

## A Cultural and Natural History of the Baxter Creek Watershed

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Prepared by The Watershed Project (previously known as the Aquatic Outreach Institute)

*Author's note: Some of the information in this booklet—particularly relating to the early Native American inhabitants of the watershed and the Rancho San Pablo period—was originally researched and published in a slightly modified form in A Cultural and Natural History of the San Pablo Creek Watershed (Aquatic Outreach Institute, 2000), as both watersheds lie within the same geographical area and much of the same general history applies.*

### *Introduction*

High in the hills of Richmond and El Cerrito, Baxter Creek begins its journey to San Francisco Bay as three, small, separate streams. Those streams—which eventually become one—make their way to the Bay in a southwesterly direction, meandering through golf courses, city parks, back yards, and vacant lots, and sometimes in pipes beneath streets, basketball courts, homes, and nurseries.

The Baxter Creek system traverses dramatic topography. Originating in springs at elevations of close to 400 feet, the creek drops to sea level in just a little over two miles as it enters the Bay. Compared to large watersheds like nearby Wildcat or San Pablo Creek, which encompass approximately 13 and 41 square miles respectively, the Baxter Creek watershed is small, draining only approximately 1.92 square miles. Yet it was once an importance resource for the Native Americans and wildlife who lived along its banks, and today it is the focus of an ambitious watershed-awareness program that is helping residents of Richmond and El Cerrito learn about their landscape, as altered as it may be, and to become watershed stewards by engaging in hands-on restoration activities.

### *The Path of the Creek*

Like many urban streams, Baxter Creek (also known as Stege, Bishop, Canyon Trail, and Tewksbury Creek) has been much altered from its original condition, having been rerouted in sections, hidden underground in others, and even—as with many urban creeks—confined in concrete channels. Like many urban watersheds, the Baxter Creek watershed has been covered with buildings and impermeable surfaces like asphalt and concrete. Because many sections of the creek flow in culverts beneath the ground, people find it difficult to understand where the creek comes from and where it goes.

The Baxter Creek watershed wasn't always so fragmented and confusing. Clues to its important past can be glimpsed today, with a little determined sleuthing and some storm drain maps. Today's storm drain system takes the three branches—the Mira Vista aka Tewksbury branch (the northernmost branch, which can be seen in Richmond's Mira Vista Park), the Poinsett branch (the middle branch, visible in El Cerrito's Poinsett Park), and the Canyon Trail, Bishop, or Stege branch (the southernmost branch, which flows through El Cerrito's Canyon Trail Park)—and joins them together into one waterway just south of Angelo's Delicatessen, near MacDonald and San Pablo Avenues. At this juncture, the three branches converge to flow in a concrete channel beneath Interstate 80.

The creek pops up above ground again briefly on the other side of the freeway (on private property), then continues its journey underground through the City of Richmond. At Booker T. Anderson Park, at 47th and Cypress Streets, it reemerges. After meandering through the park, it returns to a

culvert in which it flows southwesterly again beneath a low-income housing development known as Crescent Park (an old, lone willow survives there in a parking lot as testament to the creek's former presence above ground). It next emerges in a straightened channel beside the railroad tracks that parallel the Interstate 580 freeway, near Bayview Avenue and Carlson Boulevard. South of the Bayview flyover, it makes a sharp right turn and flows beneath I-580 into Stege Marsh and San Francisco Bay.

### *Early Inhabitants of the Watershed*

Although the watershed is not large, we know that the creek was once an important resource for Native Americans. One clue is the grinding holes carved into the bedrock outcroppings in both Mira Vista Park (Richmond) and Canyon Trail Park (El Cerrito). The Native Americans—Ohlone Indians of the Huchiun clan—drank from the creek's clear, spring-fed waters. In the rock outcroppings, they ground acorns into a gruel and carved petroglyphs. The rocks were very likely also used in important ceremonies and rituals, possibly even by other Native Americans pre-dating the Ohlones. Many cultural artifacts have been discovered along the creek, and the entire length of the stream is designated on a City of Richmond map as having "high archaeological sensitivity." The impact of the early native California residents on the stream was probably negligible, as they relied primarily on the San Francisco Bay estuary and larger streams for food resources. Any dams they might have built on the creek to catch fish would have been temporary in nature.

