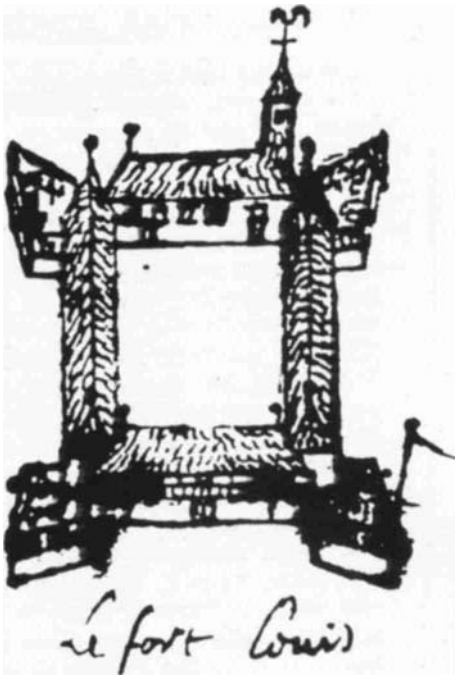
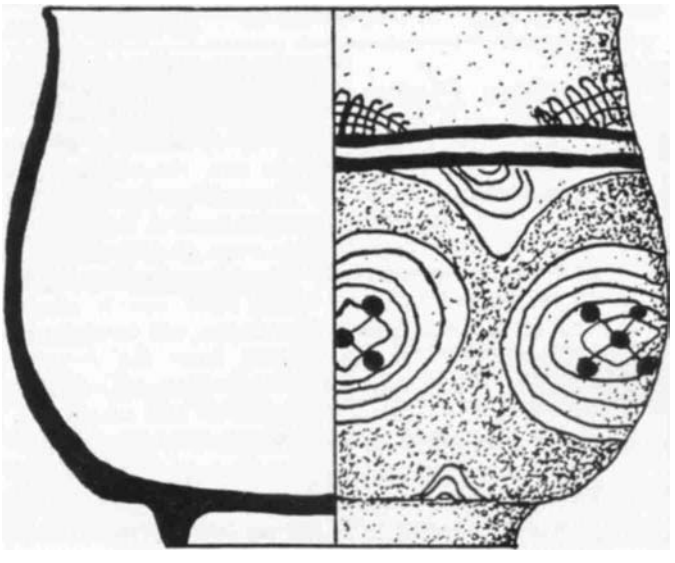
The Old Mobile Project Newsletter

Issue 6 *Winter 1992*



Food and Drink at Old Mobile

If one can judge from the number of references to food in the letters and reports issuing from the Louisiana colony between 1702 and 1711, eating and drinking must have been much on the minds of French settlers at Old Mobile. During their first few years of exploration, the colonists were preoccupied with searches for mineral wealth or trading with the Indians and had little time to spare for the relatively unprofitable pursuit of agriculture. Neighboring Indian villages could supply maize and venison, but the newly arrived Canadians and European French definitely preferred their customary wheat bread, beef, and pork to the local fare. Unfortunately for the finicky colonists, supply ships from France arrived infrequently, and their contents sometimes spoiled enroute. Commandant Bienville and others soon devised means to obtain the provisions and other goods they wanted and needed. principally by the initiation of trade with other European colonies in the area. Only gradually, and almost as an afterthought, did the colonists seriously turn to gardening and farming. During a decade of experimentation with species from all over the world, they eventually discovered which crops were suitable to the soils and climate of the northern Gulf coast.



Early documents describe Indian fields filled with maize, squash, and beans, on islands in the Mobile-Tensaw delta. Around their villages, the Indians grew watermelons and tended peach and fig trees, species all originally obtained from Spaniards in Florida. They also processed salt from saline springs north of the delta. The colonists seem to have depended heavily on Indian produce, although they complained bitterly when they were "reduced to living on Indian corn" after all other food stores were exhausted. Even corn must have seemed appealing in 1711, when floods devastated the Indian fields and some colonists survived on acorns and fish.

