

429
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Historical Commission

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM

1. Name of Property

Historic name Tanner Farmhouse

Other names/site number Cowart-Fills-Tanner Property, Cowart Homestead

2. Location

Street & number 6885 Walter Tanner Road not for publication N/A
City or Town Wilmer vicinity X
State Alabama code AL County Mobile code 097 Zip code 36587

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination
request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of
Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X
meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally
 statewide X locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Signature] 4/4/08
Signature of certifying official Date

State or Federal Agency or Tribal government in my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register
criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:
 entered in the National Register Edson H. Ball
 See continuation sheet.
 determined eligible for the _____
National Register
 See continuation sheet.
 determined not eligible for the _____
National Register
 removed from the National Register _____

other (explain): _____
[Signature] 5-20-08
Signature of Keeper Date of Action

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5. Classification
=====

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply) **Category** of Property (Check only one box)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-local | <input type="checkbox"/> district |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-state | <input type="checkbox"/> site |
| <input type="checkbox"/> public-federal | <input type="checkbox"/> structure |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> object |

Number of Resources within property

- | | |
|--------------|------------------------|
| Contributing | Noncontributing |
| <u>1</u> | <u>1</u> buildings |
| <u> </u> | <u> </u> sites |
| <u> </u> | <u> </u> structures |
| <u> </u> | <u> </u> objects |
| <u>1</u> | <u>1</u> total |

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.) N/A

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6. Function or Use
=====

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions) **Current Functions** (Enter categories from instructions)
Cat: Domestic Sub: single dwelling Cat: Domestic Sub: single dwelling
Cat: Agriculture Sub: agricultural building

=====
7. Description
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Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)
No style

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)
Foundation Wood, brick
Roof Metal
Walls Wood

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)
Continuation sheets attached.

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8. Statement of Significance

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Applicable National Register Criteria (

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.) N/A

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B Removed from its original location.
- C A birthplace or a grave.
- D A cemetery.
- E A reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F A commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions) Architecture **Significant Dates** c1886

Period of Significance c1886-c1908 1932 c1906 1932

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above) N/A **Cultural Affiliation** N/A

Architect/Builder Fills, Joseph A.

Narrative Statement of Significance Continuation sheets attached.

9. Major Bibliographical References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Continuation sheets attached.

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

previously listed in the National Register

previously determined eligible by the National Register

designated a National Historic Landmark

recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____

recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data

State Historic Preservation Office

Other State agency

Federal agency

Local government

University

Other

Name of repository: Property Owner (Copies of documentation)

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Approximately 2.5 acres

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone Easting Northing Zone Easting Northing

1 16 369550 3411960 3 _____

2 _____ 4 _____

15: Wilmer, Alabama quadrangle

Verbal Boundary Description Continuation sheet attached

Boundary Justification Continuation sheet attached

11. Form Prepared By

Name/title Marilyn B. Sullivan, Consultant

Organization _____ Date March 3, 2006

Street & number P.O. Box 681232 Telephone 334-365-6537

City or Town Prattville State AL Zip code 36068

Additional Documentation

Continuation Sheets.

Maps.

A USGS map (15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs – Key Page 16.

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items. (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

Name Eugene and Lena Tanner

Street & number 6885 Walter Tanner Road Telephone 251-649-1175

City or Town Wilmer State AL Zip code 36587

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET**

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Section 7 Page 1

Tanner Farmhouse
Name of property
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Description

(Diagram of floor plan – Page 17.)

The Tanner Farmhouse is built in a common vernacular form dictated by 18th and 19th century values of symmetry and proportion, locally available materials, and regional climatic considerations. It is characterized by a center hall plan and a one room depth with an L to the rear. It has a side gable corrugated metal roof, ¹ one exterior gable end chimney, one interior chimney², standardized mill-cut heart pine construction, and a full width hip roof porch (Area 7) supported by simple turned posts. The siding is wide clapboard. The five bay façade has a surprisingly refined center entrance, with a simple four paneled door and rectangular sidelights. The center hall adjoins a full length porch to the rear, affording every room exterior access and/or cross ventilation. The house is supported by heart pine timber blocks with very little crawl-space underneath.

It appears the house originally had three primary rooms (Rooms 1, 2, and 3) with a small shed room (Room 6) to the rear. In 1932, a kitchen room (Room 4) and a rear porch supported by chamfered posts (Area 8), were added to the L. The shed room was converted from a kitchen to a little bedroom. The kitchen and shed room have beveled exterior siding. About 1940, a single door opening between the two original rooms of the L (Rooms 2 and 3) was enlarged to its present width.

In some respects the house is a puzzle, in that the wide lap siding, the six over six narrow muntin wood windows, random 6 to 7" flooring in one room (Room 3), and the center hall configuration all speak of mid-19th century construction. However, these older elements are mixed with late 19th century standardized materials in such a way as to suggest the builder used whatever materials were available, including older salvaged materials or perhaps, "seconds" from a sawmill. For example, while room 3 has random width wide pine flooring it also has beaded ceiling and 3 ½ inch plank walls. Rooms 1, 2, and 4 of the house have 3 ½ x 5/4 inch pine flooring and 3 ½ inch plank walls. There is, however, no indication that any part of the house was ever moved or stood alone. And there is no subflooring except in the kitchen where the Tanners floored over the damaged 3 ½ x 5/4 original.

