

The Laguna Creek Dam

Built in 1890, the Laguna Creek Dam is an example of a pioneering water management facility in California. The dam was constructed to support creation of the City of Santa Cruz's first municipal water distribution system, which supplied the community of Santa Cruz with publicly funded water services.



CITY OF
SANTA CRUZ

Water Department

Private Water, Public Cost (1864-1888)

The City of Santa Cruz grew quickly during the mid-nineteenth century. In 1860, its population was roughly 1,000. By 1870, that population had more than doubled, with 2,561 people calling Santa Cruz home. This growth spurred a need for basic utilities like water to support residential and business needs. The first for-profit water supply system in Santa Cruz was installed in 1864 by Santa Cruz County pioneer, Frederick Augustus Hihn, along with business partner, Elihu Anthony. For a fee, customers of the F.A. Hihn Water Works could receive fresh, Scott's Creek water from an 8,000-gallon storage reservoir pumped to their home through redwood pipes. By 1876, the system was the largest provider of water in the City.



Portrait of Frederick Augustus Hihn (front row, fourth from left) seated amongst other prominent male Santa Cruz County residents considered pioneers, c.1890-1910. (Courtesy Special Collections, University Library, University of California Santa Cruz. Santa Cruz County Historic Photograph Collection)

A second private water supply company, the Santa Cruz Water Company, was started in 1866 by E. Morgan to compete with the F.A. Hihn Water Works. By the 1880s, the City's population increased to nearly 4,000. As the City continued to grow, both F.A. Hihn Water Works and the Santa Cruz Water Company competed to offer reliable, fresh water to residents for a fee, gradually expanding their systems to tap new sources of water. The cost of this expansion was passed onto customers, causing the cost of water to increase as the systems expanded. The increasingly high price of water inspired the City of Santa Cruz (incorporated in 1866) to buy the private Santa Cruz Water Company in 1886 with the intention of providing free water to the citizens of Santa Cruz. This concept was an outrage to F.A. Hihn, who challenged the sale in court. In 1887, the case made it to the Supreme Court, which ruled against the City and returned the Santa Cruz Water Company to private ownership. The following year, the City tried again to purchase the Santa Cruz Water Company; however, before the sale was final, F.A. Hihn bought the Santa Cruz Water Company in a private deal. Hihn immediately joined the Santa Cruz Water Company system with the F.A. Hihn Water Works, effectively shutting the City out of any opportunity to purchase an existing water system.

Santa Cruz Water Works (1888-Present)

The City Takes the Lead

Still determined, the City secured water rights to Laguna Creek in 1888.

"The Laguna," the Santa Cruz Sentinel reported in 1888, "is a rushing, roaring mountain stream, entirely rock bound and tree shaded above the falls where it is proposed to take the water out."¹ This Santa Cruz Mountains creek could supply enough water for the new Santa Cruz City Water Works system. In the winter of 1889 construction began on the system's three main components. The 1st part of

the system, the Laguna Creek Dam, was built using large blocks of local stone cut from the stream bed. The 2nd part of the

system, the 60-million-gallon Storage Reservoir, was built on a section of the ranch property where the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum sits today.

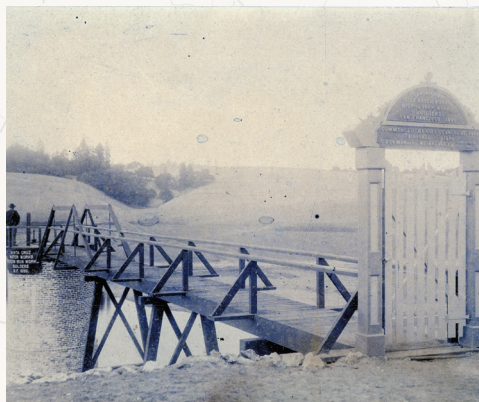
The 3rd part, the 12-mile Laguna Creek pipeline, was built from cast-iron pipes that carried water from the dam to the reservoir. When the Laguna Creek pipeline was finished in October 1890, the first City-funded water

system in Santa Cruz, the Santa Cruz City Water Works system, was complete.



A photograph of then-Director of the Santa Cruz Water Department, Wes Weber, in front of the 12-foot-high by 60-foot-wide Laguna Creek Dam, c.1960. Weber oversaw the Department during a major expansion of the system during the 1950s and 1960s, including the replacement of the original Laguna Creek Transmission Pipeline in 1965 (Santa Cruz Water Department)

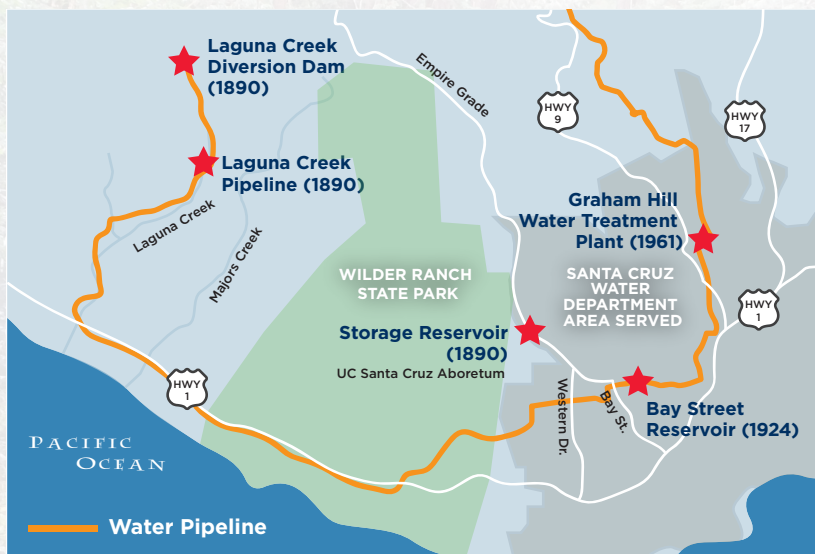
In 1892, the History of Santa Cruz County, California touted the new Santa Cruz City Water Works stating that, "Without doubt Santa Cruz is the best watered, as well as the best lighted, town on the Pacific Coast. She owns her own water supply and electric light works. The water system especially is a matter of great local pride, and, naturally enough, those connected with it take great pleasure in exhibiting it."²



Santa Cruz Water Works Storage Reservoir, c.1890s. The reservoir was located on Henry Cowell's ranch property, roughly where the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum now sits (Courtesy of The Museum of Art & History @ The McPherson Center, Santa Cruz, California)

Today, the only functioning part of the first Santa Cruz City Water Works system is the Laguna Creek Dam, which continues to divert water into the City's current water supply system. The original Storage Reservoir was replaced by the nearby Bay Street Reservoir in 1924, and the original Laguna Creek pipeline was replaced in 1965. In the 130 years since its founding, the Santa Cruz City Water Works has been updated and expanded. Now known as the Santa Cruz Water Department, it provides water to approximately 100,000 residents.

Due to the age of the Laguna Creek Dam, it required improvements to bring it up to modern environmental and safety standards. In the summer of 2021, the Laguna Creek Diversion Retrofit Project broke ground to address improvements to help improve stream habitat quality, fish screening, and overall operational function. The improvements to the dam were in line with a commitment outlined in the City's draft Anadromous Salmonid Habitat Conservation Plan.



¹ Santa Cruz Sentinel. 1888. "The Thousands of readers of the SENTINEL..." The Santa Cruz Sentinel (Santa Cruz, CA). July 17, 1888: 2. Newspapers.com.

² Harrison, E. S. 1892. History of Santa Cruz County, California. San Francisco, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Company.