At least one settler reportedly managed to successfully grow wheat, tobacco, barley, rye, oats, and flax, but many others failed in their attempts to raise these crops due to the high temperatures and humidity of the summer months. Oranges sprouted in the summer, but could not withstand the winter cold, and native grapes yielded disappointing wine. In the face of such setbacks, most colonists relied on imported flour, wine, and tobacco, and many years passed before some among them would become self-sufficient farmers.

Attempts at livestock raising proved more successful. Iberville brought cattle, pigs, sheep, and chickens to the newly established town. The sheep did not last long, but by 1708, the colony could boast of 50 milk cows, 1400 pigs, and about 2000 chickens.

Archaeological excavations during the last three years at three house sites and a blacksmith's shop site at Old Mobile have provided (and will continue to provide, as analysis continues) a considerable amount of information on the "foodways" of the French colonists. For instance, the types of pottery found at each structure suggest the kinds of foods prepared and served there three centuries ago. Charred plant remains are beginning to give us an idea of the grains and fruits consumed. And animal remains - bones, teeth, and shells - tell us about the species that were husbanded and hunted. This last category of evidence, unfortunately, is rarely recovered during excavations at Old Mobile, because most of the chemically basic animal parts were long ago dissolved

This drawing of a Puebla Polychrome majolica cup or small bowl is based on thirty-four sherds found at Structure 1, 1MB94.

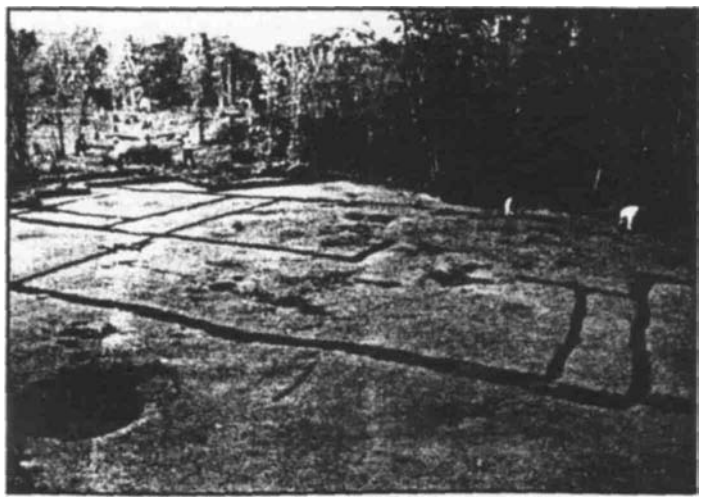
Food and Drink (continued)

by the site's highly acidic soils. A few fragmentary bones have survived, however, and these are mainly from white-tailed deer and domestic pigs.

Although charred seeds and other plant parts are seldom seen while excavating, they are usually quite numerous but elusive because of their small size and dark color. One way to efficiently collect samples of these tiny objects is to process soil samples in a flotation machine, a device that exploits the tendency of most charcoal to float in water. When soil is poured into the agitated water of a flotation machine, plant remains stay buoyant long enough to be directed into a fine cloth or sieve. A paleoethnobotanist, **Dr. Kristen Gremilllon** at Ohio State University, has just begun her analysis of the plant remains collected by flotation from Old Mobile, but we already know that corn, peaches and a large type of bean have been recovered.

A close study of ceramics is also providing some interesting insights. Most of the pottery used at Old Mobile was made by Indians, either in the nearby villages of the Mobiles, Apalachees, and other smaller tribes, or by Indian slaves kept by the French in town. According to **Diane Silvia Mueller,** a graduate student at Tulane University who is analyzing the Indian pottery from Old Mobile for her dissertation, most of the 27,000 potsherds excavated at Structures 1 and 2 are parts of simple bowls with rounded bases. Since few sherds have any soot on the exterior surface, as would be expected had these pots been employed for cooking, they were probably mainly used for food preparation, serving, and storage. Presumably, cooking was done in large iron and copper kettles, a few pieces of which have been found. Interestingly, many of the Indian-produced ceramics are copies of European forms (such as cups, mugs, and plates with foot-ring bases), although made using Indian methods.