The interior box locks and door hardware are late nineteenth century as are the four panel interior and exterior doors.

As straight forward and utilitarian as the house is, there are elements indicating great thought was given to both practical and decorative details. In addition to the handsome entrance, there are little corner curio shelves in the center hall (Room 5) and a screened corner cabinet on the back porch (Area 8). The center hall also sports a wooden gun rack, and just outside the front door is the remainder of a little clover shaped wooden notepad.

¹ Prior to 1944 the house had a wood shingle roof.

² Unlike most side gable houses, there is no indication or family memory to suggest there was ever more than one end gable chimney. It is questionable as to whether there was a second chimney in the L prior to the 1932 addition as Mr. Tanner remembers his older brother talking about how cold his room on that side of the house was.

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Section 7 Page 2

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There is a small sliding window in the wall next to the fireplace in the north room (Room 1) through which firewood can be passed. A raised platform outside the window allows the firewood to be stacked level with the window within easy reach of the occupant.

The floors of the three original rooms (Rooms 1, 2, and 3) slope slightly toward the exterior walls and have a hole in one corner of each room to facilitate drainage and drying when the floors were scrubbed.

The Tanner Farmhouse has been restored with great respect for the historic materials and configuration. It is in remarkably original condition with the exception of the chimneys and fireplaces and the rear kitchen window, which were all casualties of twentieth century hurricanes. Accordingly, the fireplace in Room 1 was built in about 1990, as were the fireplaces opening into Rooms 3 and 4. They are all brick. It was also in 1990 that the shed room (Room 6) was converted to a bathroom.

The most recent damage was caused by Hurricane Ivan while this nomination was being prepared. Two of the old pecan trees were lost in the storm. One fell on the kitchen destroying the rear window and causing the walls of the kitchen to bulge outward. The Tanners give credit to their son-in-law, Barry Jenkins, for painstakingly drawing the original walls back into place and repairing the damage. (See photos 6 and 7 for before and after the repair.) The wooden replacement window was custom made to resemble the original but is a shorter fixed sash allowing for a countertop in the little kitchen.

There is one large wood frame outbuilding within the boundaries of the nomination. It is an open garage and storage building which, although visually compatible with the farmhouse, is a non-contributing structure.

The Tanner Farmhouse retains its rural setting on an unpaved lane with piney woods to the rear and pasture land across the road to the east. The house is surrounded by historic plantings including large pecan trees and a row of cedars to the south that provides a wind break. Contemporary dwellings are located to the north and south of the property but are located outside the boundaries of the nomination.

In the early 1940s Walter Tanner was instrumental in making improvements to the Walter Tanner Road and Thompson Road, the earlier public road, diminished in importance and was never improved beyond its 19th Century terminus.³

With the road improvements came landscaping. Most of the current landscaping, including the row of cedars and the fence lines date to this period. The landscape is well-developed, with an early semi-circular drive (paved in 1990), mature camellias and crepe myrtles, and old pecan trees the Tanners call "original."

³ Thompson Road was a dirt track paralleling the 34 – 35 Section line.

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Tanner Farmhouse

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Although no formal archaeological survey has been made of the nominated property, properties of this type (farmsteads) were commonly sited within groupings of dependencies and other outbuildings, and we know a variety of farming and timbering activities occurred here. Thus, buried remains may contain information useful in interpreting the entire site.

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SUMMARY:

**Criterion C Period of Significance – c1886 – c1908
1932**

The Tanner Farmhouse is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C in the area of architecture because it is a rare intact example of the vernacular housing that characterized the social and economic development of Alabama's Long Leaf Pine Region. Carpenter-constructed of locally available materials, the house "embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type and method of construction" significant in rural Alabama's transition from a 19th century agricultural economy to the early 20th century railroad and industrial boom.

Historical documentation indicates construction of the Tanner Farmhouse was a process that lasted through two owners beginning with James B. Cowart in c1886 and ending no later than the death of the second owner in 1908. Significant repairs and/or reconstruction may have occurred after the major hurricane of 1906. The only addition since that time is a kitchen built in 1932, reflective of mid-20th century technological advances and interest in domestic conveniences. That addition and significant landscaping between 1932 and about 1940 completed the property's current appearance and character.

The Tanner Farmhouse is now rare because the form and history of such modest housing has been generally disregarded as unimportant and thus it has been subject to demolition by neglect or design. In addition, intact examples are particularly rare in the Gulf Coast Region because of their vulnerability to tropical storms and hurricanes. This researcher found no other intact examples in the Wilmer, Alabama area.

Thus, the Tanner Farmhouse represents one of the last opportunities to document the vernacular architecture of the Piney Woods Region and to interpret the historic development of northwest Mobile County.⁴

⁴ Early photographs document this ubiquitous house type in Wilmer c.1900. While some houses survive in altered states in the town of Wilmer, this researcher found no other intact examples in the town, in the Mobile County Historic Resources Survey of the surrounding communities, or through personal interviews.