Baxter Creek and the other East Bay streams were important for wildlife too. Grizzly and black bears, mountain lions, coyotes, bobcats, wolves, mule deer, and tule elk once roamed the hills of El Cerrito and Richmond and drank from the streams, while the riparian (or creek-side) vegetation along the streams provided food and shelter for many birds and small mammals like foxes, squirrels, and brush rabbits, whose remains were discovered years later in prehistoric middens, or shellmounds along the creek. In the flatlands of Richmond, jackrabbits were still so plentiful as late as the early 1900s that operators of the East Shore and Suburban Railway—a local trolley line—stopped to shoot at them. Grassland and marsh birds like meadowlarks, California quail, and red-winged blackbirds were common, their calls ringing out from the vernal pools and wildflower meadows covering the Richmond/El Cerrito flatlands. Many mammals—raccoons, striped skunks, minks, and weasels—traveled along the creek corridors at night. Today, the most common small mammal in the watershed is probably the introduced fox squirrel, which has displaced the native grey squirrel in many urbanized areas.

Huchiuns who lived closer to the Bay caught mussels, California oysters, seabirds like cormorants and grebes, and sea otters, seals, and sea lions. Occasionally, they would feast on a whale that had washed ashore. They traded the foods they found in the estuary for the goods of other clans who lived farther inland. Where the creeks transitioned from fresh to saltwater marsh as they entered the Bay, the Huchiuns caught songbirds and shorebirds in carefully hidden nets. They harvested tules, cattails, willows, and sedges, which they used for weaving over 15 different types of baskets, boats to fish in, and even huts to live in. Beneath the cordgrass, saltgrass, and pickleweed of the salt marsh, they found bent-nosed clams and snails and within the tidal channels caught sturgeon, bat rays, thresher sharks, and leopard sharks. They may have also fished for white sea bass and porpoise in deeper waters. In addition to these sources of protein, the Huchiuns ate the seeds of California buttercup, blue wild rye, creeping wild rye, farewell-to-spring, and chia, an upright blue flower with grayish leaves. The small, flat, brown seeds of chia are tasty and nutritious and are used even today by Native Americans to treat diabetes. The greens of wild clover, lupine, miner's lettuce, columbine, and spindleroot were eaten raw or steamed. Soap root flourished in the fields near the creek, and the

women would dig up its bulbs with sharp sticks and roast them over hot coals. Many of these plants still grow in parts of the watershed, often hidden among introduced grasses and weeds.

#### *The Rancho Period (1820s-1880s)*

Sometime between 1813 and 1817, the Spanish priests who established San Francisco's Mission Dolores founded an outpost in San Pablo, where they grazed sheep and grew crops. Many of the Huchiuns in the Richmond/San Pablo area were taken to Mission Dolores and forced to live in exile, allowed to return to their home ground only twice a year. In 1823, after Mexico took possession of California from Spain, the Mexican government formally awarded the Huchiun land to Francisco Castro for his service in the Mexican army, and the Mission Dolores priests surrendered the land. Castro retained some of the Huchiuns to work on his rancho, but by this time, the tribe had been destroyed as an organized group. In 1852, an agent of the United States government discovered 78 Native Americans working on Castro's rancho. In poor health (they had no immunity to diseases introduced by the Europeans), these native Americans were probably the last of the Richmond/San Pablo-area Huchiuns.

The first dramatic changes to Baxter and the other streams in the area probably occurred with European settlement. The land through which Baxter Creek flows was part of the Rancho San Pablo, a land grant consisting of at least 90 square kilometers ranging from El Cerrito north to Pinole and east to El Sobrante and Lafayette. Like the Huchiuns, Francisco Castro seemed to recognize the importance of living near fresh water and built his family's first adobe on Wildcat Creek (near today's Riverside School in Richmond).

Rancho San Pablo was primarily used for growing hay and grazing cattle, and the cattle were watered in the local creeks. The cows very likely trampled their banks, destroying vegetation and muddying the clear waters. Impacts from the trampling and destruction of vegetation probably lasted for years.

But Castro's domain did not last long. His land was contested in legal battles waged by European settlers new to the area. After his death in 1831, his heirs received title to only 200 acres. The remainder was acquired by other European settlers, often by questionable means.

