

Archaeology at the Cabildo



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Jill-Karen Yakubik and Herschel A. Franks of the archaeological firm Earth Search were the first to "unearth" the history detailed in the following pages. Our interpretation of the Cabildo courtyard draws from their lengthy detailed report of the excavation, "Archaeological Investigations at the Site of the Cabildo, New Orleans, Louisiana," written with contributions from Daniel C. Weinand, Elizabeth J. Reitz and Tristram R. Kidder. In that report Dr. Yakubik and her colleagues devote attention to the environmental setting, previous digs in the New Orleans area, archaeological methodologies, and field investigation results. We greatly appreciate Dr. Yakubik's review of our manuscript.

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ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE CABILDO

Sometimes the solution to a practical problem yields unexpected rewards. And so it was with the 1990-1991 archaeological dig in the Cabildo courtyard. In May 1988 a fire destroyed the third floor of the Cabildo, one of the principal buildings of the Louisiana State Museum. In the following years, the architects of the New Orleans firm Koch and Wilson, along with construction crews, labored over this national historic landmark's restoration. In repairing fire, smoke, and water damage, the architects had to install mechanical lines as well as rectify a pesky drainage problem in the courtyard. Because they were forced to disturb the ground, they recommended that the museum conduct a full-scale archaeological dig that would provide further details regarding the history of the Cabildo and its associated buildings. To perform this task, the museum, with a grant from the Zemurray Foundation and funding from the Friends of the Cabildo, hired Dr. Jill-Karen Yakubik and her Earth Search staff.



The archaeologist encountered a complex historical site. Since 1723 several buildings had occupied the space that the present Cabildo now covers. After the Cabildo's completion in 1799, repairs, additions, and renovations altered the structure. Some parts were demolished, while others were replaced.

The archaeological team excavated six units in the rear courtyard of the Cabildo, uncovering deposits dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Coins, which probably fell unnoticed from people's pockets, aided in dating the surrounding deposits. Over a period of about two months, the archaeologists dug up over 4000 artifacts, greatly expanding our knowledge of the Cabildo complex and its inhabitants. To the untrained eye, bits and pieces of clothing, crockery, bones, and other cast-off items may seem like worthless bits of trash destined for the landfill, where we banish our own unwanted possessions. Luckily for us, enough of the "trash" of another era has survived to become the treasure for those seeking to uncover history. For buttons, bottle sherds, and pipe stems not only tell us about the objects of which they were once part; they also provide clues about the daily lives of people who used those artifacts.

CONSTRUCTION AT THE CABILDO SITE

- 1723-1725 First corps de garde (police station) constructed.
- 1729-1730 Civil prison with enclosed yard built.
- 1751 First corps de garde demolished and replaced with a larger one at the same location. Officials renovated the civil prison, adding an arcaded front to the lower story of the rear structure. A two-story military prison and criminal chamber were also built and the jailer's quarters were expanded.
- 1769 Spanish officials demolished the front civil prison and in its place constructed the first Cabildo (Casa Capitular, or Council House). A building inventory the following year showed the military prison, Superior Council chamber, and jailer's quarters located behind the corps de garde and civil prison.
- 1788 First major New Orleans fire damaged area structures, including the corps de garde, civil prison and Cabildo. The corps de garde and civil prison were repaired and returned to use.
- 1793 Firehouse built on the site of the first Cabildo.
- 1794 Second fire destroyed the firehouse and badly damaged the corps de garde and civil prison.
- 1795-1799 Workers constructed a new, larger Cabildo, designed by Gilberto Guillemard. This second Cabildo, which survives today, incorporated the thick walls of the corps de garde.
- 1795-1801 The civil prison was repaired, renovated, and expanded.
- 1837-1839 After the construction of a parish prison, the civil prison was torn down.
- 1839 The Arsenal was built on the former site of the civil prison, on St. Peter Street, behind the Cabildo.
- 1841 A prison was constructed along Pirates' Alley.
- 1842 Construction of the Creole House on part of the site of the old civil prison, on Pirates' Alley, behind the Cabildo.
- 1848 Third story, with a mansard roof and a cupola, added to the Cabildo.
- 1850 Construction of the prison adjacent to the Arsenal, according to the design of city engineer Joseph Pilie.



