Edmund McIlhenny, born 1815, the inventor of Tabasco brand pepper sauce.

Photo courtesy of McIlhenny Company

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Edmund McIlhenny, born 1815, the inventor of Tabasco brand pepper sauce.

Photo by C. Richard Cotton

McIlhenny archivist Shane Bernard holds the original recipe for Tabasco brand pepper sauce in the archives at Avery Island.

Photo by C. Richard Cotton

Photo courtesy of McIlhenny Company

Archive offers long shelf life for rich history

By C. Richard Cotton
Special to The Advocate

AVERY ISLAND — Life is old on Avery Island. For more than 150 years, it's been home to Averys and, later, the McIlhennys began calling it home.

Through those many decades, through periods of commerce alternately based on sugar cane, oil, salt and, for the past century, hot peppers, thousands of documents and artifacts have piled up. Avery Island is home to Tabasco Sauce, the legendary hot sauce found on dining tables from the tundras of Alaska to the banks of the Nile River.

For the past five years, the McIlhennys and Averys, now a combined, complex family, have invested in an archive to house all their memorabilia.

Historian and archivist Shane Bernard, 31, began the project of amassing the archive in March 1993. Since that time, he's taken over and virtually filled a cavernous, 1,600-square-foot room in the renovated old Tabasco factory building on the island.

Along one wall, shelves hold archival boxes of artifacts that include Union "grapeshot" cannonballs shot at the island during the Civil War and the sword of Lt. Dudley Avery, one of the Avery forebears who served in the Confederate army and was wounded at the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862.

Rows and rows of file cabinets are 70 percent to 75 percent filled, Bernard said. He has only lately begun the daunting task of actually going through and cataloguing the reams of paper in the files.

Possibly the pride of the McIlhenny family is the original handwritten recipe for Tabasco Sauce. Founder Edmund McIlhenny wrote the recipe in a ledger that is kept in a safe in another part of the building, away from the general archives.

There are actually three handwritten recipes, Bernard explained, that vary somewhat from recipe to recipe. Today's product varies from the original recipes and is considered an improvement on those old sauces.

One of the significant results to come from Bernard's work, so far, is an accounting of where McIlhenny got the seeds of the tabasco peppers that form the basis of his sauce. Using family writings, of which there are many, many boxes and drawers of correspondence, Bernard has narrowed it down to a Jack-and-the-Beanstalk kind of story.

Shortly after the end of the Civil War, McIlhenny, a banker by training, traveled to New Orleans to get back into banking. Somewhere in downtown New Orleans during that trip, someone, a "man
Saucy

McIlhenny archivist Shane Bernard in the McIlhenny Archives at Avery Island.

on the street" - Bernard has not
documented who it is - gave Mcil-
henny some pepper seeds.

"It was purely accidental," Ber-
nard said of the apparent gift of
pepper seeds.

McIlhenny brought the seeds
back to the island, planted them
and began experimenting with
making a pepper sauce around 1866.

"When Edmund died (in 1890), it
was still pretty much a one-man
operation," said Bernard. During
the time he marketed his Tabasco
Sauce, 1868-1890, he made about
200,000 2-ounce bottles; Bernard
finds it ironic that the Tabasco fac-
tory today has the capacity to pro-
duce twice that number each day.

"I think (the documentation) will
clarify as some of the embellish-
ments," said Paul McIlhenny, presi-
dent and chief operating officer of
McIlhenny Co. He said he hopes
formation of the archive will result
in an accurate, comprehensive
history of the Avery and McIlhenny
families and the island itself.

The short-term goal, said McIl-
henny, is to organize "what we
had."

"Of course, maybe we should keep
some of the stories hidden," he said with a laugh.

Gray Osborne, one of Edmund
McIlhenny's great-grandsons who
now lives in Vermont, said the
archive project is an extension of
his own family quest to learn the
history of the island and its effect
within and beyond Louisiana.

"I've been to Avery Island sever-
times over the years," Osborne
said. Bernarid. During this time, he
did research along the family sto-
ties "mythical tales that weren't
accoutant and historian of the Avery
relatives who had lived on Avery
Island before the turn of the cen-
tury. "It's very much a mythic place," Osborn said. "We still gather there.

"It's of great importance to hold
that island together. It's a small
place but has a very powerful hold
on us. It's home, the place we
feel connected to."

For Bernard, heading the work
on the archive is a chance to docu-
ment one of the great family sto-
ries of southern Louisiana.

"It's fun putting it all together," said Bernard.

The McIlhenny-Avery archive is
private and not open to the public.

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