Building Mobile, Alabama:

A Look at the Lives of Antebellum Tradesmen

By

Rita K. Thompson

1852 Mobile City Map (Used courtesy of the University of South Alabama Archives)

A project of the Mobile Historic Development Commission

Funding from The Sybil H. Smith Charitable Trust & The Mitchell Foundation
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All the data collected by the author for this project can be found on the Mobile Historic Development Commission’s website

Published by the Mobile Historic Development Commission, December 2008 ©

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Introduction …

Historical preservation is more than just the preservation of buildings…it is also the preservation of people. What good does it do to save historical buildings without saving the history of those who lived in them and who built them? Mobile has such an important and colorful history that saving the personal histories of her early citizens is not only desirable, but necessary to understand how the City developed over the years. This work does not seek to re-examine earlier, well-known publications about Mobile, but some background information is included for clarity. Rather the goal is to take a look at a group of individuals about who little had been previously known. By using city directories, census records, and cemetery records, data has been collected not just for white male workers, but also for female workers and free people of color.

The data collected on tradesmen has spawned several projects. There is a poster available at the Mobile Historic Development Commission (MHDC) office which shows photos from the University of South Alabama Archives of various architects, contractors, builders, and tradesmen. There is also a website through MHDC that contains all the data collected on tradesmen and a database of early Mobile building permits. They can be used as guides for further information on 19th and early 20th century buildings.

There are inherent problems, however, with using the above mentioned resources. There are inconsistencies with spelling, in particular. Attempting to match person A from the census records with a person of similar name from the city directories can be difficult when the last name is a letter or two different. A good example is how architect Claude Beroujon’s last name was spelled “Berrijohn” in the 1850 census. Many of the census takers were not well-educated and often spelled unknown names as best they could, especially if the person they were interviewing could not read or write themselves. Since the census records do not reflect addresses, it can be difficult to make sure the
correct people are being compared. There are also a shocking amount of duplications of individuals which could indicate data was collected at both their home addresses and their places of work.

Another problem that needs addressing is that streets with the names of northern states were changed in the years during the Civil War and afterwards. For example, “New York” Street was changed to Elmira Street by City Ordinance in 1861. While many street names were changed, a puzzling question is why all the streets named for northern states were not changed.

Spelling was just one problem with city directories when information in the antebellum South was gathered door-to-door. This method often omitted many boarders living with families or even in boarding houses. While boarding houses usually listed all their boarders in the census records, due to the mobility of the working classes they were often missed in city directories.

Finding family members was almost impossible using early census records. They showed only the name of the head of the household and indicated by numbers, not names, those who resided in the same house. Beginning with the 1850s census, that changed and the government started collecting more identifying information on all those living under a particular roof. One finds not only the head of households name along with that of their spouse and any children. There is also their age, their place of birth, and their parents’ birth place. This allows comparing census information with cemetery records as a double check when an individual’s identity may be confusing.

Looking at Mobile’s earlier citizens opens a window into the realities of the harshness of their lives. Driving today down Government Street or Dauphin Street, it is almost impossible to picture the streets unpaved with horse-drawn carriages tied off in front of stores. A drive down Water Street where the cruise ship parking deck and the State Docks block the view of the river certainly does not bring to mind steam boats packed full of bales of cotton or immigrants coming to a new place. But that is Mobile’s history—it is a rich and exciting one that needs further exploration.
Above: Mobile’s Waterfront

Below: Cotton, Mobile Docks
(Sketches used courtesy of the University of South Alabama Archives)
Antebellum Mobile …

