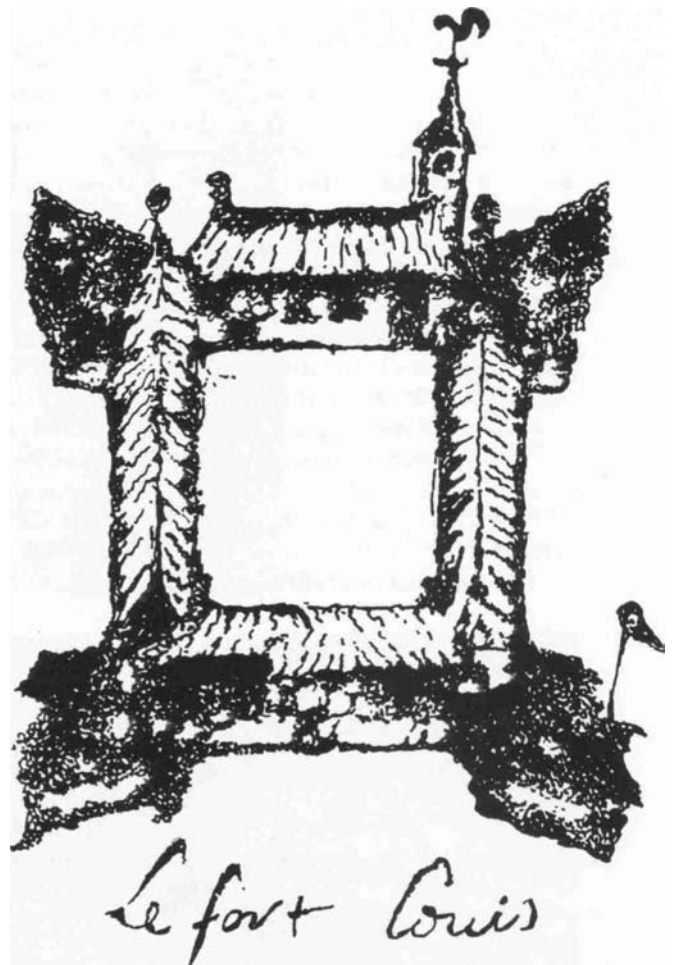


The Old Mobile Project Newsletter

Issue 1

Summer 1989



Archaeological Discovery of the Original Site of French Mobile, 1702-1711

Local tradition has long associated the area of Twenty-seven Mile Bluff on the Mobile River with the location of the early French settlement of Mobile. But archaeological traces of this important historical site have only recently been discovered. The old town site is now the focus of a research project directed by archaeologists at the University of South Alabama.

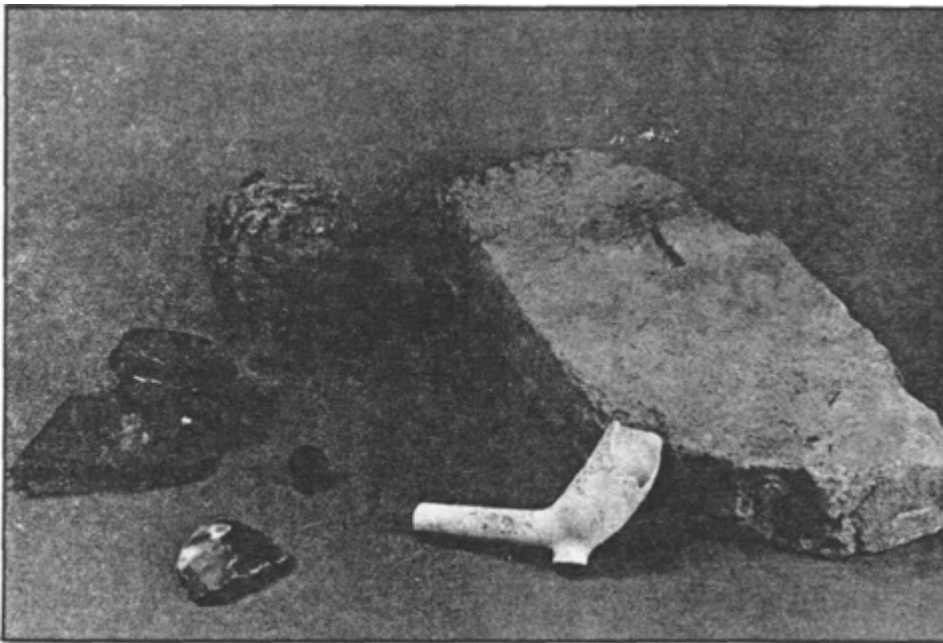
In 1902, during the bicentennial celebrations of the founding of Mobile, city leaders erected a stone monument at Twenty-seven Mile Bluff to commemorate the event. Since that date, the location of this landmark has been assumed to correspond to the vicinity of Fort Louis. However, when this possible fort site was test excavated by archaeologists in 1970, no definitive evidence was found of the fort or even of French structures at that spot.