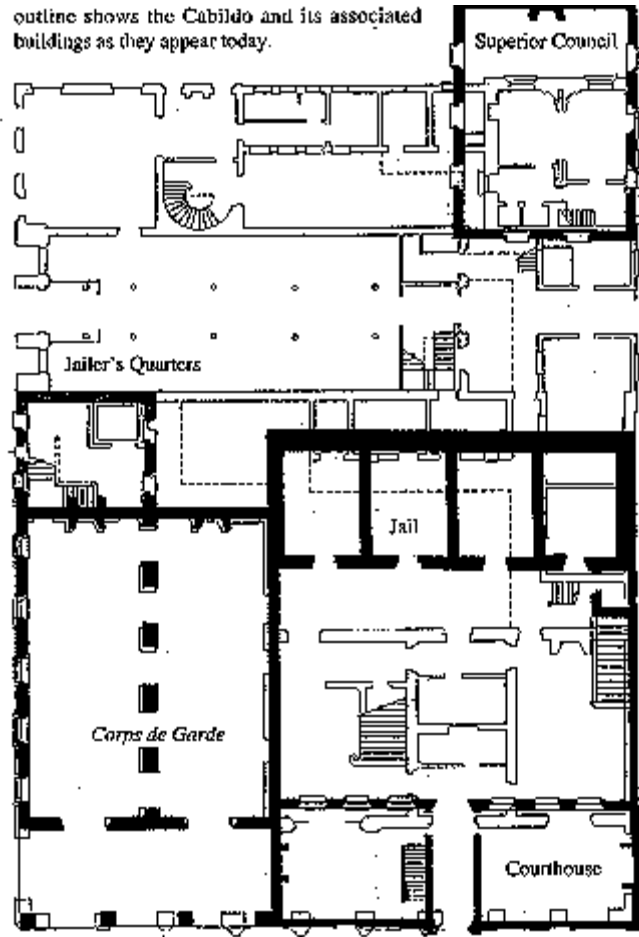
BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SITE

The Cabildo courtyard formed part of a prison complex for nearly two hundred years, spanning French, Spanish, and American rule. By 1725 the first corps de garde, or police station, stood on the grounds. Four years later, between the corps de garde and the church, authorities added the civil prison, consisting of a pair of two-story brick buildings at opposite ends of a yard enclosed by brick walls. The front structure contained a courtroom and the gatekeeper's apartment. The rear building housed the prisoners in nine cells. A combination of deterioration and the need for increased space led to the demolition of the original corps de garde in 1751. The new police headquarters, built alongside the jail, was fashioned from brick masonry. At this time officials also elected to renovate the prison, rebuilding one of the rear structure's walls as well as the prison yard wall. The courtroom became the jailer's quarters. Spanish officials instituted further changes at this site shortly after they took over the colony. Governor Alejandro O'Reilly reorganized the government, establishing the Cabildo, or town council. In 1769 he razed the front portion of the complex, where the jailer and the guard had resided, and in its place erected the first Casa Capitular, the Cabildo's meeting house.

In 1788 a great fire destroyed the Casa Capitular, the corps de garde, and the prison, leaving behind only the brick walls. More than a year later the renovated prison resumed its functions. Another large fire, in 1794, severely damaged the prison again, despite the prisoners' success in finally extinguishing the flames. Like the earlier fire, this one leveled a number of buildings in the area, including the recently built firehouse. Once more, authorities renovated the prison first, according to architect Gilberto Guillemard's plans. Architect and engineer Barthelemy Lafon won the contract, and his workers completed the job in about three months. Over the next several years, the Cabildo authorized a series of repairs and new construction, including new cells and a kitchen behind the jailer's quarters. A two-story extension of the prison along St. Peter Street contained seven cells. The entire complex of buildings occupied the present-day sites of the Arsenal, the Jackson House, the Creole House, Cabildo Alley, and the buildings at 823-825 St. Peter.

In 1839 a new parish prison on Orleans Street (behind today's Municipal Auditorium) took over the functions of the old jail. At that time, the old civil prison was torn down, but some cells adjoining the Cabildo remained and became part of a jail for the police station housed there. In 1841 a three story prison structure was built along Priates' Alley, and in 1850 a similar structure containing six cells was erected perpendicular to it. These additions still exist today in the Cabildo's courtyard. The Third Precinct Station remained there until 1914, when the space was turned over to the Louisiana State Museum.

outline shows the Cabildo and its associated buildings as they appear today.



Schematic floor plan courtesy Robert J. Cangelosi Jr.

