

THEY CAME TO STAY: POST-GOLD RUSH SETTLEMENT AT THE FORKS OF THE FEATHER RIVER

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Nearly one-third of the sites in the Oroville Facilities Relicensing Project area represent post-Gold Rush settlement, providing an excellent database for exploring research issues. This paper summarizes the resources before focusing on a sample of four sites, each representing the core of a settlement. Three of the resources have unusually rich settlement landscapes and potentially significant archaeological deposits; the fourth resource—in the scoured reservoir drawdown area—demonstrates the research potential in even this disturbed zone. With at least 24 additional such core sites recorded and many more possible, the contrasts present in these four case studies suggest the broad range of research issues present in the Oroville Facilities project area.

SETTLEMENT SITES IN THE OROVILLE INVENTORY

The miners of Gold Rush-era California formed a notoriously fluid population that waxed and waned with the success of the gold fields. While many miners were indeed sojourners who readily returned home when placer deposits were used up, others were attracted by the promise of a new setting and stayed on. Some chose the small towns that sprang up around the diggings: Hamilton, Thompsons Flat, Bidwells Bar, and Long Bar at various times challenged the town of Ophir (today's Oroville) in size and political importance. Others acquired rural land, by whatever means, and settled in. While many of these new landholders continued mining on the side, the population had clearly shifted: in 1850 miners made up 65 percent of the non-native Butte County population; 20 years later, that figure had dropped to just 17 percent.

The Inventory

Although some of these early settlements may be richly represented archaeologically, none of the actual town sites located within the Oroville Facilities Relicensing Project area are above the reservoir's minimum pool. Some (like Bidwells Bar) were recognized on archaeological surveys conducted prior to dam building in the 1960s and were minimally recorded, while others went undocumented. Thus only rural-settlement resources are listed in the Oroville inventory.

Of the nearly 500 historic-era resources recorded, 156 represent sustained settlement—reflecting this shift in the community from sojourner mining to settling in. At least eight broad property types are included:

- Foundations, structures, and building pads;
- Backfilled privies;
- Dams, wells, or spring boxes;
- Refuse deposits and domestic-artifact scatters;
- Landscaping, such as terraces and paths;

- Fences and corrals;
- Orchards, gardens, and other non-native vegetation;
- Cores of habitation (with some or all of the above)

While many of the settlement resources are single features near the edge of a farm or ranch, more than 30 settlement properties represent the core of a habitation site: the complex of house, barn, outbuildings, springhouses, and gardens that is part of day-to-day life. And nearly one-half of these settlement cores are homestead properties, patented under the Homestead Act of 1862. That act, which transferred up to 160 acres of free land to citizens who would work to improve it, was a key factor in turning miners into settlers. And because of the detailed records required to claim and “prove-up” a homestead—including descriptions of buildings and other improvements, agricultural products, livestock, farm equipment and tools, and household furniture—these properties are a special boon to archaeologists.

Sampling Settlement Sites

This paper deals with just four of the 20 settlement sites in the Oroville Facilities inventory that are being individually evaluated for the National Register. The goal of these individual evaluations is to focus on a representative sample of property types under each dominant theme to help identify the kinds of values these sites possess. Evaluated sites were subjected to intensive re-survey, metal detection, and infield artifact recording of arbitrary three-foot-diameter surface scrapes. Site-specific archival research and oral-history interviews provided context and helped to clarify site features and layout. From the results of this intensive effort at a few specific sites, more-informed decisions can be made on the National Register status of the scores of other sites in this category.

FOUR CASE STUDIES

Some salient historical facts about the four selected sites are listed below:

Smith Farm (“Brightsides”) – 1857-1887– New York – Horticulture/Wine-making

Fischer Homestead – 1850s-1913 – Germany – Family Farm

Nash Homestead – 1877-1891 – Ireland – Commercial Farm

Frerichs Homestead – 1891-1913 – California – Wage-worker’s Home

These four sites represent a wide range of time periods, environmental settings, household make-up, economic orientations, and places of origin. Each site has also experienced different events after deposition, creating special situations for identification and recordation. All of the sites in the group of four are just above or below the Lake Oroville dam site, close to once-important mining centers (Figure 1). There was no major route following the river during the early years; instead, the upper three sites were accessible from an upland route along Table Mountain, making them closer to Oregon City in the hills above than to the town of Ophir.

