

The Old Mobile Project Newsletter

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The Mobilian Indians

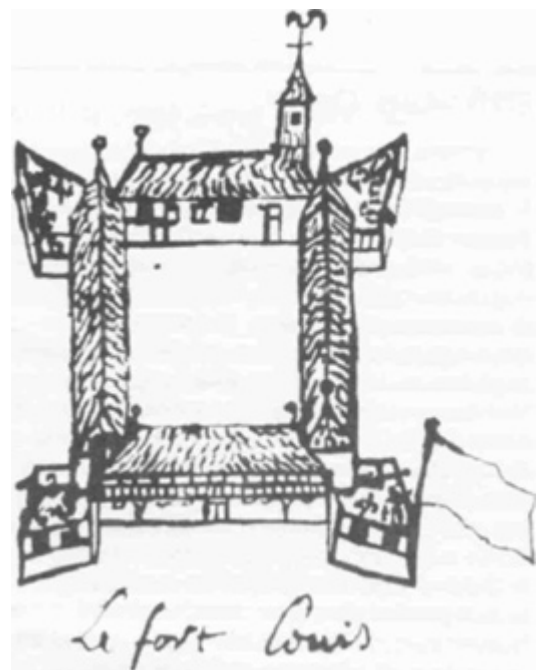
[This issue's lead story is excerpted from our forthcoming report on archaeology at the Dog River Bridge site. While a bit more technical than previous articles, it offers lots of new information and interpretations that may interest newsletter readers.]

When French colonists first arrived on the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico in 1699 (in fact, we are within months of the 300th anniversary of that event), they found the Mobile Bay area inhabited by the Mobilian Indians. Most scholars assume that the Mobilians were descended from inhabitants of the Mississippian town of Mauvilla, where Hernando de Soto's Spanish army was ambushed in 1540. Mauvilla's location some distance northeast of Mobile Bay is still much-debated — perhaps it lay midway up the Alabama River where Baron de Crenay showed "Vieux Mobilien" on his map of 1733.

Following the Spaniards' thorough destruction of Mauvilla in 1540, nothing is heard of those people until 1675, when Bishop Calderon reported the existence of the native province of "*Mobila ... on the western frontier [of Florida], on an island near the harbor of Spiritu Santo*". This has been interpreted as meaning Dauphin Island, at the mouth of Bahia de Espiritu Santo or Mobile Bay, although an island in the Mobile-Tensaw delta seems more plausible, considering the Mobilians' well-established village locations there a few decades later.

In 1686 the historic Indian people known as the Pensacolas, situated near Pensacola Bay, were engaged in a war with the Mobilians, their western neighbors. Later that year a Spanish emissary, Marcos Delgado, met with Mobilian leaders at a conference site in central Alabama. They dissuaded him from personally visiting their three towns "*because in Mobile they could not assist with any provisions whatsoever, since the drought had been so severe that although they had cultivated the ground they had secured no crop and all had dried and for many days they had sustained themselves on shellfish...*"

Mobilian villages north of the Old Mobile site ("Vieux Fort") around 1725, from a map probably drafted by Valentin Devin (courtesy Library of Congress).



With the arrival of French colonists on the Gulf coast in 1699, our information increases substantially concerning the Mobilians. On the 3rd of February, Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, leader of the expedition, bestowed the name "Isle de Massacre" on present-day Dauphin Island,

because we found on it, at the southwest end, a spot where more than sixty men or women had been slain. We found the heads and the rest of the remains along with some of their household belongings. As none of these [household belongings] have yet rotted, it appears that this occurred no more than three or four years ago.

The French initially interpreted these skeletal remains as victims of war, left where they had fallen in battle. Once the colonists gained a better understanding of local Indian burial customs, they kept the island's colorful name for a few more decades, but revised their earlier explanation, as seen in this retrospective account by Andre Penigault.