PRISON CONDITIONS

We have some information about the prison building during the French colonial era, but much less about the experience of its inhabitants. Sources from the Spanish period later in the century point to miserable conditions. The jail restored after the 1788 fire was poorly ventilated and subject to flooding. Prisoners slept on the floor in dark cells. Their efforts during the 1794 fire, however, won them some improvement in their living space. Repairs and renovations executed from 1796 to 1800, including separate cells for women and additional cells for men, alleviated crowding. Officials also made changes to thwart all too frequent prison escapes. One measure involved dismantling a shed that prisoners used to scale the exterior wall.

Prison conditions remained poor after Louisiana became a part of the United States; after all, prisons in other American cities were similarly wretched. In 1813 the grand jury for the first district of Louisiana inspected the crowded jail and found a series of very low, humid and infectious vaults, which are of course very unfit to lodge men, of whatever crimes they may be guilty" (Louisiana Courier, 2 July 1813). Debtors, vagrants, and the insane occupied the prison, often sharing cells with persons more typically classified as criminals today. Slaves were also imprisoned. Some of these were debtors, while others were charged with running away or pretending to be free." Among the 185 prisoners in the jail in 1820, vagrants numbered 23, and there were 45 federal prisoners. Twenty-three others remained untried, and 20 had committed "slight offenses." Three insane persons, 4 runaway slaves, 18 debtors, including 1 slave, and 3 slaves "pretending to be free" rounded out the rest of the count. Sentences ranged from two months of hard labor to life, with one prisoner scheduled for execution.

In 1823 about 50 of the 160 prisoners attempted to escape from the courtyard, where they took their daily exercise. In their nearly successful effort, they overpowered one of the keepers, but before they could make it to the exterior door that led to the street, the young slave turnkey secured the exit and threw the key into the street. Evading the frustrated escapees, the turnkey managed to hide in a chimney. Before the prisoners could pry open the outer door, the city guard arrived and turned back the prisoners. The prisoners then managed to gain access to the roof; but by then soldiers and concerned citizens had surrounded the prison. They shot one prisoner dead, rounded up the others, and returned them to their cells.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the famous French commentator on American life, visited the prison in 1832 and reported, "We would be unable to paint the dolorous impression that we received when...we saw there men thrown pell-mell with swine, in the midst of excrement and filth." "The place containing condemned criminals," asserted Tocqueville, "could not by any stretch of the imagination be called a prison: it's a frightful cesspool into which they are dumped and which is suitable only for those unclean animals one finds there with them. It is noteworthy that all those detained there are not slaves: it's the prison of free men."

DINING BEHIND BARS

Waste deposits unearthed during the dig substantiate Tocqueville's dim assessment. Bones deposited between 1800 and 1830 include a high percentage of rodent remains, indicating that prisoners shared their cramped quarters with rats. Faunal, or animal, remains also show that the incarcerated ate poor-quality meat. Large numbers of bones from less desirable parts of cows and pigs probably mean that prisoners lived on a diet of cheap cuts of meat. In fact, contemporary reports inform us that the jailer raised pigs and chickens in the courtyard.



Animal bones from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Top row from left: cow's shoulder blade fragment with butcher's hack marks; cow's tooth; bone fragment from cow's leg with butcher's saw cuts; cow's rib fragment. Scarring at the end of the rib suggests that fats naved it Bottom from left: sheep's or goat's shoulder bone with butcher's hack marks; pig's tusk.

A few chickens, along with other birds, seem to have graced the prison table, as well as a limited number of fish, including freshwater bullhead catfish, sheepshead, garfish, and sea trout. Turtle shells and bones suggest that the occasional terrapin appeared at the prison mess. Wild game, much more commonly eaten in the 1800s than today, also spiced up the monotonous diet of the prisoners, as did sheep and goat meat.

The bones also provide evidence of nineteenth-century butchering techniques and practices. Some show hack marks from cleaver-like butchering instruments, while most were cut with saws.

Prisoners and jailers ate and drank from a polyglot mixture of plates, bowls, cups, and saucers. Tableware fragments found on the Cabildo site confirm importation of a wide variety of British ceramics to Louisiana during the late Spanish colonial and later periods, especially large quantities of inexpensive shell-edged pearlware. This British ware was widely popular throughout the United States.



British ceramics from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Top row, from left: soup plate fragment, blue transfer-printed whiteware; plate fragment, black transfer-printed whiteware: soup plate lip in two pieces. blue shell-edged pearlware; bowl fragment. mulberry transfer-printed whiteware. Bottom from left: bowl fragment. blue hand-painted pearlware. bowl fragment, annular pearlware; cup fragment, blue hand-painted pearlware; bowl fragment, creamware.