#### *European Settlers*

By the early 1900s, Baxter Creek may have become an intermittent stream. In his 1910 paper on the shellmounds at Ellis Landing (west of the Baxter Creek watershed), UC Berkeley archaeologist N.C. Nelson found only a "very slight superficial indication of old creeks that once crossed the area . . . one or two of these run between Stege and the Berkeley Hills". (The Berkeley Hills in the Richmond area are also known as the San Pablo Ridge. The Mira Vista Golf Course lies on the west side of the Ridge, where the Baxter Creek branches originate). By 1910, grazing and other land-uses had likely already degraded many of the East Bay's smaller streams, but it is also possible that Baxter Creek dried up in the summer months, or that the many farms along its banks were diverting or pumping most of its water. Today, the creek flows year round, fed by the springs, and by runoff from irrigated golf courses, lawns, and gardens, as well as other urban sources.

By the late 1800s, several prominent landowners had settled in the Baxter Creek watershed. One of them, a retired physician named Jacob Tewksbury, was responsible for connecting the Potrero San Pablo area—the hilly land stretching from Point Richmond to Chevron's tank farm—to the Richmond mainland. Tewksbury came to Contra Costa County from South America in the 1850s and bought many acres of land in Rancho San Pablo along and between San Pablo and Wildcat

Creeks as well as along Baxter Creek. On 1899 maps, his wife, Emily, is shown as owning large parcels of land in both the upper and lower Baxter Creek watershed, along what is today the Mira Vista branch (this has prompted some people to christen it “Tewksbury Creek”).

Tewksbury built dams at both ends of the navigable channel that separated the Potrero from the mainland and connected San Pablo Bay to San Francisco Bay: one near the mouth of San Pablo Creek and the other at Ellis Landing (near the foot of 11th Street in the City of Richmond). Over time, as silt washed in and was deposited, the channel and its dendritic sloughs filled with sediment. By 1872, the government had declared the Potrero a peninsula, and Tewksbury added some of the land connecting the Potrero to the mainland to his extensive holdings. Later, the City of Richmond built on top of this former wetland. Today, a large state building, several motels, a school, roads, and a freeway are among the structures that occupy this once marshy ground.

John Davis, a farmer from Yugoslavia, also lived in the Baxter Creek watershed. Davis was an unsuccessful goldminer who opened up a restaurant and lodging house on Commercial Street in San Francisco in 1850. In 1851, he moved to the Richmond/San Pablo area, where he bought more than 400 acres from the Castro family. While he operated a farm in the San Pablo Creek watershed, he also owned a large parcel in the Baxter Creek watershed, close to where the Sakai Brothers Rose Company and the Oishi Nursery are located today, near South 47<sup>th</sup> and Wall Streets. MacDonald Avenue, once called Davis Lane, was an old stagecoach road along which Davis planted eucalyptus trees as a windbreak (the practice of many farmers in the East Bay). Davis is commemorated today by Davis Park in San Pablo—through which Wildcat Creek flows—which was sold to the City by his daughters after his death.

Another early European settler in the Baxter Creek watershed was Thomas Benton Bishop. Bishop’s land was roughly bounded by today’s Arlington Boulevard, MacDonald Avenue, Potrero Avenue, and South 45<sup>th</sup> Street. Bishop was a San Francisco attorney who acquired close to 2,000 acres of land in San Ramon when a gambler reneged on a debt. Evidently not much of a farmer himself, he hired others to manage his land, and his San Ramon ranch became famous for its beef cattle, sheep, pears, and walnuts, among other crops (today the Bishop Ranch business park is located on approximately 600 acres of the old ranch). It is likely that his El Cerrito land was used to raise dairy cattle, as dairy farms were very common here and in the Mira Vista neighborhood of Richmond. A remnant of Bishop’s presence is revealed in the form of a small shopping strip (on San Pablo Avenue just south of Conlon across from Home Depot), known as “Bishop Plaza.”