Beginning in 1977, an engineer employed at Courtaulds of North America, Inc., James C. (Buddy) Parnell became interested in locating the old town site, with the ultimate goal of identifying, securing, and remarking the town cemetery, in which were buried some prominent members of the original colony. His methods included intense scrutiny of aerial photographs of the site. Numerous unusual features were noted on the aerial photos, such as a possible fort image and several straight lines and right angles seemingly associated with the original street block grid. When searches were made on the ground, early in 1989, to confirm the existence of the streets, Parnell (along with his wife, Woody, and Pat and Puggin Lomax) discovered several low mounds containing early 18th-century French bricks, ceramics and other artifacts. These mounds apparently were the locations of French houses in the town.

The Parnells and Lomaxes immediately recognized the immense historical and archaeological significance of their discovery. Buddy Parnell's original project to locate the old cemetery has now grown to include a long-term archaeological research plan being implemented by Dr. Gregory Waselkov at the University of South Alabama. With the very generous permission and support of landowners, an excavation team is already working this summer surveying and mapping the town site. One goal is to firmly establish the layout of the town, including several key features shown on the 1702 and 1704 maps — the fort, a well, and the cemetery. Several house mounds are also scheduled for excavation.

The site of Old Mobile is a rare opportunity to learn about daily life in Alabama and the deep South during the colonial period. Most early French sites are covered by modern cities, such as at New Orleans, St. Louis, and present-day Mobile. But at Old Mobile, an entire colonial town site exists, undisturbed by later construction and thoughtless relic hunting. Now that word of the discovery is spreading, there is a real threat of destruction by illegal digging, so steps are being taken to patrol and protect the site in order that our archaeological heritage might benefit everyone.

The Friends of Old Mobile is a newly-organized support group of interested citizens that will work to promote public awareness and appreciation of the project through education and publicity, and to generate community financial support. With the 300th anniversary of the founding of Mobile only a little more than twelve years away, our aim is to learn all we can before that date about one of the most important colonial archaeological sites in North America.



French artifacts from old Mobile. (Clockwise from lower left: gunflint, glass bottle neck, iron cannonball, fireplace brick, tobacco pipe fragment, jet rosary bead).

French Colonial "Jamestown"

French efforts at colonization of the Gulf coast began with the establishment of La Salle's unsuccessful settlement on the Texas coast in 1685-1686. In 1699, Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville organized a second, and ultimately successful, attempt. After briefly occupying Forts La Boulaye and Maurepas (on the lower Mississippi River and on Biloxi Bay, respectively), the colony was moved to a location now called Twenty-seven Mile Bluff on the Mobile River in January 1702. Here the town of Mobile and a new fort — Fort Louis de la Louisiane — would serve as the capital of French Louisiana until late in 1711, when the settlement was relocated at the head of Mobile Bay, the present site of the city. During this critical period, Governor Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville consolidated French colonial control over the central Gulf coast while gaining influence among the numerous Indian societies inhabiting the vast area of the interior Southeast. French territorial claims extended east to the Appalachian Mountains, north to French-controlled Canada, and west to the Great Plains. But more importantly the French colony of Louisiana eventually grew to include sizable settlements in modern-day Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Illinois, and Missouri that played significant roles in later American history.

The first site of Mobile can be considered a French colonial counterpart to the English settlement at Jamestown. At both of these sites colonists from two different European societies first adapted to the new environment and unfamiliar native peoples of southeastern North America. Archaeological research at the site of Old Mobile will reveal how French-American colonial frontier society developed and evolved during this initial period of exploration.



