

## ARCHITECTURE AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE TABERS' CORNER HISTORIC DISTRICT, CAPAY VALLEY

KIMBERLY WOOTEN  
CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION  
P.O. BOX 942874, SACRAMENTO, CA 94274  
(KIMBERLY\_WOOTEN@DOT.CA.GOV)

GAIL ST. JOHN  
CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION  
703 B STREET, MARYSVILLE, CA 95901  
(GAIL\_ST\_JOHN@DOT.CA.GOV)

*Settlement of the Capay Valley in rural Yolo County began in earnest in the 1880s, with land colonization and crop promotion by the Vaca Valley and Clear Lake Railroad Company. Today this historic pattern of small farms and townsites remains. In 2000, increased valley traffic prompted the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) to redesign State Route 16. Federal funding required Section 106 compliance, leading to a collaborative study between historical archaeologists and architectural historians from two Caltrans offices. The study concluded that one ranch, locally known as Tabers' Corner, was eligible for the National Register of Historic Places as an historic district at the local level of significance under criteria A, C, and D. The district contained a significant collection of buildings, landscape features, and potential archaeological deposits that exemplified the agricultural history of the Capay Valley. This paper explores inter-disciplinary collaboration, its historical antecedents at Caltrans, and the Tabers' Corner Historic District itself.*

The expansion in 2000 of the Cache Creek Indian Casino, located near the northern end of Capay Valley in Yolo County, generated a significant increase in traffic traveling at high speeds through the area, leading to the need for safety improvements. The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) responded with proposed safety improvements along a 13-mi. section of State Route (SR) 16.

The Capay Valley, narrow and fertile, extends northwest to southeast some 15 mi. along the lower reaches of Cache Creek and its drainages, bordered by the low Blue Ridge Mountains. One of the first routes through the Capay Valley was the Clear Lake Road, also known as the Capay Valley Road, much of which was later incorporated into the current highway. The SR 16 corridor through the project area is rural and sparsely populated, much as it has been for the last century. There are numerous nut and fruit orchards, but large tracts of open space predominate. A few small communities established in the 1870s and 1880s, such as Guinda and Capay, still maintain small commercial and residential sections (Figure 1).

Pacific Legacy staff began field surveys within a preliminary Study Area for the proposed project in 2002. Their crew recorded 23 cultural resources within the study area, and Bonnie Clark initiated the historical research for the project. Due to State budget limitations, when Pacific Legacy's contract expired in 2003, Caltrans brought the project in-house for completion, bringing Caltrans staff from District 3 and Headquarters into a working relationship.

Of the historic-era sites within the project corridor, Caltrans determined that one farmstead, known locally as Tabers' Corner, was eligible for listing on the National Register as an historic district. Tabers' Corner retains a very high level of integrity and is the best surviving example of a late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century family-run farming operation in the valley. The district strongly conveys a