About 3,000 sherds of Asian porcelain and European-style ceramics were recovered from Structure 1 and 2 and analysed by staff archaeologist **Catherine Potter**.The cups, bowl, and saucers of Chinese and Japanese porcelain were intended for tea drinking, but could, of course, have been used for cocoa or the abundant wine, brandy, and port listed on shipping invoices. Incidentally, several wine glasses have been found, but they we'e evidently uncommon. Most of the white, tin-glazed ceramics (like their simpler and more numerous Indian-made counterparts) were used for serving. Forms include plates, bowls, cups. pitchers and a porringer. Glass and stoneware bottles were available for liquor storage.



One particularly intriguing but fragmentary pot, a piece of white, tin-glazed French **faience,** has the letters "bon" written in script on the interior surface. Perhaps the complete legend read "bon chance," good luck, or some other equally salubrious sentiment that one might appreciate after consuming the contents of the cup.

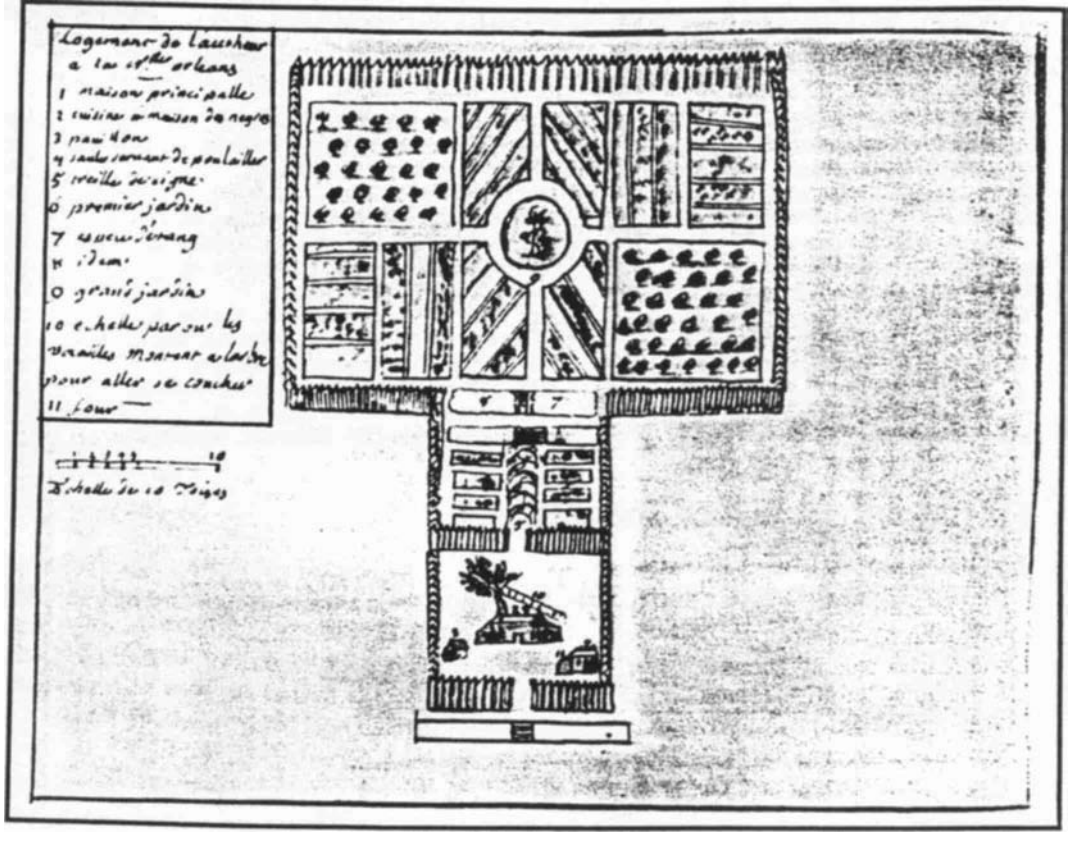
Another approach to foodways involves looking at the places in town where gardening occurred and animals were kept. Every excavated structure has been surrounded with footing trenches that once held palisade fences made from wooden posts averaging about 4 inches in diameter and probably 5 to 6 feet tall. Three of the high school students who participated in the National Science Foundation Young Scholars program at Old Mobile last summer conducted tests on soil samples from the various fenced enclosures at Structure 2 to determine how these areas were used. Stephanie Walker, Jennifer Vest, and Stephanie Hicks checked soil acidity and soil phosphate content at various locations around the blacksmith's shop and discovered one area, northeast of the shop, where phosphate levels were extremely high. There are several possible reasons for high levels of phosphate in the soil, but in this case the most likely explanation is that animals, probably chickens, were kept in that enclosure, since poultry droppings contain high levels of phosphate. The other locations with low levels of phosphate apparently served other purposes, as yards and garden areas, presumably. Studies of pollen and phytoliths (microscopic bits of silica found in many plants) recovered from the soil should help distinguish between these two types of areas. By these detailed investigations of such unintentional byproducts of human activities, we can eventually learn how people lived at Old Mobile — not just what their houses looked like, but what went on in and around the houses everyday.

