
Losing another Yolo County Historic Treasure

The Stephens Tobacco-Sheep Barn

Elizabeth "Betsy" Monroe - November 15, 2019



Above: the grand interior of the 105-year old "Stephens Sheep Barn" seen in October 2019. Since we are trying to convince the county and the current owners, Granite Construction, not to remove the barn but to leave it to be a feature in the proposed Open Space Park, we were able to tour this Notre Dame Cathedral of barns. As you can see, not all barns are alike!

The Barn's History and Story

A young barn by the standards of many still standing in this old county of farming pioneers, but there is something unique about this one: the *Stephens Sheep Barn* is clearly seen from Highway 16 as one travels between Madison and Capay, sitting north of Esparto across Cache Creek. So, what's so special about this barn and why are we about to lose it? Well, first, a little history and backstory will help.

Built in 1914 as a tobacco-curing barn, after WWI ended it was repurposed to be a sheep barn. Tobacco, you ask? Well, yes. Our local farmers are always trying new things, and John D. Stephens and brother George D. Stephens were no different. They were actual 49ers, arriving for the gold rush in California in 1849 and then finding their way to Yolo County in 1850, where they bought the parcel where the barn sits in 1851. They would go on to create one of the first water districts to control the waters of Cache Creek and deliver and sell it to their neighbors—oh, and find time to start The Bank of Woodland. They eventually bought about 8000 acres, mostly between today's Madison and Guinda and across the creek in Hungry Hollow. They started the *Stephens Agriculture and Livestock Company*, and in addition to farming they had livestock—focusing on premium sheep. According to former Yolo County Librarian Mary Stephens, granddaughter of George D. Stephens, they had it built when the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 and then WWI 1914-1918 caused an embargo of Turkish Tobacco. Now, today tobacco has a black-eye, but not then. Several local farmers chose to give it a try, so the ever-innovative Stephens brothers built a 50' cathedral of a barn to dry and cure local tobacco. For a while some, like the Greek Chiflakos brothers, were so successful and hopeful they held a Tobacco Festival in 1919 that drew 3000 people to this area—and made the newspapers from here to SF. But with the end of the embargo, the Stephens family chose to repurpose the barn for their growing sheep herds, adding feeding troughs—but not having to change much else. Its massive shade and shelter was perfect for a large sheep herd and place to shear those sheep.

From the outside, after one gets over marveling at its sheer size, it looks like a typical tin sheep barn. But step inside and it takes your breath away. Twenty some solid wood posts reach to the rafters soaring overhead unlike any barn you have ever seen. Connie Read, who comes from a historic sheep-ranching family of

Capay Valley, called it a *cathedral*. She shared a painting a local artist had done of it—it's that impressive.

So, why are we losing it? Well, as it stands, Granite Construction owns the land and has a legal right to either dismantle it or demolish it. How did this happen? In the 1996, after the Stephens family sold the property, it was stipulated that Granite Construction would “move” the barn at their own expense; but in 2002 it was renegotiated with the county that they would “move or demolish” the structures as needed. Well, they have mined all around it, but it sits on a valuable vein of gravel they plan to mine next—soon! When they contacted the Board of Supervisors that they were planning on dismantling it and salvaging some materials to sell and/or offer to the Cache Creek Conservancy to reinforce the historic barn that sits on that site and to create some sort of memorial to the barn, etc., 5th District Supervisor Duane Chamberlain leapt into action. All the current supervisors are new since these actions regarding the barn were taken by the county, so Supervisor Chamberlain asked the Board to give him some time to do some research. What came from this was the foregoing history, but also that this barn had been found *eligible* for the National Register of Historic Places in the 1990s, but, sadly, no one had taken it all the way to receive that important—and protective--designation. And, sadly, the last time Yolo County had done its own Historic Resource Guide was in the 1980s, at which time this barn was considered but not included. So, it would appear that Granite has the right to consider it of no historical importance--and to take it down. Supervisor Chamberlain was the sole Nay vote when the Board asked Granite to consider dismantling it and storing the lumber on its property until it could be determined what to do with it—as opposed to demolishing it. When asked why he voted against this as a choice, Supervisor Chamberlain—the only barn-owning farmer-rancher sitting on the current Board of Supervisors—explained that once taken apart, a barn of this age and size could never be put back together; once taken down, it was lost as the unique historic feature it is.

Then Supervisor Chamberlain convened several meetings to determine whether it were even possible to leave it where it is and work around it, creating yet another feature in the proposed Open Space Park which will stretch from the current Capay Open Space Park to the Cache Creek Conservancy. While the clock ticks on this barn's fate, Supervisor Chamberlain and others still hold out hope that a solution

can be found; that Granite Construction--now that they have been apprised of the historic significance that was sadly missed in their original assessment--will consider working with the county on a way to keep it intact and a source of historical and educational value to the county as part of the “restored” mining area which runs north of Cache Creek from County Road 85 in Capay nearly to Woodland. Discussed at these meetings was the broader vision for this Open Space Parkland, with educational plaques throughout, drawing attention to the rich history of the area: the 8000-year history of the Hill Patwin people in the area; the pioneer farmers beginning in 1850—represented by this unique barn; the flora and fauna; and the *river* we call Cache Creek. The current plan includes a walking and biking path—even horseback riding is being considered. Shaded picnic tables and restrooms will dot the way and the restored native species of trees will be replanted as they have been at the two current parks--along with access to the creek itself. Several water features are proposed in the pits that now exist; possibly also offering flood control, drought water reserves, and a place for migratory birds—on November 12, a flock of Canada Geese was seen at one such pool of water north of Capay. Wouldn't a grand and historic and cathedral-like barn be a great addition to such a plan? A shady spot to relax and learn about the history of Yolo County? Some of us cherish our storied history—and live in hope for miracles! And appreciate our Supervisor's efforts to make them happen.