The team found few French artifacts from the earliest period of European settlement, primarily because the prison structure was excavated to the base of its foundations following either the 1788 or 1794 fire. This was undoubtedly to inspect the integrity of the foundations, and it obliterated most of the evidence of prior occupation at the site. French artifacts include faience, a tin-enameled earthenware.



French-period ceramics, eighteenth century. Top row, from left: vessel fragment, Mottled-Brown Lead-Glazed Buffware; two vessel fragments, brown faience, French. Bottom: bowl fragment, Albisola Trailed, Italian.

Before 1780 French faience was common in Louisiana, but after that date British ceramics predominated. Archaeologists also uncovered limited quantities of a green-glazed buff earthenware produced in Saintonge, the smallest of the French provinces. This coarse earthenware type was common in late eighteenth-century southeast Louisiana.



Utensils, early nineteenth century. From left: bone knife handle with partial blade; utensil handle; cooking or eating utensil handle in the fiddle pattern; bone knife handle with partial blade.



PRISON PASTIMES: SMOKING, DRINKING, AND GAMBLING

Artifacts also show us how inmates and guards passed time. Fragments of pipe stems, wine and liquor bottles, and gambling chips provide evidence of the time-honored leisure activities of smoking, drinking, and gambling.

Pipe bowls and stems found within the prison demonstrate that smoking was one of the few pleasures the prisoners enjoyed. Several pipe bowls were fluted, some more elaborately than others. Two bowls, one redware and one brown earthenware, had detachable or replaceable stems. Snuff bottle fragments also attest to tobacco use.



Early nineteenth-century pipes. All pieces are mold-cast kaolin, with the exception of the pipe bowl on the far right, which is redware.

Pieces of wine and liquor bottles account for half the glass vessel fragments located in the prison interior, which is not surprising since the prisoners received liquor allotments. The crew discovered mold-blown opaque "black" glass bottles used primarily for liquor in the nineteenth century. These thick vessels appear black but are actually dark green. Wine bottle fragments tell us that prisoners also drank wine. At least once, a prisoner or a guard enjoyed wine from the St. Estephe winery, located near Pauillac in the Haute-Medoc region of France.



Glass, 1800-1840. Top row: olive glass wine bottle fragments. Bottom, from left: liquor bottle base of mold-blown 'black' (dark green) glass; French olive glass wine bottle fragment stamped with winery seal, "St. Estephe, Medoc."

As we might suspect, alcohol consumption led to certain problems, not all of them confined to the prisoners. In the late eighteenth century the public hangman not only supplied inmates with unlicensed liquor; he also helped prisoners escape in 1797. The following year, he lost his job. In 1818 a state legislative committee suggested that "the prisoners' whiskey ration might be better spent by providing them with food and clothing."

New Orleans prisoners also filled idle time with games of chance. Many games required counters. African Americans in the southeastern United States and the Caribbean islands used chips made from broken crockery; experts believe these pieces were used for the African game.

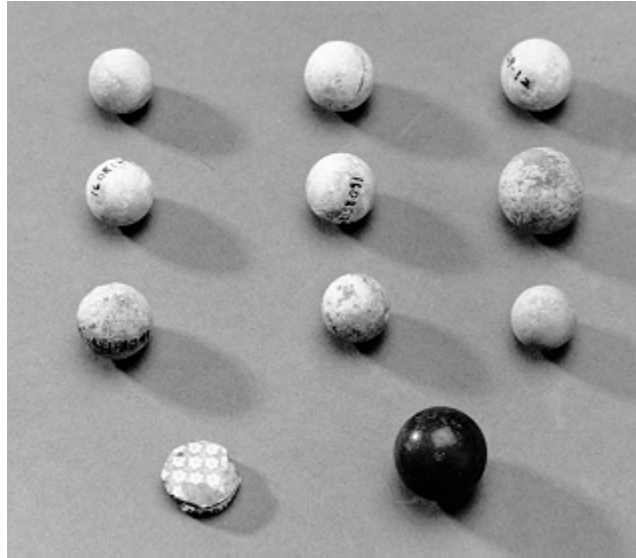


Glass 1800-1840. Top row: vial fragments, possibly pharmaceutical. The one on the left is hand-blown clear glass, while the other two are hand-blown light green glass. Bottom: bottle fragments, blue-green glass.

known as mancala or vari-solo. Archaeologists have discovered similar pieces in Louisiana at Orange Grove plantation in Jefferson Parish. At the Cabildo site, Dr. Yakubik's crew uncovered a gaming piece fashioned from a piece of British blue transfer-printed pearlware.

