Dig We Must

Avery Island excavations reveal history as it was being lived.
By Erin Zaunbrecher

Plastic storage boxes containing bug spray, towels, gloves, brushes, nail clippers and plastic bags sit under a large oak tree while students a few feet down the hill scrape, dig and haul dirt hoping to find something. This may sound like a bad summer job, but it's not. These anthropology students are looking for remains of the old Tabasco factory at Avery Island. The factory, forgotten for nearly a half-century, is where Edmund McIlhenny created his famous Tabasco Sauce.

In its second year, the excavation has expanded to cover more ground and unearth some new findings. "I didn't think we were going to have a second dig," says Shane Bernard, historian and curator for McIlhenny Co. "There's a lot of other archeological sites that need to be explored here," but the team is back and won't be discouraged by the mosquitoes that swarm around their heads.

The archeological team includes Ashley Dumas, Wes Shaw, Miranda Moore and Duane Sadow of the University of Alabama and Caleb Johnson of Northwestern University. Students from several other universities, such as the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, have helped as well.

"We made a real effort to recruit as many UL students as possible," says Bernard. Dumas, the field director, and Shaw both worked on the dig last year. The team hopes to recover artifacts relevant to life in Southwest Louisiana in the 19th century, as well as early Tabasco Sauce bottles and other historical relics.

They dig and scrape five days a week from 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and so far have found three stoneware jars used in early Tabasco production, a large glass demijohn (bottle) with a preserved wicker cover, a bucket dated 1867, a small scale, about a dozen Tabasco bottles and some fossils. Their big hope is to find an artifact and determine how old it is so they can then tell when the building was constructed. They know the building was used from 1868 to 1905 to make the sauce, but not when it was built.

The team began the excavation by digging a one-meter-wide trench that runs along the entire length of where the building’s western wall once stood. They found a foundation wall here and dug some other pits accordingly. They placed other pits around the outside of the foundation walls in hopes of finding artifacts people might have thrown out or lost as they were coming and going to the factory.

Shaw excavated a gully near the site where McIlhenny family members remembered seeing some broken glass and ceramics. The team’s objective was to find a trash dump used by factory workers. "For an archeologist, it's a gold mine," Bernard says of trash dumps, because they tell the way people lived. Shaw found broken plateware, glass and lots of Tabasco bottles. "Basically, a good cross-sampling of artifacts," says Bernard.

Another goal of the project is for the team to understand how much space and how many buildings were needed to produce the sauce. They believe the company would have had to expand because of increased demand for the sauce in the years in the cellar of that factory and eventually evolved into the Tabasco bottles we see today.

Edmund McIlhenny took over the factory after the Civil War and used it to produce his Tabasco Sauce. According to island legend, the building started out during the antebellum period as a two-story pigeon house. When the Civil War broke out, a third story was added as a watchtower for Confederate soldiers so they could guard the island's valuable salt mines.

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Anthropology students from UL and elsewhere are spending their summer vacation delving into the history of Avery Island.

"I like to think, well, maybe it fell out of Edmund's pocket," says Bernard, historian and curator for McIlhenny Co., on an old coin found at the site.

"I'm not sure," says Bernard, "I'm not sure what it is." But a couple of hours later he yelled for me to come over and he'd found a pile of bottles. "The bottles he found were modeled after 1868 perfume bottles, as early Tabasco bottles were. The style changed many times over the years in the cellar of that factory and eventually evolved into the Tabasco bottles we see today. Edmund McIlhenny took over the factory after the Civil War and used it to produce his Tabasco Sauce. According to island legend, the building started out during the antebellum period as a two-story pigeon house. When the Civil War broke out, a third story was added as a watchtower for Confederate soldiers so they could guard the island's valuable salt mines.

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These archaeological findings are thought to be the predecessors of today's Tabasco bottles.

Tabasco
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sons took over the business after his death and added several outbuildings as the business grew.

A new factory was built on Avery Island in 1905 and the old factory "sat here for a long time just deteriorating like this," Dumas says, pointing to a picture of the ruins. In the 1920s, the family used the building's salvageable parts to build its home. The site of the factory was nearly forgotten for the next half-century.

In the mid-1990s Bernard stepped in. He was working on a biography of Edmund McIlhenny and wanted to introduce the factory "almost as a character." He had the results of an LSU project to go by, but that team had mistaken a garden wall for the ruins, so they dug in the wrong place.

Bernard found the factory's floor plans hidden in the rafters of a Tabasco warehouse and was on his way. Gray Osborn, senior member of the McIlhenny and Avery families and self-taught historian, told him the ruins could be found between two sago palms, so Bernard found those and walked it off according to the dimensions on the plans.

Bernard proposed an excavation and called in anthropologist Ian W. Brown of the Gulf Coast Survey at the University of Alabama. Brown had conducted digs on Avery Island for three decades, so Bernard readily welcomed his expertise.

The first excavation began in the summer of 2000 and confirmed that the ruins Bernard had found were those of the factory. That first dig also uncovered a huge collection of artifacts.

For the second dig, more students were recruited and the process of excavation expanded and repeated. The students recover artifacts by excavating dirt from the site and then using garden hoses to wash it through a screen with one-quarter-inch holes. When the dirt washes through the holes, only artifacts are left in the screen.

Heat, rain and mosquitoes have slowed down the team but haven't discouraged its members. With the end in sight, they are trying to finish up and preserve the pits by removing debris so the foundation will be clearly exposed. The sites will then be photographed and documented meticulously.

"We're looking at time on the one hand and on the other hand we're looking for a needle in a haystack," Dumas says.

Workers other than students can also be seen shoveling and hauling dirt on the hill. These are Avery Island and McIlhenny employees, who represent the support the excavation has received from the company. As for next year, Bernard can't say if there will be another dig but he suspects they will be examining something on the island.