

The Old Mobile Project Newsletter

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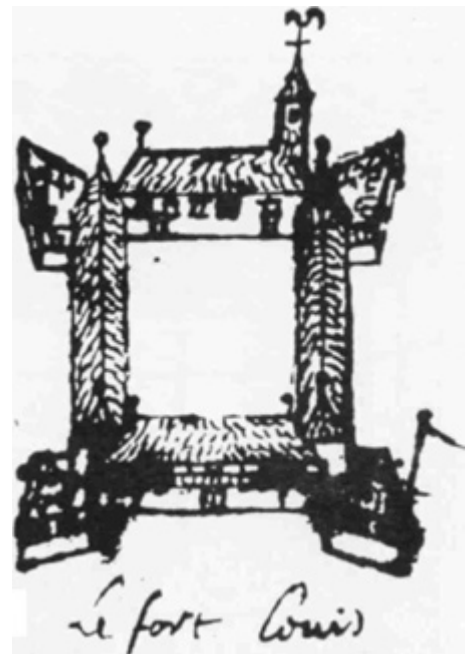
French Potters and Pottery on the Gulf Coast

Beginning with La Salle's colony on Matagorda Bay, Texas, in the 1680s and continuing until 1763, when French "Louisiane" was divided between Britain and Spain at the end of the Seven Years War, French-made pottery was used at many colonial-era towns and plantations in the Southeast. Sherds of coarse green-glazed earthenwares, fine tin-glazed faience, unglazed stonewares, and even some French porcelain demonstrate the range of continental French exports to the North American colonies. Recent research on the Old Mobile site artifacts (and many other collections in the region) is revealing some unexpected information on the French and their pottery.

Archaeologists spend an inordinate amount of time studying, measuring, chemically analyzing, and generally pondering the meaning of potsherds. This fixation with broken fragments of crockery is partly due to the near indestructibility of pots. They can be broken into ever smaller bits, but because they were produced (and discarded) in vast quantities - and because ceramics are largely unaffected by destructive environmental forces -- potsherds are often the most common artifacts found on historic archaeological sites. So are archaeologists simply making the best of a bad situation, spinning out implausible history from some rather pathetic remnants of past life? Without denying that there may be a kernel of truth in that bleak assessment, in fairness it should also be acknowledged that archaeologists can now extract an amazing amount of information from lowly potsherds, data that tell us much more about the past than simply revealing the nature of colonial table settings.

For example, one might logically assume that imports of French ceramics ended with the shift to British and Spanish rule. British merchants were eager to open a new market on the Gulf coast, and British customs officials were capable of enforcing mercantilist dictates from London. But archaeological excavations at sites occupied between 1763 and 1800 in Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana have shown that French pottery continued to be imported in quantity. Evidently the predominantly French population demanded and received familiar styles and forms of pottery, instead of adopting exclusively Spanish or British-made varieties. Archaeologists have yet to determine whether ethnicity can be distinguished for this period on the basis of pottery, but a study of some carefully selected plantation sites occupied by historically-known individuals could resolve that question.

French colonists, recently abandoned by their king and forced to carry on their lives under foreign administrations, may have had a functional reason to prefer French-made pottery, apart from any sentimental attachment to particular styles. The most commonly found French ceramics on post-French colonial sites are faience plates and platters produced in Normandy. This type