When we disembarked, we became terrified upon finding such a prodigious number of human skeletons that they formed a mountain, there were so many of them. We learned afterwards that this was a numerous nation who, being pursued and having withdrawn to this region, had almost all died here of sickness: and as the manner of savages is to gather together all the bones of the dead. they had carried them into this spot. This nation was called Mobila. and a small number of them survive.

John Swanton, preeminent authority during the early 20th century on the southeastern Indians, attributed the Dauphin Island ossuary to the Pensacolas, whom he considered the original inhabitants of the Mobile Bay area. But Penigault's explanation seems at least as likely, and he was in a position to know which native tribe used the island for burials. Furthermore, most of the region's Choctawan-speaking inhabitants (which included the Mobilians, but probably not the Pensacolas) practiced this sort of secondary reburial.

Having endured a decade of English-inspired slave raids by the Alabamas, Tallapoosas and other inland Muskogean-speaking groups (that would become collectively known as the Upper Creeks), the Mobilians welcomed the opportunities for military alliance and access to firearms that the French presence offered. Once the French established Fort Maurepas in April 1699, the Mobilians actively promoted close political and economic ties.

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Bibliophiles' Corner

Anyone with an interest in colonial history will want to see the third edition of *The Southeast In Early Maps* by William P. Gumming, substantially revised and enlarged by Louis P. De Vorse, Jr. (University of North Carolina Press, 1998, 362 pages, cloth, \$90.00). This wonderful volume includes 124 map illustrations, two dozen in color, that will prove invaluable to scholars and irresistible to cartophiles. De Vorse's extensive additions of Indian, French, and Spanish maps redress the anglocentric emphasis of earlier editions.

Map aficionados will want to obtain another important volume published this year, *Cartographic Encounters: Perspectives on Native American Mapmaking and Map Use* (University of Chicago Press, 1998, 318 pages, cloth, \$60.00). Editor G. Malcolm Lewis's comprehensive overview of Indian maps and mapping is complemented by contributions on Aztec maps, Indian land deeds from southern New England, a painted bison skin from French-era Arkansas, archaeological implications of Indian maps, and the Amerindian content of the Delisles' maps of French Louisiana.

Yet another title on the topic of native mapping has just been released, *The History of Cartography, Volume 2, Book 3: Cartography in the Traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian, and Pacific Societies*, edited by David Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis (University of Chicago Press, 1998, 500 pages, cloth, \$150.00), which is "the first book-length survey of traditional cartography outside the Western and Asian civilizations."

An Archaeology of the Soul: North American Indian Belief and Ritual, by Robert L. Hall (University of Illinois Press, 1997, 222 pages, cloth, \$49.95; paper, \$24.95), is a remarkable exploration of the sacred in Native America. Hall's *tour de force* interweaves throughout his text an explanation of the calumet ceremony, elucidating the war symbolism and the themes of adoption and mourning that underlay it. Those subtleties were largely lost on French colonists, most of whom grasped only the pragmatic value of a ceremony that reduced conflict and, more cynically, offered opportunities for political manipulation.

John H. Hann and Bonnie G. McEwan's new book, *The Apalachee Indians and Mission San Luis* (University Press of Florida, 1998, 193 pages, cloth, \$49.95; paper, \$19.95), inaugurates the series "Native Peoples, Cultures, and Places of the Southeastern United States." Illustrated in full color, this volume is public archaeology at its finest. Readers of this newsletter will remember the important role the Apalachees played in Mobile's early history, after their exodus from Mission San Luis and neighboring missions in 1704-1705. The authors present the story of the Apalachees, as it has been pieced together by archaeologists and historians over the last few decades, in a manner that is accessible and appealing, without sacrificing accuracy. Their book stands as a model of authoritative popular writing on archaeology.

Finally, *Tresors et Secrets de Place-Royale: Apercu de la collection archeologique*, by Camille Lapointe (Ministere de la Culture et des Communications du Quebec, 1998, 217 pages, paper, \$34.95 Canadian), is filled with beautiful photographs of the many spectacular archaeological finds from Place-Royale in Quebec City. Juxtaposed with swatches of antique wallpaper and period art works, the excavated artifacts are placed in the contexts of life in Nouvelle France and British Canada. The volume can be obtained from Les Publications du Quebec, Case Postale 1005, Quebec (Quebec), G1K 7B5, Canada (or www.mcc.gouv.qc.ca on the Internet).