Mobile’s propitious location allowed it to develop into a port known for its ability to ship cotton out quickly and efficiently. When cotton became “King,” there came an influx of people flooding into Mobile from across the United States and the world. By the time Alabama had become a state in 1819, Mobile’s population had grown to 809; in 1822, there were over 2,800 living on the western banks of Mobile’s bay and river. Because of their cotton trade connections Europeans were well aware of how progressive and open Mobile had become. Often people coming south from the northeast originally were on boats headed to New Orleans. They stopped at various ports along the Gulf Coast, and some people elected to settle in Mobile. This is evident in the climb in Mobile’s population between 1830 and 1860 as shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Slave</th>
<th>Free People Of Color</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>3,194</td>
<td>1,175</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>4,749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>12,672</td>
<td>3,069</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>16,282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>12,997</td>
<td>6,803</td>
<td>715</td>
<td>20,515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>21,000</td>
<td>7,687</td>
<td>817</td>
<td>29,404</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mobile handled this population growth by expanding and building. According to Peter J. Hamilton in his Colonial Mobile, the bulk of the prime real estate parcel that had been Fort Charlotte was purchased by the Mobile Lot Company to develop and sell. Mobile was developing so quickly that often short-cuts were taken by the City and by the developers. This is revealed in the unsolved drainage problems and fire issues. These concerns would only be
taken care of after a fire in 1827 destroyed most of the businesses and over 150 homes in the Conti and St. Michael Streets area.

As people waited for the City Market to open the alarms rang and every available man sped to assist with the fire at the Mobile Hotel. Unfortunately, the summer draught caused the pumps to fail and the Hotel burned to ground before a water line to the river could be formed. Close to two-thirds of the businesses in downtown Mobile burned down within six hours.

The editor of the *Commercial Register* witnessed the horror and reported that most of the buildings on Royal Street were destroyed along with those on the north side of Dauphin down to Water, along with the buildings on Water and Commerce. While Mobile had already experienced a major fire in 1820, the one in 1827 caused the Mayor and the Aldermen to create laws which would prevent the construction of all wooden buildings within designated boundaries; they would have to be built in stone or brick.²

This change was the beginning of the “modern” building era in Mobile, with contractors building in brick, not wood. This gave the City a more solid look. It was also the beginning of the various fire companies. Business supported the fire companies that would take of their neighborhoods. Mobile was now ready for a real estate boom and this boom would require the necessary manpower for construction labor.

Little has been written about Mobile’s antebellum craftsmen and tradesmen. Elizabeth Barrett Gould’s two books, *From Builders to Architects: The Hobart-Hutchisson Six* and *From Fort to Port: An Architectural History of Mobile, Alabama, 1711-1918*, show a real lack of interest in craftsmen and tradesmen. She gives no voice to the people who actually performed the work of the architects she discusses. One of the few mentions comes in her book *From Builders to Architects* where she discusses about James Flandin Hutchisson’s building practice and how he had hired “a number of masons, carpenters, plasterers, slaters, and other workmen necessary to carry out such complex designs—several under construction at the same time.”³

Harriet E. Amos Doss’s dissertation “Social Life In An Antebellum Cotton Port: Mobile, Alabama, 1820-1860,” and the
book that evolved from it, *Cotton City: Urban Development in Antebellum Mobile*, discuss briefly the competition between native-born whites and immigrants. “In the 1850s, with Mobile’s growing foreign-born population competing for jobs, tensions ran high among laborers. Residents resented newly arrived immigrants who competed for their jobs.” Doss does not examine closely the craftsmen or tradesmen, rather she focuses more on the dock and cotton workers.

While discussing the construction of the Government Street Presbyterian Church in his book on James Dakin, Arthur Scully made the comment that “…it is amazing that artisans in an out of the way place like Mobile were sufficiently skilled to provide the high degree of finish necessary for the complicated building.” It is evident Mr. Scully never examined the lives of said artisans because these workers were not only gifted and talented, they were individuals deeply concerned and heavily involved in serving their City.

![Government Street Presbyterian Church](Image)

*Government Street Presbyterian Church
(Photo by Laura Seymour)*
Immigration …

There were few truly “native” Mobilians prior to the 1880s. While some people arrived in Mobile from elsewhere in Alabama and other southern states, many came from northern states and Europe. There were Italian plasterers, Bavarian and Swiss carpenters, and Irish painters working side-by-side with bricklayers from Tennessee and Virginia. It has been suggested that white, native-born workers left slave states because of the competition with slave labor, but birth data shows otherwise.

