Group searching for artifacts from lost village of Galvez town in Ascension Parish

BY GREG LANGLEY
News Features assistant editor

Glenn Cambre, in straw hat and suspenders, leads his small dog on a leash as he walks along his property bordering the Amite River off La. 42 in Ascension Parish. He pauses and looks across the field in front of three white-painted houses. It’s maybe as long as two football fields end-to-end and in the middle, tiny red flags sprout like poppies.

They outline a 500-foot by 500-foot grid where members of an LSU Union leisure class are digging archaeological shovel test pits (STPs). This unassuming grassy field, dotted with a few pecan trees and pines and cut through by a U-shaped drive, is the site of a lost village: Galvez town.

“We don’t have any aboveground evidence of the site, but we do have historical documents that are pretty clear in showing us that the village was in this particular section. This is section 17 of Township 8 South Range 3 East. When the Americans came in one of the first things that they did was to start surveying their new territory. These surveys note the fact that in this area, Galvez town was located,” said Rob Mann, LSU professor and Southeast Regional Archaeologist and the leader of the dig.

The village in question was a Spanish-sponsored settlement that dates to the period of the American Revolution. It didn’t last, partly because the reason for its existence vanished after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. But that’s not all.

“They had lots of problems including flooding, hurricanes and crop failures and epidemic diseases. By 1820 or so, we get a sense from the documents that there’s not much left of the village. By 1830 it’s pretty clear that Galvez town is gone. So really you have a village that was here from about 1779, late 1778-1779, to about 1820. So from an archaeological perspective, it’s a nice little time capsule because there’s nothing before really — there was probably some Native America occupation of the area — but after that we don’t have any historic occupation. So when we find stuff that dates to the right time period, we can be fairly certain that we’re finding evidence of the Spanish Colonial village here,” Mann said.

“One of the things that leads us to this area is that when we look at the historic maps of the village as it was planned and as it was actually put into place, it appears that closer to the river and closer to the Spanish fort which was also built here is where most of the occupation took place,” Mann said.
That a fort and a village were built in this seemingly remote site seems logical today, but given the political situation in Louisiana in the late 18th century, it was perfectly logical, Mann said.

"The way that this settlement got started is actually a quite interesting process. There is a site at Galveztown that is: Isletos or Canary Islander (Spanish) folks coming to New Orleans. They come in 1778. He [Spanish Gov. Bernardo de Galvez] knows he has a lot of these Isletos and doesn't really want any of those Isletos there, so he used both as an omen of peace for his settlement here. They're bringing their families with them as well.

"The Galvez knows he got to get his people find places for them, so he's going out in the winter of 1778 for some place to place them in Isletos. At the area, at the confines of the Amite River was British boundary here at Galveztown. Of course, there's no land between the Spanish and the British, so it was a place where they could put down these Isletos. And it's where Bayou Manchac and Bayou Centaur are intersecting. And it's where the Spanish families from the Islefios come into Spanish Louisiana and Galvez finds them and he says, 'Well, I will take you already layout the village, and you allow me to layout the village of West Florida and driving them into Spanish Louisiana.

Mann said that second year the class has dug at Galveztown, and driving them out of British West Florida and driving them into Spanish Louisiana. They're kind of budding here, not quite sure where they are, and Galvez finds them and he says, 'I'll let you guys go back and dig the site. We're going to put our fort here.'

"And they say, 'Okay, that's fine,' and in deference to him they name the village Galveztown," Mann said. "This area is important for a couple of reasons. One, it's got a lot of history. The Native Americans thought Galvez was the high ground in the area. And it's where Bayou Manchac and the Amite River is meet and the Amite River form an impossible to travel on the Spanish side of that boundary. It's a good stopping point, Galvez is British territory, so this is a very strategic area.

One of the things that bothered us up to this area is that when we look at the historic maps of the village as it was actually put into place, it appears that close to the 19th century, or it's not being imported in Louisiana, so we know that this particular pottery must date to between 1779 and 1800 or so. We have explain, there's another pottery that dated to Starbuck. That's a 1985 single.

"This is a little later. This British crease, I say British. But it is made of the same kind, 1778, 1780s, Mann explains.

"This stuff, this British stuff, becomes more popular around 1800 that the French stuff gets pulled out of the market. Faience is a great 19th-century marker.

Mann builds the possible artifact in the point of his hand and explains that it is a flat pottery sherd, one that reveals a great deal about the site. "It's a faience."

"This little piece, although it looks fairly insignificant, is really important because it is a kind of pottery made in France, and it's made in the early 18th century but not in the 19th century, or it's not being imported in Louisiana, so we know that this particular pottery must date to between 1779 and 1800 or so. We have explain, there's another pottery that dated to Starbuck. That's a 1985 single.

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