A Second Blacksmithing Site Discovered

In mid-January, the archaeological survey team found the site of a second blacksmith's forge, located several hundred meters east of the forge site excavated in 1990. Once again, iron slag and coal have been recovered from a cluster of shovel tests. Team members are taking advantage of the seasonal die back of vegetation and this winter's mild temperatures to extend the shovel testing survey to the northern boundary of the site. We hope soon to report the discovery of the seminary site, home to missionaries from Quebec, and the town cemetery, both located in this still unsurveyed area.

After nearly three years of continuous archaeological research at the Old Mobile site, newsletter readers may be wondering about our long-range plans for the project. This year the archaeological team will complete the intensive testing program, over 10,000 shovel tests dug at 4-meter intervals over the entire site. Next year, we plan to excavate four more house sites, which, along with the four structures already excavated, will furnish an excellent cross section of households from the French colonial capital. Beginning in 1994, emphasis will shift from excavation to public interpretation and education. We have come a long way, but much remains to be done!

A complex maze ol fences surrounded Structure 2, a blacksmith's shop. The dark lines in this view are the excavated footing trenches for palisade-style fencing.



Dumont de Montigny's house and gardens surrounded bu palisade fencing, New Orleans, c. 1735. Notice the ladder (10), to permit chickens to roost in the trees at night, and the trellis (5). (Newberry Library, Chicago)

Become a Friend of Old Mobile

Archaeological investigations at the site of Old Mobile depend on community support. Because of the economic recession, the project did not receive funding from the state of Alabama, as it did last year. So contributions from individuals and corporations will largely determine the pace of field activities in the coming months. Join **The Friends of Old Mobile** and help us learn more about colonial life along the northern Gulf coast. A variety of membership types are available:

Individual ($25)
Family ($40)
Institutional ($100)
Benefactor ($500)
Patron ($1,000)

All memberships are tax-deductible. Please direct all correspondence to:

The Friends of Old Mobile
P.O. Box 6685
Mobile, Alabama 36660
or
Dr. J. Stephen Thomas
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Alabama
Mobile, Alabama 36688

