

The Old Mobile Project Newsletter

Issue 9

Summer 1993

Recent Old Mobile Research and Related Activities

Apart from a University of South Alabama archaeological field school held at the site this spring, most of the recent research on Old Mobile (site of the earliest French colonial town built within the present boundaries of the United States) has occurred in the laboratory. This fall, the project staff will publish a second descriptive report on excavations at Old Mobile. The report will discuss architectural features and artifacts found at three house sites—Structures 3, 4, and 5. As reported from time to time in these newsletters, the Old Mobile site continually surprises us with unexpected discoveries.

For instance, the unusually well-preserved floor of Structure 3 revealed that the house walls had been inset slightly from

the edge of the low, clay mound, leaving a clay apron or "banquette" under the eaves of the house. Heavy rains had washed away most of this banquette, which had evidently been intended to protect the wooden wall sills from dampness and rot. This architectural innovation had developed in Haiti during the 17th century, according to architectural historian **Phillipe Oszuscik**, as an adaptation to the subtropical climate.

One of the most unusual artifacts found at these structures was a double-walled, Chinese porcelain tea cup. The double-walled feature of the cup (which was laboriously reconstructed from 86 fragments by **Catherine Potter**) was supposed to insulate the tea drinker's fingers from the heat of the drink. Instead of

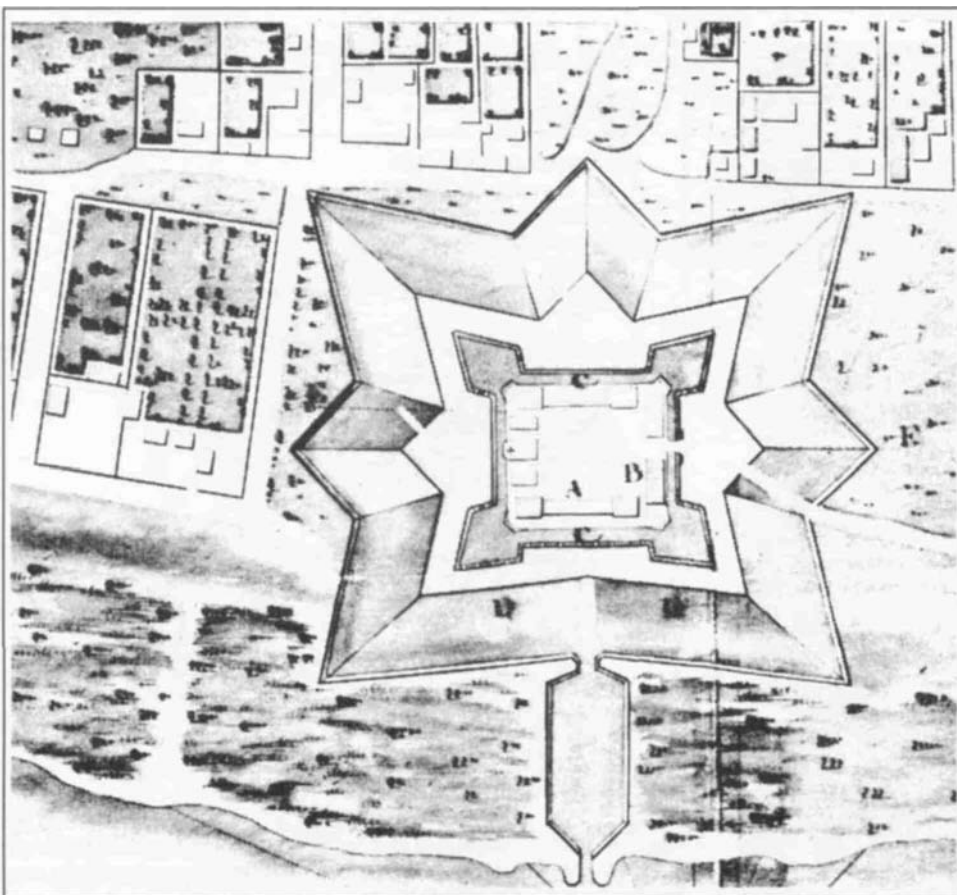
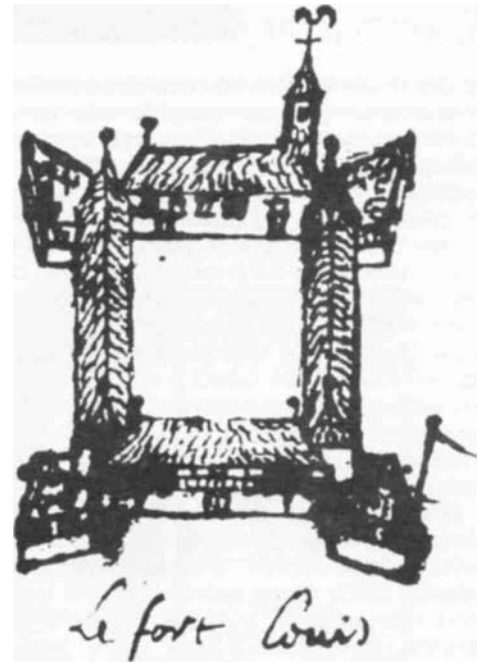
the blue-on-white decoration typical of other Chinese porcelain found at Old Mobile, this vessel is made of **blanc-de-chine**, an ivory-colored body with a molded leaf decoration interspersed with decorative cut-outs through the outer vessel wall.

