

# MORE BERKELEY WALKS- SERIES 9

by Robert E. Johnson

The walks feature:

- \* fascinating tidbits on architecture, famous people, street trees and more
- \* color photos
- \* maps with marked walking route and numbered stops coordinated with text
- \* highlights, distance and elevation gain and how to get to the starting point

## WALK 46- Westbrae

Near a former train stop with a commercial district this pleasant West Berkeley neighborhood is fairly level and features street trees with autumn color and modest homes 2.7 miles; less than 100 feet elevation gain



## WALK 47- Rockridge-Temescal Greenbelt



This level Oakland neighborhood near Rockridge has early 20th century architectural styles including lots of Craftsman bungalows and tree-lined streets. There is also an unusual linear park following the course of a buried historic creek. 2.5 miles or less with shortcuts and under 100 feet elevation gain.

## WALK 48 - Albany Hill and Cerrito Creek

The route of this walk at the Albany-El Cerrito border follows a restored creek and then climbs the often seen but little known Albany Hill where citizen efforts have helped partially preserve a natural area from urban encroachment. 2.5 miles; 350 feet elevation gain.

***Authored and photographed by Janet Byron***



## Walk 46

# Westbrae

**Overview:** The walk explores an area in west Berkeley between two traffic corridors and a historic railway corridor. The fairly flat and easy walk is characterized by modest but attractive homes and tree-lined streets that provide vibrant autumn colors.

**Highlights:**

- \* A pleasant residential area near a historic commercial district
- \* Bits of history
- \* Autumn colors on tree-lined streets

**Distance:** 2.0 miles; 2.7 miles with optional extra loop

**Elevation gain:** 40 feet; 55 feet with option

**Getting there:** Start at the southwest corner of Gilman Street and Santa Fe Avenue near the Westbrae commercial district and the overhead BART tracks. AC Transit serves Gilman Street and parking is generally available on the residential streets. Check signs for parking limitations.

Santa Fe trains ran along where the BART underground and above ground tracks are located in this area just a block up Gilman Street. Passenger service ended in the 1950s although freight trains continued until 1979, and were thus running for several years alongside BART which commenced operations in 1972. In addition a Key System electric trolley shuttle ran parallel to the east of the Santa Fe tracks. It took passengers as far as Santa Fe and University avenue where they could transfer to a transbay service and in the other direction it ended just north of Gilman Street near Codornices Creek and the Albany border. There was a plan to extend the trolley farther north but that never materialized. The Key System was owned by the Realty Syndicate which was active in land development and they gave the name Westbrae to this area. Certainly the trolley and train lines helped in the growth of this area and the location of a stop near Gilman helped promote the small commercial district which now includes a natural grocery store, bike shop, nursery, biergarten, etc.

On the southwest corner of Gilman and Santa Fe is a bright colored house in stucco. There are quite a few such brightly painted homes in the neighborhood which is one of the charms of this walk as well as the numerous and varied street trees.



leaves that turn brilliant colors in autumn. This species is dioecious with separate male and female trees so only the latter trees develop bunches of red berry-like fruits.

On the left 1320 Talbot (2) from 1922 has a very bright multi-color appearance with various ceramic sculptures including a bust of Queen Nefertiti of Egypt. There is also a large camphor tree in front whose shiny leaves are very fragrant when crushed. Then at 1305 Talbot is a 1924 house that is a full two stories and significantly larger and more imposing than the typical homes in this neighborhood (though many have been remodeled and enlarged over the years). There is a big Canary Island palm on the northwest corner with Gilman, one of the two most commonly planted palm species in Berkeley.



**1320 Talbot Avenue**

Turn left on Gilman, noting the sweetgum (liquidambar) trees along Gilman with their brilliant autumn colors that they retain for many weeks. At the next corner is St Ambrose Catholic Church (3) with a prominent bell tower, an ornate entrance, and Gothic style stained glass windows. The parish was originally founded in 1909 and had a wood-framed building with shingled exterior until the current edifice was completed in 1952. The church notes that over the years the ethnic and cultural makeup of its members has changed in dramatic ways.

Turn left on Cornell Avenue. On the right side at 1306 Cornell (4) is a modest but charming 1932 house with recessed porch and large arched window. It has varied brickwork and embedded sculptural stones and it is worth noting that brick is a fairly uncommon siding in Berkeley where homes are mostly stucco or wood sided.

At the end of the block look left on Camelia for the street trees on the south side (Bradford pears with white flowers and bright red autumn leaves). On the northwest corner at that intersection the house at 1155 Camelia has some Tudor design elements such as the half timbering. Continuing on Cornell, 1401 and 1405 Cornell (5) on the left side are a couple of typical California bungalows from around 1927. These are one story stucco houses with some Spanish style features such as arches, flat or low-pitched clay tile roofs and usually either no porch or a very small porch. The style started in southern California but also became popular in the Bay Area.