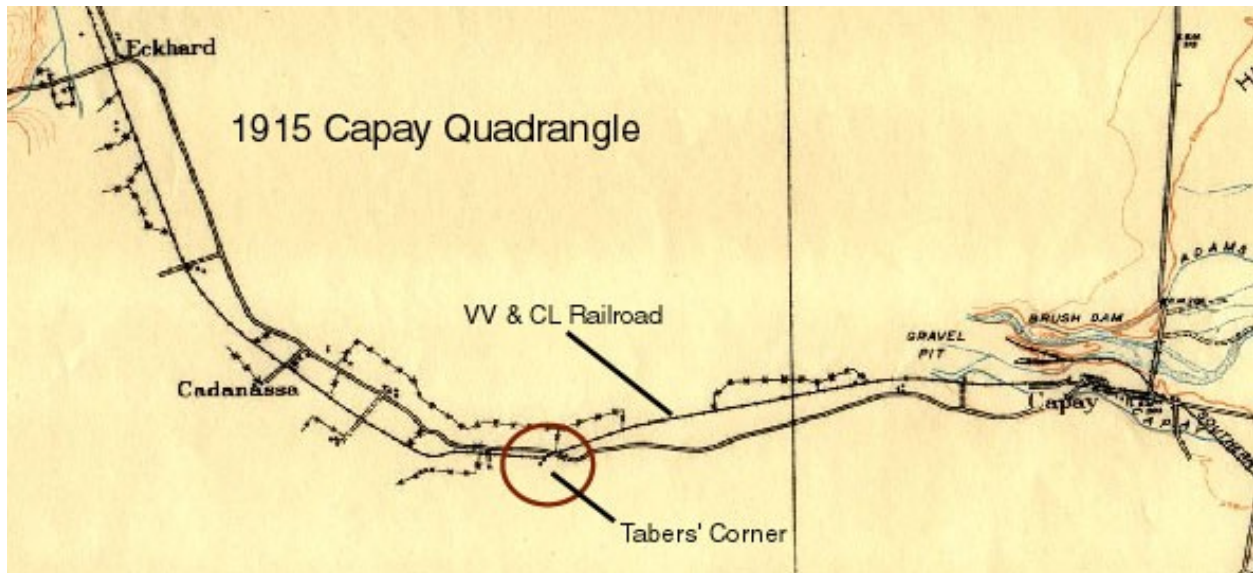


Figure 1. Map of Highway 16 corridor, Eckhard to Capay, ca. 1915.

sense of the Capay Valley’s agricultural history, and was found eligible for listing at the local level of significance under criterion A, C, and D in 2005 (St. John and Wooten 2005).

This paper will briefly discuss the history of Yolo County’s Capay Valley, the varied cultural resources within the Tabers’ Corner Historic District, and the interdisciplinary approach applied by architectural historians and historical archaeologists to the valley’s historic-era resources.

### HISTORY OF THE CAPAY VALLEY

The land that would become known as the Capay Valley was originally occupied by the Wintun people at the time of contact with non-Native peoples in the 1820 and 1830s. Early Euro-American settlement of the valley and surrounding areas by Spanish speakers provided the first name for the stream winding through the canyon and onto the plains beyond—*Rio de Jesus Maria*. Both Mexican and expatriate Americans, holding huge tracts of land granted by the Mexican government, participated in the Alta California economy through the hide and tallow industry.

Prior to California statehood, most of the land in the Capay Valley was held within one rancho: the Berreyesa family’s 40,000-acre *Rancho Cañada de Capay* (Capay Canyon). With little or no land available to individuals and families seeking affordable, smaller farming ventures, squatting was a regular occurrence. After several years of litigation resulting from California’s statehood and the battle to prove legitimate ownership, the Berryesas’ vast holdings began to be sold off.

With statehood, Yolo County became one of the original 27 counties, and for the county’s first decade, ranchers continued to focus on cattle. The stream came to be called Cache Creek by American settlers, referring to the trappers’ practice of caching fur pelts along its banks. The name change represented the movement from a Mexican influence in the valley to an American one (Merhoff 1986:2-3). In the late 1850s these lands became commercialized into “subdivisions”—such as the Arnold and Gillig Subdivision—offering large tracts of land for sale. These lands were again “subdivided” over time as property occupied by early, pioneering families was sold or inherited by the next generation.

Lorenzo Taber was among the early owners of a tract of land in the Arnold and Gillig Subdivision. In 1867, he and his son-in-law purchased 343 acres in the tract, and two of Lorenzo’s sons