The Smith Farm – Brightsides

The first site is the Smith Farm (CA-BUT-2522/H), the only non-Homestead Act property. It sits below the forks of the river, on gently sloping terraces just upstream from Long Bar, a thriving mining community in the early years with a seasonal population of as many as 2,000. New Yorker John McKinstry Smith started mining in 1850 at Banner Ledge, a quartz vein high in the same drainage; he operated Banner Mine and associated ditches for decades. In the mid-1850s Smith went back to New York and returned with a new young wife, Minerva, moving to the spot that she named “Brightsides” soon after; John was 41 and Minerva, just 17 (Figure 2). By 1880 Brightsides was a fully operating agricultural concern. On the census that year, John and Minerva are shown living with their three teenaged daughters and a diverse household, including a couple from New York, described as boarders, and their teenaged son; a young male farm hand; a young brickmason; an elderly blacksmith; and Buck Sing, a young, married cook from Canton.

The operation was impressive: the four farm workers would have helped with the large number of tilled acres—56 acres of grass and hay; large orchards of peaches and apples; and vineyards that produced substantial quantities of grapes and wine. In fact, a biographical sketch of Smith in the Wells and Chambers Butte County history claimed that he “yearly makes three thousand gallons of wine” (1882:302). Livestock was minimal. An in-depth article titled, “John McKinstry Smith: Argonaut, Entrepreneur and Agriculturalist of Long’s Bar” (McInturf 1999), written by a family historian, gives details on the personal and business pursuits of this enterprising family.

An 1882 lithograph printed with the Wells and Chambers biography is an exceptional aid that pinpoints the house location

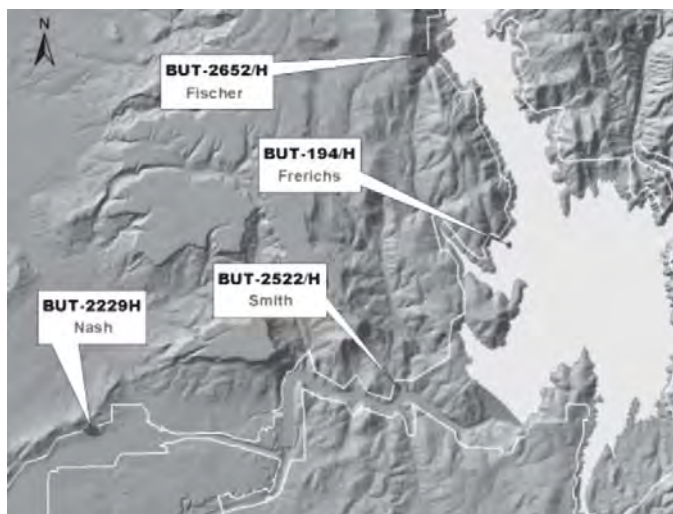


Figure 1: Locations of four selected settlement sites within the Oroville Facilities Relicensing Project.

and provides details of life at the site (Figure 3). By standing on the hill today and matching landscape features like the bend in the river and non-native plants, the former location of the house is clear. Exotic plants shown at the house entrance are still present, and a hedge of pomegranates prospers, forming a secluded yard at the side of the house. The archaeological remains of the large house cellar are present in this spot at the side of the hill. Metal detection located a probable artifact-filled privy near what was the back door, and a dense scatter of artifacts in and around the house and yard. Olives, prunes, more pomegranates, and figs grow just downslope from a small mining/irrigation ditch that feeds prime locations as it passes through the site. (The pomegranates were not just for family sustenance: an 1884 receipt from the Pacific Fruit Company indicates that Smith sold 12 boxes of

Figure 2: Minerva Jennings Smith and John McKinstry Smith, landowners at Brightsides, in the late 1850s.



Figure 3: Brightsides, the residence of John and Minerva Smith on the Feather River; lithograph from History of Butte County (Wells and Chambers 1882).



pomegranates that year.) So much remains after one-and-a-quarter centuries that the original landscape is palpable today: looking at the spot, one can almost see the lady and gentleman of the house walking through their garden, as they did in the picture drawn in 1882.

Other archaeological features at Brightsides include a large, stone-lined cellar with possible loading dock adjacent to the road leading up the hill and on to town; the remains of a large barn and a cluster of other outbuildings; and a series of stone-walled garden terraces. Little has affected the site in the past century—except for a construction road built in the 1960s, which cut through the house cellar and removed all other features in its path. The house burned down in 1887 (McInturf 1999:45). Three years later, the Smith family was homesteading up the drainage, nearer the Banner Mine, which John continued to operate. Minerva sold the property when John died, a decade later.