At the next intersection where Page Street comes in from the right and Santa Fe at an angle from the left continue straight past the traffic circle to stay on Cornell Avenue. On the right at 1444 Cornell (6) is a Victorian house with a cute octagonal turret over the porch. Dating From 1911 it is a little late for the Victorian style but one of the

older homes in this neighborhood. On the left at 1449 Cornell is an angled contemporary style building surrounded by paved parking that is the Church For Today, which is a non-denominational church that claims to be rooted in the Judeo/Christan tradition and with an interracial, diverse congregation.

1462 Cornell (7) is a nicely renovated Victorian cottage, originally built in 1916. Then at 1470 Cornell in the front yard is a multi-trunked giant yucca plant.

Turn right on Hopkins noting colorful houses in purple and blue on the left side as you go one block to Stannage Avenue and turn right again. Near the end of the first block where Jones comes in from the left



**1428 Stannage Avenue**

1506-08 Stannage (8) is a duplex with red tiles, nice window detailing, and somewhat ornate twin entrances built in 1922. Somewhat past Jones also on the left side at 1452 Stannage is a 1912 house with newer siding and an unusual second floor dormer window. At the next intersection, at the northwest corner with Page, 1428 Stannage (9) has a fascinating elephant sculpture in the front yard made from found objects (mainly rope) and very much in the style of works by Mark Olivier that populate his yard at 1118 Colusa (See Walk 8 in the *Berkeley Walks* book.)

Quite a few originally modest homes in this area have been renovated and expanded (like elsewhere in the Bay Area and the US overall) as families desire larger living quarters than in the past, when families actually averaged larger numbers than now. Farther along, after crossing Camelia, in front of 1339 Stannage (10) between street and sidewalk is a tree with contorted trunk and branches, small leaves and peeling bark that is a semi-deciduous Chinese elm, and another is just beyond it.

At the end of the block turn left on Gilman and then left again on Kains Avenue. Farther along on the right side with stone retaining wall near the sidewalk at 1330 Kains (11) is a Craftsman bungalow from 1914. This was an extremely popular style in Berkeley during the 1910s and 1920s. Bungalow refers to the bangaloo style in British colonial India of one to one and half stories with a porch or veranda. The Craftsman style was influenced by the English Arts and Crafts movement and typical homes in this style had simple ornamentation but prominent brackets, windows that were more detailed on the upper part and finely crafted features such as wooden doors, built in cabinets and so on. The gable within a gable style as in this example was quite common. More elaborate Craftsman bungalows can be found in Berkeley, Oakland and other Bay Area cities.

In the second block 1414 Kains (12) is a 1910 bungalow with elements of Colonial Revival style, particularly the twin angled bay windows and the porch columns though the latter are less in the classical mode than usually found in this style. One Internet site calls this a Queen Anne cottage, which it is not though one could argue that it is a transitional design between that Victorian Queen Anne style and Colonial Revival.

Near the end of the block on the left at 1423 Kains (13) is a newer multi-unit building with three floors including balconies and a rooftop deck along one part of the third floor. A couple of Canary Island palms are next to 1422 Kains on the right.

After Page note the cactus garden at 1451-53 Kains (14). Cactus and succulent gardens are replacing lawns as we adjust to a drier climate.



**1451-53 Kains Avenue**

One block after Jones at Hopkins Street go left and walk three blocks to Curtis Street and turn left again. If you look at a map you will see that Santa Fe, Curtis and a number of other streets in this area are at an angle to the rectangular grid of most of the rest of west Berkeley. The reason has to do with the manner in which parcels of various sizes were sold off by the Peralta family that had a huge Spanish land grant in the East Bay. Luis Maria Peralta divided the grant among his four sons and most of what is now Berkeley was given to Jose Domingo Peralta who had an adobe house near Codornices Creek not far from the location of Monterey Market.

Curtis Street here has no intersection until Gilman and is thus one of the longest blocks in Berkeley. It has a range of similar mainly modest homes to what we have seen so far on this walk. The street was named for Michael Curtis, an early farmer with a substantial holding in central Berkeley. Although not known as a major thoroughfare Curtis actually runs across Berkeley from Dwight Way all the way to the Kensington Circle. 1353 Curtis (15) on the right is another of the fairly rare Victorian homes in this neighborhood; it is from 1911 which is again a late date for the style. There may be some home or homes older than 1900 along our route but we have not identified one yet and this area was mainly farmland for many years between the part of Berkeley near campus and the Ocean View community near the bay.

On the left side at 1334 Curtis (16) is a 1910 two story home with large bay and 1332 Curtis next door is a 1905 Colonial Revival bungalow that was probably raised up to accommodate a garage and more space underneath. These are two of the oldest homes we have seen.

At Gilman you can go left a short distance to the start or go right to explore the commercial district with possible libations or if you are game for a bit more take the following option to extend your walk a little.

