

## History of the San Lorenzo Pioneer Cemetery

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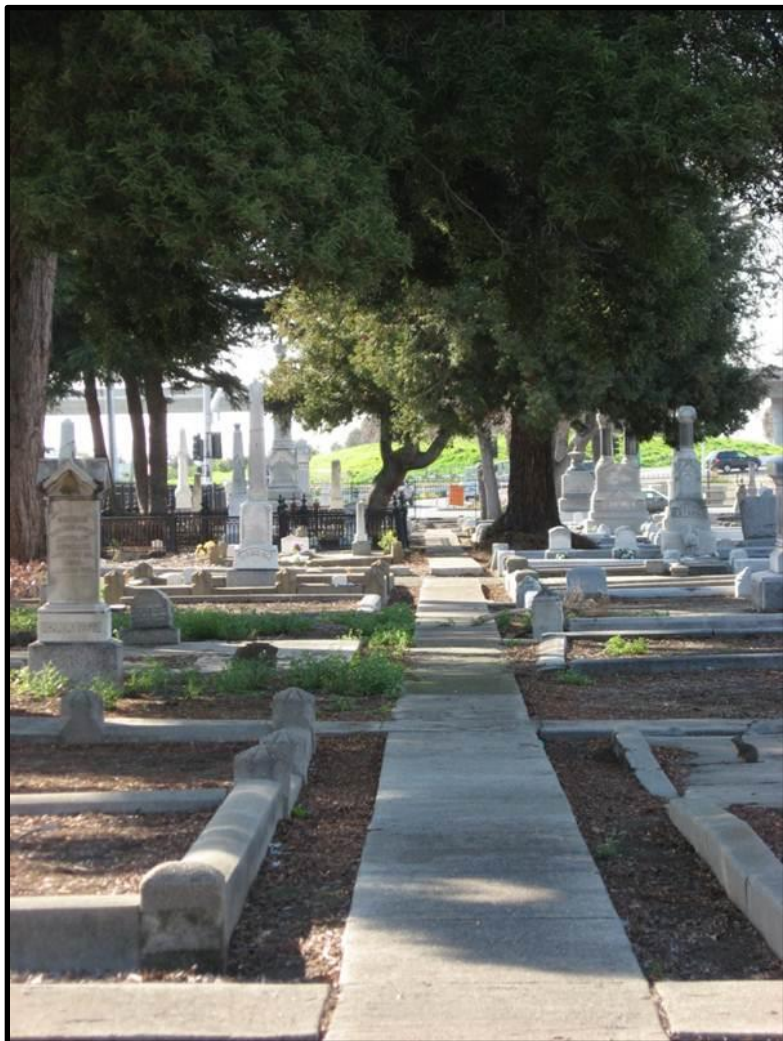
[There is] no better place to stand face-to-face with the past than in the old burying grounds...

–*In Small Things*

*Forgotten*, by James Deetz

The San Lorenzo Pioneer Cemetery is the final resting place for people primarily from the San Lorenzo, Hayward, San Leandro, and Castro Valley area, ranging from politicians to paupers. It reflects the economic and ethnic diversity of the agricultural communities that surrounded it. The cemetery represents the early history of these communities, from the settlement of Americans and Europeans during the Gold Rush to the post-World War II boom that drastically changed the area.

The cemetery, located on the corner of Hesperian Boulevard and College Street, was just on the outskirts of the small town of San Lorenzo when the first recorded burial took place in 1854. San Lorenzo was settled just a few years prior, largely by unsuccessful gold miners who thought the land was owned by the U.S. government and, therefore, open for them to claim as their own. In fact, these settlers were “squatting” on land that was part of large ranches owned by Mexican landowners. To the north of San Lorenzo Creek was Rancho San Leandro, owned by Jose Joaquin Estudillo. To the



south of the creek was Barbara Soto's Rancho San Lorenzo<sup>1</sup> and to the east and southeast was another Rancho San Lorenzo, owned by Guillermo Castro, Barbara's brother.<sup>2</sup>

The exact boundaries of the individual ranchos were somewhat loose, using natural features such as trees and rocks as markers. What became the town of San Lorenzo was on a boundary disputed by the rancho owners. The American settlers took advantage of this ambiguity in ownership and began building homes and planting crops on the land. There were so many squatters in the San Lorenzo area that it became known for a few years as Squatterville. By 1853 not only were several farms producing profitable crops, but a budding town began springing up at what is today the corner of Lewelling Boulevard and Hesperian Boulevard, centered around the first business in town, John Boyle's blacksmith shop.<sup>3</sup> In the following years, other small businesses appeared as well.

