

The Old Mobile Project Newsletter

Issue 2

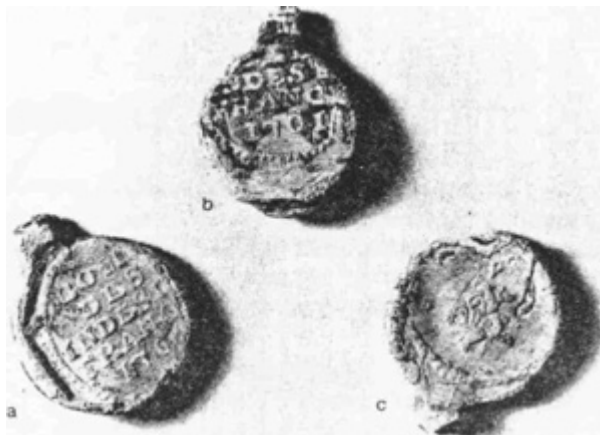
Fall 1989

Archaeological Excavation of a French Colonial House Site

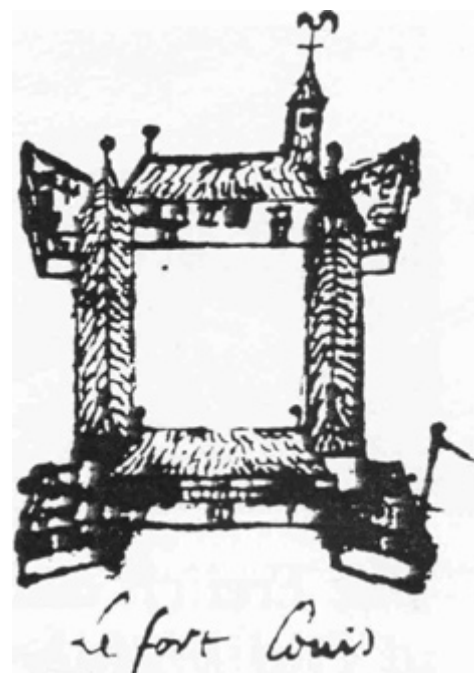
During the summer of 1989 a team of archaeologists from the University of South Alabama began explorations at the early French colonial settlement of Old Mobile, occupied from 1702 to 1711. Old Mobile served as capital of Louisiana colony, a vast interior region of North America claimed by the French in the early 18th century. As reported in Issue 1 of this newsletter, James C. (Buddy) Parnell discovered the archaeological site of Old Mobile in February of this year. In the last few months, *The Friends of Old Mobile* have generated considerable community support for the archaeological investigation of this important historical site.

This summer's excavations focused on the remains of a single house, one of several along the western edge of town that are thought to have been occupied by Canadians who accompanied the colonizing expedition in 1702. The house was a long, narrow, three-room building (consisting of a central parlor flanked by two smaller bedrooms), with a fenced garden or animal pen attached to one end. All that remained of this house were footing trenches for the wall sills, floors of clay, and some brick rubble from a fireplace.

The building would have resembled an English "half-timber" house, with the spaces between upright wall posts filled in with a clay and Spanish Moss mixture called bousillage.



Lead seals from cloth shipped to French Louisiana by the Company of the Indies in 1701.



Philippe Oszuscik, architectural historian at the University of South Alabama, has noted that the dwelling excavated at Old Mobile closely resembles a house style that was developed in Haiti, another French colony, before 1700. This style, called the "Creole cottage," continued to evolve and became the most popular house type along the northern Gulf Coast, where it is still widely used today.

Because this house is the earliest French structure to be excavated in the region—the only earlier ones are to be found in Canada and on the Atlantic coast of the United States—there were many surprises among the artifacts uncovered during the digging. Some of the most interesting objects are four small lead discs that had been clipped on to bales of cloth destined for export from France to the colony. On one side of each was stamped a fleur-de-lys; the other bears an abbreviated inscription naming the source of the cloth, the Company of the Indies, and the date 1701. The presence of these seals certainly suggests that the house excavated this summer was built soon after the founding of old Mobile in January 1702.

Most unexpected among this summer's discoveries is the great number of Spanish colonial artifacts present at this French settlement. Although the French colonists evidently relied on local Indian potters to provide them with most of their cooking pots and serving dishes, they also owned a small amount of Chinese porcelain and a larger quantity of white tin-glazed ceramics. All of the tin-glazed pottery found so far originally was made in Puebla, Mexico, and is known as majolica (none resembles French tin-glazed pottery, called faience, or the English and Dutch counterparts known as delft). We know that the French at Old Mobile seldom received supplies from France; consequently, they frequently sailed to Spanish Pensacola, and even as far as Veracruz, to trade for food and other necessities.