The Fischer Homestead

The setting of the next site—the Fischer homestead (BUT-2652/H)—was more rugged and less amenable to cultivation. Located up the North Fork Feather River, the site is on an southeast-trending meadow bounded by several drainages, at the sloping base of Table Mountain—accessible primarily by boat today. A German miner named John Jost held the land without title in the 1850s, building a house, barn, and fencing, but the first homestead claim was made by another German, Theodore Fischer, who came to dig gold in the 1860s and was naturalized soon after. Theodore and his wife, Doretta (Figure 4), *who had started a family nearby*, filed their Homestead Entry in the late 1870s. While homestead land came free of charge from the government, Fischer paid Jost \$500 for his improvements. Fischer's homestead title lists only 12 acres of tilled land and two acres of vineyards and orchard, with the rest woodland. The livestock inventory from his Homestead Proof has a homely, subsistence character: 1 horse, 3 cows, 15 sheep, 7 hogs, 50 chickens, 1 dozen tame pigeons, 2 cats, and 2 dogs.

Figure 4: Theodore and Doretta Fischer, homesteaders on the North Fork Feather River, ca. late 1860s.



Initial fieldwork was done in high weeds, and few domestic archaeological features were seen; instead, mining features were thought to dominate the site. But two years later, just before crews returned to the property for evaluation studies, a substantial wildfire scorched the site, revealing a largely undisturbed settlement complex of structural features and artifact deposits.

A total of 49 features was recorded during evaluation studies, all located within a two-foot-high perimeter stone fence that enclosed the 20-acre homestead center. The domestic complex includes foundations of the house, the stone walls of a springhouse, and a wine cellar with 75 intact barrel hoops. Nearby are the footings of two barns, many outbuilding pads, ditches, orchard and vineyard remnants, and a reservoir. The relationship between features on this burned-off landscape had been laid bare, with only available time limiting the amount of recording possible. While the site is near a well-used recreational area, the dense vegetation appears to have protected it from looters. In fact, without the fortuitous wildfire, the Fischer Homestead might have gone largely unrecorded—more convincing on paper than in the field.

New to the evaluation phase was an 1898 photograph of the house Jost built and Fischer expanded and maintained (Figure 5). The layout of the house in the photo conforms with the archaeological remains. The photo also paints a vivid picture of homestead life: Theodore is now an elderly man and, Doretta sits nearby, with some of their grown sons and their families surrounding them. The family held the property until 1913, and all five Fischer children got their schooling in nearby Oregon City and are said to be buried there today (Bisset 2005). Thus while the Fischers' agricultural products were not impressive, their successful use of marginal land and long tenure certainly were.

The Nash Homestead

This site (BUT-2229H) is in the open, rolling hills of the Forebay portion of Lake Oroville, near the historic town of Thompsons Flat. The land is gently sloping and well-watered; except for some stands of

willow, the few trees on the site are historic-era plantings. Irishman Patrick Nash, in his early 20s, arrived in Butte County in the late 1850s, where he acquired a saloon at a sheriff's sale at Thompsons Flat and filed for citizenship. In September of 1877 Patrick and Ellen Nash—who had lost their only child—moved onto their new claim and added more land. Their Homestead Proof five years later reports 70 acres of tilled land, with 170 acres of meadows, pastures, orchards, and vineyards; a relatively large house and barn; and outbuildings (General Land Office 1882). His assessed property reflects his intensive agricultural focus: it includes six horses and substantial farm equipment. Nash held the land for another decade, selling it after Ellen died in 1891.

With very dense vegetation and few modern disturbances, the only indicators during the inventory phase that this was the location of a core settlement site were the homestead map, an improved spring, and several exotic plants. The Nash Homestead is the only site of the four case studies that has no recorded Native American component, more likely because of poor visibility than because of an absence of pre-contact use. Metal detection, which was used extensively during the evaluation, was the key to revealing the extent of this homestead, and was the only means by which certain features were found.

