

# The Old Mobile Project Newsletter

Issue 14

Winter 1997

## French and Indian Structures Revealed

Last year saw the completion of two long-term excavations at Old Mobile, a French-style building (called Structure 30), and an Indian-built house located across the swamp to the west of the French town, at site 1MB147. This neighboring Native American site is one of several that grew up around the French community between 1702 and 1711. **Diane Silvia Mueller** (a graduate student at Tulane University and a long-time participant in the Old Mobile Project) excavated the Indian house, with the assistance of a grant from the Alabama Historical Commission, as part of her dissertation research on Native American responses to the European presence on the Gulf Coast during the 18th century.

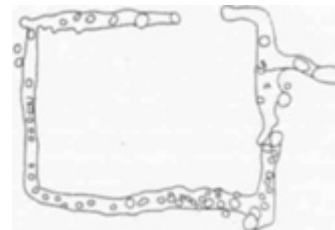
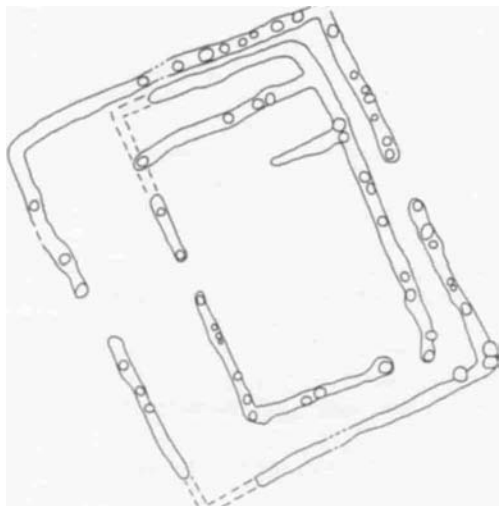
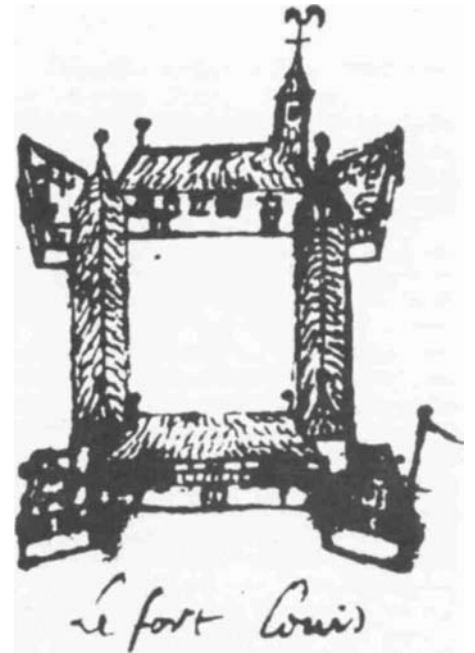
Prior to 1993, excavations conducted by University of South Alabama archaeologists at Old Mobile concentrated on the unplowed portions of the town site. An intensive, systematic survey of the approximately 73-acre site had, by that time, determined that the remains of at least 55 French structures still survived at 27-Mile Bluff on the Mobile River. In addition, the survey revealed — to our amazement — that only about one-third of the site had ever been plowed. This meant that most of the site's shallow archaeological deposits had been spared the disruptive effects of modern agricultural practices. Consequently, our excavation efforts focused on those elements of the site we expected to be most informative, the relatively intact structural features located in unplowed areas.

As structure excavations proceeded, the benefits of the site's fortuitous escape from complete cultivation became increasingly evident. The French colonists had built Structures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 14 directly on the ground surface, employing a method called *poteaux-sur-sole* or "post-on-sill" construction. Soon after 1702, the disadvantages of ground-level construction must have become all too apparent, as moisture and microorganisms and insects attacked the

wooden sills. Structures 1, 3, and 5 evidently required substantial repairs, as wall footings disintegrated; by that time the colonists had learned, perhaps from the local Indians, to replace rotted wall segments with posts placed upright in foundation trenches. [Only later, judging by the evidence from Old Mobile, did the French extend their roofs to cover encircling galleries, thereby shielding ground-level sills from the rain.] Once the town was abandoned in 1711, the French salvaged what they could — mostly hearth bricks and roof tiles — then set (ire to their old homes and left the site to the encroaching forest. Now the surviving clay floors and the charred remnants of foundation beams lay only inches below the ground surface, where even a single, shallow tilling of the soil would have obliterated nearly all architectural evidence of these buildings.