Other artifacts seem to suggest that the colonists were striving to achieve a degree of self-sufficiency on this new frontier. The earliest industry may have been brickmaking, with the rather crude, but serviceable bricks used primarily in fireplaces. A few pieces of lead-glazed pottery appear to have been made from local clays, too.



Remains of a Canadian voyageur's house at Old Mobile excavated by the University of South Alabama in 1989

existence, every party of Frenchmen who entered the interior Southeast on missions of trade or diplomacy carried a calumet.

Given the significance of the calumet in the year 1702, it is not too surprising to learn that the pipes were being manufactured by the inhabitants of the house just excavated at Old Mobile. Five pieces of cut, whittled, and drilled catlinite were found just outside the house. Catlinite (which is a soft, bright red stone) can only be obtained from a few outcrops in Minnesota, Iowa, and South Dakota; these pieces probably were carried across the continent by French-Canadians traders who canoed down the Mississippi River.

The French and Indians at Old Mobile

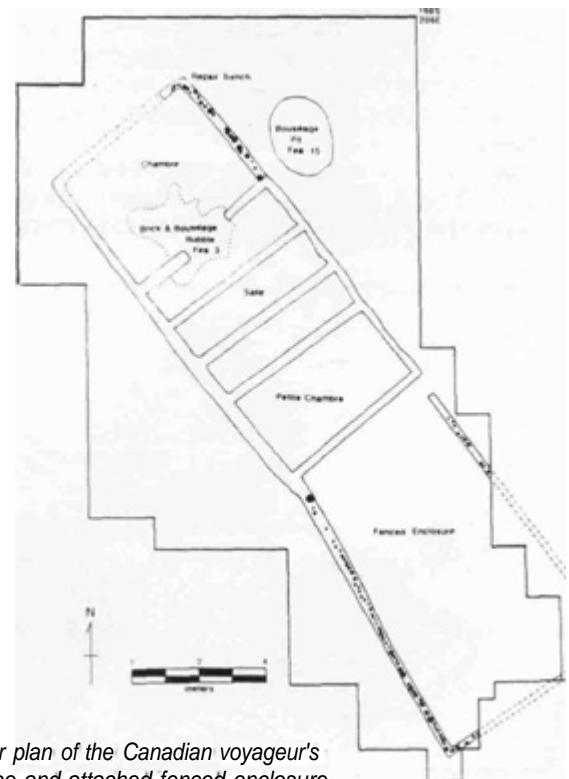
The colonists who founded Old Mobile in 1702 included French men and a few women from Europe, Canada, and the Caribbean. Among the Canadians, there existed a tradition of buying young Indians who were kept as domestic slaves, a practice that became prevalent in the new colony. In addition, several small tribes of Indians (such as the Mobilians, Apalachees, and Towasas) settled near the French fort for protection. So, in a short while, a multi-ethnic community began to evolve as French men found Indian wives or mistresses. The French government and the Catholic church at first condoned and even encouraged such cross-cultural marriages, although that attitude soon changed. But during the short lifetime of the Old Mobile settlement, Indians made up a sizable portion of the population.

The archaeological excavations this summer strikingly confirmed the importance of Indians to the community. Vast quantities of pottery were produced by Indian potters for use in the settlement. The wide variety of pottery types suggests that some may have been made by slaves or wives for their own household use, while others were produced in nearby villages specifically for trade to the town. Many pots have been found that were manufactured by Indians using traditional methods and decorations, but in European forms, including plates with footrings, spouted pitchers, and goblets. In return for supplying the French with pottery and other commodities — corn and venison were important trade items — the Indians are known to have received guns and ammunition, knives, cloth, and ornaments. The latter, in the form of small glass beads, were found in abundance during excavations at the house of the Canadian voyageur.

With a population numbering only about 200 to 300, the continued existence of the colony depended entirely on the goodwill and assistance of its Indian neighbors. One means of maintaining harmonious relations with the Indians was immediately adopted by the French: the calumet ceremony. This elaborate greeting ritual—which involved the smoking of a long-stemmed pipe, the calumet—was widely used throughout the Southeast whenever people from different societies met to trade or negotiate. So great was the symbolic power of the calumet, that prompt presentation of the pipe, with its distinctive red stone bowl, narrowly averted disaster on numerous occasions during encounters with potentially hostile tribes. For the first few decades of the colony's

Old Mobile Memoirs

By late spring of 1703, a low supply of food in the settlement seriously threatened the existence of the young colony. When a delegation of Alabama Indian leaders arrived at the fort in May offering to sell corn from their abundant village surpluses, Commandant Bienville sent five Canadians to trade at the Alabama towns, near modern-day Montgomery. But English traders among the Alabamas persuaded the Indians to attack the Frenchmen. Two badly wounded survivors paddled back to Old Mobile with the bitter news. Bienville eventually organized a retaliatory raid against the Alabamas in January, and warfare continued sporadically until peace was reestablished in 1712. So the colonists continued to rely on an occasional supply ship from France and on trade with the small Indian tribes nearby for their food. Because trade with the Indians for furs, deerskins, and food proved so lucrative, few French settlers took up farming during these early years, although most had household gardens.