Gamblers often used marbles as counters. Adults also played marbles in the eighteenth century before it became associated with childhood play. New Orleans prisoners left behind a number of marbles, mostly made from limestone, with others fashioned from polished pink marble (hence the name); the latter were less common than the former. Both kinds likely came from Germany, which exported stone marbles to the United States until World War II.

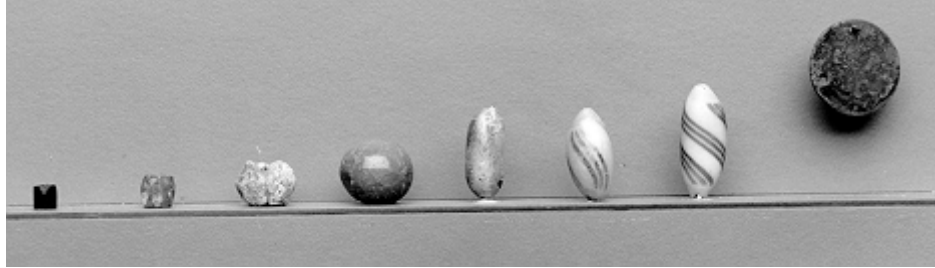
Shortly after his arrival in 1769, O'Reilly established the duties of the jailer. The new regulations mandated that the jailer prevent prisoners from gambling and specifically prohibited the jailer from playing games of chance with the prisoners. Apparently, the law was enforced at least some of the time: most gambling artifacts were found with objects from the interior of the prison buildings, where prisoners could hide their activities from a sharp-eyed jailer.



Instruments of leisure. Top three rows. marbles made from various materials including marble and limestone. 1800-1840. Bottom, from left: gaming piece, transfer-printed pearlware British; marble of unidentified polished stone, marble of unidentified polished stone 1800-1840.

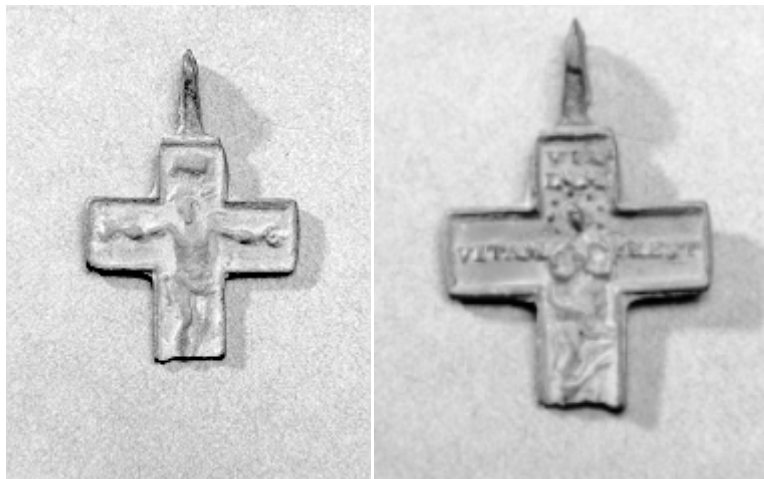
RELIGION AND HEALING AFRICAN-AMERICAN INFLUENCES

Recent archaeological digs have unearthed a variety of objects that African Americans may have valued as talismans with preventative or curative powers. Especially in slave culture, healing and religion together made up a powerful folk tradition whose African roots had intertwined with New World experience. Charms played a significant role in this holistic belief system that guided the daily lives of slaves and other African Americans. Many believed, for example, that pierced silver coins, worn on a string around the ankle, warded off evil and sometimes gave them to their children at birth. Earth Search discovered one such coin in the courtyard. Blue beads likewise suggest the presence of African Americans, since this particular color bead has been frequently found in archaeological digs at sites formerly occupied by blacks in other parts of the South and the Caribbean. The color blue is believed to have protective qualities in African belief systems.



African-American talismans. The beads were discovered in both the Cabildo dig of 1990-1991 and a 1990 excavation of Madame John's Legacy, another Louisiana State Museum property. All the beads contain the color blue, which was believed to have protective qualities. Archaeologist found the pierced silver coin in the Cabildo courtyard. In this display the coin hangs from a pin so that the small hole is apparent.