So, when we began to expand our excavations into that part of the site that had suffered the ravages of plowing during the 19th century, we did not expect to find much beneath the surface. Artifacts would certainly be found, still clustered in the vicinity of house sites, but, apart from some short segments of wall repair trenches, structural remains seemed exceedingly unlikely. By a stroke of luck, however, excavations there have revealed the only examples of *poteaux-en-terre* or "post-in-ground" construction. Structure 30, now completely excavated, and nearby Structure 31 both have foundation trenches, which suggests that they were built some years after the town's establishment, by which time enthusiasm for *poteaux-sur-sole* construction had begun to wane.

Interestingly, this part of the site seems to have suffered the effects of a severe storm. A path of storm devastation is apparent in the archaeological distribution of roof tiles, large numbers of which cluster in a swath across the middle of the site in the vicinity of these buildings. We know from historical records that "a violent squall" (continued on next page)



Simplified floor plans of a French household. Structure 30 (to the left), and a contemporaneous Indian house, site 1MB147 (above), show postmolds in foundation trenches. Both plan views are oriented with north to the top of the page, and drawn at a scale of 8 mm = 1 meter.

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struck the town in early August 1708 and "blew down the warehouse in the fort and a bastion" (*Mississippi Provincial Archives* II(1929):33). Although certainly not part of the fort complex itself. Structure 30 probably stood not far north of Fort Louis.

The architectural floor plan of Structure 30 poses an interesting interpretive challenge. When first exposed, the trenches seemed to be from two buildings that occupied that spot in sequence. One was small and rectangular, with several interior room dividers. The second, and presumably later structure was nearly square and enclosed the first, but lacked any internal partitions. As the trenches were excavated, however, the validity of this interpretation grew increasingly unlikely. While many artifacts discarded by the building's residents turned up in the plowed soil above the foundation trenches, the trenches themselves contained almost nothing except dirt. If the two sets of trenches had been built sequentially, then the latter set should contain some artifacts. As the builders dug through the debris from an earlier structure to create the foundation trench for a new one, they can hardly have prevented some refuse from the previous occupation falling into the trench. Yet no such clues were left to suggest that one set of trenches predates the other.

More plausibly, the outer set of trenches is now interpreted as a fence or palisade surrounding the small rectangular building. Fence trenches have been found near most of the other excavated structures at Old Mobile, where they seem to have functioned primarily as garden enclosures and, in at least one instance, as an animal pen. Given the small space available inside Structure 30's fence, some other explanation must apply. Perhaps this fence was intended to secure the contents of the building. Analysis of the artifacts from the vicinity of this structure should help us interpret its function, which may not have been domestic in nature.

The house at site 1MB147 is the only one affiliated with the French town that conforms to traditional forms of Native American housing. Within the town itself, many enslaved Indians lived in the homes of French colonists, and independent Indian peoples (particularly the Apalachees and Mobilians) often hired out as laborers, in which capacity they may have helped construct French houses. Thus far, excavations at Old Mobile have uncovered building styles attributable to French continental and colonial sources. So the discovery of a distinctively Indian-style structure at 1MB147 has permitted Diane Silvia Mueller to draw some contrasts between the two building traditions.

One difference that is immediately apparent is the different compass orientation of the structures. All of the excavated French buildings were aligned to the town grid, with a bearing of 320', in contrast to the north-south and east-west orientation of the 1MB147 housewalls. The Indian house at 1MB147 is considerably smaller (at 13.5 sq m) than any of the French structures. It was also constructed differently, with very shallow wall trenches containing small-diameter upright wall posts. Only Structure 30 resembles this construction method, although the trenches there were much deeper and contained more substantial posts. But, as already mentioned, the French may have borrowed some ideas from the Indians by the time Structure 30 was built.