Staff archaeologist **Ray Keene** has been cleaning and conserving the 8,000+ iron artifacts recovered from excavations at these structures. Iron corrosion is unusually severe at the Old Mobile site, so many of these specimens were unidentifiable before cleaning. Most turned out to be handwrought nails, which apparently were used extensively in house construction, contrary to expectations based on studies of later, mortised-and-tenoned. French colonial houses in the Mississippi Valley. Iron artifacts from Structure 3 (which we think was occupied by Francois Trudeau, a Canadian carpenter) include door hardware: a claw hammer, rasp, wood screw, and saw blade; cotter pins; clasp and case knives; some gun parts; and a tinned pail.

While the staff here at the **Center for Archaeological Studies** works primarily on

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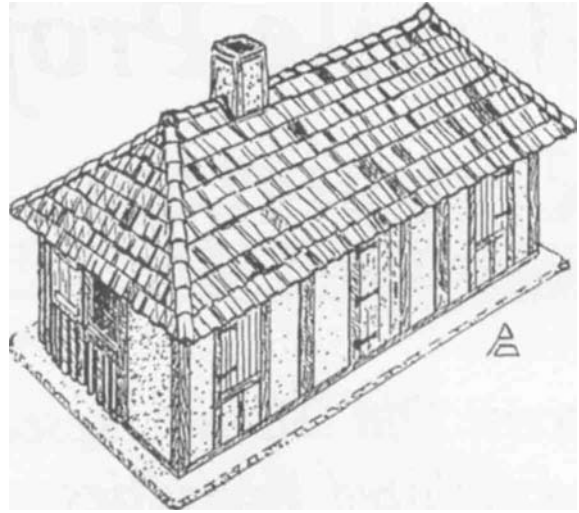
Plan of Fort Conde at Mobile, circa 1720 (Cartes Marines. The Newberry Library) Town blocks are shown divided into private lots, each with a cluster of household structures and an associated garden surrounded by palisade fences, similar to the arrangement found archaeologically at Old Mobile.



Research (cont.)

the Old Mobile Project, we have also been involved recently with several other research projects that have some tangential relationship to Old Mobile. Research Associate **Diane Silvia** and staff archaeologists **Amy Carruth**, **Warren Carruth**, and **Jody Badillo** surveyed an area of modern downtown Mobile (about 25 miles south of Old Mobile) and uncovered a portion of the colonial French occupation dating from 1711 to 1763. This site may be affected by the proposed rebuilding of Interstate-10, and, if so, would be the subject of additional excavation. Ms. Silvia is also participating in a University of Alabama excavation of the Bottle Creek site—a large, predominantly prehistoric site in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta (about 6 miles from Old Mobile), that was occupied by a small population of Indians in the early 18th century. Her dissertation research focuses on the numerous small tribes of Native Americans that lived in the Mobile area during the French period.

Greg Waselkov (Old Mobile Project Director) and **Kathryn Braund** (an independent historian living in Auburn, Alabama) have written a book entitled "William Bartram and the Southeastern Indians," which will be published by the University of Nebraska Press in the next year or so. William Bartram, the famous Quaker naturalist who wrote a book about his travels through the Southeast between 1773 and 1776, mentioned visiting the Old Mobile site. On page 410 of his "Travels," he reported seeing "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, the usually reliable Bartram, in this account, placed the ruin on the lower Tombigbee River, many miles north of the actual location of Old Mobile. Did he, in fact, see Fort Louis eroding away and later mistakenly record the location too far upstream? Or did he witness the slow destruction of some other, unknown site that once existed on the Tombigbee?



Artist's reconstruction of a domestic dwelling at Old Mobile, based on recent excavations at IMB94, showing the type of low clay mound or platform upon which the French houses were built. The clay apron or "banquette" that extended beyond the wall sills was soon eroded by rain running off the roof. This drawing shows a portion of a house wall (on the left) that was repaired using the post-in-ground construction method. (Drawing by Professor Phillippe Oszuscik, University of South Alabama.)



