For thousands of years Native Ohlone people traversed southeast San Francisco in seasonal migrations up and down Islais and Yosemite creeks to rich bayshore salt marshes. Beginning in the 1860s, these watersheds were modified by landfill, and in the middle of the 20th century overlaid with highways 101 and 280. Today's residents come from all over the globe while Ohlone people continue to live and worship on their ancestral lands.
Here is the outline of San Francisco as documented by the Spanish in the 1700s. It is overlaid with a drawing of the Spanish Rancho and on the lower left side, a map of the Portola filled with corrals, dairies, and tanneries.

1766: For early Spanish explorers, only a few landmarks of the San Francisco Peninsula stood out. Mill Creek and Hunter’s Point were two of them.

1839: The district now called the Portola 1843 was part of the Spanish land grant, “Rancho Rincon de las Salinas y Potrero Viejo” which means “Corner of the Salty Marsh and Old Pasture”.

1900s: The Portola formed part of the meat industry laborhood centered in Butchertown in the Bayview District for over 100 years, into the 20th Century. Cattle grazed in corrals in the Portola before they were driven down to Butchertown.
Edge Institutions

The Portola, at the edge of the city of San Francisco, was known as part of the “Outsidelands.” For the first century of the city’s life, community members who were vulnerable or frail were moved to the edge of the city and out of the way of city business. So the Portola became the site of orphanages, homes for the elderly, homes for unwed mothers and an immigration station. Some of these buildings are still standing and have been the site of different institutions over the course of their existence.

The photograph of the Magdalen Asylum by Edward Muybridge is courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. All other photographs are courtesy of the San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.
Portola Flowers

During the 1920s the Portola was the source of most of the city’s cut flowers and potted plants, and much of the city’s produce was grown in its small farms. Blocks with greenhouses interspersed with flower fields, vegetable gardens and corrals provided close-to-home employment for Portola residents. The first nursery, Greoppel’s, was built in 1899. The Ferrara family’s Fatima carnation nursery was the last active neighborhood nursery business and closed in the 1990s. The greenhouses of the Garibaldi family’s University Mound nursery still occupy one of the square blocks originally worked by their extended family.
GREENING
The PORTOLA

PORTOLA RESIDENTS' GREENING INITIATIVES:
PORTOLA RESIDENTS ARE WORKING COLLECTIVELY TO GREEN THE PORTOLA. CURRENT PROJECTS INCLUDE THE GARDEN AT E.R. TAYLOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, GOETTINGEN NEIGHBORHOOD GARDEN, THE ANNUAL PORTOLA GARDEN TOUR AND ALEMANY ISLAND PLAN FOR THE ENTRANCE TO THE PORTOLA AT ALEMANY BOULEVARD. PORTOLA RESIDENTS WORK WITH FRIENDS OF THE URBAN FOREST TO PLANT NEW TREES IN THE DISTRICT.

MCLEAREN PARK:
NAMED FOR THE NATURALIST JOHN MCLEAREN, WHO WORKED TO CREATE “UNspoiled ALPINE JOY IN THE CITY.” MCLEAREN IS THE SECOND LARGEST PARK IN SAN FRANCISCO. MEASURES TO CREATE THE IDYLIC PARK APPEARED ON THE CITY BALLOT OF 1926. ALTHOUGH THESE MEASURES WERE ALL DEFEATED, THE CITY CONTINUED TO WORK UNTIL 1958 TO BUY 317 ACRES TO CREATE THE PARK. TODAY, DEDICATED CITY PARK WORKERS MAINTAIN MCLEAREN.

BURNHAM PLAN:
THE UTOPIAN BURNHAM PLAN FOR SAN FRANCISCO (1905) INCLUDED THREE HUGE CITY PARKS THAT WOULD SURROUND THE PORTOLA DISTRICT. ALTHOUGH THE PLAN WAS NEVER COMPLETED, IT WAS THE FIRST TIME THAT THE PORTOLA WAS DOCUMENTED AS THE SITE OF AN EXTENSIVE UTOPIAN VISION.
Contemplation, Worship, Discovery

Everyday in the Portola there are opportunities for public and private contemplation. They include neighborhood religious communities and private worship, and all the possibilities offered by McLaren Park. Shared tai chi practice, the "alpine joy" of meditative walks, biking, tennis, golfing, picnicking, dog-walking and meandering the Philosopher's Walk are accessible. Exciting discoveries can be made daily in the new Portola Branch Library and in the Portola's many schools. The Portola offers abundant resources for solace and inspiration.
NEIGHBORHOOD REFLECTIONS

A Community Center or Cultural Center would be great. Another place like our library where everyone is welcome. Maybe we could show movies?

A thriving business district where we can shop for daily necessities is badly needed. We have to go to other parts of town just for basic needs.

If all the groups in the neighborhood could unite, working together, I think we could get a lot more of what we need for the portal.

Our streets will be safer when we address some of the root causes of problems in the portal: poverty, social tension, violence, and lack of opportunity.

A small park with a playground could help children. We need more trees here. It's kind of bald!

I've lived in this city all my life. This is the first time I've really known my neighbors.

We need a gym. Black Smith would be nice.

I think a peaceful community would be nice and have joy! There would not be violence.

I miss my old friends and the way things were.

People in this neighborhood are hardworking and have a lot of integrity.

A person would make a difference. We haven't had a leader. I think we could change that.

I think a peace center would be great. Another place like our library where everyone is welcome.

What do you think?

It's quiet!

The mayor came out to tea meeting and said, "It's so far out there. I'd rather have lunch!"

It's peaceful...

More street lighting and better traffic configuration for pedestrian safety would help. Seniors need longer lights to cross the street.

Since we lost the Boys & Girls Club there aren't a lot of things for teens to do here.

I think a peace center with a gym would be nice.

I'm talking to a senior threesom as they ride by on their go-carts (one towing a little doggie cart). A few days later, I shove up and a couple of my neighbors are out in the street practicing fly fishing.
WE MAKE THE CITY GO!
OVER THE DECADES, THE PORTOLA HAS BEEN HOME TO FARMERS, SHOPKEEPERS, NURSERY FAMILIES, HOME MAKERS, BAKERS, TECH WORKERS, WAITRESSES, LANDSCAPERS, MACHINISTS, SEAMSTRESSES, CITY WORKERS: BUS DRIVERS, POLICEMEN, FIREMEN, TEACHERS, CLERICAL WORKERS, D.P.W., SCHOOL DISTRICT, LIBRARY & HOSPITAL WORKERS. IN THE PAST, WE WERE TANNERY WORKERS, COWBOYS, MEATPACKERS, CORSETIERS, PAINT BRUSH & SKATE MAKERS.

HOME FROM WORK