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After a brief visit to the Mobilian villages by two of Iberville's men in May 1700, Charles Levasseur was dispatched in June for a more detailed reconnaissance. He found five villages, with cabins dispersed on both banks of the Mobile River for a distance of 5 leagues, or about 15 miles. The first village was called "lagame minco" (or "Yaknei minco," chief's land), with "17 cabins ... [that] have high walls of earth and are roofed with palm leaves, matted with split cane to prevent the wind from carrying away the palm leaves" A second village of Totchoco had 14 cabins, and the town of Mauvilla contained 42 cabins. Levasseur further reported that

All the men and youths are very skillful at using the bow in hunting buffalo, bears, deer, and turkey. They kill them in quantity. They are nearly all clothed in robes or turkey feather cloaks, which they plait and weave together. All who belong to this nation are of a strong, merry temperament; they dance and play almost always, but reserve the months of May and June for sowing their maize, beans, squash, and watermelons, which are their year-round food.

Late in 1701, Iberville decided to abandon Fort Maurepas (in modern-day Ocean Springs, Mississippi) and relocate to the Mobile River, where the French could have better access to the continental interior by way of the Alabama and Tombigbee rivers. Mobilian headmen offered suggestions for suitable river bluff locations on which to lay out a new French colonial town. By January 1702, the French had begun construction of Fort Louis and the surrounding town, which was called Mobile, at a spot now known as Twenty-seven Mile Bluff. In addition to its situation on a major north-south canoe route, the new location also offered the colonists proximity to the Mobilians, who were willing to provide food and military assistance to the colonists.

While the new French colonial capital was under construction, Iberville's brother, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, investigated the Mobile-Tensaw delta swamps immediately east of town. According to Iberville,

He got an Indian to show him the place where their gods are, about which all the neighboring nations make such a fuss and to which the Mobilians used to come and offer sacrifices. The Indians claim that a person cannot touch them without dying on the spot and that they came down from the sky. A gun had to be given the Indian who showed where they were; he did not get closer to them than 10 steps away, and with his back turned. It took a search to locate them on a little hill among the canes, near an old village that is destroyed. on one of these islands. The gods were brought here. They are five images - a man, a woman, a child, a bear, and an owl - made of ceramic in the likeness of Indians of this country. I personally think that some Spaniard in the time of Soto made the figures of these Indians in ceramic. Apparently it was done a long time ago. We have them at the settlement. The Indians who see them here are amazed at our boldness and amazed that we do not die as a result. I am taking the images to France, though they are not particularly interesting.

If the ceramic effigies were, in fact, taken to France, no further sign of them has since been found by historians or ethnologists. This drama probably occurred at the Bottle Creek site, the Mississippian mound center on Mound Island, which is labeled "Isle aux Statues" on an inset of the 1718 Delisle map. This account indicates the reverence which all of the local tribes still held for this sacred site, strongly suggesting cultural continuity with an earlier period.

Having French colonists as close neighbors had serious implications for the Mobilians. Their population plummeted during the early 18th century as direct contact with the European and Canadian French introduced unaccustomed Old World diseases, particularly yellow fever in 1704. Father Le Maire noted in 1714 his "amazement to see how death has mowed down whole tribes since the arrival of the French in these parts" Continual losses from enemy raiding were perhaps the next most serious drain on their population, through casualties and captives. The five Mobilian villages of 1702 dwindled to two by the end of the next decade, and apparently to one by the late 1720s.