**Option:** Before you reach Gilman Street go right just after a chain link fence and just before a utility box on a narrow paved path (called Geneva's Path but may or may not be signed here). Do not cross to the other side of the elevated BART tracks which is the wider Ohlone Greenway (featured in Walk 18 in the *Berkeley Walks* book.) This short path takes you to a point where two streets curve around to join each other. Bear right on what is Neilson Street (sign incorrectly says Neilson Avenue) noting on the left at the head of the curve a two story house behind a fence at 1345 Neilson (17) that is from 1909 and thus another of the early homes in this neighborhood.

Just beyond this on the right at 1340 Neilson (18) is a cute 1926 cottage with charming small front garden. At Hopkins go left and then promptly left again on Northside



**Northside Community Garden**

Avenue that runs parallel to Neilson. The street first angles right and then just when it angles left you come to Northside Community Garden (20) on the right, one of three community gardens virtually adjacent to each other. The others are the Peralta Community Garden and the Karl Linn Community Garden, noted on the aforementioned Ohlone Greenway walk.

Just beyond the garden as the street angles left you are walking parallel to a metal fence. This is the location where BART goes in and out of its tunnel that is under most of Berkeley and the tracks become elevated going north. It

was thanks to citizens like Mabel Howard, mayor Ron Johnson and Berkeley voters that BART goes underground through much of the city. BART wanted to build an elevated track through most of the city but Berkeley voted to pay for the projected cost difference in putting BART underground. When you get to the place where Northside joins Neilson bear right to again take the narrow path along the BART fence and then at Gilman Street go left one block to the starting point or go right to enjoy a snack or libation in the Westbrae commercial area, an area that grew up when there was a commuter rail stop here.

## Walk 47

# Rockridge-Temescal Greenbelt

**Overview:** Starting near Rockridge BART in north Oakland, the walk is in a fairly level neighborhood with homes mainly built in the years after the San Francisco earthquake, pleasant tree-lined streets, and a charming small park. There is a pleasing variety of Craftsman homes and a couple of 19th century Victorians.

**Highlights:**

- \* Lots of varied Craftsman bungalows as well as homes in other styles
- \* A little park and trail that provide an oasis even though near the freeway
- \* Proximity to the popular Rockridge commercial area and BART