Old Mobile, 1702

Extracts From Recommended Books on Old Mobile

After two days of laborious travel, the overloaded vessels entered the mouth of the Mobile River and by the end of the next day, August 1, 1704, the passengers came upon the settlement, which sight they had for nearly a year been anticipating. Situated on the highest part of a twenty-foot bluff the relatively small wooden fort stood out from the rest of the town, more from its position on the bluff than because of any vast superiority of size or construction. (Upon landing, La Vente noticed that although the fort was not yet three years old it was already beginning to rot around the bastions). As the boats moved past the fort and circled back toward the creek to the northwest of the town, the rows of crude wooden dwellings (numbering nearly eighty in all) could be seen extending upward from the damp streets and water-soaked gardens surrounding them.

From *Old Mobile: Fort Louis de la Louisiane, 1702-1711*, by Jay Higginbotham, Museum of the City of Mobile, 1977

Where pass steamboats loaded the one way with provisions and for the return trip with hundreds of cotton bales from the upper rivers, then sailed Iberville and his compeers, pioneers and gentlemen of France. From those now neglected shores looked out men and women like ourselves, founding indeed an empire for Louis XIV, but often amid hunger and danger, sometimes yearning for beautiful France and straining the eye to catch the first glimpse of the boats from Dauphine Island, coming from the Loire, or other vessel expected from the old home. There, on the land where now grow pines, and where the silence is unbroken except by the distant locomotive or passing steamer, was the town clustering about Fort Louis, in streets and lots, where civil life began with its joys and sorrows, almost two hundred years ago.

From *Colonial Mobile*, by Peter J. Hamilton, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910 (reprinted by the University of Alabama Press, 1976)

Support The Old Mobile Project: Become a Friend of Old Mobile

Current archaeological excavations at the site of Old Mobile depend on community support. The cost of this summer's exploratory work alone will exceed \$30,000. Join *The Friends of Old Mobile* and help us learn more about life in early Alabama. Contributors of \$25 or more will receive subsequent issues of the newsletter with reports on the latest discoveries. Contributions are tax deductible. Please make your check payable to "University of South Alabama Archaeology Fund," and send it to:

The Old Mobile Project
c/o Dr. Stephen Thomas, Associate Dean
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Alabama
Mobile, Alabama 36688

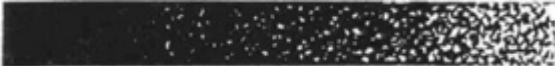
The following individuals and institutions have contributed \$1,000 or more to the Old Mobile Project:

Mr. Jay Altmayer, Mobile
University of South Alabama
Coastal Research and Development Institute
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Alabama Graduate School

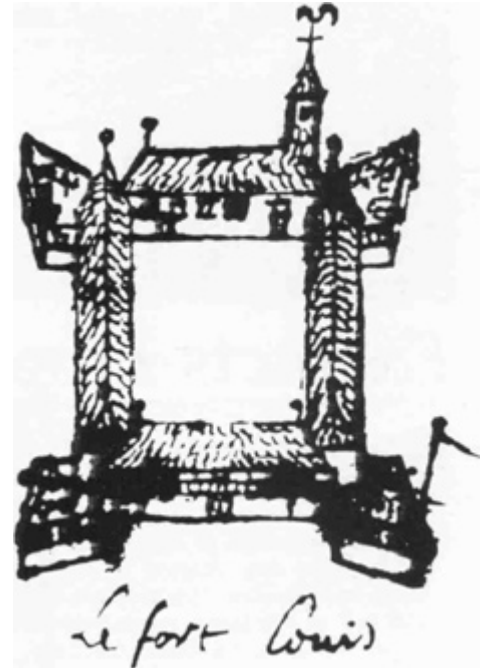
The Friends of Old Mobile

Executive Committee:

Jay Higginbotham, Chairman
Jack Friend, Vice-Chairman
Dr. Samuel Eichold, Vice-chairman
John Bertolotti, Secretary
Dr. Stephen Thomas, Treasurer
James C. Parnell, Advisor
Pat Lomax, Site Security
Dr. Gregory Waselkov,
Archaeological Project Director



*Fort Louis de la
Louisiana, about
1704*



The Old Mobile Project
Dr. Stephen Thomas
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Alabama
Mobile, Alabama 36688

Non-Profit
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 506
Mobile, AL