With any growing community, the need for a burial ground eventually becomes a necessity. San Lorenzo was no different, and an unofficial cemetery sprang up on the edge of the small town, on land that was part of Rancho San Leandro.<sup>4</sup> One of the original settlers in the area, Thomas Mulford, recalled that when he arrived in the area about 1849, an "Indian" hut sat on the site of the cemetery.<sup>5</sup> There is no corroborating evidence to support his claim, and he made the statement more than thirty years later. Why that particular piece of land became a burial ground is unclear. However, the close proximity to the tiny business district and homes of San Lorenzo fit with the late nineteenth century culture, when death and departed loved ones played a bigger part of life. Death was not something to fear, and there were elaborate rules, both written and unspoken, for handling the dead and mourning periods. Grave markers of the time reflect the life of the person buried there as well. The size and decoration of the marker befit the person's wealth, standing in the community, occupation, and nationality.

Interment records from the San Lorenzo Cemetery indicate there were four burials between 1854 and 1863. There is anecdotal information and discrepancies on the remaining headstones themselves that indicate there were other burials in the cemetery before and during this time. Earlier records from the cemetery appear to be lost, and many grave markers have also been lost that would have helped confirm the exact number of burials in this first decade. These

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the Soto rancho appears in historical resources as Rancho San Lorenzo, Rancho San Lorenzo Alto, and Rancho San Lorenzito.

<sup>2</sup> These Mexican landowners spent many years fighting with the U.S. government proving the validity of their claims following California receiving statehood in 1850.

<sup>3</sup> *History of Alameda County, California*, M.W. Wood, publisher, 1883, p. 452. The following year Daniel Olds opened a store at a location that later became the Willows Hotel.

<sup>4</sup> See Map Number Three, *New Historical Atlas of Alameda Co. California Illustrated*, Thompson & West, 1878.

<sup>5</sup> Woods, p. 436.

early burials were placed without any specific system. There may have been a fence around part of the area at that time.

The disorganized nature of burials and the general look of the site, combined with the growing development of the area, likely spurred a group of concerned citizens to form the San Lorenzo Cemetery Association on February 27, 1864. The group met at the San Lorenzo Grammar School, where they selected trustees to act on behalf of the Association and laid out duties for the association to oversee the burial grounds. Their first job was to secure the deeds to the property, about three and a half acres, from William Meek and John Lewelling.<sup>6</sup> They also made plans to attempt to buy enough land to straighten the northern boundary of the grounds from John B. Ward. Additionally, they were to lay out and sell plots, construct fences, and arrange for proper maintenance.<sup>7</sup>

Establishment of the Cemetery Association followed the trend of rural cemeteries being created throughout California. The state legislature passed an act in 1859<sup>8</sup> allowing for the creation of rural cemetery associations, whereby an organized group of citizens could legally come together to purchase property from private landowners to create cemeteries. Usually, there were already burials on the land being purchased, and the creation of a cemetery association allowed for the organizing and selling of plots without the landowner being held responsible for the upkeep. Around the same time, other cemeteries were established at Mt. Eden, Hayward, San Leandro, and Oakland.

Following the first meeting of the San Lorenzo Cemetery Association, the group asked for public subscriptions to finance the purchase and care of the cemetery. The subscription money went toward the purchase of graves in the cemetery. John Lewelling and William Meek, the wealthiest landowners in the area, led the list of 87 subscribers who contributed a total of \$637.50 to the land purchase. Individuals and families who purchased plots at that time came from San Lorenzo, San Leandro, Hayward, and Castro Valley. The majority were farmers, such as William Meek, John Lewelling, Leonard Stone, Charles Stenzil, and Neil McConaghy and business owners, such as Henry Smyth, Andrew Hansen, and William Roberts.<sup>9</sup>

On March 5, 1864, the Cemetery Association elected its charter officers: John Marlin, President; Leonard Stone, vice-president; Henry Smyth, treasurer; and G. Knapp, secretary.

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<sup>6</sup> John Lewelling purchased his land to the east of the cemetery in 1854 while William Meek began purchasing land in the San Lorenzo area about 1860. When they both acquired the land where the cemetery sat is unknown.

<sup>7</sup> San Lorenzo Cemetery Association Meeting Minutes, February 27, 1864

<sup>8</sup> "An Act to Authorize the Incorporation of Rural Cemetery Associations" approved April 18, 1859 by the California State Legislature; repealed by section 32 of Chapter 1148, commonly known as the general Cemetery Act, approved June 19, 1934.