But one of the most prominent—and flamboyant—landowners was Richard Stege, a gold miner and entrepreneur from Germany. In the early 1870s, Stege married Minna Quilfeldt, a wealthy widow, and acquired 600 acres of grazing land, encompassing what is now the 19.5-acre Booker T. Anderson Park. Stege, his new wife, and her daughter lived in a southern-style mansion near the site of today’s Stege Elementary School, at 49th and Cypress Streets. To the northeast were dairy and cattle ranches and farms, including John Davis’ and Thomas Bishop’s properties. In the late 1800s, Stege sold large sections of his and his wife’s property to several explosives and chemical manufacturing plants. The small industrial town that subsequently developed and incorporated in 1905 was named after him. A railroad depot was located nearby, near 47th and Carlson, not too far from the shoreline, and the industrial community of Stege—with businesses like the Metropolitan Match Factory, California Cap Works, Stauffer Chemical Company, and the Tonite Powder Works—thrived during the late 1890s and early 1900s. During these years, Richmond was still

primarily pasture land, but in 1912 it annexed Stege. The legacy of some of those former industries is evident today near the mouth of the creek, where contaminated soils are being remediated.

Richard Stege created elaborate gardens on his estate, planting palms and other trees, along with beds of roses, violets, and carnations. He also dammed (and probably straightened) portions of Baxter Creek and possibly another creek that appears to have flowed through the site to the south of it, to create a series of ponds for rearing frogs. Stege began operating a frog farm, selling frogs for \$2 apiece to San Francisco restaurants for their tasty legs, a popular delicacy. His business became California's largest and most successful frog ranch. But Stege may have unwittingly been an early contributor to the demise of the native red-legged frog, federally listed today as a threatened species. In addition to raising native red-legged frogs, Stege imported bullfrogs, which are known to eat young red-legged frogs. In any event, his gourmet idea caught on. By 1898, he was besieged with competition from other frog entrepreneurs, and his thriving business came to an end.

An 1899 map of land use in 1894, under the parcel entitled "Est. of Minna C.C. Stege," shows a somewhat sinuous stream. The straightened stream may have been trying to recover its natural meanders, in spite of Stege's dams and other alterations. After Stege's death in 1898, his daughter Edith (his wife had died a few years earlier) continued to live on the estate. In approximately 1912, a small schoolhouse (called "Stege School") was built on the land. Shortly thereafter, Edith Stege sold the property to the Eastshore and Suburban Railway, a local trolley line, which turned the area into "Eastshore Park," complete with a popular dance pavilion and skating rink.

### *Urbanization*

When the rail company bought the land from Edith, it further altered the creek, reclaiming the frog ponds as public swimming holes. During the Depression, public use of the railway's park declined, and a new entrepreneur bought the land, hoping to develop it commercially. However, in the late 1930s, over the objections of many citizens who were concerned about the cost, the City of Richmond purchased the land for \$17,000, demolished the old Stege mansion, and created a new public park called Potrero Municipal Park. In 1943, to serve the women who worked in Richmond's many industrial plants during World War II, the city built a children's day care center just to the west of the creek. At the end of the war, the city leased the building to the Richmond School District, which operated it as Pico Elementary School. Later, that school moved to another location, and the former day care center was converted to Gompers Continuation School. Despite the fact that that facility was put up hurriedly and never designed to be permanent, it remained on the site until 1970. At some point during the intervening years, Potrero Municipal Park became known as East Shore Park; in the early 1990s, its name was changed again, to Booker T. Anderson, Jr. Park, for an esteemed minister and former mayor of Richmond. Irma Anderson, his widow, is Mayor of Richmond today.

No evidence is available as to exactly what happened to the creek during the early years under city ownership of the park, although in a 1947 aerial photo, the school/day care center buildings can be seen close to the creek, which appears as a vegetated, sinuous stream. But plan drawings for the park show that by 1953, the creek had been channelized or straightened, and a plot plan for the park identifies only an "open drainage ditch," suggesting that the creek was no longer seen as the aesthetic amenity of prior days. In 1970, the Gompers School buildings were demolished, and the landscape architecture firm of Royston, Hanamoto, Alley, and Abey made extensive "improvements" to the creek, widening and rerouting the upstream half of the channel in an apparent attempt to accommodate construction of a new parking lot.

Downstream, near the mouth of the creek, about 50 small apartments and a community center were built during World War II, to house shipyard workers. The community, known as Seaport, was inhabited primarily by African Americans, who planted vegetable gardens in the rich soils near the creek and marshes and raised small animals. Stauffer Chemical was sited next door and manufactured sulfuric acid (it is this substance that is being cleaned from the soils today). Seaport was torn down in 1956, and Stauffer Chemical was bought by Zeneca, which is remediating the site today.