**Distance:** 2.5 miles; 1.1 or 1.7 miles with shortcuts

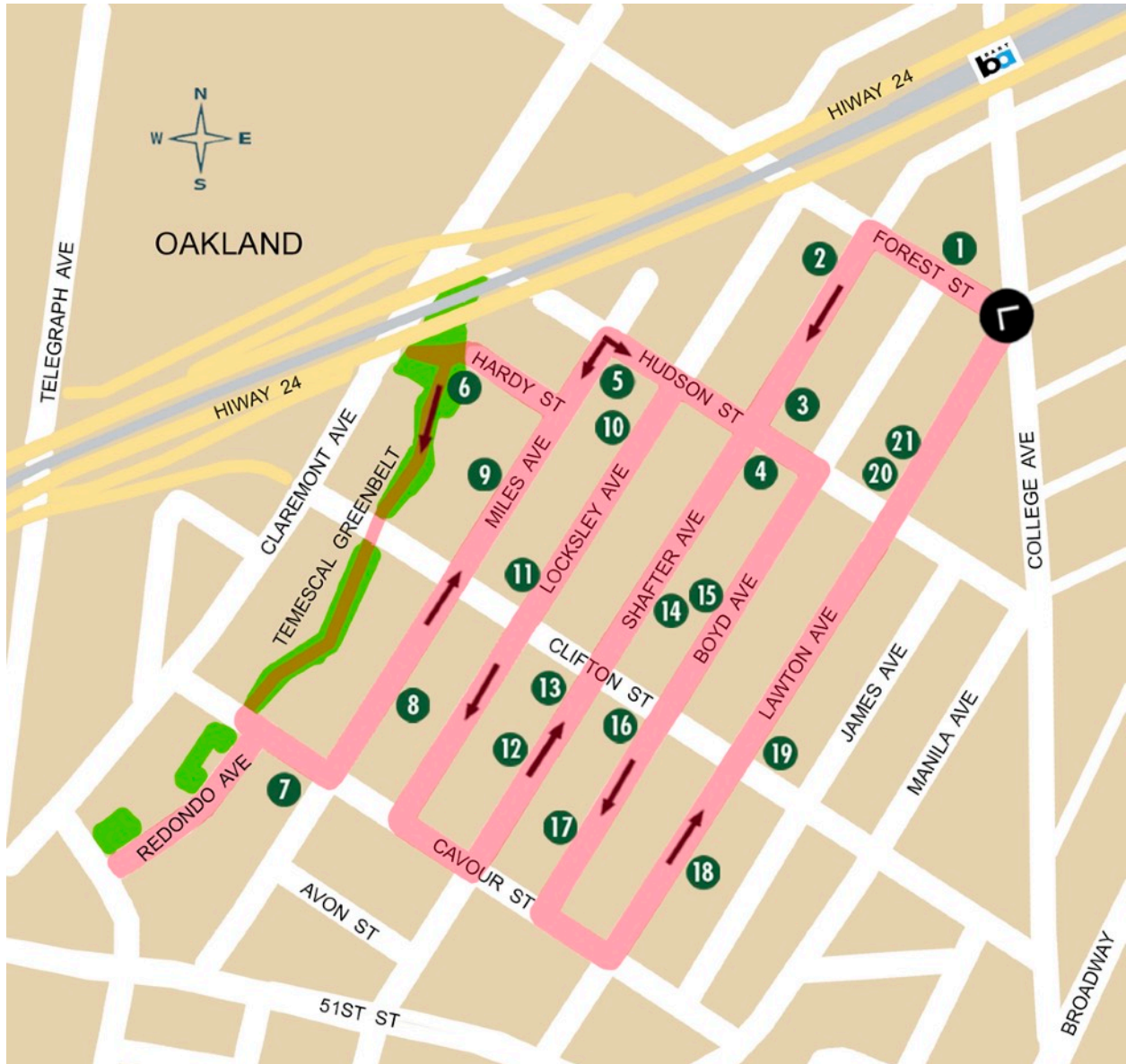
**Elevation gain:** less than 100 feet

**Getting there:** Start at the corner of Forest Street and College Avenue only a block from the Rockridge BART station. There is also fairly frequent AC Transit service. Parking can usually be found on Forest Street or other nearby streets but there are generally 2 hour parking limitations for non-residents.

The area is part of the neighborhood called Temescal but sometimes called Rockridge as the unofficial boundaries vary according to different sources and often the northern part of today's walking area is regarded as part of the Rockridge neighborhood. Temescal includes one of the earliest parts of Oakland as a village grew up around the estate of Vicente Peralta (the center of a huge land grant) near where Claremont and Telegraph Avenues intersect today. The name comes from Temescal creek a name in turn that seems to be derived from an Aztec word for a sweat lodge as someone saw native Ohlone structures near the creek that were similar to Aztec versions. The neighborhood was on a major route from Oakland city center to UC Berkeley and is mainly a residential area that was an Italian American neighborhood for many years and more recently became popular among young couples as some other parts of Rockridge became too pricey. Most homes along today's route date from the high growth period after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

Head away from College on Forest Street. Opposite Boyd Avenue at 320 and 324 Forest (1) note the interesting curlicues on the bargeboards which face out from under the





eaves of the house roofs and dormers. They were probably done by the same builder in 1911-1912. There are Chinese pistache trees along the right side of Forrest that turn brilliant colors in autumn.

A short block later turn left on Shafter Avenue in a somewhat southerly direction. The area has large numbers of Craftsman bungalows as well as some other styles, mainly from the first 20-30 years of the twentieth century. Another style is the high peaked Colonial Revival of which 5459 (2) and 5455 Shafter on the right side are examples, both from 1910. The classical columns on the porch are frequent features of this style.

Intermixed with single family homes you will also see some duplexes and apartment buildings (generally quadraplexes, i.e. those with four units). There is also a nice Colonial Revival bungalow with the typical porch columns at 5445 Shafter also from 1910. The word bungalow is derived from the British period in India and refers to a

residence of one to one and half stories with a porch or veranda. Craftsman bungalows, of which there are good examples across the street at 5442 and 5438 Shafter, feature prominent structural elements such as brackets under the roofline, detailed windows that usually are more divided on the upper part than the lower, front porches, fairly steep roofs with gables that either face the street or to the sides, siding of wood boards, wood shingles or sometimes brick or stucco. The Colonial Revival bungalows by contrast usually have classical porch columns, wood board siding and comparatively lower pitched roofs except for the version seen earlier with a steep gable facing the street.

A large Canary Island palm is across the street in the yard at 5442 Shafter. An expanded and colorful 1911 Craftsman house is farther along at 5418 Shafter (3) with some atypical large windows. Craftsman and Colonial Revival styles were thus being built in the same period in this neighborhood. At the southeast corner with Hudson Street is a quite large Victorian house (4) from 1890 that was being renovated around 2023-2024 and is one the oldest houses on this walk.

Turn right at Hudson and go two short blocks to Miles Avenue noting a cactus and succulent garden on the right at 454 Hudson. On the southeast corner is a two story building at 469-73 Hudson and 5392 Miles (5) with apartments above and two former shopfronts below which are now the Danspace studio with dance classes and events for both children and adults. Cross Miles and turn left to go down the right side of Miles. Sweetgums line the sidewalk and street with their bright autumn hues. A short time later turn right on Hardy and at the end of the short block is a street bulb.