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Historic Context

Situated in northwestern Mobile County, Alabama, in the community of Wilmer, the Tanner Farmhouse lies approximately four miles east of the Escatawpa River and Mississippi State Line. It is located about thirty miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico and twenty miles west of Mobile Bay. The community of Wilmer is about fifteen miles northwest of Alabama's historically second largest city, Mobile, on the approximate route of the historic road from Mobile to Natchez.

The Farmhouse is located in a rural setting on Walter Tanner Road, a dirt track which runs north, perpendicular to U.S. Highway 98. It is about a mile north of Wilmer proper, in the heart of Mobile County's Piney Woods Region.

An understanding of the rich history of the Tanner Farmhouse begins with the unique landscape. The area is characterized by long leaf pines and sandy soil and is part of Alabama's Long Leaf Pine Region. Historically referred to as the Piney Woods Region, it represents one of the "fastest declining forest ecosystems" in the U.S.⁵

The Tanner Farmhouse's setting is beautifully described in Steve Lyda's Prine Road.

Spread out like a patchwork quilt of age classes, is a pine forest, dissected by a labyrinth of creeks and small streams covering 18 full sections in two townships, or roughly 11, 00 acres. The Escatawpa runs untamed throughout its 81-mile course... If I got ambitious, I could shoot a compass heading through the broad basin and climb out on the white sandbar on the river's east side in time for lunch. A red-tailed hawk, with a hot band of crows on him, could clear the span in a matter of minutes. From high above the thermals, he could look down through the canopy and see deep sand ridges, spiked with tall longleaf pine and lowly scrub-oak snaking their way into dark and shallow drainages hidden beneath the red bay and gum trees.⁶

The Wilmer area was first settled as a way station on the early east-west road, as this was the trail used for moving herds of cattle, sheep, hogs, and other animals to market in Mobile. By 1870 it was known as the community of Albritton and there was significant migration into the area for the next two decades. Many of the migrants were homesteaders from North and South Carolina by way of southeast Mississippi. This included the settlers of the Tanner Farmhouse c. 1886.

The Federal Homestead Act of 1862 related not just to the opening of territory west of the Mississippi River, as is commonly assumed but had great implications for Reconstruction Alabama as well. (As far as this researcher can determine, the relatively short-lived Southern Homestead Act of 1866 had no implications for the nominated property.)

⁵ March 5, 2001 letter from the Longleaf Alliance to the Alabama Department of Transportation.

⁶ Steve Lyda is a former Mobile County Forester. His memoir, Prine Road, recounts experiences hunting on the Tanner Farm and in the Wilmer area.

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According to the Federal Homestead Act, any head of a household, at least 21 years of age, regardless of race, could claim a 160 acre parcel of Federal Lands by filing their intention to do so and by paying a filing fee of \$10.00 at the nearest Land Office. The Homesteader was then compelled to build a home on the land, make improvements, plant a crop, and farm it for five years before taking two witnesses with him to the Land Office to sign the "proof" document. After successful completion of the "proving up" and payment of a final \$6.00 fee, the Homesteader received a patent (deed) for the land.

The Homestead Act and the prevailing open range policies were extremely important in the Piney Woods Region of Alabama because both provided effective avenues for the poor and/or disenfranchised to survive and even prosper as small farmers and cattlemen. An 1883-1884 report on Mobile's "Trade, Commerce, and Industry" states that, between 1870 and 1880, "the number of small farms [in Alabama] considerably more than doubled."⁷

While the region did not prove to be prime farm land, it is well documented that the Piney Woods were successfully used for free-ranging cattle from the time of Spanish settlement.

Brooks Blevins' book, Cattle in the Cotton Fields, states the "southern piney woods area provided an ideal habitat for cattle raisers. Warm winters allowed for year round grazing with little attention to stock. Long leaf pine forests presented little allure for the planter but offered sawgrass and other pastures for cattlemen."

According to the 1804 Census of Washington County in the Mississippi Territory, which included most of southern Mississippi and Alabama at the time, there were large breeders in what would become southwest Alabama. "Cattle herds in this area were dominated for many years by Spanish longhorns, now referred to as 'cracker cattle'."

Blevins records a fascinating description of free-ranging in the Piney Woods Region written in the 1840s by a man named Claiborne. It is fascinating in part because the account could just as easily have been written in the early to mid-1900s. Blevins writes, "At Leaksville, just a few miles from the Alabama line in Greene County Mississippi, Claiborne observed a piney woods roundup and skillfully recorded the event for posterity:"

Many of the people here are herdsmen, owning large droves of cattle, surplus increase of which are annually driven to Mobile. These cattle are permitted to run in the range or forest, subsisting in summer on the luxuriant grass with which the teeming earth is clothed, and in winter on green rushes or reeds, a tender species of cane that grow in the brakes or thickets in every swamp, hollow and ravine. The herdsmen have pens or stampedes at different points in the forest, where at suitable times they salt the cows, and once or twice a year they are all collected and marked and branded...⁸

⁷ Land, Mobile.

⁸ Blevins quotes from J. F. H. Claiborne's "A Trip through the Piney Woods." Leaksville is approximately 30 miles from Wilmer.

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Blevins goes on to note that “the focal point and market for much of southern Alabama’s cattle industry was Mobile,” thus establishing the importance of the old road leading northwest out of Mobile through Wilmer into Mississippi.

