capitola Branch Library will be finished and loaded with books. Thanks in part to the efforts of Linda Smith, Gayle Ortiz, and the Museum Board of Trustees, the Museum has arranged to have a permanent display case in the library. It will feature changing displays on Capitola history. "It will be local history for the locals," says Curator Frank Perry. "While the Museum gets visitors from all over California, and indeed all over the world, it is us locals who will be using the library. I am looking forward to creating exhibits that area residents will enjoy."



With the exterior of Capitola's new library nearly complete, the interior is quickly taking shape.

Piles Left Behind Have Stories to Tell

By Niels Kisling

In the winter, when the ocean waves carve away sand from the beach and deposit it offshore for future use, these piles 'surface' on Hooper's Beach beside Capitola Wharf. Old timers like me may remember a small shack there in the 1960s where boats and motors were stored.



For a while the odor of polyester surfboard resin wafted into the air from this same shack where surfboards were once produced and repaired.

History reveals that these uncovered piles used to support a much bigger structure—a structure that is entwined in, and rich with history from Capitola's past.

The Capitola Light Tackle Club was a grand structure built in the late 1920s. It was a two-story, 22-room clubhouse at the base of the wharf. The massive structure featured a lobby, kitchen and living space downstairs with bedrooms upstairs that could accommodate up to 50 overnight guests.

The club was intended as a tool to help promote Capitola and the Bay Head Land Company's nearby development called, Monterey Bay Heights. If you bought land up there, got you a free club membership. Memberships were also offered to the public for \$12 a year, but sales were poor. The tackle club was already in trouble before it opened in July 1928. Two months after it opened, the club folded with the elaborate furnishings being repossessed by the Santa Cruz Furniture Company in October 1928.



Image: Gordon van Zuiden

The Capitola Light Tackle Club is pictured in this 1920s image. Rispin's Bay Head Land Company also built a golf course in Monterey Bay Heights to try to attract wealthier investors to the area.

Santa Cruz County ended up owning the structure which burned on March 21, 1940. The heat was so intense that, according to Fire Chief Lee Gutterman, the fire cracked plate glass windows in several of the homes above Hooper's Beach.

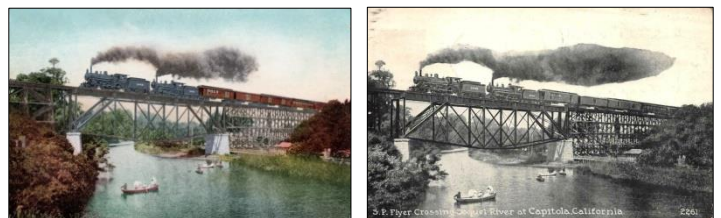
From Photograph to Postcard to Painting

By Frank Perry

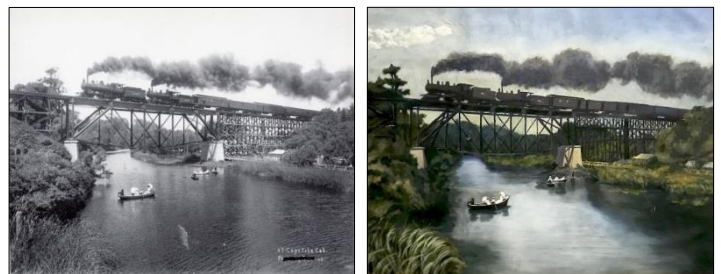
In making an inventory of the Museum's art collection, one painting caught my eye. It was an oil painting of two old-fashioned locomotives pulling a train across the trestle, smoke billowing into the sky. I had seen this image before—in a photograph and also on a postcard.

The original photo was taken in about 1907 by Ole Ravnos. Ravnos operated the photography concession in Capitola for several years during the very early 1900s. The Museum did a special exhibit of his Capitola photos in 2016. The display was possible in large part to the efforts of board member Gordon van Zuiden, who has spent many years tracking down Ravnos photographs.

Of the many images Ravnos took, the picture of the train is one of his best known. The Edward H. Mitchell Company of San Francisco published it as a colorized postcard not long after he took it. A black and white version was published by the Pacific Novelty Company. I was especially interested in the painting because, for one thing, I think it is quite well done. Second, Ravnos's wife, Amelia, was a painter of some renown. Could it be that she did this painting based on her husband's photograph? There was no name or date visible, so I carefully removed it from the frame, hoping maybe the artist's name was hidden underneath. It turned out that the painting was done on canvas, but it had been taken off its original stretcher and glued onto a sheet of plywood. This was not the best way to treat an oil painting, but it was probably done to help conceal some tears in the canvas.



The color and black & white versions of the postcard appear above.



The Ole Ravnos photo image on the left is the subject of the unsigned painting on the right. Is the mystery painter Amelia Ravnos?

