

WEST OAKLAND: A TERMINUS OF THE URBAN WEST

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ABSTRACT

The I-880 Cypress Freeway Replacement Project affects cultural resources along the San Francisco Bay in West Oakland. In 1869, West Oakland became the terminus of the Transcontinental Railroad. Passenger, freight and local trains all passed through West Oakland to the Long Wharf and "Mole" jutting into the bay. There, passengers and freight were loaded and unloaded for and from travel across the bay and across the Pacific. A majority of West Oakland's residents were affiliated with the railroad. Most had come from the eastern U.S. and many from across the Atlantic. The Oakland these people lived in was unlike cities of the east coast and Europe. This paper presents an historic context for Oakland, a typical "new" city of the 19th-century Pacific Rim. Vast spaces, large capital investments and new technology created an Urban West which had a rail terminus and port in West Oakland.

The relocation of the Cypress Freeway Replacement provides the opportunity to investigate a large cross section of West Oakland. The volume of information both historical and archaeological should facilitate mid-range research where the big concept meets the little pits. Research themes include Consumer Behavior, Ethnicity and Urban Subcultures, Industrialization, Urban Geography and Waste Disposal under broader contexts of Modernization, Victorianism and Working-Class Culture.

While these contexts provide a means of dealing with excavated materials, they also relate to other themes, one of the broadest being the historical archaeologist's old standby, Capitalism. In recent years, archaeological research on capitalism has begun to focus on material culture. As Mark Leone and Parker Potter (1994) recently described the approach, consumer goods are seen as "vehicles for the transmission of dominant ideologies and as prime targets for cultural redefinition through the process of consumption." They refer to this approach as the "archaeology of impoverishment" or "the often inequitable process by which some people in capitalist society lose wealth." Two basic premises of impoverishment are that capitalism requires that some people will be impoverished despite their attempts to avoid it, and that material culture has different meanings in different cultural contexts. This premise of impoverishment has particular relevance to the Pacific Rim where economic cycles of boom and bust were the norm.

Capitalism was a driving force in the development of the Western United States and Canada, as well as Australasia during the nineteenth century. These areas are characterized by their vast expanses, which required huge amounts of capital and technological advances to develop. They are also separated by the great distance across the Pacific, which prolonged the use of commercial sailing vessels (Gibbs 1987). These factors combined to unite the Western U.S., Canada, and places around the Pacific Rim that developed during the nineteenth century.

In the United States, the West has generally been associated with the frontier—a boundary changing through time as settlement progressed from the Atlantic seaboard. Based on the agrarian myth, Frederic Jackson Turner promoted a "frontier thesis" of white men taming the wilderness and farming their way across the continent. It had little to do with reality, considering that in 1776 the Spanish were settling San Francisco and the Russians were moving down the coast.

West of the Mississippi River, settlement from the east was urban rather than rural. The West was about cities, trains, corporations, money and government. Those who benefitted most were typically those who could mediate between cultures, consumers and resources. These were typically the merchants, manufacturers and politicians. With much of western economy based on extractive industries, land became the essence of the West. If America was the land of opportunity, it was due to the opportunity of owning or at least exploiting the land.

Land also defined western cities. The ability of cities to expand into suburbs distinguished western cities from their eastern counterparts which more closely resembled their European predecessors. New cities acted as supply and processing centers for the surrounding rural areas. Typically the extractive industries of the West relied more on labor than on machinery. The dependence on labor meant higher wages for workers who could then purchase a home in a city; the city could expand its boundaries to meet demand through improving transit. Alternatively, industrial manufacturing invested in machinery leaving little for wages. Workers were typically clustered near the factory in high density rented housing or tenements.

Western cities relied upon rail transit as a means of expanding into suburbs. Most of the new cities, especially those that were successful over an extended period of time, depended upon or were at the mercy of the railroad. Railroads opened large areas of land not adequately served by water transport.

They linked fertile new regions to world markets. Many cities went boom or bust depending upon location of the railroad.