Only one object from the Cabildo dig bears witness to western European religion. A crucifix fragment, made of a silver alloy, was mass-produced by stamping in a process much like the minting of coins.



Front and back of a mid-eighteenth century crucifix.

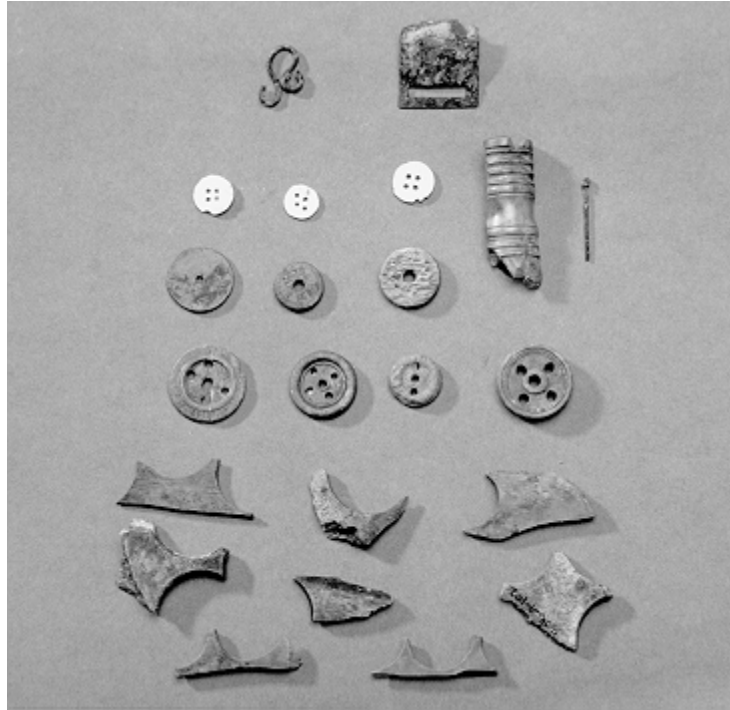
THE PRISON WARDROBE

If not carefully preserved, cloth deteriorates with the passage of time, but buttons, buckles, decorative beads, and sewing tools, such as those found in the Cabildo dig, offer clues about the clothing of an earlier day. The archaeologist uncovered buttons from both civilian clothing and military uniforms. In the age before standardized prison practices, prisoners wore personal clothing rather than uniforms. Guards wore police or military uniforms. Button materials included shell, brass, and, primarily, bone. Military buttons include a type manufactured between 1798-1807 and issued to the United States infantry.



Metal buttons. From left: pewter military button, United States Infantry Second Regiment. 1808-1811; brass military button United States Artillery Battalion 1802-1810; white metal military button. United States Infantry. 1798-1807; unidentified metal button.

Numerous bone button blanks (the leftover material after a button is cut out) indicate that the prisoners themselves made bone buttons much as prisoners make license plates today. Usually the bone came from cattle shins. First, they boiled or steamed it to soften it cut it into sheets, flattened it, and dried it Then they cut or punched the bone into rounds that were finished by stamping, drilling, incising, or carving. These buttons follow several styles, including "cores with single center holes, meant to be wrapped with thread or yarn before use. Eighteenth-century buttons had three to five holes by the 1800s the buttons were machine drilled. Other clothing fasteners discovered include metal buckles and a hook that would have been used with a matching eye. Brass thimbles and a carved bone needle case found on the site imply that prisoners or their jailers maintained their own wardrobes. Both these sewing tools and the button blanks were found in the prison courtyard area, suggesting group, rather than individual work. Undoubtedly, the natural light of the courtyard made outdoor work the logical choice.



(Clothing fasteners and sewing tools, early nineteenth century. Top row: eye and buckle. Second row, from left: shell buttons; possible needlecase fragment made from turned, polished bone; brass needle or pin fragment. Third and fourth rows: bone buttons Bottom three rows: bone button blanks.

CONCLUSION

Mute fragments do not present a full picture; those found at the Cabildo make up only a few pieces of an enormous jigsaw puzzle. In certain cases it is difficult to see how the pieces fit, for they raise more tantalizing questions than they answer. Fortunately, other fragments do fill gaps in our vision of the past and our understanding of people, their lives, and the places in which they lived and worked. The archaeological finds both confirm and clarify the written record. In the end, these discoveries amplify our appreciation of the Cabildo site, enriching its significance for our own time



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