By the 1940s, the City of El Cerrito was largely built out, and much of the Canyon Trail branch of the creek had been put underground. The City of Richmond was built out by then, too, and many of its creeks disappeared as well, including much of the Mira Vista branch. Dairy farms and poppy fields gave way to houses, streets, businesses, and more impervious surfaces. Much of the land mid-watershed was purchased by Japanese Americans for nurseries. The area between MacDonald Avenue and Cutting Boulevard along San Pablo Avenue—where I-80, Honda of El Cerrito, and Home Depot sprawl across the landscape today—were home to close to a dozen, mainly Japanese-American-owned nurseries. A few of those businesses, located west of the freeway, still operate today.

At the top of the watershed, the Mira Vista Golf and Country Club (then called the Berkeley Country Club) was built in 1920, designed by Scottish golf course architect William Watson. The creek in its natural state disappeared, probably moved to make room for holes and turf, although its water was obviously pumped and used to create special “water features,” such as a pond.

As more of the watershed’s natural surface was paved over, rainwater raced into the creek, exacerbating erosion and probably causing localized flooding. But rather than recognizing that impervious surfaces—such as streets, driveways, and roofs—were preventing rainwater from slowly infiltrating into the ground, and thus causing most of these problems, storm water engineers blamed the creeks, justifying putting them underground. Later, in the 1950s, the Poinsett Park section was put in a pipe underground, as were many sections of the creek in the Richmond flatlands—such as the Oishi Nursery site—as part of “improvements” to the storm drain system. Interesting, however, the creek is still shown as open in the Richmond flatlands on recent USGS topo maps.

### *The Watershed Today*

Attitudes toward storm water and creeks are changing. Many cities, storm water agencies, and flood control districts are realizing that creeks are not the culprit, but that our land use practices and patterns are largely to blame for our flooding and erosion problems. New regulations that require developers to better treat stormwater runoff have been put into effect by the San Francisco Regional Water Quality Control Board (the regulatory agency responsible for protecting the Bay and all of its waterways), evidence of a more enlightened way of thinking about urban runoff. Along with this new understanding comes interest in restoring—and even opening up—degraded and buried waterways.

Since 1997, the Friends of Baxter Creek, with support from the Watershed Project, have been busy promoting restoration through the watershed. At Mira Vista Park, the Friends transformed a barren, unvegetated section of the creek into an attractive woodland grove planted with willows, alders, dogwoods, ocean spray, currant, wild rose, elderberry, and even some young redwoods. An adjacent demonstration garden offers residents examples of drought-tolerant, native plants—including purple

needlegrass, blue wild rye, Douglas iris, and California buttercup—that provide important habitat for wildlife. Restoration work continues in Mira Vista Park today.

In 1996, the Poinsett Park branch of Baxter Creek was daylighted. A block-long stretch of creek was removed from a failing culvert beneath this El Cerrito-owned park, as an alternative to the cost of repairing the pipe. (In the 1898 *San Pablo Precinct No. 2 Register*, William and Charles Poinsett are listed as local farmers. It is likely that the street—and park—were named after one or both of them.) Redesigned by Ann Riley (the author of *Restoring Streams in Cities*) after an engineering firm made an initial, unsuccessful attempt at restoration, the “new” creek is a piece of wild flowing between two city streets. The creek here grows lush with willows, alders, and big-leaf maples. It has become popular with neighbors and children, as well as with the decision-makers and politicians who visit it on creek tours to learn about daylighting. It is also a source of plant material for other restoration projects in the watershed. Pacific chorus frogs sing here in the spring, and the riparian canopy is thick with goldfinches, Steller’s jays, bushtits, cedar waxwings, robins, and many other songbirds. A sharp-shinned hawk frequents the site, and an owl has even been spotted hunting here. Just three years after the creek was daylighted, the first bird’s nest appeared, tucked in the fork of a willow. Studies by a local UC Berkeley professor have shown that this restored stretch of creek is healthier—and boasts more diversity of aquatic insects—than a non-restored, degraded stretch upstream. Just downstream, west of a large basketball court, the creek surfaces again behind private residences on Rosalind and Poinsett Streets. Although it has been encased in concrete in much of this reach, mature willows and alders line the banks, providing important habitat, and residents enjoy the sights and sounds of birds and frogs in their back yards. The creek is also open above Poinsett Park, where it flows through backyards in some unusual structures, including a brick-lined channel covered with bars. It also flows (openly) beneath patios and carports.