Many cattlemen owned no land at all but free-ranged significant herds of cattle, sheep and hogs well into the twentieth century, when Alabama’s 1901 Constitution turned public policy in favor of large land owners and industrialists, including the burgeoning railroads. From that point on, litigation between cattlemen and the railroads over cattle on the tracks increased and electoral laws assured that interests favorable to closing the range would be elected. On a local level, free-ranging was practiced and remained controversial in the Wilmer area well into the 20th century.

As the piney forests became increasingly accessible by rail, a timber boom swept northern Mobile County from about 1880 to about 1915. A contemporary commercial bulletin reports the worth of the piney forests north and west of Mobile had been discovered by 1883. “The growth throughout this entire section is magnificent long-leaf pine – the yellow pitch pine of commerce... Besides yielding tar, pitch, rosin, and turpentine, it furnishes one of the most valuable species of lumber known to commerce...”⁹ In fact, by 1900 forest products exceeded cotton as the port of Mobile’s largest export.

Probate records document attempts to establish rail service through the Wilmer area as early as 1877. The Mobile, Jacksonville and Kansas City Rail Road reached Wilmer in 1898. A late nineteenth century map of Mobile County documents the web of logging roads throughout northwest Mobile County as well as the proposed path of the railroad. The map also helps us understand the seeming irrelevance of the state line to residents whose family and economic connections with southeastern Mississippi continue to the present.

Steve Lyda fills in the history after 1915, as the region came full circle to its first use by European settlers.

In the heart of the big woods, is a large tract comprised of half-dozen large ownerships... and one true road, which is still dirt.¹⁰ The road was named the CC Trail for its role during the Depression. The [Civilian] Conservation Corps used it as access for forestry, which for the most part, was tree planting. Prior to the 1930’s, most of the timber had been heavily logged and converted to farm fields. The experiment with agriculture ultimately failed on soils too poor to feed a family, much less turn a profit. The slash pine conversion did not fare well either. The pulpwood stands were later clearcut and the old fields regenerated with a mix bag of poor quality oak, gum, brush, and rattlesnakes. By 1950, fire had entered the equation when the remaining families started wholesale burning the infertile land for longhorn scrub or cracker cattle. From exile, longleaf pine again emerged to reign as royalty, peacefully coexisting with the free ranging herd... The area has not had to endure mass alteration for the past fifty years...

Such is the context in which the Tanner Farmhouse developed.

⁹ Land, Mobile.

¹⁰ The contiguous Walter Tanner and Blewette Tanner Roads.

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Tanner Farmhouse

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History of the Property

Homestead Certificate 8091, Application number 21667, dated June 19, 1891, documents James B. Cowart's acquisition of the NE ¼ of Section 34, Township 2 South, Range 4 West, "containing one hundred sixty two acres." Subsequent records include his wife, Narcissus B. Cowart. (Her name also appears in documents spelled "Narcisa" and in census records as "Netty" and "Nettie.")

Judging from 1860, 1870, and 1880 census records, Narcissus Cowart (maiden name) moved with her family from Mississippi to Albritton prior to 1870. Her father, Jesse Cowart, was one of the charter members of the Methodist Church in Albritton that year.

James B. Cowart's origin is unclear. Even census records tell us he was born both in Alabama and Mississippi. It appears, however, that a Cowart married a Cowart and that they had their first child in Alabama in 1882. Based on the Homestead Act we have to assume they established residence on their homestead no later than 1886.

The earliest tract map found in the Mobile County Archives (Township Book 1, Page 20) is from the "late 1800s" and predates the 1898 railroad. It has a residence hand noted in what appears to be the location of the Tanner Farmhouse. "Cowart" is noted as the resident.

In 1893, two years after proving their homestead, James B. and Narcissus Cowart sold the SE ¼ of the NE ¼ of Section 34 (40 acres) to John M. Cowart for \$40.00. Two years later they sold half of their original homestead (80 acres), the W ½ of the NE ¼ of Section 34, to timber man, L. I. Brannon.

According to local historians, Brannon came to Albritton in 1880, subsequently "owned most of the timberland around Wilmer," and opened the "first sawmill in the immediate vicinity." Heretofore, much of the timber from around the Albritton community was taken east to a large sawmill on the north-south rail line at Oak Grove or was floated down the Escatawpa (called the Dog River on some old maps) to mills on the Gulf.

Local accounts credit Mrs. Brannon with renaming Albritton to Wilmer when she opened the first post office in their home in 1896.¹¹ The name Wilmer was chosen to honor Richard Hooker Wilmer, an Episcopal priest of the day who wrote The Recent Past from a Southern Standpoint (1887), a defense of the South's late rebellion.¹²

Brannon paid Cowart only \$30.00 for his eighty acres. While it was quite common for large landowners to "subsidize" others to homestead land for them, we currently have no information other than this transaction regarding the Cowart's financial relationship to Brannon.

¹¹ Miscellaneous newspaper clippings from the Mobile Public Library Local History vertical file and self-published references in their local history collection.

¹² Roger et. al. Alabama.

