

60 Years at 906 S. Franklin Street: Examining Residential and Commercial Life at Mobile’s Virginia Street Site

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Site Background

The Virginia Street Site (1MB551) is located south of downtown Mobile on the corners of Virginia and South Franklin Streets. Phase III excavation was conducted at the site for the I-10 Mobile River Bridge (MRB) Archaeology Project in late 2021 and early 2022. A total of 161 features were investigated and over 14,000 artifacts recovered.

Site Components:

- Middle Woodland
- Colonial period
- Five residences (1870s to the 1960s)
- Bottling Plant (1940s+)

History

Many of the homes on Franklin Street were occupied by renters; however, the Owens Family owned the property at 906 South Franklin Street for over six decades and through three generations. Jesse and Lillie Owens purchased the lot in 1897. This working-class, African American family lived there until the 1960s, when they were forced to sell their property due to the construction of Interstate 10.

The Owens were economically successful, eventually purchasing 912 and 914 South Franklin Street as well. The 1915 Sanborn Map also shows a shop attached to the house. Jesse and Lillie’s daughter was a teacher and their grandsons worked in major local industries like shipping, at the air force base, and as a lawyer.

Their neighborhood, known as Down the Bay, is a predominately African American community first settled in the late-1800s. Oral history from the I-10 MRB Project reveals Down the Bay was a thriving, self-sufficient community that was severely impacted by construction of I-10 and urban renewal efforts. The latter were justified as improving communities by removing “blighted” properties.

VIEW ARTIFACTS



VIEW DOCUMENTS



Features

Phase III excavation identified the south side of the house through a series of postholes. These postholes are aligned roughly east-west in a 34-foot line, which was the length of the structure according to historic documents. Two features with dense artifact deposits were excavated in the vicinity of the house: Feature 124 and Feature 158.



Neither of these features are located within the Owens property boundary; however, Feature 124 (bottom right) is likely affiliated with their home, as the lot to the north was vacant until the 1940s. Feature 158 (bottom left) is likely affiliated with the property at 908 S. Franklin Street to the south, which was rented. In addition to providing insight into the residents of these properties, these two features may also allow for a comparison of owner and tenant consumption patterns in the area.



Artifacts

Notable artifacts from Feature 124 include children's items, such as slate pencils, marbles, and fragments of porcelain dolls and tea sets, as well as a large quantity of Albany slip stoneware jugs, many of which are whole. One jug has a printed maker's mark that reads Meyer, Jossen & Co. Fine Whiskies Mobile, Ala. A preliminary inventory of the faunal remains shows a large amount of indeterminate bone, butchered bone, and indeterminate shell, as well as almost equal utilization of cow, chicken, pig, and deer.

Notable artifacts from Feature 158 include a large quantity of smoking pipes, glass bottles, and children's items. One United States silver three-cent piece with a drilled hole was recovered. It may have been used for adornment or as a weight. A preliminary inventory of the faunal remains showed a large number of indeterminate bones, as well as butchered bones. Of the identified faunal remains, over half were attributed to fish and approximately one-quarter can be attributed to pig, specifically to the limbs.

Preliminary Findings

Feature 124 appears to be one deposit, while Feature 158 looks to have been created through multiple depositional events. Feature 124 was likely filled with refuse when 906 S. Franklin was demolished in the 1960s. Artifacts recovered include aluminum cans, a battery, and a high percentage of whole bottles and jugs, which support this hypothesis.

Faunal remains from Feature 124 have an equal amount of domestic and wild vertebrates, including numerous bivalve shells and low meat bearing elements from animals. The faunal remains from Feature 158 are mostly fish vertebrae. The pig bones likely represent butcher trimmings, such as shank cuts and pig's feet.

Future comparative analysis may identify differences and similarities between the two assemblages. Most importantly, Down the Bay was a neighborhood "condemned" in the 1960s during Mobile's urban renewal; however, the long-term ownership at 906 S. Franklin Street and the artifacts in these features point to a well-maintained and functioning community.