<sup>9</sup> San Lorenzo Cemetery Association Meeting minutes, March 5, 1864

They also appointed a committee to draw up a plan for laying out lots and walks in a suitable manner.<sup>10</sup>

At the Association's third meeting, on March 19, 1864, the officers authorized the Treasurer to purchase the property from Lewelling and Meek for \$500. Mr. Ward had refused to sell any land along the northern border of the cemetery, however. The land purchase was completed by the end of March of that year and William Campbell Jr. was appointed sexton. The sexton was responsible for taking care of the grounds, tracking burial records, and digging the graves, for which he received \$5 per grave. The price of single graves were \$7.50 each, lots were \$15 and blocks were \$60. Each lot had six gravesites and a block was four lots making 24 gravesites.<sup>11</sup> By April, a plot map of the cemetery was registered with Alameda County and the cemetery was finally an organized entity.

In the following months, the Association received the final payments from those individuals who had initially subscribed. Their subscriptions were basically deposits on their plots and most of them paid off the additional money in smaller portions. The Board also arranged for the grounds to be cleaned up; had logs removed (which may have been used as borders around some of the graves); bought wood to build a fence; and hired a local carpenter to build a fence, and paint both the new and existing fences.<sup>12</sup> It was never the intention of the Association to care for the individual gravesites, though some families and individuals paid the Association to take care of certain sites for a set period of time. Whoever owned the deed to the plot was responsible for keeping the location neat.

From 1865 until the last meeting of the association in 1961, the Board met annually, unless a special meeting was called to discuss a pressing issue. They met at various places around the community, such as the San Lorenzo Grammar School, the Willows (a local hotel), J.L. Shiman's store, the church across the street from the cemetery, the Village Hall (a sort of community center), and at individual homes. During the meetings, they discussed general operating business of the cemetery. They decided such things as how to spend money in making repairs around the property, the necessity of digging a well, pursuing purchase of additional land, ordering trees and shrubs removed from plots because they were causing damage, and changing the price of purchasing a grave.<sup>13</sup> A persistent issue discussed many times was the need to have the cemetery cleaned up, the gates locked, and signs posted to keep out garbage.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, March 5, 1864 and March 19, 1864

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, March 19, 1864

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, April 16, 1864-October 21, 1864

<sup>13</sup> See San Lorenzo Cemetery Association minutes book.

Some discussions of note: on May 9, 1866 the trustees decided to designate a “tier of blocks on the east outer side of the cemetery, commencing at the northeast corner” as a paupers field.<sup>14</sup> At this time, the cemetery was rectangular with a street running along the eastern border. In March 1868, they agreed to raise the price of lots to \$20.00. At this meeting, the officers appointed a committee to approach Mr. William Knox, who owned property near the cemetery, about buying land to expand the cemetery. The following year it was reported that the committee failed to reach an agreement with Mr. Knox but they agreed to try again. In 1869, it was recorded that they failed again in the land purchase. On April 7, 1875, the board agreed to pay the sexton to move anyone buried in the designated aisles between plots into the adjoining lots. These may have been burials done prior to the formation of the Association. On March 6, 1880, they agreed to raise the price of lots to \$25 and single graves to \$10. Then in

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, May 9, 1866

1888, they raised the price of lots to \$50 each. In 1912, the cost of interments was raised from \$5 to \$8.

In 1913, the Association reached an agreement with Ethel Meek Montgomery, William Meek's youngest daughter, to purchase a piece of land to the east of the cemetery. The purchase price was \$500 for less than half an acre (the same price paid to her father and Mr. Lewelling for the rest of the cemetery grounds 49 years prior) and the sale completed in October of that



year. The trustees also arranged to have Tracy Street, which ran between the cemetery property and this new piece of land, closed to traffic allowing for a modest expansion of the grounds to the railroad tracks.<sup>15</sup> The revised map containing the block plan for this annexed portion of the cemetery was filed with the county in April 1914.<sup>16</sup>

By the end of the teens, the Association was discussing charging plot owners \$2 for not taking care of their plots and not allowing further burials in a plot that was not being cared for. There is no indication whether this action was carried out. They also ordered the sexton to receive payment for interment prior to digging any graves especially from "strangers or doubtful payers".<sup>17</sup> In 1920, the Association raised the interment fee from \$8 to \$10.<sup>18</sup> It seems clear that the Board were

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, March 8, 1913

<sup>16</sup> "Block Plan of Annex to San Lorenzo Cemetery, April 14, 1914, filed in book 23 of Maps, p. 65. Alameda County

<sup>17</sup> Meeting minutes, March 1919

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, March 6, 1920

concerned about rising costs in operating and maintenance of the cemetery and the unkempt look of the place.