French culture found limited acceptance among the Mobilians, principally in the realm of material goods such as firearms, which quickly became indispensable for hunting and warfare. Parish baptismal records include seven references to Mobilians accepting that sacrament. All of the names of the baptized children and their parents are French - Jean Louis, Marie Magdeleine, Therese, Marie Jeanne. Jean-Baptiste — but we do not know whether these individuals retained their native names, as well. The headman of the Mobilians from 1728 to 1735 was called Tonti, named for Henri de Tonti (conceivably, his father). La Salle's legendary lieutenant who died at Mobile in the 1704 yellow fever epidemic. Adoption of French names and religion may have occurred principally among the leading rank of Mobilians, who benefited most from French patronage. In addition, a few Mobilian children, perhaps orphans (or war captives), were kept in French homes as housekeepers, and some Mobilian women became prostitutes, including one "public woman" who married a Canadian in a controversial secret ceremony.

Historical documents provide little information on life in the Native American villages around French Mobile. One important exception, though, is a description of Mobilian burial customs written by Dumont de Montigny, probably based on his observations made during the 1720s and 1730s. Since his account indicates a continuation of mound ceremonialism into the historic period, it is of particular interest to archaeologists.

The people who live along the Mobile [River] and who are called Mobilians ... have neither Temple nor any other common place where they can bury or display their dead. So, when their Chief dies, here is what they do. Fourteen or fifteen peds (about 15 to 16 English feet) from the entrance of his house they erect a kind of elevated earthen stage about four and a half peds (almost 5 feet), and put together four large forks of oak set into the ground with transverse pieces: next they cover it with bound and interlaced canes, so it quite resembles a bed of the Indians. On this stage they place the coffin, made from a single piece of pine that, as I have mentioned elsewhere, is incorruptible: after which they put the corpse inside adorned in his most beautiful clothes, and place over it the coffin lid also made from a single piece and rounded, and nail it shut. The deceased thus remains exposed on this stage his feet pointed toward the entrance to the house. At his head is a tall pole set in the earth that rises more than six peds [about 6 1/2 feet] above this monument, and attached to which are not only all the Calumets that he received during his life, but also the scalps that he took, or which were presented to him. At his head is placed his dog, which was killed to keep him company and to hunt with him in the land of the Spirits: and on both sides of his coffin are his pipe, some tobacco, some gunflints, his gun, his horn full of powder, his bag full of shot. and finally all the accouterments that one can think would be needed by him in the other world.

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Your Support is Needed, and Appreciated

For the past ten years, the **Center for Archaeological Studies** has worked very hard to preserve some remnants of our fast-disappearing historic past. Staff and students have excavated at Old Mobile, Port Dauphin, Spanish Fort, and in downtown Mobile at the sites of the new Exploreum, Galloway-Smith Middle School, and the old City Hall & Market. As the city's tricentennial rapidly approaches, we are working closely with the staff of the Museum of Mobile to provide artifacts for exhibits in their new facilities. Numerous reports have been published, with more on the way, and a public-oriented book on Old Mobile is in the works. And the Old Mobile Archaeology website (at www.southalabama.edu/archaeology/) is a big hit with kids and adults alike.

Unfortunately, funding for the Center is running out. Can you help? Your contributions would support a new excavation planned for this spring at Old Mobile, additions to the website, and more publications - like this newsletter! An interest-generating fund could be created from large donations to insure the long-term survival of the Center. Please help us continue providing high-quality archaeological activities and services for the people of Mobile and south Alabama.

Tax-deductible contributions, made payable to the "University of South Alabama," should be sent to the Center for Archaeological Studies, HUMB 34, University of South Alabama 36688. Thank you for your generosity and your dedication to preserving the past for tomorrow.

Duphin Island Survey

Last year the site of French-colonial Port Dauphin (1702 to circa 1725), on Dauphin Island, was the scene of a major excavation by the Center for Archaeological Studies at the University of South Alabama. Analysis of the artifacts recovered during that project will continue for another year. In the meantime, **George Shorter** from the Center is directing an archaeological survey of the island (funded by the Alabama Historical Commission), searching for all kinds of sites from the prehistoric to Civil War eras. The storm surge associated with Hurricane Georges (no relation) uncovered several shipwrecks, so other buried clues to the island's past may also have come to light. If any readers know of archaeological sites on Dauphin Island, please let us know by calling the Center at (251)460-6563.

