

Santa Cruz County History – Saving Carmelita Cottages

Saving Carmelita Cottages
by [Rick Hyman](#)

California's newest coastal hostel opens soon [1993] in Santa Cruz, in a Victorian cottage nestled under mature trees in a garden setting. Travelers of all ages and nations will be welcome. Few will hear of the obstacles - bureaucratic, political, financial - that the hostel's sponsors overcame to provide low-cost lodgings while preserving a piece of Santa Cruz history. The cottage, built in 1872 by Timothy Dame, a steamer captain, is one of six in the Carmelita Cottages complex.



(Photo by Ray Sherrod)

(Exterior of the renovated Dame cottage showing retention and accentuation of architectural features including stained glass, double hung windows, stick style gable brace, bay window, and front porches along with heritage plants in a garden setting and refurbished iron fence and wooden gate.)

This is not the first time that the twin causes of historic preservation and low-cost coastal access have been furthered by creation of a hostel. Partly due to financial assistance from the State Coastal Conservancy, Californians can visit four other coastal hostels in historic buildings: a Civil War era building at Fort Mason in San Francisco, a lighthouse on Pigeon Point in San Mateo County, a lighthouse in Montara, farther north, and in a restored farmhouse (DeMartin House) in Redwood National Park in Del Norte County. Each is unique. All bring closer the dream of a 1,100- mile chain of coastal hostels, each no more than a day's bike ride from the next. But none was so plagued with controversy, nor required such perseverance from local sponsors and Conservancy staff, as this charming new one, on Main Street, Beach Hill, two blocks from the Santa Cruz beach and municipal wharf.

The Gift

The hostel project was made possible by a generous gift. Lottie Thompson Sly, who inherited Carmelita Cottages and lived in them most of her life, bequeathed them to the city of Santa Cruz. In a 1953 handwritten will, two years before she died at age 83, she stipulated that the property was to become a park, "cleared and properly landscaped, making it a restful place for the public to enjoy." Should the city fail to establish the park, the property was to go to Stanford University. Mrs. Sly's will gave life tenancy to her friend Abra Budworth, who survived her for 21 years. After Mrs. Budworth died, also at age 83, the city took possession.

The bequest consisted of close to one-half acre, with six board and bat cottages, with gables and stained glass windows. Two face Main Street, four are behind them, close together in a courtyard, surrounded by trees and flowers. Just three blocks from the noisy, bustling boardwalk, Carmelita Cottages are an island of tranquillity from a more leisurely time.

"A towering deodora cedar with a trunk larger than a person could reach around stands guard at the entrance to the garden," wrote Ida Hills in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* in 1976. "A liquid amber and tulip tree only slightly smaller than the cedar complete the ... canopy." Camellia, pink dogwood, variegated azalea, rhododendron, and a variety of roses are among the "handsome old plants that have outlasted the generation which planted them," she observed.

The will was unambiguous about the grounds. They were to be a public park. But what of the cottages? Did they have to be "cleared?" If not, what could be done with them? The city considered its options under the watchful and covetous eyes of Stanford University attorneys. Under Stanford's pressure, it agreed in 1979 to demolish five dwelling units by July 1, 1984 - two immediately. Two structures fronting the street would be allowed to remain for historical museum purposes.

When tenants and preservationists heard of this plan, they were furious. Vocal among them was Matilda Bachelder, 92.

"I've lived in my home for 25 years and I'm against them wrecking my house to make room for a park," she told the city council in 1979. When a reporter called, she met him at the door and pointed at the elaborately landscaped garden, "I planted everything you see around here."

Others argued that the cottages should be protected for their historic value.

"Preservation must apply not only to prominent civic buildings or impressive major houses, if we are to have any understanding and appreciation of our past,"

argued Sara Holmes Boutelle, of the Santa Cruz County Society for Historical Preservation, in a letter to the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*.

The city backed off and, almost a year later, in 1980, reached a revised agreement with Stanford. As the tenants moved out, the units would not be re-rented, but they would be renovated. The July 1, 1984 deadline was retained for all units to be vacated and the property made into a park.

Attention turned to the cottages' potential use. A committee established for the purpose of considering alternatives persuaded the City Parks and Recreation Commission to support a privately operated bed and breakfast. But the city council was uncomfortable with the idea of evicting low-income tenants for a project that would serve people of greater means.

It was at this point that the Santa Cruz Youth Hostel Society stepped in. This non-profit volunteer organization was looking for a permanent home for a successful summer hostel it operated in rented school space. In canvassing city-owned land, the society became aware of the cottages, decided they would do perfectly, and applied for their use as a 45-bed, European-style hostel. But, at a special city council meeting held just after Christmas 1982, the idea was abruptly nixed.

The council majority supported continuing the affordable housing use by renegotiating the agreement with Stanford. The council did endorse locating a hostel somewhere in town, enabling the society to proceed with an application to the Coastal Conservancy for funding.

With encouragement from Coastal Conservancy staff and from Jim Lang, director of Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Department, and armed with favorable petitions, the Hostel Society returned to the city council for support of its application seven months later. This time the council told the society that Carmelita Cottages could be added to the list of possible hostel sites.

The Battle

Thus began - yes, just began - a lengthy battle to actually secure city permission to renovate the cottages as a hostel. The society set about negotiating a lease, securing plans, and applying for permits. On January 24, 1984, the city designated the cottages a historic landmark. (Listing in the *National Register of Historic Places* followed on March 20, 1986.) Ironically, because the cottages - the same cottages that the city had planned to raze - now had city landmark status, the society was required to obtain a special historical alteration permit. The Historical Preservation Commission was supportive. But when the society came before the Zoning Board for a use permit, neighbors, concerned about more traffic and transients, testified against it, bolstered by opposition petitions. The board voted three to two for denial, on the ground that the hostel would be incompatible with the neighborhood's residential character. The Hostel Society appealed to the city council.