In their article “Natives and Immigrants, Free Men and Slaves: Urban Workingmen in the Antebellum South,” Ira Berlin and Herbert Gutman examine how immigration affected six southern cities, including Mobile, in the years leading up to the Civil War. One of their assumptions was that foreigners appeared “marginal” as compared to native workers and were at the bottom of the social structure. This was not the case in Mobile. Because of Mobile’s large immigrant population, the newcomers were not automatically delegated to the lower rungs of the social ladder as in northern cities. Rather, they were a viable and important part of Mobile’s community. Perhaps the most important thing to remember about the immigrants is how they brought their own uniqueness to that of a developing city. They helped to shape perceptions of race and class in Mobile’s society.

While overall only a small proportion of immigrant workers came to the South, census records and local immigration records reveal the diversity of Mobile’s population between 1840 and 1860. Almost two-thirds of all workers in Mobile were native to countries other than the United States. Out of 7,457 employed and propertied free adult males in 1860, 50% were white foreign born. People arrived in Mobile from almost every country in the world. One would expect a large influx from England or Scotland, but there were also large groups of tradesmen in Mobile who came from France, Scotland, and Canada. The largest contingent of immigrants, however, came from Ireland and Germany. The politics of Europe can readily explain why so many were streaming into the United States.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birthplaces given in 1850 &amp; 1860 Census records*</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Portugal</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Russia</th>
<th>England</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Spain</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>Guadeloupe</th>
<th>Switzerland</th>
<th>Holland</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
<th>Wales</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>Isle of Man</th>
<th>Austria</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Belgium</th>
<th>Corsica</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>999</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data covers both census years, but no individual was counted more than once.

Early Irish immigration in the 1820s can be blamed on the large landholders in Ireland and the low wages they were paying their farm workers. In 1845, the potato blight almost destroyed Ireland and caused massive emigration to the United States. While large numbers came earlier, in the 1840s close to two million Irish arrived in this country full of hope and looking for a new start. Because many of them arrived without financial resources, they had little choice but to take on the heavy labor jobs, especially in the construction industry.

As large as the number of those arriving in the United States from Ireland, there were also considerable numbers from the German states. The immigrant origin tables show the large German population in Mobile. Citizens were fleeing the various German states in record numbers. In Wirtemberg King Frederick I had abolished a policy of conservative constitutionalism, secularized Church estates and established state taxes. The end of the “Continental System” created severe problems in manufacturing for sale, and there was a shortage of food due to the peasants returning home from war. Add to this the inheritance
custom of dividing lands between all surviving children and you have too many people on too little land, all of whom were starving.°

### Immigrants from German States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baden</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bavaria</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunswick</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamburg</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanover</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hesse</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mecklenburg</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prussia</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saxony</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waldeck</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westphalia</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wirtemburg</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>115</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another issue facing many Germans was the marriage law. In Mecklenburg, no one could marry without owning a home and no one could own a home without incurring an obligation to the prior owner. In 1841 there was one marriage for every 145 inhabitants; in 1850, one for every 269. Illegitimate births more than doubled between 1820 and 1860, as people found ways of getting around marriage laws. Workers were given permission to marry IF they agreed to emigrate to America.°

The German immigrants went out of their way to fit in to their new country and their new lives. They did not seek to create a “new” Germany in America; rather they assimilated themselves into their new society. In Mobile along with social organizations, the German immigrants formed an organization called the “German Fusiliers.” It was a quasi-military group and served in the war with Mexico and in the Civil War. German carpenter John Emrich was elected the captain of the 8th Alabama Infantry Fusiliers. He was wounded and captured at the Battle of Gettysburg.°°
The data on the table below is very surprising. It shows that over 55% of all those who came from states other than Alabama came from northern states. Of that number, 40% came from New York, 16% from Pennsylvania, and 14% from Massachusetts. In many ways, coming to Mobile must have been like arriving in a foreign country for them.