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Probate records reveal Willis Tanner sold land to the railroad in 1897, reserving the timber rights. Probate records of his estate in 1902 also reveal he had accumulated significant acreage in both Mississippi and Alabama by the time of his death. The inventory of his estate included "stock of mds. in store at Wilmer," ten hogs, and one half interest "in 300 head of cattle, more or less." The cattle were free-ranged.

Willis Tanner's oldest son, Francis Marion Tanner, was born in Mississippi in 1859. By 1900, he and his wife, Georgiana (Anna), lived just north of the Cowart Homestead in the E ½ of Section 27. Probate and census records give us a glimpse of Marion Tanner's activities, including large land and timber transactions, "hauling logs," and working a "sawmill." Family members believe this refers to logging his land and being involved in Brannon's sawmill operation.

Gene Tanner reports his grandfather "ran" cattle and worked the timberland until his early death in 1916. Family history attributes Francis Marion Tanner's death in part to the stress of a devastating hurricane in 1916, which wiped out large stands of his timber. This coincided closely with the closing of the Wilmer sawmill in 1915, signifying the demise of the timber industry in this part of the County.

Interestingly, Albritton Precinct Census records indicate the Cowarts - that is, the original owners - never moved away from the immediate vicinity. The Tanners remember "Mr. Jim and Miss Nettie" and believe they rented the Tanner Farmhouse and worked for the Tanners between 1912 and about 1920.

Gene Tanner's parents, Walter and Mazie Tanner, were married in June of 1920. He reports they moved into the Farmhouse at that time and that he, the second child, was born there in August, 1931. A little sister was born into the household in 1933. Perhaps it was the growing family that precipitated an addition to the house in 1932, when the kitchen was built.

It was not unusual for property transactions in rural areas, especially among family members, to go unrecorded for some time. Because of that and because Francis Marion Tanner died without a will, most of what we know about the division of his estate comes from family memory and from affidavits recorded at the Probate Office in the late 1920s and early 1930s. By 1933, Walter Tanner held clear title to the house and pasture east of it. A 1934 mortgage for \$500 from the Land Bank "pursuant to the 'Emergency Farm Mortgage Act of 1933'" verifies the Tanner's farming activities.

Among other activities, Mrs. Tanner, a schoolteacher, also grew flowers in the summer and made natural wreathes and decorations in the winter to sell at the Mobile curb market. Sadly, documenting the history of a house deals not only with life and growth but also death and loss. In 1940, Mrs. Tanner died at home of pneumonia contracted during the Christmas curb market season.

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According to Gene Tanner, up until about 1940, plans were for Thompson Road to be the “improved” north-south public road. Thus for years, the family walked across the pasture east of the house to retrieve their mail from a box on Thompson Road.¹⁵ His father, he reports, was instrumental in making the Walter Tanner portion of the old CCC Trail the main connector, as it is today. Accordingly, the road was named for him. It was at this time much of the existing landscaping was installed including a row of cedars to the south of the house and fence lines defining ownership.

Gene and Lena (Eubanks) Tanner married in 1954, moving into a frame house they built north of the Tanner Farmhouse. In 1972, they built the brick house immediately north of the Farmhouse, while Mr. Walter Tanner continued to reside in the “home place.”

In 1977, Walter Tanner died, leaving the farmhouse vacant. Damaged by Hurricane Frederick in 1979, it remained vacant until 1990. For most modest, vernacular housing in the rural South this would have been the end of the story, as the house was slowly reclaimed by nature, weed covered and rotting. And its history would be discounted and forgotten in the face of “progress.” But Eugene and Lena Tanner wrote a different ending.

The Tanners restored the little farmhouse in 1990, faithful to its simple style and materials, and moved in. Despite Hurricanes Ivan (2004) and Katrina (2005), they continue to live in the Tanner Farmhouse and work to keep the farm’s rich history alive.

While the Tanners had inquired about historic designation many years earlier, it was the proposed widening and re-routing of Highway 98, (c2000) that precipitated a Section 106 Federal Review, through which this farmhouse was identified as significant. The new highway proposes to cut through the pine forest and Big Creek Lake watershed¹⁶ north of Wilmer and will cross Walter Tanner Road just north of the Tanner Farmhouse. While the Section 106 Area of Potential Effects did not include the Farmhouse, the project will be visible and presumably audible from the Tanner’s front porch.

The narrow historic perspective reflected in the conclusions drawn by the Alabama Department of Transportation environmental review serve to remind us of the need to recognize, record, and preserve the vernacular - that is, those parts of our history that defy broad-brush generalities and bear witness to ordinary, colloquial realities.

The DOT review states, “the area does not have rich or even good farm land, and thus was never intensively farmed. It did not develop a plantation economy, either ante- or postbellum, and thus did not ever support many farm workers.

¹⁵ The early plan for Thompson Road is clearly evident on the 1943 USGS Map. Today however, the road reflects its early configuration terminating just east of the Tanner Farmhouse.

¹⁶ Mobile’s municipal water supply.

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The area was not settled until the latter half of the nineteenth century, and then only very sparsely by essentially subsistence farmers.”¹⁷ By way of this nomination, we hope to enlarge that perspective.

We do, however, agree with the DOT assessment that “many of the earliest homes and structures... were not especially substantial and were subject to damage or destruction by hurricanes and tornadoes.” Such was often the nature of pioneer housing. And we agree that “nineteenth century structures are exceedingly rare in the vicinity.” The Tanner Farmhouse is a rare intact exception.

