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The Cooper Brothers Mercantile Store

The Cooper Brothers Mercantile Store was built in 1854 by two brothers, John L. and William F. Cooper. It was located on Main Street, now called Front Street, where the county jail now stands. The Cooper Brothers were also responsible for the loan of the flat, sandy land that the first county court house was built on Willow and Main street. Also involved in the court house construction was Thomas W. Moore.

The Cooper Brothers store was a labor of love for the two socially prominent men. It was a sturdy edifice made of solid, local redwood trees and a split shaved roof a 1/2 inch thick. The Cooper Brothers came from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania and were related to James Fenimore Cooper, the author of *The Leatherstocking Tales* and *The Last of the Mohicans*. The store is said to be a replica of a store from their hometown in Pennsylvania. There is evidence which shows goods for the store were brought across the plains by WF Cooper. Brother John was also involved in the workings of the store. The brothers had originally come to California in the heat of the gold rush, had a store in San Francisco which burnt to the ground that originally was called the Pittsburgh Enterprise Company. The brothers moved into the Santa Cruz area around 1850.

The store was a one story building with a gabled shingle roof with windows on each side with green shutters. From a quote by Ruth Bald (book 8, page 48) we learn: "The most old-fashioned window in the city was in the most old-fashioned store, that of the Cooper's at Front and Cooper Street, which started in the 1850s. It was a street of the old structures in the city and each side of the entrance, a small one, had the regulation type of window used on the inside of the glass windows where there was always an exhibit. Along the street were what were in the early days the first store windows....these were small windows protruding from one or two feet out from the main wall of the building and in them could be placed only a few exhibits of the wares on the inside of the store."

John Cooper is reported to have loved children and the children loved to come into the store because he would give them ginger and lemon snaps. Fancy cookies were sold separately from the other groceries. The big hits with the kids were the Shoofly, a large sweetened cracker, the raisin crackers, and finally the coconut taffy. The entrance to the store was in the center of the store. On one side was the groceries. On the other side was cloth in bolts sold by the yard. On tables were dishes and oil cloths of many designs. Oil cloths were preferred over linen by pioneer families. However, a popular linen table cloth was a red linen with white fringes.

In the center of the store at the rear of the building was the Big Box Stove. They hired a fireman to keep the fire burning. Around the old stove, current events and politics were discussed. Santa Cruz was a very Republican town; The Cooper brothers were very active Republicans in the local government. An interesting note is that Watsonville was a democratic burg due to the settlers of that area being mainly from the southern democratic states. Watsonville had segregation policies in place before the word "segregation" was even an issue. The other brothers, Harry and Fred, operated the Cooper Stationary Store and a small print shop built on Pacific Ave. on the side of their home property.

Because John Cooper had served as a land agent, he was well aware of the plight of the native Americans at that time. He took an Indian named Telos, aka Marians Hablitos, and gave him a job in the store. He also took Telos to the gold fields when he returned to the gold fields in the late 1850s. Telos lived in a small room at the back of the store. Telos was a Chaloctoc Indian, a subgroup of the Ohlones from the Loma Prieta region in the Santa Cruz Mountains. John L was also affectionately known as "fatty," well, because he was a big man.

In 1894, the store burned down along with the Courthouse and several other prestigious buildings in the city. The Mike Leonard and Horace Randall shoe store was built over the ashes of the Cooper Brothers Mercantile Store. The Cooper Brothers came from a remarkable family known for their kindness and fairness to others. The store was an outgrowth of that altruism.

Sources. *Santa Cruz, The Early Years*/ Leon Rowland/Paper Vision Press 1980.; Margaret Koch's *Santa Cruz County Parade of the Past*.