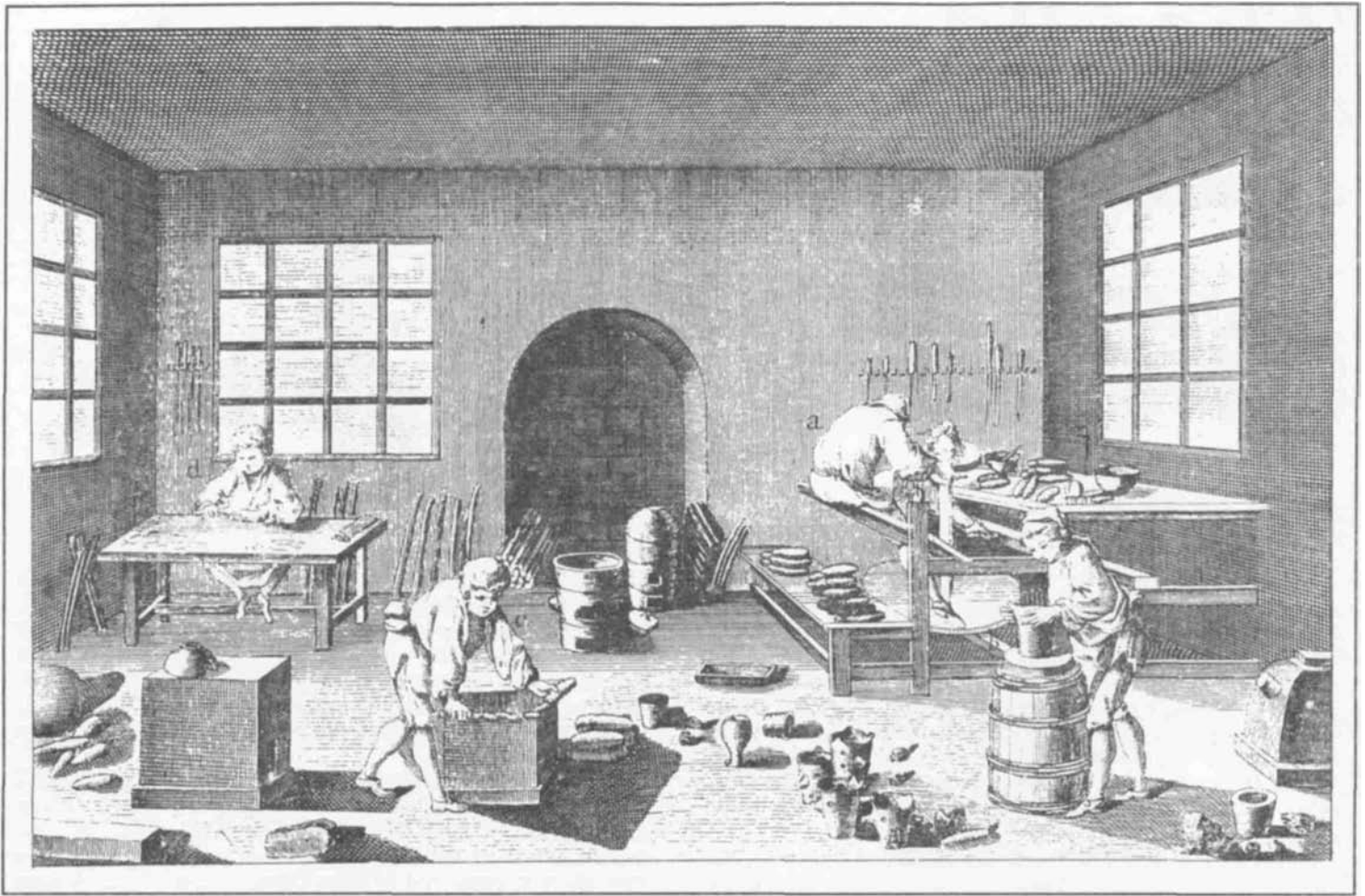


of ware has white tin-glazed interiors (often decorated with blue or polychrome designs) and dark brown lead-glazed exteriors; the latter provided considerable heat-resistance, which permitted the plates or platters to be heated before serving, harsh treatment that competing Spanish and British wares would not tolerate. Perhaps persistent French traditions of food preparation and serving explain the continued demand for French pottery in the Gulf coast region.

Another topic that archaeology can address is the precise European source of different pottery styles. Particular design motifs have long been associated with pottery produced in different regions of France, but French potters are known to have moved from place to place and to have copied others' styles. A more reliable approach involves the chemical analysis of clays and glazes. Although these were moved about, too, as especially fine clays and consignments of lead were commercially traded throughout Europe, particular pottery production sites probably had standard sources for these raw materials. In an initial effort to identify faience sources in France, Jacqueline Olin and some of her colleagues at the Smithsonian Institution's Conservation Analytical Laboratory have been sampling sherds from the Old Mobile site and other nearby sites for a neutron activation analysis of faience clays. Last spring Jared Mitchem, a member of the Old Mobile Project research team, obtained samples by drilling small holes in the broken edges of many faience sherds. The pottery dust will next be irradiated in the nuclear reactor at the National Institute of Standards, outside Washington D.C., so that the chemical constituents of each sample can be accurately determined (to the level of parts per million). Stage 2 of this project will involve the similar sampling of potsherds from pottery kiln sites in France; a comparison of results should begin to reveal the patterns of French faience production and trade in the eighteenth century.

Another unresolved research question concerns possible manufacture of European-style pottery along the Gulf coast during the colonial period. A colonial document from New Orleans, dated August 26, 1729, mentions two fractious faience and earthenware makers ("*fayanciers et Pottiers*") named Caussy and Boissier, "who came to us last year [but] have not been able to get along with each other." Caussy, the letter goes on to explain, "is an extraordinary man who admits that he has not been able to live on good terms with his father and his mother or his wife." Although Boissier made plans to produce 60,000 roof tiles, there is no further mention of that enterprise, or of any other attempt by colonists to locally produce European-style ceramics (other than bricks, which were made at many locations, including Old Mobile).

