

El Cerrito Historical Society

Accomplishments in 2021, Goals for 2022

Accomplishments in 2021:

As have many organizations in the wake of Black Lives Matter, the historical society has been focusing more **attention on the Black community**. We had a bit of a head start thanks to ongoing, earlier research by (now former board member) Joanne Rubio.

The newest member of our board, who joined at the start of the year, is **Patricia Durham**, whose accomplishments include helping found and leading the annual Martin Luther King Jr. celebration in the city.

Joanne Rubio, who served on the society board for a decade, left the board when she moved out of the area mid-year. Joanne was a dedicated researcher into early El Cerrito history and many other topics.

Covid very much affected the society during 2021, preventing us from holding in-person programs. Use of our archive in the Shadi Room at City Hall was also restricted. In addition, the death of our vice president, **Chris Treadway**, who edited our publication the Forge and did so much more, was a tragedy.

In 2021 the society also mourned the passing of the city's longtime, retired **librarian Grace MacNeill**, who passed away at age 97. Grace had been a longtime member of our board.

Publications and research: The society published two issues of our magazine **The Forge** in 2021, each featuring a lead article tied to **El Cerrito's earliest Black residents**, who arrived in town starting in 1898. One of the articles focused on Walter G. Maddox, a leader in the Black community and pioneering publisher.

We published our email newsletter **Sparks** monthly, with many articles, including profiles of local businesses. The January 2022 issue of the Chamber of Commerce's Byline had a history of one of the city's oldest businesses, Pastime Hardware, that was prepared by the society.

Much research took place in 2021 that will see publication in 2022, including the society's first ever **oral history**. It focuses on a longtime resident and a founding member of the El Cerrito branch of the NAACP, **Gerald Martin**.

The society also published its first ever **rack cards**, which describe the society and its role and seek new members. The nicely designed cards are available at city hall, the El Cerrito and Albany libraries, and other locations.

Research assistance: The society provided help to almost two dozen researchers during the year who were interested in topics ranging from Creedence Clearwater Revival (one, a film about the band, will be out soon; another is a book), to Japanese flower growers, the city's original natural setting, the old Gill Nursery, and the city's post-World War II development.

We provided historical information for theater artist Erin Merritt for her excellent "**Neighborhood Stories**" theatrical series of events that were held outside in various El Cerrito locations; viewers watched from their cars. The society also took part in the city's Human Relations Commission's **Truth and Reconciliation** presentations, some of which delved deeply into racial injustice in our city.

Society member **Barbara Hill**, our former chief archivist, continues to play a major role assisting in research.

Programs: The society put on two programs in 2020, including a great presentation about Lu Watter's old jazz club Hambone Kelly's by Chris Sterba at our annual meeting. Pat Durham and Minna Wilson presented a wonderful film and "live" over Zoom history of El Cerrito's Martin Luther King Parade.

In addition, society members made presentation about El Cerrito history and architecture to two seniors groups.

Archiving: Although the society did not have an archivist in 2021, we did accept many important donations. Among them: David Pryde donated materials relating to the history of his family business Pastime Hardware; Gerald Martin donated material related to his life and the El Cerrito NAACP; Joann Steck-Bayat donated cool posters from the World War II era El Cerrito High School.

Jon Bashor donated material about the death of the Richmond Independent; ephemera from 1960s and 1970s, from Joe Paulino; material on the history of the Hillside Natural Area from Susan Schwartz; back issues of the Kensington Outlook from Marvin Martin; movies about Bay Area history produced by Eve Ma, who donated them. Rich Bartke donated material about Kensington history and Maybeck Estates.

Jack Freethy, who donated a memoir he had written about life in El Cerrito, among other topics, along with ephemera from the city's earlier days and from his father's El Cerrito Mill and Lumber, and a book Jack put together, "El Cerrito Family Homes Built in 1935-1955 Bring Back Childhood Memories."

Goals for 2022:

Programs: We plan to return to live programs, as health concerns allow. We have programs lined up on the great Ouija mania that gripped El Cerrito in the early 20th century; on local journalism, its rise and fall; on internationally known mid-century homebuilder Earl "Flat Top" Smith, who ran his organization from an El Cerrito lumberyard; and more. The society will sponsor a hike during the Hillside Festival on May 14-15.

Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the El Cerrito Recycling Center. The society and the city's Environmental Quality Committee are preparing events to mark this occasion, including a program on Aug. 5 – the date in 1972 when the center first accepted donations. We also hope to honor Joel Witherell, the city's community services director, who over its first 20 years did more than anyone to ensure its success – indeed, its existence.

Research and publications: We intend to continue our focus on the Black community and other people of color. We have talked about publishing a historical map to El Cerrito sites and may take that on. We already have volunteers committed to editing Chris Treadway's unfinished book, a history of gambling and nightlife in El Cerrito.

Envisioning a history room at a new El Cerrito Library. As plans continue to create a new library in the city, the society will seek to create a room dedicated to local history there, to be run in conjunction with the society.

Archiving. By the spring we intend to be back in the business of archiving our collection, and to begin reaching out to improve it. The archive is woefully short of material about the city from 1960 on to today.

Preservation. The society wants to work with the city on providing historical interpretation for the rebuilt Rodini family home on Elm Street, which is part of a new condo development. We will continue to watch over the city's important built environment to ensure preservation of historic buildings and other sites. We continue to advocate for a survey of historic sites and for adoption of a historic preservation ordinance.