



HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA HISTORY & CULTURE

Spanishtown, or Half Moon Bay as it is now called, is perhaps the oldest settlement in San Mateo County, dating back to the 1840s. For thousands of years, the land was inhabited by Costanoan Indians. They lived in many places around San Mateo County, including Half Moon Bay's Pilarcitos Creek. Cabrillo Highway (Highway 1) and Highway 92 generally follow original Costanoan trails along the coast and over the mountains. In the 1840s, land grants were given to early Mexican settlers.

With the gold rush, Americans and others of many cultures soon followed. The early community became known as "Spanishtown" because of the number of Spanish speaking inhabitants there. In 1874, Spanishtown officially became known as Half Moon Bay, named for the beautiful crescent-shaped harbor that lies just north of town. As the late 1800s passed, the area's character became established by the diverse representation of cultures that made the Coastside a prime example of the American melting pot.

The 1906 earthquake destroyed Mexican adobes and some early American efforts to build brick business buildings in Half Moon Bay. Wooden homes and shops survived the quake, and many of those early wooden structures still remain.

In 1907, the Ocean Shore Railway was constructed along the shoreline from San Francisco to Tunitas Glen, just south of Half Moon Bay. Due to financial problems and the increasing popularity of the horseless carriage, the railroad ceased operation in 1920.

Half Moon Bay developed a new personality during The Prohibition Era (1920-1933) because the hidden ocean coves and thick fog provided the ideal setting for rumrunners from Canada and for local moonshiners.

The City of Half Moon Bay was incorporated in 1959. It is now a town of approximately 12,800 people. It has many reminders of its early beginnings in the mid-1800s as an agricultural town. Fields of flowers, artichokes, brussel sprouts, Christmas trees, pumpkins and other crops blanket the breathtaking landscape.

Half Moon Bay has been diligent in preserving its history, with traces of its past visible in the many historic buildings in downtown Half Moon Bay. The historic business district still shows signs of what downtown was like in earlier days. Present day "explorers" of Half Moon Bay will still see original farms dating back to the 1800s, as well as miles of deserted white sandy beaches, redwood forests, beautiful state parks, fields of wild flowers, and hiking and biking trails along ocean bluffs and mountain ridges as far as the eye can see. It has retained its small-town charm, with locals offering friendly greetings along Main Street.

The Half Moon Bay History Association offers a self-guided walking tour booklet, “Treasures of Half Moon Bay,” available for a small donation. It features more than 50 historical homes, churches, commercial buildings, bridges and cemeteries, dating back to the 1800s. The book can be found at many shops, including the Chamber of Commerce at 235 Main Street, and the 1855 Zaballa House at 324 Main Street. The Zaballa House also has an interesting “History Room” with a diorama of 1861 Half Moon Bay.

A few specific points of interest include:

The James Johnston House (1855) - This unusual saltbox-style home, known as The White House of Half Moon Bay, was built by wealthy Half Moon Bay pioneer James Johnston. The building is now listed on the National Register of Historical Places. *110 Higgins Canyon Road, (650) 726-0329, www.johnstonhouse.org*

Cemeteries – Trace the history of the area’s courageous pioneers at Pilarcitos Catholic Cemetery and International Order of Oddfellows Cemetery, located on the north side of Highway 92 and another near the end of Miramontes Street. A more obscure old cemetery can be found near the location of the defunct old town of Purissima, a few miles south of Half Moon Bay, off Verde Road.

Estanislao Zaballa House (1859) – This home was built by Spaniard Estanislao Zaballa who is credited with laying out the streets and blocks of Spanishtown in 1863. He came to California and married into the family whose land grant became Half Moon Bay. He also established the very early San Benito General Merchandise Store & Saloon. *324 Main Street, Downtown Half Moon Bay, (650) 726-9123, www.zaballahouse.net*

Giuseppi Boitano’s General Merchandise Store and Saloon (1873) - This is the oldest place of continuous retail business in town. *527 Main Street, Downtown Half Moon Bay.*

San Benito House (1905) - Originally named The Mosconi Hotel, a moderately-priced hostelry for visitors to the Coastsides, this cozy bed and breakfast is one of the oldest lodging establishments in Half Moon Bay. There are 12 guestrooms, beautiful gardens, an on-site deli and San Benito Ale House, a classic saloon. *356 Main Street, (650) 726-3425, www.sanbenitohouse.com.*

Half Moon Bay Jail (1911) – As the oldest remaining public building in Half Moon Bay, the historic jail reopened in 2018 as a museum home to artifacts, informative displays about the Half Moon Coastside. Visitors will find extensive information on major time periods along the coast including the Gold Rush, Prohibition era, and World War II. Open on weekends from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. *511 Johnston Street, (650) 726-4468.*

Half Moon Bay Bakery (1929) – Taste a slice of history at this Italian bakery. Built by Italian immigrant Nat Castiglione, this bakery became famous for its delicious Italian bread, baked in its original brick ovens, which are still in use today. *514 Main Street, Downtown Half Moon Bay, (650) 726-4841.*

About the Half Moon Bay Coastsides

The Half Moon Bay Coastsides is a charming seaside respite located 45 minutes south of San Francisco. Nestled between the Santa Cruz Mountains and the Pacific Ocean, this breathtaking region consists of four distinct areas - the North Coast, Half Moon Bay, the South Coast and the Redwood Region. Featuring the best of Northern California all in one place, visitors will enjoy miles of white sandy beaches, redwood forests, a historic downtown filled with local artisan shops, beautiful state parks, fields of wild flowers, and trails along ocean bluffs and mountain ridges as far as the eye can see. A sampling of activities includes horseback riding on the beach, farm fresh dining, shopping, biking, hiking and world-class golfing and surfing.

For more information on visiting Half Moon Bay, visit www.visithalfmoonbay.org or call (650) 726-8380. Like our [Facebook](#) page and follow us on [Twitter](#) @visithmb and [Instagram](#) @visithalfmoonbay.

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