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Archaeological examples of Indian-made Colono wares-- unglazed vessels in the shape of European plates and pitchers -- are abundant on many colonial-era sites, including the earliest examples from Old Mobile. Colono wares made by enslaved African-Americans may await archaeological discovery, particularly in Louisiana. But all of our other evidence points to an overwhelming reliance on European ceramic imports until the early 19th century.

Until recently we thought that the story of French pottery on the Gulf coast came to an end around 1800, coinciding with the influx of American settlers who brought their own folk pottery tradition, and a taste for British refined wares, to the region. But a recent survey of the artifact collections stored at the University of South Alabama's Center for Archaeological Studies turned up a collection gathered by **Dan Jenkins** 23 years ago on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay that contained some very unusual potsherds. These thick, yellow-glazed earthenware sherds came from some massive storage jars, nearly identical in every respect to storage jars made in the 18th and 19th centuries at Biot, near Cannes, overlooking the Mediterranean in southeastern France. Sherds of this type had been found years ago at excavations in downtown Mobile, and an entire vessel was recovered by fishermen from Mobile Bay that is now on display in the Pensacola Historical Museum; all were assumed to have come from France. But now we must consider the possibility that this and perhaps other traditional French styles of pottery were manufactured on the Gulf coast.

Joey Brackner, folklorist with the Alabama State Council on the Arts, has documented the presence of at least (our French-born potters on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay as early as the 1830s and 1840s, including Augustine Marechal and Francis La Coste. [A jug attributed to Marechal (a.k.a. Marshall) is presently

A French Potter's Workshop, from L'Encyclopedie, ou dictionnaire raisonne des sciences, des arts et des metiers, edited by Denis Diderot and Jean-le-Rond d'Alembert, vol 8, 1771 (a - potter at his kickwheel. d - pipemaker, e - kiln).

on display at the Mobile Museum of Art, part of a touring exhibit of 19th-century arts and artifacts. "Made in Alabama: A State Legacy"] Following that lead, University of South Alabama student **Catherine Henderson** has been able to trace some of those potters' movements in county deeds and other documents, which raises the possibility of attributing particular kiln sites to these French artisans. In pursuit of that goal, Dan Jenkins recently retraced his steps from two decades ago to relocate the kiln site that started our search.

Especially intriguing is the question why potters would be making distinctively French-style pots here at such a late date. In the 1830s, could there still have been a demand among the large Cajun and Creole populations of Louisiana and the rest of the Gulf coast for traditional French vessel forms? We hope to pursue this story of the "second French occupation" of the Mobile area through further documentary and oral history research and excavations.

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Certificate in Historical Conservation and Presentation

A post-baccalaureate program in Historical Conservation and Presentation has been developed jointly by the University College of Cape Breton and the **Fortress of Louisbourg** National Historic Site, Nova Scotia. This intensive program, which will be offered for the first time in 1996, consists of three 5-week sessions between the second week of May and the end of August. Most classes will take place at UCCB, with labs and practicums held at the Fortress of Louisbourg. Courses include: Louisbourg Overview, Collections Management (2 parts), Archaeology, Material Culture, and Presentation Methods, followed by a 12-week directed study work placement to be scheduled at the participant's convenience. The certificate program draws on the unparalleled resources of the Fortress research center, which encompasses 5 million artifacts, 750,000 pages of microfilm, 5000 cubic feet of original paper records, plans and views, and over 35 years of experience with curation, material culture research, and historical presentation at one of the premier historical sites in North America. The staff of many parks, laboratories and research centers in the United States and Canada could benefit immensely from a program that combines academic and theoretical understanding with practical experience. For more detailed information and registration materials, please contact: Extension and Community Affairs, University College of Cape Breton, Box 5300, Sydney, Nova Scotia B1 P 6L2, Canada; Phone: (902)539-5300; Fax: (902)562-0119; E-mail: rmackinn@sparc.uccb.ns.ca.

Upcoming Meeting

The **Center for French Colonial Studies**, a society dedicated to the study of French Illinois (in its broadest geographical sense), will hold its annual meeting at Old Mines, Missouri on October 13-15, 1995. Highlights of the meeting will include a reception at the Mine au Breton Historical Society, six presentations by historians and archaeologists, lunch at the St. Michael House, and a tour of early 19th-century lead smelting furnaces by Jerry Sanschagrin. Those interested in attending should immediately contact Marge Wilhauk, Secretary-Treasurer, 339 St. Mary's Road, Ste. Genevieve, Missouri 63670; (314)883-7171.