You are now fairly close to the elevated freeway but there is a small parklike area called the Rockridge-Temescal Greenway (6). To the left are playgrounds and to the right a restroom and a fenced off dog area. The park is also called Frog Park, an acronym for Friends of the Rockridge Temescal Greenbelt. Most of the park is a thin strip that follows the former bed of Temescal Creek which was culverted in the 1960s despite community opposition when Hiway 24 was built. However, the concerned citizens did obtain the right to leave open space for a future park.

Go over between the playground and the fenced dog park to the right to look across the street for a mural under the freeway, done by artist Gary Graham and students in 1977 depicting an underwater panorama of sea creatures and divers; it was restored by the artist in 2003. The dog park dates from 1995 and the rest of the park



**Rockridge-Temescal Greenbelt**

was built in the early 2000s thanks to strong involvement by the community including many years of planning and construction of the playgrounds. This was carried out by hundreds of volunteer citizens to hold down costs with the first phase done in 2002 and other phases in later years. Supposedly at times water is pumped up from the culvert below to make a faux creek running through the greenbelt but we have not seen evidence of it. The creation of the park was a major issue for a neighborhood in Oakland that is underserved by public open space.

Go back past the playground and away from the freeway and bear right on the paved path that goes between two playground areas that include a fairly innovative play structure to the left. There are mature trees as the open area along the path narrows down. Beside the path is a depressed area with stones that represents the former Temescal creek. Here and there are some cement posts with plaques designating animals native to the area such as Cooper's Hawk and rainbow trout but the eyeholes on each side don't seem to reveal anything. When you get to a street, cross carefully to continue on the path where you will pass the local Department of Motor Vehicles office and related parking lots. Eventually on the left is a raised platform with miniature versions of the animal sculptures and descriptions. In the DMV parking lot and opening on to parallel Claremont Avenue is the Temescal Oakland Farmers Market on Sundays from 9 am to 1 pm.

Not far from here on the other side of Claremont Avenue and near Vicente Way, Telegraph and 55th Streets was the site of Vicente Peralta's adobe, the center for the Temescal village and the huge estate that he inherited from his father Luis Maria Peralta, extending all the way to what is now Emeryville, downtown Oakland and the Berkeley border. There were four estates for the four sons including that of Jose

Domingo Peralta which covered most of what is now Berkeley.



**5185 Miles Avenue**

When you come to another street named Cavour, cross it carefully and go down Redondo Avenue to see Little Frog Park; there seems to be one segment across from 5262-64 Redondo with a big oak tree and some native cottonwoods (that often grow near creeks). Another segment of the park is at Clarke Street; it has benches, playground equipment and redwood trees. Turn around and return to Cavour.

Go right on Cavour Street. When you get to Miles go right just a little bit to note the Victorian house on the corner at 5185 Miles (7). It dates

from 1885 and thus would seem to be the oldest on our route. It has a turret and an impressive rounded porch including curved glass windows. Across the street and a bit

farther is a house with false front from 1904 that has elements of the Italianate style such as the shelflike features over the door and windows. Now turn around to cross Cavour and head north up Miles. Farther along note 5228 Miles (8) on the right side from 1901 which combines elements of Colonial Revival and Victorian. The interesting shingle pattern in the large gable that slopes outward at the bottom is Victorian. However, the arch over the porch entryway with short columns on each side is more Colonial Revival in style.

The lots on the left side in this block and the next back onto the Temescal Greenway that we walked along and many of them contain duplexes, often back to front rather than side by side. Some of them also include newer residences built to the rear. A good example of this you can see in the next block looking down the driveway at 5323 Miles (9). There are also some California bungalows on this block with stucco siding, low pitched roofs that are usually in clay tile and small or nonexistent porches. An example is at 5343-45 Miles. Overall it is well kept neighborhood and has experienced some gentrification like much of the Rockridge area though there still seems to be an ethnic mix of the people seen at the Greenway and on the streets.

Turn right on Hudson Street and go one block to Locksley Avenue.

**Shortcut:** If you are short of time go one more block on Hudson and left at Shafter and right on Forest back to the start.

To continue the walk turn right on Locksley, and at number 5369 is a 1912 house (10) that was modernized and a full second floor added though the historic porch and front door seem to have been retained. There are a number of eucalyptus trees which seem like an unusual choice for sidewalk street trees. Near the next intersection 5305 Locksley (11), originally built in 1905, was lifted up to make a full floor underneath (around 2019?) and some of the historic features were modified.. On the next block are quite a few more houses that have been altered and/raised up which obviously provides the residents with more space, although it somehow makes this block seem a bit less harmonious than most of the others along the route although like the others it does have nice autumn colors. Note the sculpted trees at 5231 Locksley. Go left on Cavour and left again on Shafter.