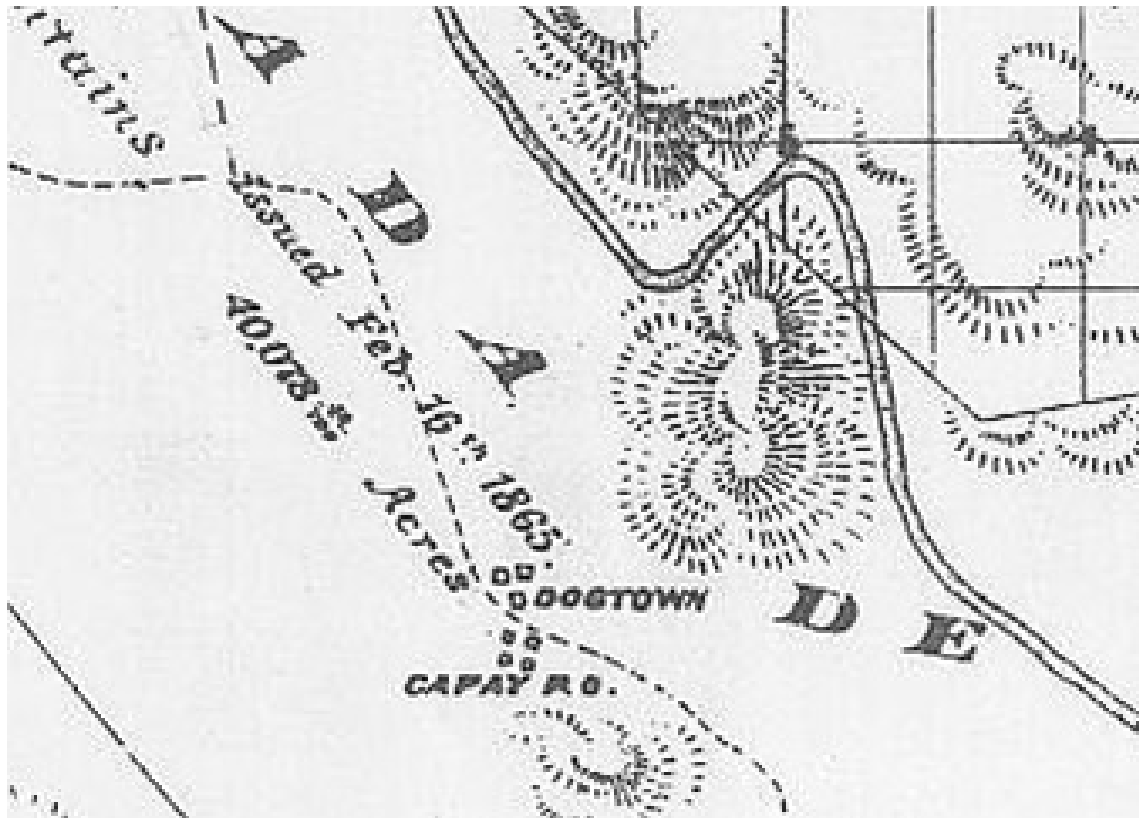


Figure 2. Map of Dogtown, within Rancho Cañada de Capay, Yolo County, ca. 1865.

later purchased another 343 acres. Much of the Tabers' original holdings remain in the family and have been continuously farmed for more than 125 years.

The earliest community within Capay Valley was that of Dogtown, or more respectfully, Capay City (Figure 2). Established around 1855, it was intimately associated with the Wood family. By the 1880s the town had fallen from grace; it disappeared completely by World War I. Langville replaced Dogtown in economic importance in the valley, laid out 5 mi. to the east in 1874 by John Lang. The name was changed to Capay in 1888 when the railroad came through town, right down the main street. Capay, for many years was the only commercial district in the valley, providing a shipping point for the valley's agricultural products (Gilbert 1879; Merhoff 1986).

Up the road from the Tabers and the Woods was the Cadenasso family. Nicola and Antoinetta Cadenasso, along with Nicola's brother, settled here in the 1870s, purchasing a section of the Arnold and Gillig Subdivision. The history of the Cadenasso family illustrates the next phase of development for the valley. In 1878, they sold 659 acres of their land to the Capay Valley Land Company, the Vaca Valley & Clear Lake Railroad's land agent. The family continued to occupy their original farmstead, located at the northern extent of the Capay Valley Land Company's newly created town, Cadenasso Colonies.