Alas, no name was visible. But perhaps if some of her paintings are discovered, we can at least see if our painting is in the same style. If anyone knows of a painting by Amelia Ravnos, please let us know.

The History That Connects Us

By Dave Peyton



My first meeting with Paul Parsons was more routine than it was memorable. I was attending the museum's volunteer orientation and Paul was one of nearly 35 museum volunteers who I was meeting for the first time. I would go on to immediately forget nearly all their names, but I would soon re-learn them again.

As a new volunteer I was excited to join the corps of dedicated community volunteers whose job it was to keep the museum open to the public by welcoming visitors and sharing Capitola's rich and interesting history.



Dave Peyton and Paul Parsons are standing next to each other (back row, 2nd and 3rd from the right) in this volunteer orientation photo.

The second time I met Paul Parsons was a day I will never forget, and I doubt that he will either. I was finishing up my two-hour shift at the museum front desk, preparing to make way for the next volunteer who was Paul Parsons, according to the schedule. As a new volunteer I'd been enthusiastically signing up for multiple shifts every week and I was getting to know a great many of the other volunteers. I was looking forward to spending a few moments getting to know Paul, as it would be my first chance to do so.

I didn't know it then, but the tall gentleman who came through the back door dressed in shorts (a signature look it turns out) with a big smile and a glint in his eyes was our oldest volunteer. With a firm pre-Covid hand shake we formally introduced ourselves and I gave up the seat at the desk. Sitting in the side chair, I filled Paul in on the last two hours at the museum.

There hadn't been a huge turnout during my shift and it remained pretty slow as Paul began his. This gave us time to exchange pleasantries and to share a bit about ourselves.

It didn't take long before Paul inquired about my interest in the museum and by extension what brought me to Capitola. I explained that I had a life-long interest in history, so the museum was a natural for me. With the encouragement of another museum volunteer, I joined the group. Paul and I shared our love of history, and it soon turned out that we shared something even greater.

His question: "What brought you to Capitola?" was easy to answer. I began by telling him that my maternal grandmother had owned homes on the Prospect Avenue bluffs overlooking Capitola Village. Although we lived in San Jose while growing up, my sisters and I spent most summers, many weekends, and holidays at one of my grandmother's homes—usually accompanied by our mother who had grown up in Capitola.

I went on to explain that by the time I reached high school I had less interest in Capitola and didn't get reacquainted with the charm and character of the community until years later.

All of this seemed to satisfy Paul and he noted that coincidentally, while he was in high school, he had dated a young woman who lived in a house on the same bluffs. Then he casually mentioned that her name was Colleen.

Yes, Colleen was my mother!



She and Paul were classmates at Santa Cruz High School in the class of 1948. They had seriously dated during that final year. Hearing him say my mother's name brought me to tears as she has been gone for a number of years and I miss her very much. She was my anchor in a life of occasional rough seas, and someone I could always count on for sound advice and a loving hug.

Paul had obviously been smitten by my mother and though their lives took them on different paths after high school, he still has fond memories of their time together and what might have been. We tripped down memory lane for a while, with him telling me about their time in high school and me filling him in on my mom's life after high school. That conversation was deeply meaningful for both of us.



Dave Peyton

Needless to say, Paul and I have a special bond now, and though we are not related, I affectionately call him "dad" and he in turn calls me "son" to acknowledge the history that connects us.

Swift Action Saves Museum

By Niels Kisling

God willing and the creek don't rise might describe our grand opening a decade ago this month.

Approaching Capitola Avenue on foot from Riverview, I had cheer in my step and a fist full of 'happy balloons' for our exhibition grand opening ten years ago. My mood soon changed when I saw rescue divers in wetsuits, a cop backed up against the police station with water up to his knees, and news helicopters filming the scene from overhead. The street had become a roaring torrent of rushing water that separated me from the museum.

On March 26, 2011, God was willing, but Noble Creek did rise in a biblical way that morning. Several inches of rain in a short period of time, combined with a breach in the culvert under Bay Avenue, cancelled our grand opening and resulted in a disaster for Capitola.



Sadly, image #1 shows a set of stairs from the mobile home park behind city hall floating down the street towards the ocean. Capitola Avenue resembles a river in image #2. This sign in image #3 points the way to the beach—'just follow the raging water until it gets to the ocean.'

The water came within inches of the floorboards under the museum, but it did not breach the interior thanks to Steve Swift's quick thinking. While dozens of homes and businesses were affected that day, the museum came through relatively unscathed. Sometimes it takes a village to save a museum, and other times it just takes a little Swift Action.



This is the scene that unfolded in front of me as I approached Capitola Avenue. I was stunned to see firemen standing next to rescue divers, a cop up to his knees in raging water, and news helicopters hovering overhead.

To get to the museum I had to go back home and double back on foot over the train trestle. An hour later with water now flowing across the city hall parking lot, we could all see that the museum was in trouble from the rising waters.