French Colonial Historical Society to Meet in New Orleans

The 25th meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society will be held in New Orleans' *Vieux Carre* on June 2-5, 1999. As always, the meeting program will include presentations on Old and New Regime colonies around the world, with special emphasis this time on Louisiana. Lots of special events are also planned, so conference attendees can experience and enjoy the unique cultures of Cajun and Creole Louisiana. For more information on the meeting, contact Greg Waselkov by phone (251-460-6911), email (gwaselko@jaguar1.usouthal.edu) or at the address on this newsletter.

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For fear that these things would be stolen by someone, not only are they nailed down firmly, but they are also cemented; after which all is covered with dirt, in a way, however, that one can see the ends of that which was given. Finally, to protect this from the ravages of time, a cover of cypress bark is placed on top.

As for the others, this tomb is not peculiar to the Chiefs: all the Indians of this Nation, men, women, boys and girls, have a similar elevated tomb outside their houses and care is taken to put alongside the coffin of each an ornament that distinguishes the person, a gun beside a warrior, next to a woman a pestle, a fan, etc. Thus entering one of their Villages, one can see both the dwelling places of the living and those of the dead.

If an archaeological excavation of a Mobilian village ever occurs, this passage from Dumont's memoir may prove helpful in interpreting that settlement.

The Mobilians lent their name to the "Mobilian Jargon," a *lingua franca* or contact pidgin, that served as a second language, easily learned by Indians and Europeans alike because of its limited lexicon and simplified grammar. It may have developed during the 17th century, when refugee tribes migrated into the central Gulf coast. Arrival of the French in 1699 meant additional linguistic diversity in a region where the need for a mutually intelligible pidgin had existed for a century. Many French colonists learned Mobilian Jargon, and their movements across the mid-continent undoubtedly contributed to its widespread use.

Though dwindling in number throughout the early and mid-18th century, the Mobilians served as military surrogates for the French. In 1719 a Mobilian force ambushed a pillaging band of French military deserters, and in 1732 a war party of Mobilians and Tomes celebrated a victory over the Chickasaws.

Mobilians accompanied a French negotiating delegation to the Choctaws in 1746 led by M. Beauchamps. "Between 7 and 8 o'clock of the morning we reached the Mobilians who awaited us and who were playing a game of ball (also known as "little brother of war") by way of fitting themselves for following us. Upon my arrival they sang the calumet and an hour afterwards the horses, destined for this expedition, arrived"

From time to time, the French employed Mobilians as porters to the Choctaw country, and as rowers of bateaux sent up the Tombigbee and Alabama rivers to resupply Forts Tombecke and Toulouse. For this last task, slaves or hired Indians were preferred to soldiers who tended to desert in alarming numbers when sent to the frontiers of Louisiana.

When France ceded its Louisiana colony to Spain and Great Britain in 1763, at the end of the Seven Years War, the Mobilians decided to leave their homeland of the Mobile-Tensaw delta and move, with most neighboring tribes, the *pettes nations*, westward to the Mississippi Valley. They went by canoe to New Orleans in March 1764, and by 1768 occupied a village with the Chatos on the Amite River in British territory. There Lieutenant Governor Montfort Browne attended a "calumet dance" held in his honor by Mattaha, headman of the Mobilians, whom he persuaded to move his village closer to Baton Rouge. One year later, though, the Mobilians met with Spanish Governor O'Reilly in New Orleans, and by 1772 this band of about 15 individuals had settled in the Rapides district of Spanish Louisiana, on the Red River, where most of the other refugees from French Mobile relocated. Because of their continuing ties to the British, however, they were refused their annual allotment of presents by Spanish officials in 1772. By 1775 they were said to be serving as hunters for both Spanish and British colonists. This seems to be the last historical reference to the Mobilian Indians.