The street is somewhat wider than Miles and Locksley with more street trees and somewhat larger front gardens. Some of the trees (pears?) bloom in March with white flowers. At 5237 Shafter (12) there is a raised up glass "room" in the front yard that may hold miniature furniture or other sculptures made to one twelfth



**5237 Shafter Avenue**

scale by the resident artist and called Twelve2One. Then 5278 Shafter (13) on the southeast corner is a Craftsman bungalow, built in 1916 and more recently remodeled with very pronounced structural features such as the brackets that are further emphasized by the paint job. In the next block 5324 Shafter (14) from 1912 has a handsome chimney of river stones and a wide porch while another wide porch is at 5336 Shafter. Farther along on the left side the 1910 Craftsman at 5367 Shafter has attractive carpentry in the porch columns and there is an upper level addition that is set back so as to preserve the historic facade.

On the Southeast corner with Hudson at 5380 Shafter (4) is the Victorian house we noted earlier which dates from 1890 and is thus probably one of the two oldest houses on today's route and it is certainly the grandest. It features a large yard, ornamentation over the porch and bay windows and on the bargeboards as well as fish scale shingles on the upper level and incised panels on the lower wall. In the middle of the right bay is a window that has an upper arched section with stained glass. In the rear is a two story projecting wing with big glass windows all around on the ground floor level. big old gnarly tree in the yard? Foundation etc work in 2023?

If you need to cut the walk short continue straight on Shafter and right on Forest back to the start. To continue the walk turn right on Hudson and then right again on Boyd Avenue which is somewhat narrower with smaller front yards and fewer street trees, but there are nevertheless some attractive trees and it has a more intimate feel than Shafter. At the southeast corner at 415 Hudson is a large Colonial Revival style house. Well down the block between 5335 and 5329 Boyd (15) is a very large California coastal live oak tree. They are called live oaks because they retain leaves through the winter.

At the southwest corner with Clifton Street (425,27,29 Clifton) (16), the core of the structure is a historic 1910 house, but it has been expanded at the front and sides up



**5225 Boyd avenue**

to the sidewalk to create three residential condominium units, all with front entrances on Clifton. Continue on Boyd and at 5225 Boyd (17) is a small but densely landscaped garden that is a riot of color and texture, mainly of succulents with some fanciful statues as well. The gardening has been done by resident Julianne Sherback.

At the intersection are some sweetgums and a ginkgo tree that provide bright autumn color. Turn left on Cavour and left again on Lawton Avenue for the final leg of the walk. At 5238 Lawton (18) is a 1929 residence that combines elements of Craftsman and California stucco bungalow. In the

next block just after Clifton at 5302 Lawton (19) is an impressive 1912 stucco Craftsman with the numerous details brought out by the paint scheme. This street is also wider than Boyd, similar to Shafter, and this block has some larger homes with full two stories, generally in stucco with styles such as Mediterranean. A large residence which is actually a 1914 duplex is a block later at the northwest corner with Hudson at 5405 Lawton/402 Hudson (20) in brick and shingles. Then at 5417 Lawton (21) the long row of windows over the garage has lovely stained glass flowers.

At the end of the block you arrive at College Avenue where the starting point is there across Forrest. You may want to enjoy the many restaurants, shops and cafes or continue exploring other streets in this very walkable urban area.

**A note on street names:** Although there was a prominent Shafter family in Oakland, Shafter Avenue is reportedly named after General William Rufus Shafter who was awarded the Medal of Honor in the Civil War and was a prominent leader in the Spanish American war. This view seems justified since nearby Miles Avenue was named after Major General Nelson A. Miles who was also distinguished in these two wars. Though I could not find confirming evidence, I think Lawton Avenue was named after General Henry Ware Lawton, a Civil War hero who also fought in the Spanish American War and then in the Philippine American war where he died in action. He was well respected in the Philippines and a central Plaza in Manila and a road to the military cemetery were named after him. Further strengthening this view, Manila Avenue is a parallel street two blocks away. Cavour Avenue is probably named after the Count of Cavour, a leading figure in the 19th century reunification of Italy

## Walk 48

# Albany Hill and Cerrito Creek

by [\*Janet Byron\*](#)

**Overview:** Near the border between El Cerrito and Albany, the walk explores the restored Cerrito Creek before ascending into the little known public park on Albany Hill offering a wide variety of plants and birds as well as occasional impressive views.

**Highlights:**

- \* Tree-lined Cerrito Creek with possible sightings of fish or aquatic fowl
- \* A climb up into Albany Hill Park with native plants and a eucalyptus forest
- \* Views of the San Francisco Bay and the East Bay hills

**Distance:** 2.5 miles; 1.85 miles with shortcuts

**Elevation gain:** 350 feet

**Getting there:** Start in front of Peet's Coffee at the southwest corner of San Pablo Avenue and Carlson Boulevard. AC Transit service is fairly frequent, and the walk starts only a few blocks from El Cerrito Plaza BART station. Parking is usually available on Carlson. Check signs.