Thus, we believe the Cowart-Fills-Tanner property represents one of the last opportunities to document the architecture of the Piney Woods Region and to interpret the historic development of northwest Mobile County.

¹⁷ Alabama Department of Transportation Project #NHF-210(211), “Summary of Historic Development in the Project Area,” p. 8.

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The legal description of the Tanner Farmhouse property, which also constitutes the boundaries of this nomination, is as follows: (See attached maps.)

The Tanner Farmhouse is an approximately 2.5 acre parcel located in the SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 34 Township 2S Range 4W. It begins at a point 155 feet south of the NW corner of the SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ S34 T2S R4W then runs southeasterly 438.21 feet then southwesterly along the west right of way of Walter Tanner Road 270.14 feet then northwesterly 281.98 feet to the quarter line then north along the quarter line to the point of beginning.

Justification for the boundaries: The boundaries for the Tanner Farmhouse were defined by the following factors.

1. The Tanners subdivided their property to allow deeding the adjoining north and south lots to their two daughters. The parcels do not have separate names or numbers.
2. The Tanner Farmhouse property is visually well defined by a quarter line to the west and by the 1940 road improvements and landscaping to the south and east.

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Section: Additional Documentation
Key to Photographs
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All photographs were taken by Marilyn Sullivan. The original negatives are in the possession of the Alabama Historical Commission.

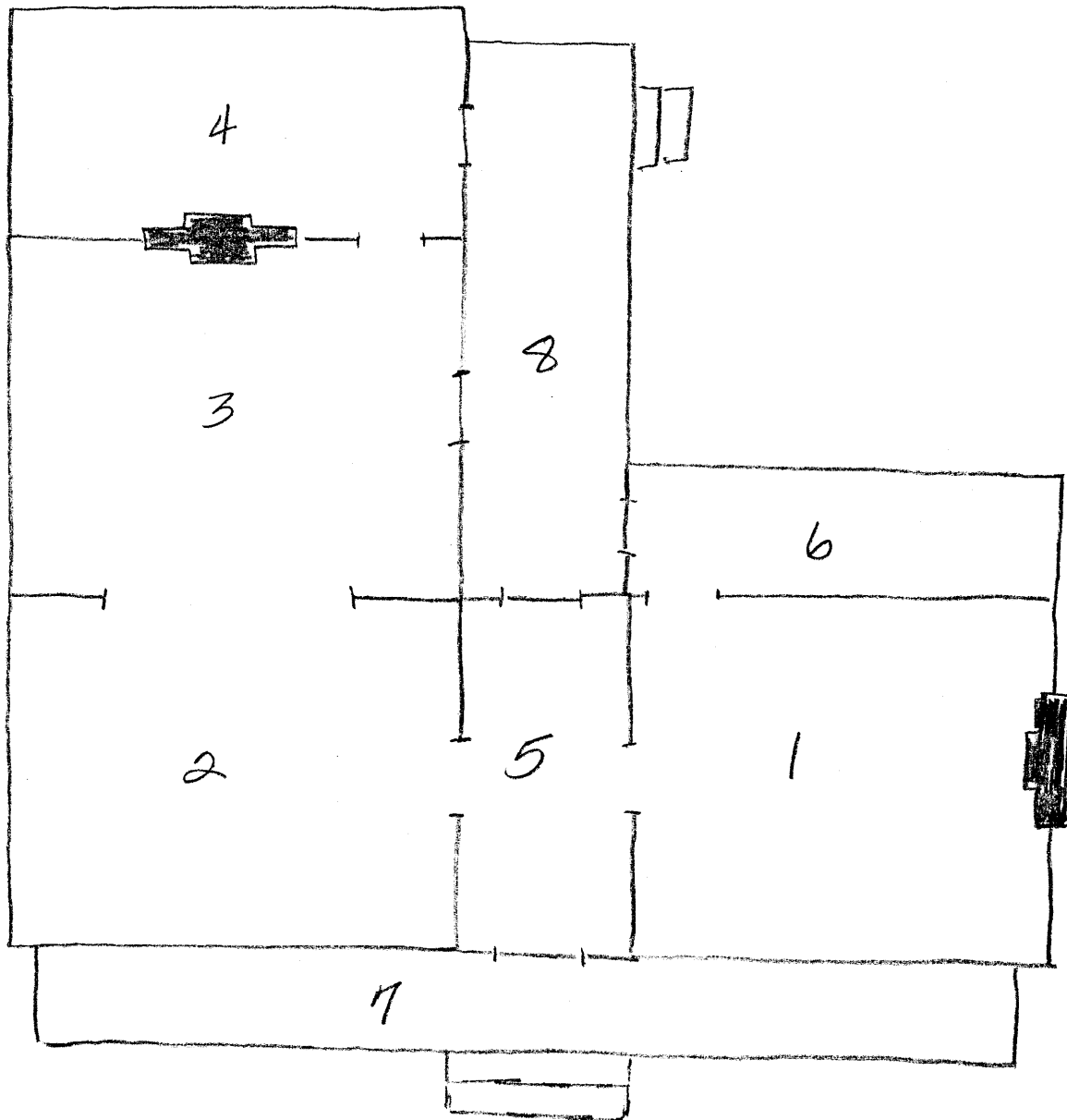
1. Looking toward the west at the front of the house. May 2004
2. Looking east across the paved driveway and Walter Tanner road. May 2004
3. Another view of the façade and front porch showing the north gable end of the house. Camera facing slightly southwest. May 2004
4. Looking at the north gable end of the house. Camera facing southeast. Notice "log access" window to the right of the chimney. May 2004
5. View of the rear of the house. Camera facing northeast. May 2004
6. View of the rear of the house before Hurricane Ivan (September 2004). Camera facing east. May 2004
7. View of the rear of the house after repair of hurricane damage. (House in process of being scraped for painting.) March 2006.
8. View of back porch. Camera facing east. May 2004
9. View of back porch. Shed room to the left. Camera facing south. May 2004
10. Detail of front entrance. Camera facing west. March 2006
11. Interior view of front entrance. Camera facing east. May 2004
12. Wall board and beaded ceiling detail. Photo taken in dining room. Camera facing north. May 2004.
13. Example of typical interior doors. Photo taken in kitchen. Camera facing north. May 2004
14. Interior view from kitchen door through dining room into living room. Camera facing east. May 2004
15. Interior view from living room looking through dining room toward kitchen. Camera facing west. May 2004.
16. View of shed room converted to bathroom. Camera facing northwest. May 2004
17. Detail of corner curio shelves in center hall. Camera facing west. March 2006
18. Exterior view of firewood access opening. (Room 1) Camera facing southwest. May 2004
19. Garage/Storage shed. Camera facing southwest. May 2004