Steve Swift could see it too and he had a plan.

About his actions, wife and past museum curator Carolyn Swift, said, "The Swift Action did save the day for the museum. I was amazed that he could so calmly go to the lumber yard, pick out those boards, and march through the crowd upstairs at City Hall (without hitting anyone) to get from the upper parking lot down to the museum. I remember Laurie Hill shouting encouragement as Steve tried to place the wood in the right position to divert the water. 'Helping! Helping,' she said."

"I also recall Linda Smith and I taking the new exhibit apart in some ways to protect the dress forms and clothing, and stuff on the floor we didn't want damaged. We escaped the building out the back door and over the ramp railing."



These strategically placed boards in the city hall parking lot diverted rising flood waters around The Capitola Historical Museum, sparing the interior by inches.

HISTORY QUIZ—



- 1—Name the woman driving this stagecoach.
- 2—What was she probably most-legendary for?
- 3—Who created this image?

(The answers can be found on the last page)

Essential to the Capitola Museum

By Dave Peyton

Essential workers at the Capitola Historical Museum?

Well, not exactly as we now recognize those front-line health care workers who care for us in our desperate time of need. Or those grocery store employees who have been working tirelessly from day one of the pandemic keeping shelves stocked with food and critical supplies, or even the letter carriers who haven't missed a beat in nearly a year of Covid-19.

We're talking about the essential volunteers who keep the museum open throughout the year and who fully expect to take their seat at the front desk as soon as it's safe to reopen. We depend on the nearly 40 volunteers to welcome visitors to the museum 16 hours each week. Volunteers help plan and host special events such as exhibition openings and assist the city in maintaining the landscaping. Our essential volunteers keep the museum operating and in tip-top shape.

Volunteers give nearly 800 hours a year in support of the museum.

Volunteers often help provide the context to the museum's displays and exhibits with stories and tales of the past as they lived it. Visitor questions can often be answered by a volunteer with an exact knowledge of the timing and circumstances of a particular situation, and if the answer isn't from a personal experience, it comes from a studied and informed perspective supported in part by the museum's library of reference material.

A number of volunteers give "above and beyond." John Nicol, before he and Anne retired from the museum, would stand outside the museum cajoling and convincing passer's by to "take a look inside" while Anne, at the desk, would give a cheerful greeting and add each visitor to the daily tally. Steve Kayser and Bill Patterson help maintain the grounds. Steve recently rebuilt the window boxes and planted them with succulents while regularly trimming and watering. Marilyn Chapin took responsibility to fashion new volunteer name badges and Kim Natuk put the front desk in order, and she dutifully tries to keep it that way. Though all the volunteers are essential to the well-being and success of the museum, key volunteer Harold Raphael manages the Volgistics online volunteer scheduling program without which we would be back to the inefficiencies of desk-bound pencil entries on a paper calendar.

Yes, it's true museum volunteers are not in the same league with those who are essential in fighting the battle against Covid-19, but without our "essential" volunteers the museum would be a shadow of itself with far less soul and character. We all look forward to the day when the museum gets back up and running, and it is filled with visitors and staffed by our happy volunteers.

Editor's Note: We recognize all our volunteers as being essential to the Capitola Museum. This has been a difficult time for everyone—a time which we all hope will soon end, or at least be minimized enough that we can safely get back to the business of sharing the history of the town that we all love so dearly.

The Capitola Museum has recently received generous donations from:

Jennifer & John Anderson	Robert & Diana Deacon
Rickey Feldner	Carin Hanna
Marvin Jensen	Kathleen A. King
Nancy Lenox	Joan Gilbert Martin
Gayle & Joe Ortiz	Paul Parsons
David Peyton	Mary E. Renz
Karen Ruland	David Tirri
Jerry & Robynn Walters	
Nancy & Michael Davis (in memory of Bob Anderson)	
Susan B. Lynn (in honor of Emmy Mitchell-Lynn)	
Richard Nutter (in memory of Olley Richard Nutter)	
Stanley D. Stevens (in memory of Bob White)	
Susan & Nels Westman (in memory of Emil Edgren)	

Recently, the following artifacts were generously donated to the Capitola Museum:

Anonymous—two vintage postcards of Capitola
David Fuentez—collection of aerial photos by Trini Contreras
Laurie Hill—Begonia Festival artifacts
Niels Kisling—1980 Shadowbrook Menu
Heather Lazare—Pawla's Violet Farm catalog
Nancy Di Cicco—Soquel and school memorabilia

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The Capitola Historical Museum

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Museum Hours: **Currently closed due to the pandemic**

Curator: Frank Perry

Board Members: Niels Kisling (President), David Peyton (Vice President), Pam Greeninger (Secretary), Brian Legakis (Treasurer), Emmy Mitchell-Lynn, Dean Walker and Gordon van Zuiden
Museum Youth Board Member: Joshua Henshaw