Margot Cunningham, Albany's natural areas coordinator since 2017, in viewing Albany Hill noted, "So many people don't know about this place. You look up while driving by and see this green thing, and don't realize that there's a park here."

Located between busy San Pablo Avenue and the El Cerrito Plaza mall to the east and even busier Interstate 80 and Pacific East Mall to the west, Albany Hill is an ecological island amid urbanity at the edge of the San Francisco Bay. More than 100 native plants, 150 moths and butterflies, and 100 bird species have been spotted here, as well as a native scorpion. Willows grow along the banks of Cerrito Creek to the north and a mature forest of coast live oaks flanks its east side. The 338-foot summit is crowned with around 1,000 nonnative eucalyptus trees, many of which are diseased and are being thinned to limit fire danger.

It's Cunningham's job to help coordinate all things Albany Hill. For the past decade, Albany, a city of 20,000 between El Cerrito and Berkeley, has been implementing its 2012 [Albany Hill Creekside Master Plan](#), which includes accessibility upgrades, fire

## Albany Hill and Cerrito Creek 2



safety measures, and the preservation of native plant communities and important overwintering sites for monarch butterflies.

From the starting point walk away from San Pablo Avenue on Carlson and bear left onto Adams Street, which looks kind of like an alley and dead ends at Cerrito Creek Path West, with recycled-glass and ceramic paving on the sidewalk.

### **Two Counties, Two Cities, One State, One Creek**

El Cerrito — which means “the little hill” in Spanish — takes its name from the hill in Albany.

Cerrito Creek forms the border between Albany and El Cerrito, as well as Alameda and Contra Costa counties. Discussions are underway to build two bridges across the creek, a challenging proposition because of the multiple jurisdictions involved, including a small portion owned by the State of California’s Orientation Center for the Blind.

At the end of Adams Street, a small overlook extends over the creek with an information board on the various critters — from insects to mammals and birds — which can be found in this area. Walk along the path with a fence and the creek to the left and housing to the right. Native trees line the creek here, such as willows, coastal live oaks, buckeyes, and a couple of tall sycamores.



Then a sign explains how a web of small creeks fed into a wetland here; people put the creek into a straight channel and lost the wetlands. Moreover, the measures did not stop occasional flooding. Across from this sign Middle Creek is seen pouring into



**Looking back upstream on Cerrito Creek**

Cerrito Creek; an upper fork of the former stream is called Blackberry Creek in the north Berkeley hills.

A little farther along is a small park (1) with playground equipment on the right, another sign about birds, and a stone pond-like channel for flood control in times of heavy rainfall.

Finally, the paved path ends at the parking lot of Pacific East Mall (Ranch 99), with an informal dirt path along the left side of the pavement. (It would be helpful if the mall owners would put in a proper path for pedestrians.)

The creek continues toward the Bay on the left with a

blank building wall on the right (a prime opportunity for a mural).

Families of mallards and other waterfowl can often be seen on this stretch (2) of Cerrito Creek. At the end of the parking lot turn left to cross over Cerrito Creek on Pierce Street. Across Pierce to the west is a wall along the I-80 freeway. Turn left again on the other side of the bridge to walk back along the creekside trail on the Albany side. There are hundreds of homes on Albany Hill, including the high-rise towers farther along on Pierce Street; multifamily housing with terrific views to the east; and single-family homes on the slopes to the east and south. Behind the fence are 4- and 5-story multiunit buildings, with tennis court, picnic tables, basketball hoop, and a line of cottonwood trees.

Follow the main trail as it eventually angles off away from the creek to the right. Just beyond this point, keep an eagle eye out for mortar holes (3) in the large, fairly flat rocks on both sides, which the Huichun band of Ohlone used for pounding acorns, grass, and wildflower seeds. The Huchuinn lived along the creek and its tributary here for thousands of years, and flecks of shells from their middens can be seen in the soil along the trails.

A short distance past the mortars, turn right on the first trail you see to start climbing the hill, with sections of wooden steps and switchbacks. This area is dominated by native plants including oaks, elderberry, gooseberry, blackberry, poison oak, and

hazelnut, as well as seasonal flowers such as hounds' tongue, sticky monkey flower, aster, bee plant, miner's lettuce, wood mint, Indian cucumber, cow parsnip, and sweet peas.

While walking up through the mature oak forest, be grateful to all the East Bay residents who have fought various ill-advised development schemes on Albany Hill since the 1940s, including proposed construction of a 17-million-square-foot PG&E water storage tank; a planned removal of 200 feet from the hilltop to build 300 homes; and a scheme for a luxury hotel with 527 rooms, a convention center, 3 bars, and a swimming pool,



**Mortar holes**

Spurred by the committed stewardship efforts of Friends of Albany Hill, Albany began acquiring the land to create [Albany Hill and Creekside Park](#) in the 1990s. These days several local volunteer groups advocate for the park and tend Albany Hill's natural areas: [Friends of Albany Hill](#) works to preserve native species and supports the annual monarch butterfly migration; [Friends of Five Creeks](#) restores habitat along the creek banks and hillsides; [El Cerrito Trail Trekkers](#) regularly fishes trash out of the creek; and Cunningham's group, [Tending the Ancient Shoreline Hill \(TASH\)](#), pulls invasive plants to allow natives to return and supplements with native plantings.