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Catherine Potter (foreground) and Diane Silvia excavating wall foundations at Structure 3, IMB94. The trenches supported post-in-ground walls of a shed-like attachment to the original house.

New Publications

The last few months have brought notices of more books recently published on French colonial Louisiana. Louisiana State University Press has once again taken up the task of publishing an English translation of Marcel Giraud's impeccably researched **A History of French Louisiana**, nearly two decades after Joseph Lambert's translation of volume 1 ("The Reign of Louis XIV, 1698-1715") appeared in print in 1974. Brian Pearce's translations of volume 2 ("Years of Transition, 1715-1717") and volume 5 ("The Company of the Indies, 1723-1731") are now available, and the missing volumes should appear soon. His methodical, detailed approach to history (volume 2 covers only two years) explains why the 93-year-old Giraud was unable to finish the projected series of volumes on French Louisiana. But at least the completed volumes will now be more readily accessible to English-speakers.

For bibliophiles, Carl A. Brasseaux and Glenn R. Conrad have compiled **A Bibliography of Scholarly Literature on Colonial Louisiana and New France** (Lafayette, Louisiana: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1992). Some fascinating items of French colonial material culture are illustrated in **The Wreck of the Auguste** (Ottawa: Canadian Parks Service, National Historic Sites, 1992) the story of a captured French merchant ship that sank off the coast of Ile Royale (Cape Breton Island) in 1761, while carrying Canadians into exile in France. Underwater archaeologists recovered a wide variety of ship's parts, weapons, coins, drafting instruments, silver tableware, and other personal objects. The booklet can be obtained from Canada Communication Group-Publishing, Supply and Services Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1A0S9.

Of related interest is David J. Weber's monumental volume, **The Spanish Frontier in North America** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), which considers the European settlement

of the area that is today the southern United States from a Hispanic perspective. French and Spanish ambivalence toward the other's colonies is admirably detailed in Weber's accounts of imperial competition and economic rivalry that repeatedly ebbed and waned between French Louisiana and neighboring Spanish Texas and Florida.

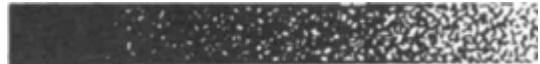


French buccaneer of Saint-Domingue (Haiti), from Alexandra Olmer Exquemelm's *Histoire des avanluners* (Paris: Jacques Le Febvre, 1686). Several buccaneers joined Iberville's colonizing expedition between 1698 and 1701. They probably introduced the basic elements of Creole architecture to the Louisiana colonists.



French Soldiers, 1709, by Antoine Watteau. This drawing shows European French army infantry. Colonial troops of "les Compagnies (ranches de la marine" would have been equipped somewhat differently, but the buttons, buckles, and sword and gunparts depicted here are all represented in the Old Mobile artifact collections.

*The Old Mobile Archaeological Project is
Pleased to Welcome the Following New
and Renewing Members:*



Dr. James Axtell, Williamsburg, VA
Dr. Charles J. Balesi, Chicago, IL
Dr. Amy Turner Bushnell, Baltimore, MD
Ms Pauline Page Butler, New Orleans, LA
Dr & Mrs. William Case, Mobile, AL
Dr. Edward S. Cooke. Jr., New Haven, CT
Mr. Bernard J. Diamond, Jr., Mobile, AL
Dr. Samuel Eichold, Mobile, AL
Fort Ligonier Association, Ligonier, PA
Mrs. Hilda Fuller, Mobile, AL
Mr. Richard S. Fuller, Tuscaloosa, AL
Mr & Mrs. Richard R. Johnson, Mobile, AL
Dr Kenneth Kolson, Washington, DC
Ms. Norma C. Lehman, Birmingham, AL
Lee McCoy, Mobile, AL
Mackinac Island State Park Commission, Mackinac Island, MI
Mr. John S. Martin, Mobile, AL

Mr. & Mrs. Robert Meaher, Mobile, AL
Ms. Mane-Reine Mikesell, Chicago, IL
Dr. Gary R. Mullen, Auburn, AL
Museum of Southern Decorative Arts, Winston-Salem, NC
Dr. Timothy K. Perttula, Austin, TX
Mr. Richard B. Redwood. Jr., Mobile, AL
Dr. & Mrs. Charles Rodning, Semmes, AL
Jean Singley, Axis, AL
Mr. & Mrs. Morgan Slade, Mobile, AL
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
Jody Streeety, Satsuma, AL
Ms. Laquita Thomson, Huntsville, AL
Dr. Bertrand Van Ruymbeke, Charleston, SC
Mrs. Mabel B. Ward, Mobile, AL
Mrs. Annette D. Winter, Mobile, AL
Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI

