Natural History

Unlike the more rocky northern areas of San Francisco, Visitacion Valley rests atop fertile sedimentary soils that made the region especially conducive to farming in the 1800s. Silty sandstone from the Colma formation was deposited before the last ice age, between 80-120,000 years ago. A small ephemeral stream flowed through Visitacion Valley near what is now Geneva Avenue. The entire shoreline stretching south of Bayview Hill was originally marshland.

The Ohlone tribe of the Muwekma Ohlone inhabitants occupied two known villages in Visitacion Valley, called Amuctac and Tubsinte. Shellmounds, where native inhabitants would discard the remains of the abundant shellfish they harvested from the San Francisco Bay, have been found on the site of Executive Park near Bayview Hill.

In the mid-1800s as a result of the Gold Rush, many German, French, Italian and Maltese immigrants settled in Visitacion Valley and established farms, dairies, and nurseries. San Bruno Mountain to the south was quarried for gravel. Although the San Andreas Fault runs just west of the Sunnydale Basin, little damage was sustained in the 1906 earthquake because Visitacion Valley was primarily undeveloped agricultural land at the time.

Shoreline Morphology

By the 1930s, the presence of a railroad and the Hetch Hetchy water supply brought more waterfront development to Visitacion Valley and the Sunnydale Watershed. The Schläglo Company and Hunters Point Shipyard attracted the development of several worker housing communities such as Candlestick Cove and Sunnydale Housing.

From 1949-52, the marshland in Brisbane and around Bayview Hill was filled to create Highway 101. Much of the material used to create Candlestick Point was originally the peak of Bayview Hill. Landfilling along the San Francisco-Brisbane border further pushed the shoreline eastward. This practice of massive bayfilling was curtailed in 1965 with the formation of BCDC (Bay Conservation and Development Commission).

Current Projects

The Leland Avenue Streetscape Project was completed in 2006. The project manages stormwater with green infrastructure and provides pedestrian improvements along Visitacion Valley’s main downtown street. Sunnydale HOPE SF and the Schläglo Company Redevelopment project efforts are moving ahead with planning and entitlements.

The SFPPUC’s Sunnydale Green Nodes project proposes green infrastructure at key meeting points in Visitacion Valley.

Neighborhood History

Named after the superintendent of Golden Gate Park from 1887-1943, this 377-acre park had remained undeveloped primarily due to its hilly topography and lack of roads. In 1904 Daniel Burnham proposed the creation of a hilltop park, and from 1926-1946 the city purchased individual properties with general fund money until the vision was realized. After the 1906 earthquake, many city dwellers whose homes were destroyed set up tent communities in McLaren Park and later settled in the area.

The name Visitacion Valley derives from its 1777 Mexican land grant title - Rancho Canada de Guadalupe, La Visitacion y Rodeo Viejo – given by a group of Spanish priests and soldiers who lost their way en route to the Presidio. As the area developed, a number of windmills facilitating irrigation earned it the nickname “Valley of the Windmills”. Pumped water was used for agriculture and cattle grazing. About 60% of the current population is of Asian ancestry, leading to another area nickname “The Fourth Chinatown.”

The Geneva Towers were two twenty-story residential buildings constructed in 1967 by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Originally intended to be affordable working-class housing, the Towers became crime-ridden and unsafe and were destroyed by implosion in May 1998. In 2004, the city created the Sunnydale Unification Network (SUN) to recommend infrastructure improvements to the area.