If any doubt remained that the house at 1MB147 was constructed by and for Indians, the nature of the artifact assemblage seems conclusive. While the variety of artifacts found at 1MB147 closely corresponds to the types found at any of the French structures at Old Mobile, the proportions differ in every category. Roof tiles, which are so numerous at Old Mobile, are represented by only two fragments, one of which was used as a whetstone. Chipped stone debris is abundant, though nails are scarce — precisely the opposite quantities recovered from the French house sites. And a refuse pit filled with the shells of *Rangia* clams, found at 1MB147, is the only recovery of this notoriously unpalatable food source from either site, although the shells are abundant on prehistoric sites in the area. Comparative studies of this sort are providing new insights on the interaction of European and Native Americans during the early years of French colonial Louisiana.

## 1997 Calendar

The 13th edition of the bilingual calendar, *Les Francais d'Ame'rique/French in America*, is now available. Keep current on this year's cultural events and historical anniversaries with a full-color calendar that commemorates French contributions to the history and civilization of North America. You can obtain the calendar for \$6.50 (plus \$1.50 for postage and handling) from R. Mikesell, 1155 E. 56th Street, Chicago, IL 60637-1530. Checks should be made payable to: French/American Calendar - 1997.

## Chartesfort (1562-3) and the La Belle (1686)

French colonial archaeology in the southeastern US has become very active of late. After nearly two decades of excavations at the 16th-century Spanish colonial townsite of Santa Elena, on Parris Island, South Carolina, Chester DePratter and Stanley South have announced the discovery of an even earlier European settlement. **Chartesfort**, a small fortification established by a French Huguenot expedition in 1562. Found underlying the remains of Spanish Fort San Felipe, excavation of Charleston will commence this year near the 8th fairway of the Parris Island Golf Course on the Marine Corps base.

Equally exciting is the rapidly unfolding story of the **La Belle** shipwreck. In July 1995, underwater archaeologists led by Barto Arnold from the Texas Historical Commission found the wreck of one of the supply ships that accompanied Rene-Robert Cavelier. Sieur de la Salle's colonizing expedition to the Gulf coast in 1685. A year later, as the French colony dissolved in acrimony, **La Belle** was driven aground in a storm. A massive excavation effort during 1996 recovered vast quantities of artifacts from the hold of the unfortunate ship. Finds include a keg full of glass trade beads, a crate of muskets and sabers, a bronze cannon, a wooden cannon carriage, and unusual varieties of French earthenware and stoneware pottery vessels. For more information on this project, which is employing state-of-the-art electronic data recovery methods, consult their web site at <http://www.thc.state.tx.us/bellertndex/htm>.

## Bibliophile's Corner

The French colonial experience was well-represented in publications of the last year or so. One surprisingly good read is the **Colonial Wars of North America, 1512-1763: An Encyclopedia**, edited by Alan Gallay (Garland Publishing, New York, 856 pages, 1996: \$95.00). Few would include an encyclopedia on their summer vacation reading short list, but this volume is exceptional, a real page-turner with nearly 700 essays, many of them on French outposts, battles, campaigns, wars, colonies, prominent individuals, and relations with Indians. This is undoubtedly the most reliable single-volume reference available on the topic.

Less imposing in weight, but equally interesting, are two short books intended for the general public — or at least the historically-literate segment of the public. **The French Colony In the Mid-Mississippi Valley**, by Margaret Kimball Brown and Lawrie Cena Dean (American Kestrel Books, Carbondale, 32 pages, 1995: \$9.95 from American Resources Group, 127 N. Washington St., Carbondale, IL 62901), offers a well-illustrated introduction to the Illinois Country during the French Regime. Ivor Noel Hume, of Colonial Williamsburg fame, inimitably describes some of the artifacts recovered from a mid-18th-century French merchantman in **Shipwreck! History from the Bermuda Reefs** (64 pages, 1995: obtainable from Capstan Publications, P.O. Box HM 1745, Hamilton HM GX Bermuda).