Also in 1920, the Association began talks with the Alameda County Infirmary (now Fairmont Hospital) to sell the recently annexed east portion of the cemetery, closest to the railroad tracks.<sup>19</sup> The sale fell through but the Association and the Infirmary did enter an agreement where the Association would receive \$10 for each interment made on behalf of the Infirmary. These interments would be placed in the annexed portion of the cemetery. Between 1920 and 1931 over 800 individuals who died at the County Infirmary, and who either had no family to pay for burial or the family could not afford it, were buried at the San Lorenzo Cemetery. These “pauper’s graves” were indicated by simple, painted wooden markers. On average, three to six individuals a month, from all races, were buried in this section of the cemetery. The original markers were burned in a fire that swept through the east end of the cemetery in the 1940s.

Throughout the 1930s, fewer burials occurred in the main portion of the cemetery, forcing the Board to temporarily stop paying the sexton and raise the price for a single grave to \$15, three graves to \$37.50, and \$75 for a plot of six graves. The price of interments was raised to \$15 as well.<sup>20</sup> Over time, families of those buried in the cemetery died or moved, leaving the graves unattended. With fewer interments and a lack of interest on the part of the general community, the cemetery became overgrown. By the late 1940s, vandalism started taking a toll. The area around the cemetery was now a booming community, with houses being built on farmland and new families moving to the area. The significance of the cemetery and those buried there became less important to the more recently arrived residents. Long-time members of the Cemetery Association were dying off, and it became more difficult to find individuals to fill the vacant seats. As early as 1944, the trustees began talking about approaching Alameda County for assistance in caring for the cemetery, but they did not act on the discussion at that time.

For a brief moment in 1947, it looked like the cemetery would see a resurgence, when the Association entered into talks with Service Company Ltd. about building a mausoleum on the cemetery grounds.<sup>21</sup> The Association went so far as to begin selling space in the mausoleum before realizing sometime in June 1947 that there were too many legal issues involved with constructing and running a mausoleum and that the Association simply did not have the capabilities to handle it.<sup>22</sup> The brief hope for revitalizing the cemetery faded. Over the next

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, March 24, 1920

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, march 2, 1935, March 5, 1938

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, March 9, 1947

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, June 14, 1947. Also, copies of deeds in HAHS Archives, from San Lorenzo Cemetery Association regarding sale of locations in the mausoleum.

ten years, the cemetery continued to degrade, with headstones toppled over, and garbage, weeds and vandalism running rampant.<sup>23</sup>

In April 1958, members of the Association board began seriously discussing the possibility of turning the cemetery into a memorial park dedicated to the pioneers who settled the area. The Association asked the Hayward Area Historical Society (HAHS) for assistance. HAHS assigned the problem of the cemetery to a standing committee on Plaques and Monuments, chaired by local attorney Manuel L. Furtado. The committee began gathering signatures to petition the Alameda County Board of Supervisors to declare the cemetery abandoned and dedicate it as a pioneer memorial park.

The following year, with the encouragement of Alameda County Supervisor Francis Dunn, State Assemblyman Carlos Bee introduced an amendment to the state's health and safety code relating to cemeteries. The amendment allowed a city or county to declare a "nonendowment care cemetery... that threatens or endangers the health, safety, comfort or welfare of the public" and that has not had more than 10 burials in a five year period be declared abandoned and closed to all future burials. The final section of the amendment stated that after the city or county had given 60 days notice of intention to close the cemetery and removed any dangerous structures from the property, by resolution, the county would dedicate the abandoned cemetery as a pioneer memorial park and install a suitable memorial to those buried there.<sup>24</sup>

The Cemetery Association held their final meeting in March, 1961. At the meeting, Supervisor Dunn explained some of the details involved with the county taking over the cemetery and dedicating it as a memorial park. Dunn further requested the Cemetery board send a letter to the Board of Supervisors approving the county's takeover of the cemetery. The officers requested their lawyer do so. This is the last official act of the Cemetery Association.<sup>25</sup>

While the assembly bill did not specifically mention the San Lorenzo Cemetery, the county finally had the legal means to take it over. This legal jurisdiction, combined with the wishes of the Cemetery Association and backed by the HAHS-sponsored petition<sup>26</sup>, encouraged the Alameda County Board of Supervisors to pass Resolution 96564 on April 11, 1961 declaring the cemetery abandoned. The resolution cited the above-mentioned amendments to the Health and Safety Code and noted that the Cemetery Association did not have the proper funds to maintain the grounds, which had become a safety concern. Additionally, the resolution noted

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<sup>23</sup> *Oakland Tribune*, Sunday, Nov. 29, 1949 "San Lorenzo Pioneers Lie in Neglected Cemetery Plots"

<sup>24</sup> Assembly Bill No. 2331, Chapter 1241, "An act to amend Sections 8825, 8826, 8827, and 8828 of the Health and Safety Code, relating to cemeteries." Approved by Governor June 24, 1959, filed with secretary of state June 29, 1959.