Floor plan of the Canadian voyageur's house and attached fenced enclosure

Mr. John H. Friend, Jr. (left) presents a contribution to the Old Mobile Project to Dr. Gene Crossley, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, University of South Alabama

We Appreciate Your Contributions

Donations from the public are helping to carry on archaeological research at Old Mobile until grants can be obtained from state and federal agencies. Some of the largest donations have come from two of the site landowners, Courtaulds Fibers Inc. and E.I. DuPont de Nemours & Co.

Courtaulds is an international corporation that produces fibers and chemicals for textile, industrial, medical, aerospace, and defense industries. The plant at Axis, Alabama, has been in operation since 1952 producing rayon from eucalyptus cellulose. Through David Christian, Courtaulds' Chief Executive officer, the company substantially contributes to the Old Mobile Project not only with monetary support, but also by providing security and access to the site.

DuPont, through plant manager Ronald Burger, has also donated major funding and provides the research team with access to their portion of the site. The plant at Axis is one of the major chemical producers in the Mobile area, producing herbicides and surfactants. Other DuPont contributions programs strengthen community development and local educational institutions.

Governor Guy Hunt has made a generous contribution from the Governor's Discretionary Fund that has enabled survey work to proceed this fall.

Two private individuals, John H. Friend and Dr. Samuel Eichold (both Vice Chairmen of the Friends of Old Mobile), have also recently contributed substantially to project funding. Jack Friend is a professional management consultant specializing in market research. He enthusiastically supports local archaeology, as exemplified by his membership on the City of Mobile Archaeological Preservation Committee, the Baldwin County Preservation District Review Board, and the Archaeological Preservation Committee of Baldwin County, which he founded.

Dr. Eichold, author of *Historical Mardi Gras*, received his medical degree from Tulane University. He is a member of the Mobile Museum Board, the Mobile Tree Commission, and the Bienville Club, and is curator of the medical museum at the University of South Alabama College of Medicine.



Jean-Baptiste Saucier

Commandant Bienville looked upon the Canadian settlers at Old Mobile as the "backbone of the colony," according to Jay Higginbotham in his book *Old Mobile: Fort Louis de la Louisiane, 1702-1711*.

Jean-Baptiste Saucier was particularly noted, among the Canadians, for his energetic efforts to establish farming in the colony. He was one of the first to establish a profitable plantation, supplying produce to other French colonists, and in exchange for Spanish silver to Pensacola, Havana, and Veracruz.

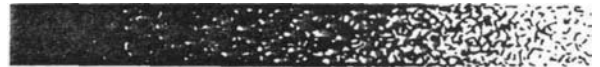
Saucier married Gabrielle Savary, who arrived in Louisiana on the ship Pelican in 1704. They had five children; their youngest son, Francois, became a noted military engineer and designed forts Toulouse, Massac, and Chartres during the 1750s. Numerous descendants of the Sauciers live in the Mobile area today.

Become a Friend of Old Mobile

Current archaeological investigations at the site of Old Mobile depend on community support. The cost of this winter's exploratory work alone will exceed \$20,000. Join *The Friends of Old Mobile* and help us learn more about colonial life along the northern Gulf coast. 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 recently
contributed \$1000 or more to the Old Mobile Project:**



Governor Guy Hunt, Montgomery, AL
(Governor's Discretionary Fund)
Courtaulds Fibers, Inc., Axis, AL
E.I. DuPont de Nemours & Co., Axis, AL
Mr. John H. Friend, Jr., Montrose, AL
Dr. Samuel Eichold, Mobile, AL

***The Friends of Old Mobile
Executive Committee***

Jay Higginbotham, Chairman
John H. Friend, Jr., 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

***The Friends of Old Mobile Are Pleased to
Welcome the Following New Members***

Mr. Jay Altmayer, Mobile, AL
Ms. Rosemary Archambault, Mobile, AL
Ms. Elizabeth Burge, Fort Myers, FL
Mr. Bernard J. Diamond, Mobile, AL
Mr. Robert Edington, Mobile, AL
Dr. Samuel Eichold, Mobile, AL
Mr. Kenneth Hannon, Mobile, AL
Ms. Emily Miller, Mobile, AL
Mr. N. A. Nicholson, Mobile, AL
Mr. & Mrs. William P. Roberts, Wetumpka, AL
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Ms. Mabel Ward, Mobile, AL
Mr. and Mrs. Worden Weaver, Theodore, AL
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Ms. Paula Weiss, Montgomery, AL



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