Follow the trail and continue up a newer set of stairs with handrails to where Jackson Street ends (4). To the left are townhouses finished in brown shingle and projecting out over the steep hillside on large columns. Continue up the stairs to the right and follow the trail uphill to the main park entrance at the end of Taft Street (5).

In 2020 Albany completed a 482-foot, ADA-compliant cement trail from this uppermost park entrance. Benches with views dot the summit area. Labeled native plants are along the first part of the ADA trail (6).

Trail improvements include regraded trail and 100 new steps at the park entrances at Taft, Jackson, and Madison streets on the hill's south side. "The city wants to increase access for more people," Cunningham says.

With the help of the Richmond nonprofit [Urban Tilth](#), Albany is continuing improvements by installing additional steps, decommissioning switchback cutoffs, and shoring up eroding areas of trail; furthermore, local Eagle Scouts are planning additional trail projects.



**Near the summit**

The tall eucalyptus on Albany Hill — which were planted in the late 19th century as a buffer for dynamite and gunpowder factories on the northwest side — are now suffering from [leaf blight fungus](#), and they present a fire danger to surrounding residents.

“The trees can’t photosynthesize and make enough energy to survive,” Cunningham says. “Plus climate change and the warmer, drier climate is affecting them in a way that they won’t be able to make it.”

To limit fire danger, Albany has installed a new fire hydrant at the summit and hired Urban Tilth to mow annual grasses and remove bark and branch debris, as well as a tree company to remove dead eucalyptus. Staff from the Albany Fire Department and others inspect Albany Hill daily. In 2021, the City of Albany launched a plan to address the death of the eucalyptus forest on Albany hill due to drought and disease. The plan includes the removal of dying and dead trees, which increase fire risk, and restoration of native ecosystems.

Monarch butterflies have used the hill’s eucalyptus as overwintering sites in significant numbers, Cunningham says, although [the counts](#) were alarmingly low recently. [Albany has been consulting](#) with arborists and scientists to figure out how to remove the hazardous, diseased trees and restore native habitat for the monarchs, which will involve protecting native understory and planting trees for them to overwinter in.

“Most of the people I talk to don’t like the eucalyptus,” Cunningham says. “But we have to make sure that we do the tree removal in a responsible way.”

Walk downhill heading south on the wide dirt trail (7), which is somewhat eroded and rocky, taking time to admire the occasional views that open up toward the bay or the east bay hills. Farther down the hill, an 11-acre, unfenced tract on the west side is privately owned and remains zoned for residential development; the owners are currently asking \$10 million for the property.

At the signed fork (8), there are two alternatives: (option 1) Head left as signed for Taft. This is the shorter way, but the steps farther down are tricky and there is a sharp drop-off from the eroded trail. At the bottom is Taft Street, near an intersection (9); or (option 2) Bear right signed for Pierce. This is a longer way but less steep and tricky and a preferred route. After a short distance go left at a trail intersection where another signpost points to the end of Hillside Avenue (10). Follow that street as it gradually descends and curves around and you will get to the intersection with Taft (9) noted in option (1).



**Sign at trail fork**

Having taken either option, from the intersection go downhill on Hillside. Cross Cerrito Street, which comes in from the right and go straight for a little while. Then opposite 925/927 Hillside take the unsigned staircase on the right (11) down to Jackson Street. Cross and continue straight down one block on Castro Street, then turn left on Madison Street. At 630 Madison on the left (12) note a garden full of figurines, toy monsters, Mr. Potato Heads, and other quirky stuff.

There are two options from this point

(option 3) For a somewhat shorter but noisier route, go right down Clay Street opposite 602 Madison (13) (no sign at this writing) two blocks to San Pablo Avenue and go left and then left again at Carlson to the starting point.

(option 4) For a longer and nicer route that includes some repeat of the trail, reenter Albany Hill Park on the unpaved path at the end of Madison Street (14). Notice the newish steps, native plantings, and plank bridge over a gully that drains into Middle Creek. The tributary disappears into a culvert under the Orientation Center for the Blind, then winds through dense willows before flowing into Cerrito Creek.

When you reach Cerrito Creek, a tree trunk section provides a possible crossing point (this is a location for a proposed bridge) but probably best avoided if you are not extremely confident in your balance or the creek is in high flow. Instead, enjoy the creek again by walking back to Pierce Street on the Albany side, going right over the bridge, and turning right again to return the way you came past the Pacific East Mall parking lot and along the paved Cerrito Creek Path West to San Pablo Avenue.