The land colonies created by the Capay Valley Land Company advertised parcels as small as five acres, as well as residential lots. The land company promoted the dream of affordable land ownership, touting the railroad and its access to "the choicest lands in the beautiful and fertile valley" (Merhoff 1986:139-140). In essence, the planned layout of the railroad from Madison to Rumsey in the late 1880s both introduced new communities and reshaped original settlements, in terms of idea and affordability, to create the modern layout of the valley today. The population of the Capay Valley increased in the 1890s as a result of these changes, peaking at 1,381 in 1900. The valley then began a gradual population decline



Figure 3. Capay Valley orchards, Yolo County, ca. 1910, Shinkle. (Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California.)

for the next five decades (Larkey and Walters 1987). Trucking and the conversion of fruit orchards to less perishable crops diminished the importance of the railroad, and a gradual abandonment process began in 1934, ending when the rails were finally removed in 1977 (Merhoff 1986). In spite of many changes, the character of the valley has stayed very close to its nineteenth century roots.

### **TABERS' CORNER HISTORIC DISTRICT**

As mentioned above, the Taber family name has long been associated with the Capay Valley, beginning in 1867 when Lorenzo Taber and his son-in-law purchased the eastern one-half of Block I of the Arnold and Gillig Subdivision, comprising 343 acres. The pattern of the Taber family's occupation and their farming practices represent the historic trends in the Capay Valley and much of the Sacramento Valley, including an agricultural transition from grains to fruit and nut production (Figure 3).

The 243 acres purchased by Harmon Jay Taber in 1879 is the subject of this paper. Harmon first constructed a barn on his land, followed shortly thereafter by the first residence and outbuildings. Local historian Ada Merhoff (1986) wrote: "Brothers George and Harmon both had home orchards of mixed fruit, and now in 1890 George put in 16 acres of Muscat grapes – 7,000 vines whose produce would be shipped east by 1893. Brother Harmon converted some grain acreage to prunes and vines, planted the first almond trees of what would become showplace orchards, would increase his planting each year to have by the end of the century 30 acres in fruit." Although the majority of those trees are gone, a small remnant of the orchard survives in the northwest corner of the parcel.