In preparation for the meeting, former hostel board member Laurel Wilson recalled

"walking door-to-door to counteract misrepresentations that the hostel would attract disruptive people. It was fun meeting our future neighbors, discovering a wide variety of ages and lifestyles."

The Hostel Society won the petition battle with hundreds of signatures, as well as many supportive letters. Opponents testified that they represented the majority of area property owners concerned about the perceived disruption that the hostel would bring, but the council, in a pivotal four to three decision in October 1984, overturned the Zoning Board and conditionally granted the use permit. Neighbors then sued the city over its decision.

Superior Court Judge Rollie Hall concluded that use of the site for a hostel (by night, with the grounds open to the public during the day) did not violate the terms of Lottie Sly's will. Hostel opponents appealed. Over one year later, the Court of Appeals also ruled for the city.

In April 1985, the city leased the cottages and surrounding grounds to the Hostel Society for ten years at a dollar a year. That same month, the Coastal Conservancy approved a \$75,000 long-term loan for the renovation project. The Hostel Society set about the arduous task of securing the remaining necessary design, landmark alteration, coastal, and finally, building permits. Suffice it to say that they were not routinely and expeditiously approved. As the Hostel Society's plans had to adhere to rigid city earthquake, handicapped access, and energy-efficiency requirements, costs escalated. The estimate for the project skyrocketed from under \$200,000 to over \$500,000. That meant "a lot of bake sales," observed Ken Sievers, then-president of the society. A legal dispute with the first designer, who failed to secure his architectural license, further delayed efforts. Frustrated, the society rented a year-round, 18-bed hostel elsewhere in the city.

Still, it continued to press on with Carmelita Cottages.

"This is just such a natural," said Sievers. "This is a great place for travelers going up or down the coast. Somehow there has to be a way to make it happen."

Efforts to find funding under two state bond acts, Propositions 18 in 1984 and 70 in 1988, were unsuccessful. The society did manage to secure the services of a contractor and youth workers under

the county-sponsored Job Training Partnership Program to spruce up the grounds and deteriorating buildings. But efforts to parlay cottage rehabilitation into a job training exercise failed to materialize.

By 1990, cost estimates for the project had risen to \$800,000. Discouraged, the Hostel Society voted to terminate the Carmelita Cottages project, reasoning that it could buy a suitable building that was already up to code for less money. The city again began to explore other options for the property, including a mix of housing and park use.

As the society still had a lease on the Carmelita Cottages, however, the organization continued to maintain the grounds and employ a caretaker. Coastal Conservancy staff approached the Hostel Society about restructuring the restoration by phasing the project over a longer time period. Conservancy staff pledged to seek out additional funding. After more than a year of extensive efforts by the Conservancy and the Hostel Society, the funding was secured, and a new plan was developed.

The Victory

By this time, the Hostel Society's permits had expired and its lease had only five more years to run. The approval process had to be revisited, but this time around, there was comparatively smooth sailing. The Hostel Society again successfully canvassed the neighborhood to ensure that the project had support. In May 1991, the city council agreed to a new 30-year lease. The next month the Conservancy replaced its original loan with a \$375,000 grant to the Hostel Society. Failing to find off-street parking on Beach Hill, the Hostel Society planned that Carmelita Cottages would be operated as an annex to the current hostel. In March 1992 the Zoning Board unanimously approved new permits, stipulating that automobile parking not be available at Carmelita Cottages.

Even with this guarantee, some lingering neighborhood opposition remained. But having previously expended considerable money only to lose in court, the leaders did not mount another aggressive campaign and did not appeal the Zoning Board approval.

So in October 1992, a decade after the society first envisioned a hostel at Carmelita Cottages, construction commenced on what will be the first dormitory at 315 Main Street. Shortly afterward, the adjacent two-story home, built circa 1872 by saloon keeper Thomas V. Johnson, was raised to add a new foundation. It will be the second dormitory, and will open later this summer.[1993]



(Photo by Ray Sherrod)

(Exterior side view of the renovated Johnson cottage showing unobtrusive disabled ramp access with wooden railing blended in and retention of historic architectural features including ornamental gable braces.)

While the political battles may now be over, much work remains to complete the project. As visitors enjoy the remodeled 19th century accommodations, they will initially find the rear building off-limits. The society has nine years remaining to raise the funds to renovate these into a manager's unit, a kitchen dining/laundry, and two more dormitories.

If history is any guide, the Hostel Society will succeed, as perseverance has been the organization's trademark. In highlighting historic milestones, this account does injustice to the untold hours that individuals expended on grant applications, lawsuits, and other peripheral matters in addition to designing the new hostel. "We lost a lot of good volunteer people; they got burned out," commented Peter Pethoe, a veteran board member. But new volunteers have stepped in with equal commitment and determination. Although board member Peter Kambas bemoans their lack of political acumen, Laurel Wilson recalls hearing praise from other state hostel leaders about the locals' political sophistication. Kambas believes the society was encouraged to persist with Carmelita Cottages by a sense of broad support from the community and government officials, even in the face of the specific negative decisions mentioned. The society's unselfish mission to provide a needed and rewarding service to world travelers will be apparent to all who will now be able to stay at Carmelita Cottages.

Rick Hyman, a planner with the California Coastal Commission in Santa Cruz, recognized the Carmelita Cottages' potential as a hostel over ten years ago. He chronicled their [early history](#) in a chapter of *Every Structure Tells a Story*, (Santa Cruz Historical Trust, 1990).

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