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From Canada come several very useful publications. Jacques Guimont presents the results of his preliminary excavations at Samuel de Champlain's 1626-1628 farm in *La Petite-Ferme du cap Tourmente* (Septentrion, Sillery (Quebec). 230 pages, 1996; \$20.00 Canadian). The complex building techniques employed there involved clay block wall construction (p<se). soon followed by earth-fast post walls with clay daub infilling {bousille}. Three volumes of the *La Collection Patrimolnes, Dossier* series include "Les menus objets de Place-Royale," by Christiane Marier (**Dossier95**, Les Publications du Quebec. 528 pages, 1996; \$19.95 Canadian), and "Les ustensiles, les objets de couture et le luminaire de Place-Royale," by Yves Tremblay (**Dossier96**, 390 pages, 1996; \$12.95 Canadian), and "La porcelaine chinoise de Place-Royale," by Nicole Genet and Camille Lapointe (**Dossier 92**, 205 pages, 1994; a revision of a 1980 report: \$9.95 Canadian), which document 17th- and 18th-century artifacts recovered in excavations at Quebec's Place Royale. All four of these Canadian publications can be obtained from La Librairie du Nouveau Monde. 103 rue St-Pierre, C.P. 83, Succ-B, Quebec G 1K 7A1; FAX: (418)694-9486.

Two outstanding interpretive articles on French artifacts recently appeared in "Trade and Discovery: The Scientific Study of Artefacts from Post-Medieval Europe and Beyond." edited by Duncan R. Hook and David R. M. Gaimster, *British Museum Occasional Paper* 109 (1995: distributed by British Museum Press. 46 Bloomsbury Street. London WC1B 3QQ). They are "A Late Sixteenth-Century European Trade Assemblage from North-Eastern North America," by William R. Fitzgerald, which describes distinctive glass beads, copper kettles, iron axes and knives supplied by Basque, Breton, and Norman traders to Native Americans in the St. Lawrence Valley, and "French Stoneware in North-Eastern North America," in which Jean-Pierre Chrestien and Daniel Dufournier present the first results of their massive study of French stoneware production and its distribution in North American archaeological sites.

## Potteries Grant Requires Cash Match

Issue 13 of this newsletter described a preliminary study of the pottery-making industry that developed around Mobile Bay (especially in the vicinity of Montrose, Daphne, and Fairhope, on the Eastern Shore) in the early 19th century. Our research has been inspired by **JOEY BRACKNER**, folklorist with the Alabama State Council on the Arts, who has worked for many years compiling information on Alabama's early potters and their wares. From his findings, we know that recently arrived French immigrants contributed significantly to the rise of this industry, and traditional French forms of pottery were even produced here for a few decades.

The Alabama Historical Commission has now offered a matching grant of \$9,900 to the University of South Alabama's Center for Archaeological Studies to support a thorough documentation of the Eastern Shore potters and their kiln sites through archaeological survey and historical research. The results of this new study, to be conducted in the spring and summer of 1997, will be presented to the public in the form of an illustrated monograph.

But before work can begin, \$9,900 in matching funds must be raised to release the grant money from the Alabama Cultural Resources Preservation Trust Fund. If you are able, please consider making a tax-deductible contribution to help support this effort. Contributions, made payable to the "University of South Alabama," should be sent to Dr. Gregory Waselkov, Archaeology — HUMB 34, University of South Alabama, Mobile. AL 36688-0002. Anyone with knowledge of pottery kiln sites on the Eastern Shore is urged to contact either Greg Waselkov at (334)460-6911 or Bonnie Gums, project field director, at (334)460-6562.

Michael James Poret's *Louisiana Indian Studies: A Selected Bibliography* (Center for Louisiana Studies, University of South-western Louisiana, P.O. Box 40831. Lafayette. LA 70504, 284 pages, 1995; \$25.00) lists many French-related sources among its 2,419 references. This thorough work should reward inveterate perusers of such compendia with many previously overlooked articles and monographs.

Readers in search of new or out-of-print publications on French colonial Louisiana might consider contacting Russell Desmond, proprietor of *Arcadian Books/La Librairie d'Arcadie*, 714 Orleans Street, New Orleans. LA 70116: (504)523-4138. On occasion, he has been able to supply copies of the French edition of Marcel Giraud's *Histoire de la Louisiane Francaise*. and many other nearly unobtainable but essential volumes, for pleasure or research.