<sup>25</sup> San Lorenzo Cemetery Association minutes, March 9, 1961.

<sup>26</sup> May 26, 1960 letter from John Lewis, Deputy District Attorney to County Surveyor Olof E. Anderson



that only ten burials had been conducted in the previous five years. The resolution concluded with an order to give 60 days' notice of the intention to close, after which time any dangerous items would be removed from the grounds and the cemetery declared a Pioneer Memorial Park.<sup>27</sup>

Two years later, the Board of Supervisors passed a second Resolution, 102661, ordering that a memorial be constructed at the cemetery. The resolution stated that the Alameda County Public Works department was to work with the Hayward Parlor of the Native Sons of the Golden West and the Hayward Area Historical Society in the construction of the monument.<sup>28</sup> On March 24, 1964, one hundred years after the creation of the Cemetery Association, the cemetery was officially dedicated as the San Lorenzo Pioneer Memorial Park, honoring early pioneers of the area.<sup>29</sup> A few days later, a ceremony was held at the cemetery where a dedication address was given by County Supervisor Robert Hannon.

Declaring the cemetery a memorial park did not greatly improve its general conditions. Throughout the years, the County has done what it could to keep the grounds clean, repairing or replacing fences, and cutting down trees when necessary. On occasion several groups have worked together to repair or replace structures at the cemetery. One such instance of this was the replacement of the decorative iron fence surrounding the cemetery in 1998. Funding for the fencing came from Alameda County Supervisor Gail Steele, the Ashland Redevelopment Budget and Alameda County Public Works as a result of a meeting between the different agencies and representatives from San Lorenzo Unified School District, First Southern Baptist Church, and the Ashland Citizens Advisory Committee.<sup>30</sup> Without all these entities coming together, replacement of the fence may not have happened.

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<sup>27</sup> "Resolution No. 96564 Declaring the abandonment of the San Lorenzo Cemetery as a place of future interment and ordering the publication of notice of such abandonment." Passed and adopted by the Alameda County Board of Supervisors, April 11, 1961.

<sup>28</sup> Resolution No. 102661 "Construct Monument". Adopted by the Alameda County Board of Supervisors, January 2, 1963.

<sup>29</sup> Resolution No. 107163 "Dedicate Memorial Park". Adopted by the Alameda County Board of Supervisors, March 24, 1964.

<sup>30</sup> Email communication with Doris Marciel, August 3, 2011



Occasionally local residents, organizations, and HAHS have also helped take care of the cemetery. In 2001, a local Eagle Scout, Girard Chilson, offered to build 802 white crosses to mark the pauper's graves from Fairmont Hospital. The original crosses had burned down in the 1940s and the area had become overgrown with weeds and debris. With money donated by HAHS, Chilson bought supplies and built the crosses, with help from friends and family. The following year, Girl Scout Leslie McGallian offered to erect the crosses in the cemetery. With help from her troop, family, and local businesses, she got the pauper's field cleared of debris, graded, measured and marked the area, and had the crosses placed in a precise grid pattern. In 2004, a monument listing all the names of the individuals buried in the pauper's graves was installed with additional money donated by HAHS. The wooden crosses were spruced up and repaired by another Eagle Scout, Aaron Marr, in 2011 and are due for another refresh soon.

The San Lorenzo Pioneer Cemetery reflects the diversity of people who settled this area after 1850. The burial records and gravestones indicate people who were born and raised in the area and others who were immigrants from the East Coast, Ireland, Scotland, Denmark, China, Portugal, Germany, Sweden, France, and Japan. The cemetery is integrated. People of different nationalities and economic status are mixed together in the main portion of the cemetery (excluding the burials from Fairmont Hospital). The occupations of those buried there also reflect the agricultural history of this region, with the majority being farmers.

Furthermore, the cemetery reflects the central role of San Lorenzo in the region. At the time of their deaths, people who are buried in the cemetery came from not only the Hayward, Castro Valley, San Lorenzo, and San Leandro area but also Oakland, Dublin, Livermore, the Central Valley, and even as far away as Los Angeles and Hawaii. The gravestones tell stories in their artwork and styles that reflect the period of installation. The cemetery is an important historical artifact, a reminder of the roots of this community.