Breakdown of those born in the United States  
Birthplaces given in 1850 & 1860 Census records*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District of Columbia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Unknown States</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data covers both census years, but no individual was counted more than once.
What constitutes a tradesman? For the purposes of this work, tradesmen are considered to be any workers involved in the building trades—from the architects to the carpenters and all those in between. They were born in the United States and they were born internationally and somehow found their way to Mobile. The tables shown below give the statistics of those practicing their trade in Mobile. This reveals that those performing skilled labor trades such as carpentry, brick work, painters, roofers, and metal workers were divided fairly evenly between natives of the United States and those foreign born.

Perhaps more interesting is the number of foreign born who performed certain trades such as plastering or stone work. Ireland supplied by far the most painters, metal workers, brick workers, plasterers, and stone workers. One of the most tantalizing questions is whether some were brought to Mobile by builders or contractors for specific jobs.

All of the tradesmen and craftsmen cannot be discussed without mentioning the homes and businesses they built. Throughout Mobile there was a considerable amount of private construction occurring during the antebellum period. Houses were going up across the City from the downtown area and the burgeoning suburbs past the City limits at Broad Street, and down Springhill Avenue and Old Shell Road. Some individuals were also building second homes in the Spring Hill area in an attempt to escape the yellow fever.

Master Builder Jonathan Kirkbride’s imagination is still visible in downtown Mobile. In 1849, he and his partner Robert Ellis, a Master Bricklayer, purchased the lot where the old jailhouse was located. Kirkbride took this building and turned it into a beautiful structure. He enlarged it and added a Greek-Revival style porch on the front. When their partnership disbanded in 1854, Kirkbride purchased the house and lived there until his death in 1895. The house stayed in the Kirkbride family until 1926. Eventually the house came into the hands of the National Society of Colonial Dames of America. It now goes by the name Fort Conde-Charlotte House.12
Left: Fort Charlotte-Conde House
(Used courtesy of the University of South Alabama Archives)

Right: Christ Church Cathedral (Used courtesy of the University of South Alabama Archives)

Left: City Hospital (Used courtesy of the University of South Alabama Archives)
Some of the other notable buildings of this era included the Calbert-Webster House (George E. Redwood, Master Builder), Christ Episcopal Church (James Barnes, Builder), the City Hall and Southern Market (Richard H. Redwood, B.F. Scattergood, and George W. Gregory, Chief Contractors), the Ellis-Lyons House (Robert Ellis, bricklayer and Jonathan Kirkbride, builder), Franklin Street Methodist Episcopal Church (Richard Redwood, Contractor), Government Street Presbyterian Church (Thomas S. James, brick contractor), and the U.S. Custom House and old Post Office (Jonathan Kirkbride and Robert Ellis, builders). Unfortunately, thanks to urban renewal of the late 1950s and 1960s, only a few of the structures built by these men remain.

As part of the Civil Works Administration (CWA) during the Depression, a group of unemployed architects and engineers became a part of the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) to document architectural, engineering, and industrial sites. They created a national database to identify and list significant historical properties. It is thanks to HABS, the brainstorm of Charles Peterson in 1933, that we get an idea of how many homes were destroyed over the time period of 1933 to 1985. In the State of Alabama as a whole, out of the 727 structures indexed by HABS 321 have been destroyed, 16 were moved and/or reconstructed in another location, and 43 have been abandoned or ruined. In Mobile County, the worst county in the State, there were 177 recorded, with 138 of those destroyed, seven moved or reconstructed elsewhere, and four abandoned or ruined.

