

Foundations from the Past: The History of Downtown Morro Bay

Along the coast of central California lies the quiet town of Morro Bay. Known for its famous “Morro Rock” and quiet, small town lifestyle, Morro Bay has become a popular destination for many tourists. But what are the origins of this small pearl along California’s coast? In the distant year of 1872, Franklin Riley and Carolyn Mathers surveyed a small coastal area in hopes of selling plots of land. These plots would soon become the city of Morro Bay, and their layout has been preserved to this very day. While street naming conventions were changed in 1958 from numbers to proper titles, their layout remained. This change in convention marked a turning point in Morro Bay’s history, indicating an acknowledgement of their individuality as a small classical town. Morro Bay was still the small closely connected town it had always been, but this small change indicated an understanding of this role.



Original Platt Map 1872 Courtesy of SLO Public Works

The Morro Bay we know today was largely shaped by the US Navy. The Navy built a base in Morro Bay during WWII, adding crucial infrastructure to the bay to make it usable by larger ships. After the war, the newly built infrastructure became commercialized and was taken over by local businesses.¹ This created two distinct sections of town: the waterfront and the historic downtown. Since the addition of the waterfront, there has been a strong desire from the citizens of Morro Bay to integrate these two areas. Legislation and plans have been formulated many times, but a lack of funding has prevented any implementation as of May 2019. However, a strategic plan to connect the two areas was adopted in January 2018 and is currently in progress. This plan’s main goal is to preserve and enhance the town’s rich fishing industry history and working waterfront while making Morro Bay unique to any other seaside communities.²

¹ Hadley Meares

² City of Morro Bay

Morro Bay is a diamond in the rough with a lot of interesting history and various activities to do both downtown and by the bay. The original buildings from the times of Franklin Riley (1870's) are no longer standing. The original structures were built by the settlers themselves, with no help from official architects or building professionals. While this is a feat within itself, these buildings did not last the test of time. If you look closely downtown, there are a few buildings that have been renovated, including the Siren. Look inside and you can still see the original brick and timber structure of the building. The Bay Theatre was built in 1941, making it one of the oldest buildings downtown. However, the first community church in Morro Bay was built earlier. It finished construction in 1901, at a cost of \$1,231.32 built on a \$25 lot.³



Bay Theater

Picture by Kyle Pearson

The small eclectic town of Morro Bay is known for its many treasures that have survived throughout the town's history. One such treasure is the Central Coast Music building. Once a host for Vaudeville theatre shows, featuring dancing girls and monkeys, eventually became a silent theater in later years. As time went on, the theater's original purpose was abandoned, and it was repurposed into a music store. You can still the remnants of the stage and projector room in this modern establishment. The stage now serves as the centerpiece of the store, showcasing its products, while the projector room functions as a guitar repair room. The building itself may not be the only holdover from the past, however. Rumor has it that a phantasmal spirit wanders the building during later hours. One employee even reported the sound of a women's voice coming from the stage one night. Filled with history, character, and maybe even a hint of horror, Central Coast music is a defining example of Morro Bay's small-town charms.⁴



Central Coast Music

Picture by Michael Sitar

³ Morro Bay Historical Society

⁴ Eddie Frawley