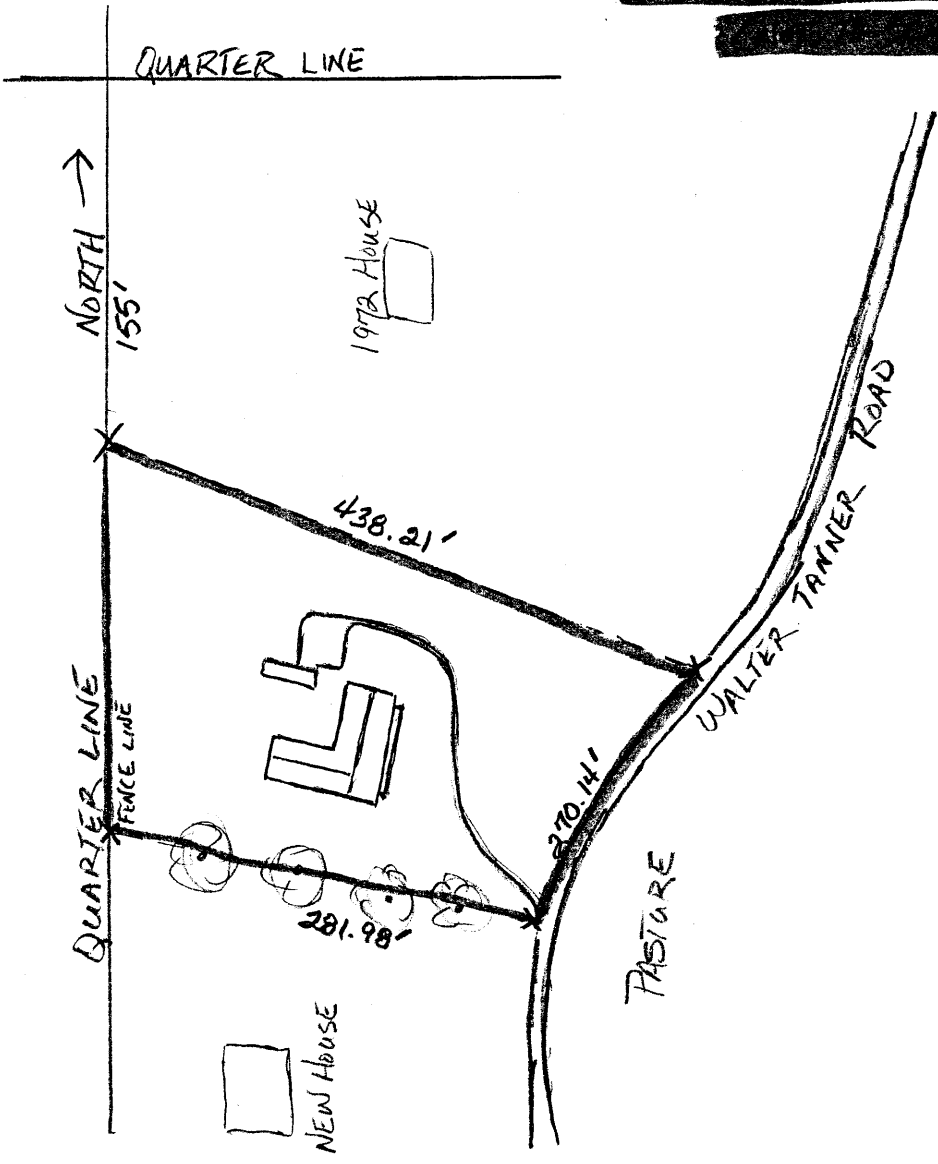
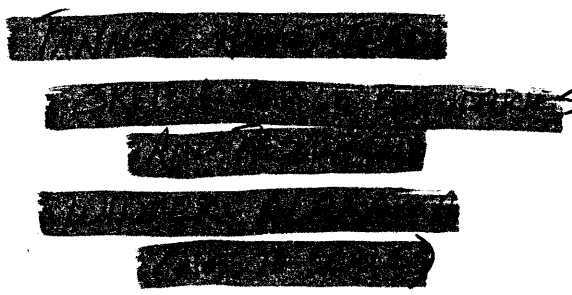
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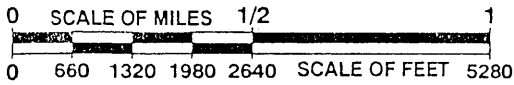
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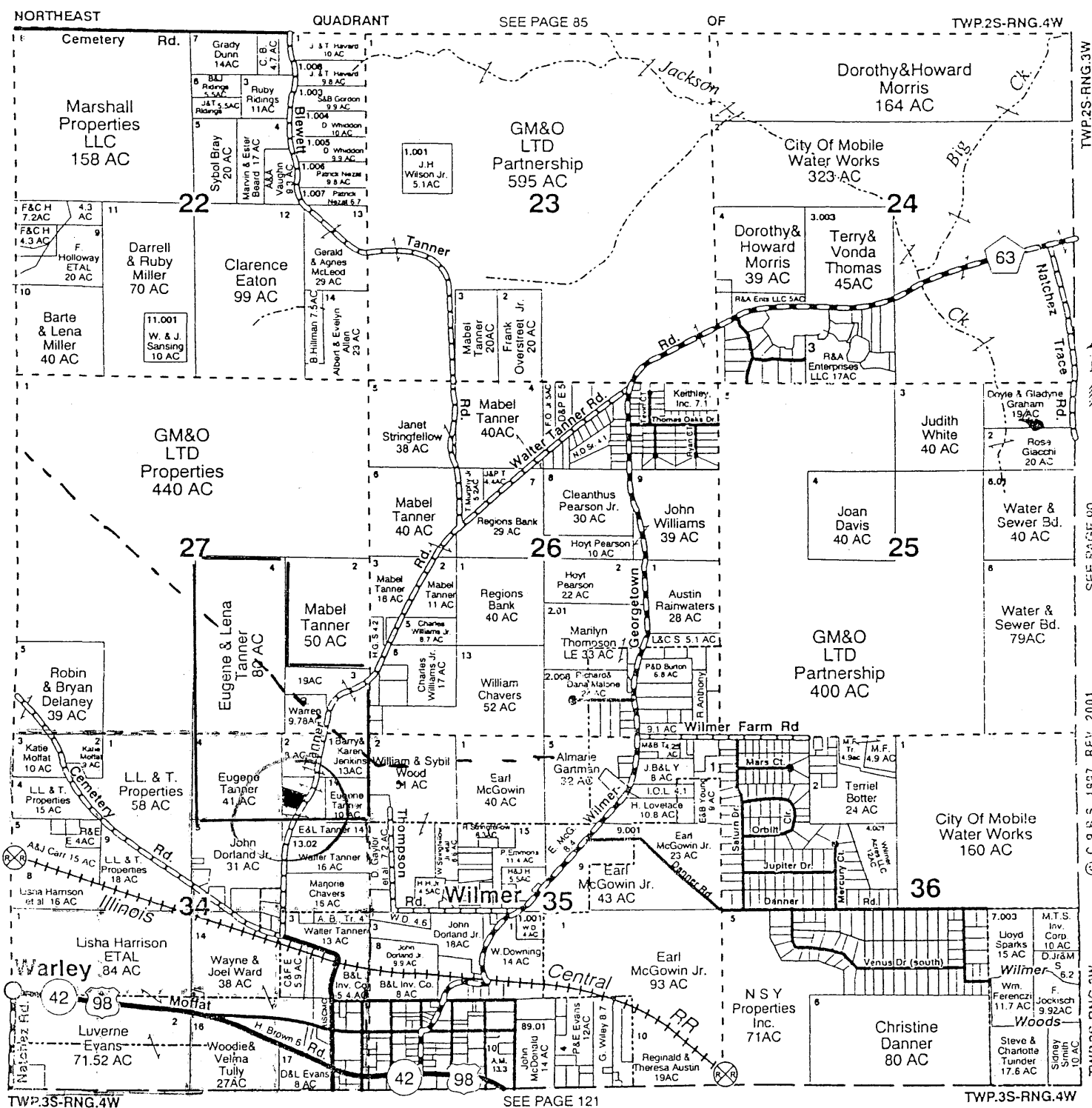
Floor Plan - Key to Description
Not to Scale
North >







TWP.2S-RNG.4W - SOUTHEAST
MOBILE COUNTY, ALABAMA (LOCATOR 16)



*TANNER HOMESTEAD
WILMER, MOBILE CO., AL
COUNTY PROPERTY OWNERS MAP*

TWP.2S-RNG.3W
SEE PAGE 90
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TWP.2S-RNG.3W