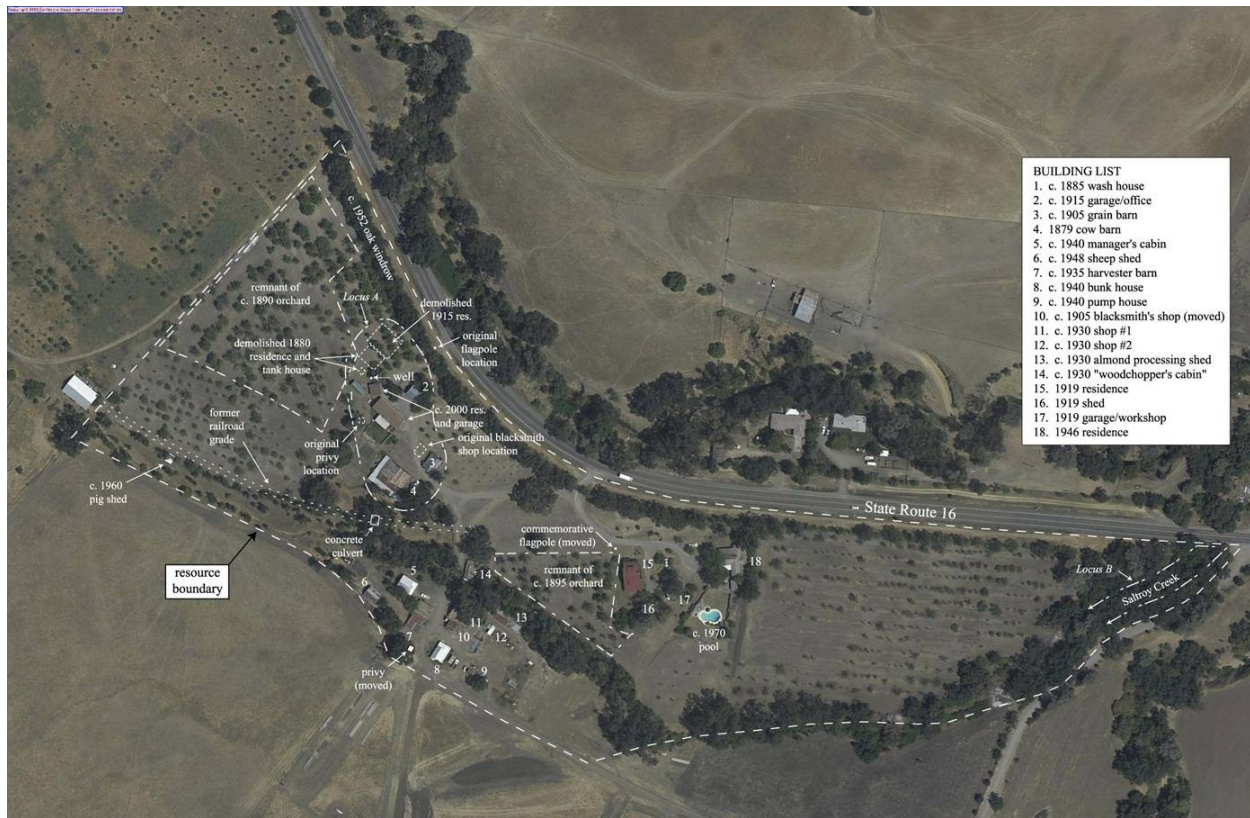


Figure 4. Tabers' Corner Historic District, 2005 (map by Gail St. John).

The built environment of Tabers' Corner Historic District comprises a collection of late-19<sup>th</sup> through mid-twentieth century farm buildings, all of which are wood-frame, vernacular structures that retain a high level of integrity (Figure 4). The district includes five residential buildings: Merlin Taber, Senior's residence (1919); Merlin Taber, Junior's residence (1946); a woodchopper's cabin (ca. 1930); a ranch manager's cabin (ca. 1940); and a bunk house (ca. 1940). The District also contains 12 ancillary buildings: a ca. 1885 wash house and a ca. 1905 outhouse (moved) associated with the original 1880 residence (demolished); a ca. 1915 garage associated with the second, 1915 residence (demolished); a garage and a shed associated with the 1919 residence; a large, transverse barn, constructed in 1879 as the first structure on the property; a grain barn (ca. 1905); a sheep shed (ca. 1948); a harvester barn (ca. 1935); a pump house (ca. 1940, reconstructed); a blacksmith's shop (ca. 1905, moved); a large shop (ca. 1930); a small shop (ca. 1930); and an almond processing shed (ca. 1930). Additional contributing elements of the District include a ca. 1920 flag pole with a concrete base bearing two bronze, commemorative plaques; a well and several mature ornamental trees associated with the 1890 residence; and finally, the remnants of ca. 1890 and ca. 1895 orchards.

While conducting an oral interview with Harmon Tabor, Junior, we learned that the 1890 almond trees had more than just historical significance (Figure 5). Mr. Taber had made an agreement with Burchell Nursery, a large grower in California, allowing them to collect germ plasm from the trees. As cultural resources specialists, we realized that we were out of our league and that it might be appropriate to request another technical specialist's involvement. A District 3 biologist contacted the grower to obtain an explanation of their interest in the trees. In layman's terms, they had determined that the ca. 1890 trees had a genetic resistance to bud wilt, a common cause of crop failure in modern varieties. Burchell collected and introduced the germ plasm into a hybrid variety, some of which have since been planted at Tabers' Corner.



*Figure 5. Remnant of the 1890s Tabers' Corner orchards (photograph by Gail St. John).*

The landscape of standing structures and orchards, combined with historical documentation and the family's oral history, helped define the potential areas for archaeological deposits, especially in the absence of testing. The pedestrian survey conducted for the project resulted in the identification of two archaeological loci. Locus A, measuring 360 ft. from north to south by 240 ft. from east to west, centers on the area of earliest occupation, with the remains of several generations of homes and farm buildings. These include the location of the standing 1879 barn; the location of the razed 1880s residence and tank house, standing washhouse, well (functional until 1980), and the original location of the 1880s privy; the location of the razed 1915 home and standing 1915 garage; and finally, the original location of the 1905 blacksmith shop and standing packing shed. Locus A was determined eligible for the National Register as a contributor to the district for its ability to yield information important to understanding late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century domestic practices and farming technologies at the local, regional, and state levels.