Once features were identified and cleared, the remains of the house were found to be clearly marked by low basalt slabs. A well-used dump, buried by sediments and vegetation, was found by metal detection to the east of the house along a creek, a short walk from the back door. To the west, the barn was linked to the house with a cobble-lined path. Two improved springs were located near the residence—one cut into the subsoil and another with a cobble cistern. Artifacts were plentiful, with all appearing to date to the Nashes' fairly short tenure. While this site lacks the exceptional documentation of the Smith and Fischer sites, the clarity of the features and of the layout of the farm are ample testament to the site's history. The site lies at the edge of public land, with little to draw visitors. Except for State fence-building and maintenance activities, the site appears untouched by the events of the past century.



Figure 5: The main house on the Fischer homestead, with Theodore and Doretta and family, ca. 1890.

The Frerichs Homestead

The last site (BUT-194/H) is quite a departure from the others—historically, archaeologically, and visually. Most distinctive about the Frerichs Homestead today is its location within the reservoir fluctuation zone at 700 feet above mean sea level. For boating safety, all surface features of the zone were removed by the State, rendering the area a virtual “moonscape” and making it difficult to envision the Frerichs Homestead. While it looks bleak today, a Native American midden with 10 housepits was recorded here in 1963, and a productive spring is just upslope, indicating a favorable spot for habitation.

Louis Frerich filed his Homestead Entry in 1891, when he was in his mid-20s. He is the only California-born homesteader among this group, the son of German immigrant saloonkeepers at Thompsons Flat. While improving his homestead claim, he married a local girl, the daughter of Portuguese immigrants who held property nearby. And rather than farming or mining for himself, or balancing the two, Louis worked for wages at a distant mine. He described the land on his Homestead Entry (#4403) as “Hilly land, but can be cultivated in spots.” His 1896 Homestead Proof lists a dwelling, barn, and barbed-wire fencing around the whole property. The Frerichs’ agricultural efforts were minimal: they had a fenced garden and cultivated three or four acres. By 1913 Louis and Mary had sold the property, after 22 years, and moved to downtown Oroville, where they lived well into their 80s.

While reservoir drawdown scours the surface of the site annually, laying bare some artifacts and features, sediment deposition from upslope works to fill in the spaces, masking the site surface. Thus even in this completely barren setting, metal detection was needed to reveal the site constituents. The detector “hits” formed a pattern across the slope of the knoll, allowing surface scrapes to target relatively dense areas of the deposit. Visible were a variety of decorated and plain ceramic sherds; glass of every color; cast-iron stove parts, and a great variety of other metal artifacts, including some personal items. Substantial deposits were not encountered in this surface work but have not been ruled out.

The Frerichs Homestead represents a shift to modern lifestyles at the turn of the twentieth century. Louis and Mary demonstrated several modern traits: California-born, marrying outside their families’ native ethnicities, working as wage earners despite homestead ownership, and ultimately settling in town. Even the barbed-wire fencing in the mid-1890s suggests investment in modern technology. The strategies selected by the Frerichs reflect a strong contrast with, for example, those of the Fischer family, for whom long-term stability was the goal. Or with the Smiths or Nashes, who in different ways were bent on maximizing opportunities.

RESEARCH VALUES OF SETTLEMENT SITES

A few decades ago, archaeologists passed by the kinds of domestic archaeological sites that have been focused on in this paper, looking not at research potential but rather at other National Register criteria: association with great events and significant people, or with uniqueness

or mastery of design. More recently, interest has begun to shift to the historical archaeology of the rural West, with one major focus being the study of the rural domestic site. Research models or contexts for evaluation and interpretation have been developed, and research questions that help to identify the information potential of rural domestic sites have been posed (e.g., Hardesty 1994; Stein 1990; Wilson 1990). While there have been few opportunities to work with substantial rural domestic deposits in northern California, recent data-recovery efforts by the ASC in Tuolumne County demonstrate the potential (Ziesing et al. 2005). The Oroville Relicensing Project’s research design takes many of these ideas and focuses them on the specific kinds of sites present in the project area.

There are at least two dozen more sites recorded in the Oroville Facilities Relicensing Project inventory that represent the core of a habitation site. And there are another 15,000 acres yet available for survey. The four sites dealt with in this paper—the homes of the Smiths, Fischers, Nashes, and Frerichs—demonstrate an exceptional potential for amassing a database of differing land-acquisition strategies, economic approaches, family-space organization, and household demography, all seen through the framework of distinctively personal histories as they are reflected in material remains.

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