

WASSAMA VILLAGE  
(Wassama Roundhouse State Historic Park)  
(Leaves Falling Vilage)  
Roundhouse Road (Road 628) between Peterson Creek Road and  
Leach Road  
Ahwahnee  
Madera County  
California

HALS CA-62  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY  
PACIFIC WEST REGIONAL OFFICE  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
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Oakland, CA 94607

## HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

### Wassama (Leaves Falling) Village (Wassama Roundhouse State Historic Park)

HALS NO. CA-62

- Location:** Roundhouse Road (Road 628) between Peterson Creek Road and Leach Road, Ahwahnee, Madera County, CA 93601  
Lat: 37.373972 Long: -119.722511 (Center of the Roundhouse, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84).
- Significance:** The site includes the last remaining roundhouse in California – a traditional structure used by Native American people since the 1860s. The site continues to be used by Miwok descendants for ceremonial purposes and as an interpretive site by State Parks.
- Description:** The park is located south of Yosemite National Park and north of Oakhurst at elevation 2267 feet, in a small rural town called Ahwahnee, in the California foothills. Access to the site is via a narrow paved drive off Roundhouse Road that leads up into the park. The site has gently sloping topography that steps down to the south. It is an oak-grassland with a few tall Valley Oaks (*Quercus lobata*) and other trees. The park is surrounded by a split-rail fence, and beyond the park boundary there are rural, private properties. The distant view of hills, clad in Oak woodland, is much as it would have been during the time when the original roundhouse was built.

The entry drive is marked by stout stone columns, each with a metal, bell-shaped light fixture on a staff-shaped arm. Each column has a sign identifying the site as “Round House Ranch”. There is a lightweight, ornamental-iron vehicular gate between the columns. The author did not see a pedestrian access way into the park, suggesting that the only access is via the entry road. As you enter there is a wood-sided park building, a separate restroom building, and a small paved area on the western portion of the site.

The main feature of the park is a 40-foot diameter roundhouse, actually an octagon-shaped building, that is sited on a level area of open grassland, on the lower (south) portion of the park, adjacent to two mature oaks – the largest on the property. These trees are well-formed, and provide shade during the summer months. There are several picnic tables beneath the canopy. The roundhouse has pine board siding, and a new shingle roof with a smoke hole.

Near the high point of the park, on the north end, there is a small burial plot (approximately 100 feet x 60 feet) defined by a split rail fence with two horizontal members. Access to the cemetery is through openings on the west and east sides – there are no gates. A very subtle, eight foot wide dirt path, marked with rocks, leads to the west opening. One large oak at the center, casts shadow over most of the cemetery. The ground surface is covered by non-irrigated grasses and is without

formal paths. Most graves are unmarked while a few have simple wooden crosses, and fewer still have upright or flat stone monuments.

The third feature is a grinding stone approximately 25 feet by 8-12 feet wide. This low, broad stone has more than 30 mortars of varying depths. The layout of the mortars forms an oval shape within the oval shaped stone. This feature is partially fenced by a split rail fence. There is no interpretive sign.

There are a few other picnic tables, trash receptacles and a small (approximately 3 feet diameter) structure of unknown purpose within the park; also some moss-covered rock outcrops. The site includes a cremation site and mourning area, but those were not apparent to the author during her visit.

History:

The following sections on Pre-history, Ethnographic Context and Historic Context taken from the Cultural Resources component of the Madera County environmental document for the Sierra Meadows Estates development.

Prehistory

“The Great Central Valley, has a long and complex cultural history with distinct regional patterns extending back more than 11,000 years. The first generally agreed-upon evidence for the presence of prehistoric peoples in this general region of California is represented by distinctive fluted spear points, termed clovis points, found on the margins of extinct lakes in nearby San Joaquin Valley. Most of the clovis points have been found on soil horizons containing the bones of extinct animals such as mammoths, sloths, and camels. Based on evidence from elsewhere, the ancient hunters who used these spear points existed during a narrow time range of 10,900 BP (before present) to 11,200 BP.

The next cultural period represented, the Western Pluvial Lakes Tradition, thought by most to be subsequent to the Clovis period, is another widespread complex that is characterized by stemmed spear points. This poorly defined early cultural tradition is regionally known from a small number of sites in the Central Coast Range, San Joaquin Valley lake margins, and Sierra Nevada foothills. The cultural tradition is dated to between 8,000 and 10,000 years ago and its practitioners may be the precursors to the subsequent cultural patterns that emerged in central California. Approximately 8,000 years ago, many California cultures shifted the primary focus of their subsistence strategies from hunting to seed gathering and more generalized collecting as evidenced by the increase in food-processing implements found in archeological sites dating to this period. This cultural pattern is best known for southern California, where it has been termed the Milling Stone Horizon, but subsequent studies suggested that the horizon may be more widespread than originally described and was likely present throughout this region of California. Radiocarbon dates associated with this period vary between 8,000 and 2,000 BP, although most seem to cluster in the range of approximately 6,000 to 4,000 BP.

Cultural patterns, as reflected in the archeological record, particularly specialized subsistence practices, became codified within the last 3,000 years. The archeological record becomes more complex, as specialized adaptations to locally available resources were developed and populations expanded. Many sites dated to this time period contain mortars and pestles and/or are associated with bedrock mortars implying increasingly intense exploitation of the acorn. The range of subsistence resources utilized, along with Native American exchange systems, expanded significantly from the previous period. Along the coast and in the Central Valley, archeological evidence of social stratification and craft specialization is indicated by well-made artifacts such as charmstones and beads, often found as mortuary items. Ethnographic lifeways serve as good analogs for this late prehistoric time period.