University of South Alabama Laval University Exchange Program

After several years of negotiations between the University of South Alabama and Laval University, in Quebec City, an exchange program became a reality with the arrival of **Pierre Bouchard** in Mobile this spring. Sponsored by Professor Reginald Auger, Pierre is a masters degree candidate in the history department at Laval. During his stay on the Gulf coast, Pierre participated in our spring excavations at the Old Mobile site, contributed to the analysis of French ceramics from the Dog River site excavations, visited Auburn University's ongoing excavations at the historic Creek Indian site of Fusihatchee, and helped us explore New Orleans' Vieux Carre. With this very successful first exchange, the way is now open for other Canadians to follow and for students and staff at the University of South Alabama to take part in excavations at French colonial sites in Quebec (while, not incidentally, enjoying one of the finest cuisines in the world).

1996 Calendar

A bilingual calendar, **Les Francais d'Amerique/French In America**, illustrated with 12 color photographs depicting historical events and prominent French Americans is available for \$6.50 (plus \$1.50 for postage and handling) from R. Mikesell, 1155 East 56th Street, Chicago, IL 60637-1530. Checks should be made payable to: French-American Calendar-1996.

Notice for Bibliophiles

Quite an array of recently published books should appeal to the readers of this newsletter. Archaeologist Marcel Moussette's summary volume on the Intendant's Palace excavation in Quebec City is now in print (**Le Site du palais de l'intendant a Quebec: Genese et structuration d'un lieu urbain**. Les editions du Septentrion. Sillery, Quebec. \$3000 Canadian). This beautifully printed volume describes the results of nine field seasons at this very important location, successive site of a brewery (1666-1675), the intendant's palace (1685-1713), the King's storehouse (1716-1760), another brewery (1852-1968), an urban park (1971-1982), and now an interpretive archaeological site. Moussette explores the evolution of this particular place while considering more general processes, the gradual accretion of buildings and artifacts and memories and associations that create a sense of place at any given time and location. He is also the co-author, with Francoise Niellon, of the newly reprinted volume, "L'Habitation de Champlain" (**Le Collection Patrimoines, Dossier** 58. Les Publications du Quebec, Quebec. 1985). Long in demand but out of print, this report describes the architectural remains and artifacts recovered from the initial French settlement in Canada, dating from 1608

Rene Chartrand's latest publication, **Canadian Military Heritage: volume 1, 1000-1754** (also available in French as **Le Patrimoine militaire Canadien: tome 1, 1000-1754**. Art Global, Montreal. 1993) is an extravagantly illustrated history of the French military in Canada. All three of these Canadian publications can be obtained from La Librairie du Nouveau Monde, 103 rue St-Pierre, C.P. 83, Succ-B, Quebec G1K 7A1: FAX:(418)694-9486.

As part of the celebrations this year for the 275th anniversary of the founding of Louisbourg, Eric Krause has edited a collection of papers entitled **Aspects of Louisbourg: Essays on the Economic, Social, Military, and Commemorative History of an Eighteenth-Century French Community in North America**. It is available from the Louisbourg Institute, P.O. Box 5300, Sydney, Nova Scotia B1P 6L2. for \$19.95 (plus \$3.00 shipping) Canadian.

Moving south to the Mississippi Valley region, Charles E. Peterson's classic study in social and architectural history, **Colonial St. Louis: Building a Creole Capital**, has been reprinted by Patrice Press (1810 West Grant Road, Tucson, Arizona 85745; \$9.95, 1993). In this revision of the 1949 edition, Peterson has added a remarkable series of illustrations, including many historic photographs of long-demolished French and French colonial vernacular structures. For the nearby Illinois River Valley, we now have Judith A. Franke's **French Peoia and the Illinois Country, 1673-1846**, Illinois State Museum Popular Science Series, vol. 12, which can be purchased from the Illinois State Museum Society, Spring and Edwards Street, Springfield, IL 62706 (\$23.00 plus \$2.30 shipping; Illinois residents add \$1.66 sales tax). Commemorating the 1692 French settlement at Peoria, this book gathers all pertinent historical and archaeological information on French colonial life in central Illinois, highlighted by facsimiles of some original documents.

Finally, Martha Wilson Hamilton has published her work, **Silver In the Fur Trade, 1680-1820**, which illustrates some French Regime silver, as well as many pieces made in Montreal and Quebec after 1760 (or trade with Indians. Contact the author at 15 Bartlett Street, Chelmsford, MA 01824-3938, for information on the cost of this book.