Archaeologists dig into Tabasco Sauce history

By KEVIN BLANCHARD
Acadiana bureau

AVERY ISLAND — For years now, the McIlhenny's have told and retold the story of their beginnings on this hilly island, savoring each remembered detail like a spicy drop of Tabasco Sauce.

One of those stories tells how Tabasco was first bottled more than 130 years ago in the old laboratory, a creaky-looking, white clapboard building built on a grassy green hill overlooking Bayou Petite Anse.

Another story says the laboratory was first a barracks for Confederate soldiers, stationed on Avery Island to protect the valuable salt mines from the advancing Union.

Quite a heady story for a part of Avery Island, now mostly quiet, except for birds' songs and the hum of mosquitoes.

The family razed the laboratory in 1928, having long before modernized production. Stands of oaks and bamboo now crowd the hillside, almost shielding from view small hills of a brick foundation poking through the ground like a ship wrecked in shallow water.

But three weeks ago, a team of archaeologists cleared some of the bamboo and began to dig into the hillside. They're looking for tangible evidence that jibes with the family stories and might provide more insight into the lives of those on Avery Island.

The work began with Shane Bernard, a historian for the McIlhenny Company writing an early history of Avery Island and Tabasco Sauce.

A team from LSU that tried to excavate the laboratory in 1987 found lots of artifacts, but never found the building, Bernard said.

One day, while leafing through the volumes of pictures and documents he's collected since 1993, Bernard said he realized the LSU team dug in the wrong place.

Holding out an original blueprint of the laboratory, Bernard and a McIlhenny family member walked the dimensions of foundation while pushing their way through thick bamboo.

The piles of brick matched where the blueprints said the corners of the building used to be. Excited, Bernard called University of Alabama anthropologist Ian Brown, who is trained in archaeology.

Since the end of May, Brown and

University of Alabama archaeology student Ryan Bays wipes dirt from a brick found at the site of the first Tabasco plant on Avery Island near the Marsh House, the original family house. In the background, Alabama graduate students Wes Shaw, left, and Ashley Dumas work in a test pit.
a team of graduate students cleared the bamboo and divided the hillside into 616, one-meter squares staked off with string.

Each square gets individual attention. Only a tiny amount of dirt is removed at a time, layer by layer. Students then dump the dirt into sifters or trucks, just to be sure nothing’s missed. Archaeological digging is a meticulous process, Brown said.

Brown and Bernard said they hoped to find Civil War-era artifacts. By Friday, they’d found a button that’s possibly military and some unidentified small pieces of metal, Bernard said.

Those artifacts will be taken to Alabama, where researchers can look at them under a microscope.

But the long-buried foundation itself is giving clues to the building’s history that fit with the family’s stories.

The laboratory’s three-story tower — so the story goes — was once a pigeon house. Confederate troops built the rest of the building around the tower to use as barracks.

The tower later provided a lookout from which soldiers could spot Union gunboats heading up the bayou from Vermilion Bay.

Brown points to a square hole dug where the tower’s foundation meets the foundation of the rest of the building. The differences between the two sets of bricks and the way they were laid seem to point to different construction times, Brown said.

The McIlhenny family used the building to produce the first batch of Tabasco Sauce in 1868. Edmund McIlhenny, a New Orleans banker who married into Avery family, perfected the Tabasco recipe in the laboratory.

Near a side wall, where old, scratched black-and-white photographs show windows, the diggers found broken glass.

Along another wall the diggers uncovered old glass bottles with round bottoms, which were put in saddle bags. Determining how old the bottles are will take more research.

In a pile of buried ash the diggers found alligator teeth, muskrat jaws, tiny bones, fish hooks, iron nails, lead shot and shotgun casings. This part of the laboratory might have been used most recently as a hunter’s storage area, Brown said.

Having so many old pictures of the site and family stories about what went on there is incredibly helpful, Brown said.

While the photos and stories are historical records that provide the “big picture,” Brown said he hopes to unearth some of the smaller items that might reveal something about the early settlers on Avery Island.

“We provide the material of life,” Brown said. “It’s the minutia, the little things that were left behind that tell us a lot about people’s lives.”

For example, in the back of the building, diggers said that they hope to find early Tabasco Sauce bottles dropped by workers, Bernard said.

Written records show that workers walked through the back doors of the laboratory with cases of finished Tabasco Sauce every day until operations moved in 1905 to a new building on the island, Bernard said.

Some of those bottles must have dropped over the years and were forgotten under a porch or rock. Diggers said that they hope to find them as historical evidence — something tangible from the past.

The students also found remnants of a wooden barrel, but they don’t know what it was used for.

When digging is finished, Brown will return to Alabama, where the information will be analyzed and put into a computer to chart the building. Artifacts will be compared to the written records, and conclusions drawn about what life was like on Avery Island more than 100 years ago.

But only the old family stories can ever describe the smell coming from that back door — the pungent, stinging aroma of fermenting vinegar and pepper mash that brought tears to the eyes.