Scholars have given a variety of names to the 19-century cities of the trans-Mississippi West. Gunther Barth (1975) called them "instant cities." Lawrence Larsen (1978) referred to the "Urban West," citing the 1880 census. Most recently, Lionel Frost (1991) has used the term "New Urban Frontier Cities" to describe the new cities of the American and Canadian West, Australia and New Zealand. The new cities typically were commercial centers with gridded streets and single-family detached housing. They were associated with railroads and many were also ports. Several of the cities had initial growth due to mining booms; those such as San Francisco, Denver and Melbourne survived as manufacturing and shipping centers. Others such as Seattle achieved success through diversification of the economy.

San Francisco, as an industrial center, actually had many features of an old city. It fit the new city model better when considered in conjunction with suburbs across the bay, such as Oakland, which began as a suburb prior to becoming a new city on its own. Fortunately for our project, the neighborhood of West Oakland contains many new city features and well represents the Urban West on the Pacific Rim. Many past and present residents of Oakland have had first-hand knowledge of the impoverishment of capitalism.

The town site of Oakland had been occupied for centuries by the native Ohlone whose numbers dwindled after European contact. There was a 75 percent mortality rate at the mission in San Francisco. The Ohlone were used as the labor force for the mission and secular endeavors of the Californios, who lacked other sources of labor.

Rancho San Antonio, including the future site of Oakland, was granted by Spain to Luis Maria Peralta in 1820. His land grant extended along the eastern shore of the San Francisco Bay from present San Leandro to Oakland. In 1842 at the age of 83 Peralta divided his estate among his four adult sons. The portion containing all of the original town of Oakland was given to Vicente, who at 30 was the youngest. This tract went from Lake Merritt north and west to present Alcatraz Avenue between the bay and the hills.

Despite confirmation of the claim by the U.S. government, Peralta's land was overrun by squatters and speculators and stolen away by lawyers and politicians. The assault on the land grants began prior to the Gold Rush. In the early 1840s loggers started clearing the redwood forest of the East Bay hills, including some larger trees that had been used as navigational markers for ships on the bay. The redwoods were cleared by 1860. The Peraltas were unprepared for the extent of depredations on their property. Besides the timber, cattle were often rustled at night by denizens of an expanding San Francisco across the bay.

Problems grew exponentially, along with the Gold Rush population. Despite the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed nine days after the gold discovery, many '49ers felt no obligation to reimburse the Californios for anything they took. The

Bear Flag Rebellion and Mexican War, along with the tenets of Manifest Destiny, convinced many settlers the land was for the taking, especially since Californios occupied the best land. Without enforcement of their rights by the U.S. government, the Californios had little recourse but to get what they could for their land.

Even settlers who legitimately leased or purchased land from the Californios still had to contend with squatters and the courts. Unfortunately for Vicente Peralta, Horace Carpentier was one of those squatters. Carpentier was a lawyer from Columbia College who had arrived in San Francisco in 1849 at the age of 24. He made his fortune the old-fashioned way—through avarice, litigation and political corruption.

In May of 1850 along with Edson Adams and Andrew Moon, Carpentier built a house at the foot of Broadway, the best landing in the area on San Antonio Slough. They each claimed 160-acre tracts and had them surveyed into city lots. Carpentier's had Broadway running down the center. They then sold the lots, which they did not own.

Despite Peralta's having legitimate title, he was at a disadvantage. The Spanish land grants were not written in English, the mission records and other documents were scattered as far as Mexico City, and the surveys used natural landmarks. Carpentier understood U.S. law and the significance of square parcels, which had legal precedent in the various land acts of the federal government (Dick 1970). Land was being parceled out by the quarter section, which made the 160-acre tracts a reasonable size to justify in court.

Like most of the Californios, Peralta was land rich and cash poor. He had to sell or deed most of his land to pay for taxes and attorneys' fees. There were plenty of settlers across the United States who could sympathize. Many who had settled and farmed land lacked the hard currency or gold to pay for what was rightfully theirs when the government held a land sale. Despite preemption, these settlers often were at the mercy of speculators possessing gold coin.

More than a speculator, Carpentier was the quintessential manipulator. In 1851 he became enrolling clerk for the state legislature. By 1852 he was elected to the assembly, gathering 519 from an estimated 150 eligible voters in the district (Bagwell 1982:48). A year later he incorporated the town of Oakland with a state bill and the town trustees promptly deeded him the entire waterfront. In 1854 Carpentier had the assembly incorporate Oakland as a city, changing the form of government from board of trustees to mayor and council. That year he was elected mayor, again by a questionable number of votes.

Carpentier's political ambitions supported his business schemes. Using the waterfront for leverage, he gravitated toward even bigger schemers of higher political office. His crowning achievement was acquiring the transcontinental railroad terminus by joining his control of the waterfront with the Central Pacific Railroad. The Central Pacific was founded by the "Big Four": Stanford, Huntington, Hopkins and Crocker. All had made their fortunes as merchants during the Gold Rush

and expanded their wealth with the railroad. Central Pacific's president, Leland Stanford, used political fortune to take advantage of the greatest federal land giveaway ever, the building of the transcontinental railways. Stanford was conveniently California's first Republican Governor when his company was given exclusive rights to the California section of the original transcontinental line by the nation's first Republican President, Abraham Lincoln.

While Carpentier was hated for many of his previous schemes, to the point of inciting riots, he was a hero for acquiring the rail terminus, and especially a hero to West Oakland residents whose property values soared. During the 19th century, the railroad was the core of West Oakland.

Since 1863, local lines had been running along Seventh Street, also known as Railroad Avenue. The Seventh Street line had been planned to bypass Carpentier's monopoly of the estuary waterfront. The later transcontinental line ran closer to the water near First Street. Both lines extended piers into the bay for access to ferries and shipping at the end of Seventh Street.

Prior to the railroad, Oakland was desirable for features such as climate and a healthful environment. Many houses were estates for those escaping San Francisco. Prior to the pier at Seventh Street, however, commuting was unreliable and expensive due to the sand bar at the mouth of the estuary. Yet there were benefits to the eastern shore of the bay. Oakland was also known as the "Athens of the Pacific" due to its private schools, as well as the University of California and Mills Seminary. Public education, some of which was supplied by the social reformers, consisted of the basics for those not heading to college. Child labor was still common since school was not mandatory. As a proper place to live, West Oakland had a variety of churches. But a different type of spirituality seemed more popular: saloons could be found on most blocks of Seventh Street and on many corners throughout the neighborhood, much to the dismay of the reformers.

As industry developed in West Oakland, the neighborhood changed from upper- and middle-class families to one dominated by single workers and working-class families. From 1870 to 1910, most of the residents of West Oakland either worked for a railroad or for one of the many industries dependent upon transportation. Various mills, canneries and the like converted raw materials into products shipped to and from the east by rail or west by sea. Many of the transport workers on ships or trains resided in the numerous boarding houses found in the project area.

As transportation expanded 19th-century capitalism, the mercantile system provided the merchant class with social mobility. Two ethnic groups who did particularly well as merchants were the Jews and Chinese. Many Jewish residents had connections on the east coast to suppliers of goods needed in the West. Access to a ready supply of merchandise brought in turn wealth and prestige in a capitalist society (Rosenbaum 1976). Chinese merchants found their social status improved within their transplanted culture (Tsai 1983:17). Since the Chinese were generally ostracized as a group and subject to ex-

clusionary laws, they found Chinese stores not only stocked with familiar goods, but also potentially safer.

During the late 19th century West Oakland was a homogenous neighborhood of ethnic diversity. There was a relatively balanced mix of native-born and immigrant residents of various nationalities. Racial divisiveness was more noticeable by occupation than by residence, the major exception being the Chinese, who served as a lightning rod for prejudice and bigotry around much of the Pacific Rim during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Despite their providing much of the labor force for projects such as the transcontinental railroad, they were excluded from working at the West Oakland railyards by the local trade unionists. Asians were also relegated (with the exception of servants) to living in enclaves, while the other residents of West Oakland enjoyed life in an integrated neighborhood.