In 2001, at the Canyon Trail Park branch, the Friends of Baxter Creek planted native alders and dogwood among the ivy-covered banks. That park, too, is important wildlife habitat, and a pair of rare Cooper’s hawks has been seen nesting there. Black phoebes, warblers, and nuthatches forage in the creekside canopy, and dragonflies skim the man-made pond at the bottom of the park, which is an important refuge for Pacific chorus frogs. El Cerrito resident Jim McKissock has spent many years creating habitat for the frogs at this pond. On the hillside to the south of the creek, soap plant, Dutchman’s pipevine, toyon, and a variety of native grasses still thrive among the live oaks that dot the hill. A group, lead by the Bay Area Rock Art Research Association, is creating an ambitious plan to protect the petroglyph boulder, and install a native plant garden and interpretive signage adjacent to the boulder (see sidebar). Someday, with lots of volunteer assistance, perhaps the ivy will be cleared from the creek banks, and native plants, providing valuable wildlife habitat, will be planted on the creek.

Yet another place to see the creek is on the “Gateway” property—so named because it represents the boundary between Richmond and El Cerrito. This open space behind Albertson’s Grocery Store at Key and Conlon is at the heart of a partnership between the community and the City of El Cerrito to continue the Ohlone Greenway and preserve and restore the creek. Though degraded, the creek flows openly for about 650 feet, and will be restored in the near future. Funds have been raised to design and build a Gateway park at this site, which will feature a restored creek, and extension of the Ohlone Greenway, and a graceful gateway between the Cities of El Cerrito and Richmond.

A song sparrow often sings in the willow thickets here, Pacific chorus frogs cling to the cattails, and a western aquatic garter snake has been seen slithering through the tall grasses near the creek. The

creek takes a sharp northward turn on this site, having very likely been rerouted by one of the railroads that once crossed the site—possibly the California and Nevada, a narrow-gauge line with a wood burning locomotive that took passengers from Berkeley to picnics in Orinda in the late 1800s. Much later, Burlington Northern Railroad ran a line through the site, discontinuing it in the late 1970s.

It was this site that galvanized the Friends of Baxter Creek to try to protect the creek. By the mid-1990s, the land had sat dormant and derelict for years, and was in serious danger of being developed or paved over. To prevent that from happening, the Friends wrote a grant proposal to the California State Coastal Conservancy to enable the City of El Cerrito to acquire the old railroad right-of-way along the creek. That grant was awarded to the city in 2002. This acquisition is the first step in the restoration of the creek on the property, as well as the continuation of the Ohlone Greenway alongside it, which will eventually link with the Richmond Central Greenway on the west side of San Pablo Avenue. In the winter of 2004/05 funding was awarded for the design and construction of the “Gateway Park.” The Friends of Baxter Creek are excited to be a part of this exciting restoration project. Among other activities, the Friends will coordinate community workdays, propagate native creek-side plants, monitor water quality, and provide outreach and education to local schools!

On the west side—where Adachi Nursery operated until the early 1990s—the confluence of the branches (where they come together) can be seen just south of Angelo’s Delicatessen. Although the creek has been riprapped (lined with large rock) and put into a concrete channel here, it is frequented by swallows, black phoebes, white-crowned sparrows, song sparrows, and even an occasional mallard.

Just on the other side of I-80, a tiny section of creek—encased in sac-crete (stacked “bags” of concrete)—pops out from under the freeway on the Oishi Nursery property. According to one of the owners, the rest of the creek was put underground in a pipe beneath the nursery as recently as the 1960s, to allow more room for greenhouses. The path of the culverted creek is obvious and can be followed via a dirt easement the nursery granted to the City of Richmond. On Wall Street, the southern border of the nursery complex, a grove of willows has sprung up, hinting at the presence of underground water. The nursery, which grows carnations, has drawn groundwater from a well on this site since the early 1900s, as has nearby the nearby Sakai Brothers Rose Company.