Technical Report Now Available

A descriptive report on the initial survey and excavations at Old Mobile has just been published, as the first volume of the "University of South Alabama Anthropological Monograph" series. Archaeology at the French Colonial Site of Old Mobile (Phase 1:1989-1991), edited by Gregory A. Waselkov. contains 230 pages of text and is profusely illustrated with 126 photographs, drawings, and maps. This report presents the detailed results of artifact analyses, including studies of artifact distributions around Structures 1 and 2, a house and a blacksmith shop. Other sections cover bricks, glass beads, smoking pipes, gunflints. lead seals, pottery (Indian-made, Asian, European, and Colonial), and many othertypes of objects. An architectural history of the French Creole cottage, by Dr. Phlllppe Oszuscik, concludes the volume. This and at least two other similar reports, to be published late in 1992 and 1993, are meant primarily for professional archaeologists, but a summary volume on the entire project and written for a general audience will be published in 1995. For those interested in the nitty-gritty of archaeological research, the monograph can be had for $12.00 (plus 4% tax in Alabama), payable to the University of South Alabama, from the editor at the address on the last page of this newsletter.

Recent Grants for Old Mobile

The Mitchell Foundation and the University of South Alabama have once again provided generous support for the current fieldwork, specifically to keep the archaeological survey team and security guard on site during the next several months. The project staff also wants to say "Thank You!" to all who responded to the recent appeal for new and renewing members. Due to these contributions, we have met the challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. releasing the final installment of matching federal funds for the project.

The Friends of Old Mobile are Pleased to Welcome the Following New and Renewing Members:

The Azalea Club, Mobile, AL
Or. & Mrs. Phillip P. Boucher, Huntsville, AL
Mrs. Kathenne A. Brinkley, Mobile, AL
Or lan W. Brown, Tuscaloosa, AL
Ms. Norma S. Calametti, Mobile, AL
Ms. Valene Case, Mobile, AL
Mr. John Coleman, Mobile, AL
Mr. Stephens G. Croom, Mobile, AL
Ms. Ann W. Oelchamps, Mobile, AL
Mr. Bernard J. Diamond, Mobile, AL
Dr. & Mrs. S.C. Perguson, Mobile, AL
Mr. Vernon E. Fowlkes, Mobile, AL
Mr Robert H. Garner III, Mobile, AL
Mr. E. Robert Graveline, Palmer, MA
Dr. Kenneth Hannon, Mobile, AL
Ms. Ann B. Heann, Point Clear, AL
Mrs. Emily Hearin, Mobile, AL
Mr. Howard F. Hickey, Mobile, AL
Mrs. Leannah P. Holland, Mobile, AL
Mr. & Mrs. Nicholas Holmes, Mobile, AL
Mr. Thomas A. Horst, Jr. Mobile, AL
Mr. Robert Houston, Mobile, AL
Mr. & Mrs. Herndon Inge. Jr,. Mobile, AL
Col. and Mrs. Richard R. Johnson, Mobile, AL
Mr. Douglas B. Kearley, Mobile, AL
Mr. & Mrs. Harold L. Long. Jr., Creola, AL
Mr. Arthur B. McLean, Mobile, AL
Mr & Mrs. John C.H. Miller. Jr., Mobile, AL
Mrs. John D. Moran, Pass Christian, MS
Mr. & Mrs. Roy E. Parker, Mobile, AL
Mrs. Louise T. Parmley, Mobile, AL
Dr. & Mrs. Ralph B. Pfeiffer. Jr., Mobile, AL
Dr. & Mrs. Guy L. Rutledge. Jr., Mobile, AL
Mr. Harry F Ryan. Jr., Theodore, AL
Mr. George H. Schroeter, Mobile, AL
Mrs. Mabel B. Ward, Mobile, AL
Mrs. Worden Weaver, Theodore, AL
Mrs. Willie Mae Wefel, Mobile, AL
Mrs. Jo Ann S. Wheelis, Mobile, AL
Mr. LUIS M. Williams, Mobile, AL
Dr. Hollis J. Wiseman, Mobile, AL
Dr. Peter H. Wood, Hillsborough, NC

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