Although this final item has little to do with the French colonial period, there is an Old Mobile connection. This newsletter writer recently co-edited a volume of William Bartram's writings (*William Bartram on the Southeastern Indians*, edited and annotated by Gregory A. Waselkov and Kathryn E. Holland Braund, University of Nebraska Press. Lincoln, 341 pages, 1995; \$46.50). When Bartram, a Quaker naturalist from Philadelphia who traveled across the South during the early 1770s. explored the Mobile-Tensaw delta in September 1775. he came upon "vestiges of a rampart and other traces of a fortress: perhaps fort Louis de la Mobile, but in all probability it will not remain long visible, the stream of the river making daily encroachments on it. by carrying away the land on which it stood." Unfortunately (or later-day archaeologists attempting to locate Fort Louis, the context of this passage suggests that Bartram was describing an unrelated (and misidentified) site many miles upstream from Old Mobile. In spite of such occasional errors, though, Bartram remains one of our most valued observers of the early historic Southeast and its peoples.

## "Who techeth a fool, as that glueth togidere a sherd."

John Wyclif's 14th-century translation of this Biblical proverb is one of the earliest usages of "sherd" to refer to a piece of broken pottery, a potsherd. Not only does the word possess a considerable antiquity, but "sherd", in contrast to "shard", has been established since the 19th century as "normal archaeological spelling," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, and as every professional archaeologist in the English-speaking world will attest. Why, then, have writers and editors for newspapers, magazines and television recently begun to insist on "shard", when "sherd" or "potsherd" is meant? Even *Colonial Williamsburg*, a popular magazine produced by a writing staff with ready access to professional archaeological advice, is now inflicting "shard" on its readers, many of whom presumably know better. One would think that "shard" — which can legitimately refer to a piece of glass or steel or stone, a gap in a hedge, a notch in a tool, an insect's wing case, a kind of fish, or even a patch of cow dung — already carries a heavy enough etymological burden, without resuscitating an archaic usage.

Admittedly, Shakespeare's priest in *Hamlet* (Act 5. Scene 1) recommended that "for charitable prayers, Shards, flints, and pebbles, should be thrown on" Ophelia's grave. Likewise, in 1656, Abraham Cowley imagined (in *Davtdeis*, Book II) Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple with "scarce ought now of that vast City's found But Shards and Rubbish". For the sake of such quaint texts should we then submit to the tyranny of the press and adopt other elements of obsolete vocabulary? Editors and proofreaders might consider other fourteenth-century alternatives, "scherdys" or "schoord," each more appealing to the antiquarian ear than the well-worn, customary, simple "sherd."

## *Old Mobile Porcelain* *Featured in Antiques Magazine*

The July 1996 issue of *Antiques* carried an article by **LINDA ROSENFELD SHULSKY** about Chinese porcelain found in excavations at Old Mobile. Ms. Shulsky, an art historian who has been researching porcelain recovered from Spanish colonial sites in New Mexico and Florida, combed museums all over the world for intact examples of the types of vessels now represented by broken fragments in the Old Mobile collections. The results of her search (which led to the Groninger Museum in the Netherlands, the Topkapi Saray Museum in Istanbul, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City) are presented in stunning color photographs, juxtaposed pictures of sherds with their whole counterparts. Almost all of the Old Mobile specimens are "typical of wares made at Jingdezhen, China, during the reign of the emperor Kangxi (r. 1662-1722)" Historical and archaeological evidence strongly suggests that these porcelain cups and plates were obtained by the French colonists at the Spanish ports of Pensacola, Havana, and Veracruz, where merchants had access to the China trade. Shulsky considers the archaeological porcelain to be fine quality wares, some of which may have been used to decorate mantelpieces — an unexpectedly non-utilitarian usage, and one more bit of evidence that the resourceful French colonists at Old Mobile managed to acquire symbols of wealth and social status in spite of infrequent resupply from France.

## *University of South Alabama/ Universite' Laval Exchange Program*

In the second year of student exchanges, **MARTIN GAUTHIER** spent the month of April in Mobile, engaged in excavations at the Old Mobile site and a rapid exploration of New Orleans' Vieux Carre. Martin is a masters degree candidate, under the direction of Professor Reginald Auger, in the history department at Laval. The first exchange student from South Alabama, **ASHLEY DUMAS**, a recent graduate of the anthropology program, helped last summer with excavations directed by Professor Marcel Moussette at a 17th- century manor house site on ile-aux-Oies, an island in the St. Lawrence River downstream from Quebec City. While there. Ashley also put to use her second major, in French, by searching the Seminary Archives for letters from mission priests stationed at Old Mobile. These exchanges have been quite successful for all concerned and the program is expected to continue for at least another year.