#### Ethnographic Context

The park area is located with lands claimed by the Penutian-speaking Southern Valley Yokuts at the time of initial contact with European American populations circa AD 1850. These peoples occupied an area extending south and west to Buena Vista and Kern Lakes at the southernmost end of the Great Central Valley. While located within Yokuts territory, the park area was also visited by the Southern Miwok and Western Mono (Monache). The Yokuts and Miwok were both Penutian-speaking peoples who dominated the Central Valley, Delta and San Francisco Bay areas, but the Monache were Shoshone-speaking, culturally related to the desert dwellers east of the Sierra Nevada crest.

The basic social unit for the Yokuts, as with most other California groups, was the family, although the village was also considered a social, political and economic unit. Often located on flats adjoining streams, villages were inhabited mainly in the winter because it was necessary to go out into the hills and higher elevation zones to establish temporary camps during food-gathering seasons (i.e., spring, summer, and fall). Villages typically consisted of a scattering of small structures, each containing a single family of from three to seven people. Larger villages like Wassama Village also contain an earth lodge.

As with most California Indian groups, economic life for the Yokuts revolved around hunting, fishing, and collecting plants, with deer, acorns and avian and aquatic resources representing primary staples. The Yokuts used a wide variety of wooden, bone, and stone artifacts to collect and process their food, and were very knowledgeable of the uses of local animals and plants and the availability of raw materials that could be used to manufacture an immense array of primary and secondary tools and implements. However, only fragmentary evidence of their material culture remains, due in part to perishability and in part to the impacts to archaeological sites resulting from later (historic) land uses, particularly logging and mining.

### Historic Context

Interior California was initially visited by Anglo-American fur trappers, Russian scientists, and Spanish-Mexican expeditions during the early part of the twentieth century. These early explorations were followed by a rapid escalation of European-American activities, which culminated in the massive influx fostered by the discovery of gold at Coloma in 1848. The influx of miners and others during the gold rush set in motion a series of major changes to the natural and cultural landscape of California that would never be reversed.

Oakhurst and Ahwahnee are located at opposite ends of the Fresno Flats, an active and lucrative placer mining area of the 1850s. With the discovery of gold in this area, large numbers of European-Americans, Hispanics, and Chinese arrived in and traveled through this region. The vicinity became known as the Grub Gulch Mining District and yielded an abundance of ore through the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. During the initial days of gold mining, European-Americans also discovered Yosemite Valley. Although the Valley lies north of the Ahwahnee region, its discovery nevertheless affected the area because the two were connected by the Yosemite Stage and Turnpike Company's Turnpike Road. This road eventually became SR-41 which now follows approximately the same route and which is located a short distance east of the park.

### History of the Wassama Village from other sources

The original roundhouse was a semi-subterranean building constructed in the 1860s and was used for ceremonial purposes by the Southern Miwok tribe. The site was known as Wassama Village meaning Leaves Falling. This structure was burned in 1893 by the native people, upon the death of their leader in keeping with tradition.

The new roundhouse, built in 1903 is an above-ground structure that utilized the original center pole in the construction. This roundhouse was restored in 1978 when state parks purchased the property, and is the only remaining Miwok roundhouse in California. The site is known to have prehistoric and historic-period cultural deposits. The roundhouse is used by Native Americans for religious ceremonies, dancing, and for interpretive programs. According to a monument at the site "Southern Miwok dances, including the 1870 Ghost Dance are known to have been performed in the round house."

According to the Madera County Genealogy website, the roundhouse built in 1903 was constructed of poles cut and hauled from Captain Jim Rohan's 80-acre allotment three miles to the north. Rohan and Johnny Jacobs hauled all the material and directed the building. Other Native-Americans who helped build the new roundhouse included Chief Peter Westfall, his sons Johnny and Eff, Jim and Sam Johnson, Charles Rohan, Frank Tex, Johnny Gibbs and Ben Jacobs. There were many more but their names are forgotten.

Wassama Roundhouse is California Historical Landmark No. 1001.

Sources: Site visit on October 23, 2010.

“American Indian Places: A Historical Guidebook” by Francis H. Kennedy, No. 327  
Wassama Roundhouse State Historic Park, by Linda E. Dick, Bissonnette and Les  
James, Suzanne Ramirez, Karen Sargoza, and Bernice Williamson.

Cultural Resources component of the Madera County Sierra Meadows Estates  
Subdivision EIR, Madera County Planning Department, 2037 W. Cleveland, Madera,  
CA 93637 and RBF Consulting, 14725 Alton Parkway, Irvine, CA 92618.

[http://www.madera-  
county.com/rma/archives/uploads/1116955383\\_Document\\_sec0507.culturalresources  
.pdf](http://www.madera-county.com/rma/archives/uploads/1116955383_Document_sec0507.culturalresources.pdf)

“CVIP Miscellaneous Recreation Centers”

<http://www.fresno.com/evonline/misc-rec.htm>

Wassama Roundhouse Association, P O Box 328, Ahwahnee CA 93601, (559) 683-  
8194 <http://coarsegoldrealestate.com/html/ahwahnee-california.htm>

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[http://www.allyosemite.com/history\\_museums/wassama\\_round\\_house.php](http://www.allyosemite.com/history_museums/wassama_round_house.php)

Madera County GenWeb, Roundhouse Indian Cemetery,

<http://www.cagenweb.com/madera/RoundHouseCemetery.htm>

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Restored roundhouse on level area of park shaded by valley oaks. Oak woodland on foothills in the background. (Chris Pattillo, October 23, 2010).



Burial ground surrounded by split rail fence, shaded by valley oaks (Chris Pattillo, October 23, 2010).



Grinding stone west of the roundhouse (Chris Pattillo, October 23, 2010).



Looking north at the park entry with stone column, light and gate. Park building in background, left side. Split rail fence at park perimeter. (Chris Pattillo, October 23, 2010).