Locus B is a "shifting" deposit of domestic refuse within a branch of Saltroy Creek bordering the district along its western limits. On behalf of Caltrans, consulting archaeologists conducted an intensive recordation of artifacts, including porcelain and WIE (white improved earthenware) fragments; solarized amethyst, green, milk, cobalt blue, aqua, and brown glass fragments; assorted tin cans; and cut bone. Many of the manufacture marks on the bottles dated between the 1920s and 1940s (Figure 6).



*Figure 6. Sample of artifacts from Saltroy Creek (photograph by Pacific Legacy, Inc.).*

The domestic refuse within Locus B is associated with the Taber family and their employees, dating from the 1880s until 1950. During that time, residents at Tabers' Corner dumped refuse into the slough near its intersection with the railroad tracks, where the artifacts washed downstream along Saltroy Creek. The family discontinued this practice in the 1950s, and the dumpsite was buried. Dumping in creeks was common practice in many rural areas, as several of the valley's residents mentioned. As refuse removal services became more common in the 1930s and 1940s, the practice declined.

Seasonal flooding annually relocates many artifacts, creating a continually changing pattern of cultural materials in Locus B. Unless the main dump, which was outside the project area and scope of this effort, is thoroughly documented, recordation within the creek can potentially recover new information time and time again. While these artifacts are no longer within a stratified timeframe, the tight association with the Taber family and their hired laborers outweighs this fact. The deposit is able to contribute significant information to the history of the district, as it contains information on consumer preference of commercial goods, subsistence modes, and other information associated with daily living and farming practices. In the case of such deposits, intensive recordation of the materials present realizes all the data potential, essentially eliminating the feature's ability to yield additional significant archaeological information.

Tabers' Corner Historic District contains a collection of approximately 20 structures and at least two distinct archaeological loci dating from 1879 to 1948, representing four generations of continuous occupation by the same family. Although not individually eligible, taken together the buildings and archaeological features represent the finest surviving example of a late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century family-operated farmstead in the Capay Valley. The district retains a high level of all aspects of

integrity from its period of significance and is an outstanding illustration of the agricultural history of the Capay Valley.

## INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

Traditionally, architectural historians and historical archaeologists have approached the historic-era resources encountered on Caltrans projects separately. While some limited discussion ensued over a property, generally architectural historians and historical archaeologists wrote separate reports, often for different aspects of the same resource. Historical archaeologists collaborated with prehistoric archaeologists in writing an *Archaeological Survey Report*, which contained an inventory of all archaeological sites within a project area. At the survey level, architectural historians wrote a separate *Historic Architectural Survey Report*. When Caltrans began updating their *Standard Environmental Reference* documents, more commonly known as the *Environmental Handbook*, staff realized that historical archaeologists and architectural historians had much to offer each other. Caltrans officially promoted an interdisciplinary approach by reintroducing the *Historical Resources Evaluation Report*, within which all historic-era resources are described and evaluated. Having been so accustomed to a narrow focus, cultural resources staff has started to readjust to the new, broader viewpoint as projects providing an opportunity for writing a combined document present themselves. In the end, to those of us who have worked collaboratively, the practicality and economy of this approach are obvious. Most importantly, both the agency (and, indirectly, the tax payers) and the resources benefit from collaborative reporting.

When first presented with this project, cultural staff began in their usual way: data gathering. An outside consultant had conducted much of the initial research for this particular project, which moved Caltrans staff to the next step: information dissemination. It immediately became apparent that the two historic-era resources specialists were after the same information. Further, we realized that collaborating would effectively reduce each individual's workload. Notes gathered from oral histories; archives; and Assessor, building permit, deed, and tax records contained information useful to both disciplines. By sharing data and ideas, we began to form a clear picture of the history and evolution of Tabers' Corner, and for that matter, the Capay Valley, that was not apparent through examination of the material remains. Creating a fully developed context of the property and the region – one that included both surviving and vanished resources, above and below ground level – allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of the property under all National Register criteria.