And farther downstream, an ambitious restoration project took place in 2000 when the Urban Creeks Council restored the stretch of creek in Booker T. Anderson, Jr. Park, which had become degraded over time. The Urban Creeks Council removed concrete from the banks, reintroduced meanders to the straightened reaches, and replanted the banks with native trees and shrubs, including willow, white and red alder, creek dogwood, ninebark, currant, wild rose, and many other species. Three large floodplains were created, which are inundated in heavy rains, recalling the swampy days of Stege’s ponds. An old weeping willow still grows along one of the banks, a legacy of his estate.

The restoration has attracted a huge diversity of birds, both residents, and migrants, which come through in the winter along the Pacific Flyway. A new “grove” of toyon—with bright red berries—has cropped up on one bank, courtesy of the berry-eating birds, who are doing their part to restore the native landscape—toyon was once very prevalent in Richmond. Pacific chorus frogs have recolonized the site, too, as if in homage to the site’s froggy past. In the winter, white-crowned and golden-crowned sparrows, black phoebes, robins, cedar waxwings, and yellow-rumped warblers can



all be seen and heard here. A juvenile black-crowned night heron, as well as snowy and great egrets, have been spotted hunting for frogs in the creek. Today, the Friends of Baxter Creek play a critical role in maintaining and stewarding the site, and students from Stege Elementary have made the creek an integral part of their curriculum, a program begun by the Urban Creeks Council and carried on by the non-profit Kids for the Bay.

Another good spot for viewing the creek in a fairly natural state is at its mouth, which can be seen from the San Francisco Bay Trail, at the 51<sup>st</sup> Street entrance in Richmond. After flowing alongside the railroad tracks that parallel Carlson Boulevard and I-580, the creek takes a sharp right turn just south of the Bay View flyover, and joins up with another, unnamed, open creek just to its south, to flow beneath a pedestrian bridge into the Bay. Before meeting up with the unknown creek, Baxter Creek flows beneath an old, disused bridge near a former firing range (this spot is accessible only by circumventing a gate meant to close off the old road). Though this area was once covered with chemical factories and other industries, and the landscape is still somewhat degraded (full of trash and shell casings), the creek here is lovely, and its banks have been reclaimed by bright yellow gumplum, coyote brush, and other native—and non-native—plants. Songbirds chatter and flit across the creek, and it is a spot well worth seeing since Baxter Creek is one of the few urban streams in the East Bay to flow openly into the Bay instead of emptying out from a culvert. The area at the mouth of the creek is also home to the endangered California clapper rail.

### **Opportunities for the Future**

The Friends have their hands full working on all of the sites described in this booklet. Yet, there are always more opportunities for restoration. If the Oishi Nursery site were ever redeveloped, for example, there is a wonderful opportunity to daylight the creek as part of any housing or other development there. Another possible daylighting site can be found just east of the Kennedy High School football fields at Richmond's Plaza One Park, beneath which the creek flows in a culvert. And the creek as it flows through the Adachi site could be freed from its riprap and concrete and restored to its natural state as an amenity to accompany the future Richmond Central Greenway. Projects like these will require full support and enthusiasm from city staffs, council members, and redevelopment agencies, and the Friends hopes to continue to build upon past collaborative efforts.

Despite the fact that much of Baxter Creek runs underground, the Baxter Creek watershed is full of restoration successes. Local and state government, regulatory agencies, and non-profits have been involved in supporting and funding these projects. However, it is the people in the community, who formed and participate in the Friends of Baxter Creek, which have provided the vision and drive to make these projects happen. The Friends of Baxter Creek are an active force for positive change in their community.

The Friends have shown what a handful of citizen activists can do to transform their neighborhood. Participants in the Friends of Baxter Creek have forged strong partnerships with local government, and carried out projects that helped restore environmental quality and the quality of human life in their neighborhoods, while creating a forum for neighbors to get to know each other.

For now, the Friends, with support from the Watershed Project, hold regular meetings and work parties at sites throughout the Baxter Creek watershed. New volunteers are always welcome to participate in FOBC activities. If you are interested in getting involved visit the Friends website at [www.creativedifferences.com/baxtercreek](http://www.creativedifferences.com/baxtercreek) or call the Watershed Project at (510) 231-5655.

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