While the local railroad had developed West Oakland, the transcontinental railroad dominated it. The Central Pacific lines initially went along First street out new piers at the end of Seventh Street south of the old pier. By 1871 the new pier was 11,000 feet long and called the Oakland Long Wharf. From the Long Wharf, train cars could be loaded onto ferries for the trip to San Francisco. As the Central Pacific expanded, more wharfs and facilities were built, including the Oakland "Mole" pier completed in 1882 as a passenger terminal. The Central Pacific even took over the local trains. Eventually, the main line would shift and come from the north, limiting the westward expansion of West Oakland.

The expansion of facilities increased available jobs and West Oakland increased housing density with infill, while many of the early residents who could afford to moved to cleaner neighborhoods. The railroad had a complex hierarchy which did allow for upward mobility. Many railroad employees, however, needed to be near the facilities so they could be readily summoned. As the previous residents moved away new immigrants from Europe and the U.S. took their places.

In 1910 the local line switched from steam to electric in response to the Key Route trains servicing newer suburbs. The Key Route pier was built further north and its site eventually incorporated into the Bay Bridge. By that time the neighborhood was rapidly changing as ship building and industry increased prior to World War I. Immigration from Europe diminished and more African-Americans arrived from the South.

One German-American resident blamed the Depression for destroying West Oakland's racial harmony, as Dust Bowl emigrants brought Jim Crow (Olmsted and Olmsted 1994:168). The railroad also switched to more modernized equipment with standardized parts, requiring fewer workers. The thirties brought in the slum clearance that leveled houses, displacing many West Oakland residents. The Victorian houses were replaced with barracks-like projects for new armaments workers. These projects were segregated, with alternate buildings for Whites and Blacks.

Gone was the lifestyle experienced by people like Royal Towns whose father William had been a cook during construc-

tion of the transcontinental railroad and was later a porter. With his multi-ethnic experience, William had learned to speak some Spanish and Chinese. Royal, a lieutenant in the Oakland Fire Department, had learned many distinct speech patterns and idioms growing up in West Oakland. In the 1940s Royal used his knowledge of "blarney" to persuade an Irish policeman in New York to let him onto the restricted dock where Royal's son's ship was berthed. When initially stopped, Royal asked the officer if he had been "born in the year of the black potatoes or the big wind?" The officer was surprised hearing an African-American speak like a countryman. Royal explained that he had grown up with numerous Irish families as neighbors and was escorted to his son's ship. He later said "it's all in knowing the language or vernacular of the particular ethnic group that you live with...This has happened in many instances in my life where I have utilized some of the things I learned from those kids down there [in West Oakland]" (Daniels 1990:100).

The neighborhood continued to experience setbacks and change. The opening of the Bay Bridge in 1936 shifted the focus of cross-bay travel away from West Oakland. In 1939 the Bridge Railway combined with the proliferation of automobile travel, was the end of the local trains on Seventh Street. The last train ran down Seventh Street in 1941.

The Second World War further changed West Oakland as the military industry and facilities expanded. Workers from around the country filled jobs in the shipyards and defense industry. Temporary workers' housing also replaced large estates such as the McDermott House and other early homes. The dependence on federal money further removed West Oakland's economy from its residents. The railroad's switch to diesel engines required even fewer workers, creating an even greater surplus of labor in the community. By the time the freeway passed through in the 1950s, West Oakland had fallen on hard times.

The Port of Oakland however, which initially expanded due to the transcontinental railway has survived as the premiere port of the bay. Its ability to expand early on and its access to land transportation is why Oakland's Port has flourished. The port's success stands in contrast to the West Oakland neighborhood which lay impoverished and isolated under the shadow of the Cypress Freeway for the past three decades. Although West Oakland is not without hope, residents have found a common voice and successfully lobbied for the present freeway alignment circumventing rather than bisecting their neighborhood. The removal of this visual and psychological barrier has reunited West Oakland with the rest of the city it's former residents helped to build.

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