Initially, Caltrans cultural staff considered whether the resources within the Capay Valley Highway 16 corridor met the criteria for eligibility as a cultural landscape. Upon closer investigation, however, the lack of integrity found in the individual elements, combined with a relatively high degree of modern infill, including the recently expanded casino, made this argument untenable. While historical archaeological sites and combined archaeological sites/historic structures were present throughout the project corridor, most of the archaeological deposits considered to be possible contributors to the "site as a whole" were outside the area of direct impacts or ADI, and thus beyond the scope of the project. In the end, Tabers' Corner was the only historic-era resource determined to be an eligible property.

The decision to approach the resources as an historic district, as opposed to a single "site" or even a rural historic landscape, was based primarily on the architectural value of the property. As we discovered, what constitutes a "district" differs between historical archaeology and architectural history. Without standing structures, the archaeological remains would have been viewed as two loci within a single farmstead site, evaluated as such, and possibly determined ineligible. A "district" composed solely of historic-era archaeological deposits often tends to be geographically larger in scale and is composed of a collection of sites "historically linked by function, theme, or physical development or aesthetically by plan" – more akin to a landscape than a single resource. Conversely, a "district," by built environment standards, contains a collection of features that lack sufficient merit to be eligible individually, yet together form a cohesive unit that has historical value and significance. Built environment districts can be



*Figure 7. Two views the eligible 1915 residence at the Tabers' Corner Historic District (photograph at left by Gail St. John, 2005; photograph at right by Caltrans, 1949).*

large or small, contain several buildings or dozens, and be on one parcel or many, as long as the cohesive unit conveys the significance of the resource (Figure 7). Within this context, we were able to evaluate the relatively small Tabers farm as a district, and determine that it has historical significance as the best surviving example of a family-run farmstead in the Capay Valley, reflecting the agricultural history of the region.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the discussion of Tabers' Corner as a whole, considering architecture, landscape, and archaeology within a well-developed historical context made the argument for eligibility of the resource as a district much stronger. Taken individually, many features of the Tabers' Corner Historic District lacked sufficient significance to warrant National Register eligibility. The value of this property lies in the number and variety of the features, the high level of all aspects of integrity, and the story they tell when considered as a whole. By treating Tabers' Corner as a district, we were able to include all of the contributing elements, even the remnant of the 1890 orchard that might otherwise have been overlooked.

This joint effort between historical archaeologists and architectural historians allowed for a more detailed examination of the resources present within the project area, strengthening the possibility of eligibility for individual resources by placing them within a larger context both physically and temporally. In addition, writing a document that combines both archaeology and architecture allows greater access to

the history of a site, community, family, or individual. Having completed this project, the interdisciplinary approach seems so basic and common-sense to us now that it's hard to imagine working any other way. This collaborative effort has not only resulted in a much more thorough investigation and evaluation, but it has served to make each cultural resources specialist much more aware of the other discipline. Just within the last decade, it was not uncommon for an architectural historian looking at a home from the 1860s to overlook the potential for the archaeology within and surrounding that home's footprint, and vice versa, with archaeologists not recognizing the value of working with the architectural historian to develop a broader history of a site in order to complete a much more comprehensive evaluation of significance. By working together, the two disciplines learn from each other and, as a result, provide a better service to both the resource and the public.

#### REFERENCES CITED

Gilbert, Frank T.

1879 *The Illustrated Atlas and History of Yolo County, California*. De Pue & Company, San Francisco, California.

Larkey, Joann L., and Shipley Walters

1987 *Yolo County: Land of Changing Patterns*. Windsor Publications, Northridge, California.

Merhoff, Ada

1986 *Capay Valley: The Land & the People, 1846-1900*. Roger C. Franke, Woodland, California.

St. John, Gail, and Kimberly Wooten

2005 *Historical Resources Evaluation Report for a Proposed Safety Improvement Project on State Route 16, Yolo County*. California Department of Transportation, Sacramento.