A number of antebellum buildings still stand that have been or are in the process of being restored. While the specific contractor or workers are unknown, the fact that these buildings are still standing show they were well built. A good example can be found in the row of buildings at 161-167 State Street in the De Tonti Square area. The land was first owned by T. Price and W. Kennedy and was deeded over to Harry Toulmin in 1818. The property eventually ended up in the hands of the Batre family. They constructed three two-story row houses in 1839; today only two of the three remain. Because they were built after the fires that ravaged downtown, they were constructed in brick. These buildings are particularly important because they are two of the few remaining homes that were built specifically for rental purposes.
Above and right:
Advertisements in the 1859 Mobile City Directory

Above: Advertisement in the 1856 Mobile City Directory
When Interstate-10 was being constructed in the downtown area, many houses were either razed or were moved to other locations. The University of South Alabama is now home to two of such buildings that were built in antebellum Mobile—the Seaman’s Bethel and the Toulmin House. The Seaman’s Bethel was in such poor condition that it has to be torn down and re-built on campus. The Toulmin House, a raised Creole influenced structure, was built in 1828 by Theophilus Toulmin in the location now known as Toulminville. In 1978, the house was moved to the University of South Alabama campus. It was decayed, but was transported in large pieces and reconstructed on campus to its former glory. It now houses the USA Alumni Association.\textsuperscript{16}

The former Mobile City Hospital, located on St. Anthony at Broad Street was built in 1831 to replace the aging King’s Hospital. John H. Collins was the contractor for this major project. It is now the office for the Mobile County Department of Pensions and Security. It was renovated thanks to a $500,000 donation from J.L. Bedsole. His involvement in the project came through Mrs. Stephens Croom and Mrs. Sam Betty, who knew of his love of preservation. After the building was renovated, it was dedicated as a memorial to Mr. Bedsole’s sister, Lorraine Bedsole Tunstall.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Photo above: The Toulmin House (Used courtesy of the USA Archives)}
Photo above: Seaman’s Bethel
(Used courtesy of the University of South Alabama Archives)

Below: Advertisements found in the 1842 Mobile City Directory
Community Activities …

Numerous tradesmen and craftsmen were active in civic activities. Several were elected as Aldermen and a few became councilmen. They wanted to help shape and guide Mobile during the active years of the late 1840s.

With the trade of cotton in the 1830s, Mobile’s entire economy was based on the Port. Mobile’s leaders wanted to change the City’s dependency on cotton. Their foresight saved Mobile in the years leading up to the Civil War. Diversification was necessary for the survival of the City. Mobile had a cotton mill, iron foundries, a flour mill, a rope factory, the gas works, sawmills, marble works, and naval stores. To survive, Mobile needed to be more than just a cotton port. The City needed men with ideas who wanted to be involved in the City’s growth.

It is interesting to note the various tradesmen who served their city: Jonathan Kirkbride (NJ), a builder, served as Alderman in the 4th Ward in 1855-56. During the same time period, John Lowary (unknown), a carpenter, served as Alderman in the 6th Ward, and bricklayer George Petty (TN) and brick maker Allen Ryland (VA) served in the 7th Ward. None of these individuals were Mobile natives.

The “Can’t Get Away” club also had tradesmen in their midst. The organization was incorporated with the State of Alabama in 1854 and among the members were several prominent tradesmen including Charles Delage (unknown), George Bond (MD), James Hutchisson (NY), and Claude Beroujon (France). A dozen or so men who regularly lunched together organized the Club in 1839 as a way to aid the less fortunate who had yellow fever and could not afford medical assistance. At the time there were only three or four doctors in the City, and the few available nurses would often charge as much as $10 a day for home care. Their relief fund would only aid yellow fever victims. They believed there were other groups to take care of further charitable issues. There were yellow fever epidemics in Mobile in 1839, 1853, 1858, 1867, 1870, and 1878. The epidemic in 1853 was the most severe—reports say that between 20 and 50 deaths occurred daily.
Tradesmen were also extremely active in the local fire companies. Fighting fires was serious business. The fires in the fall of 1827 showed how easily Mobile could be destroyed. The pride of Mobile, these companies paraded yearly in displays larger than those of the mystic societies. There were large balls, dinners, and speeches of praise at these events. The parade itself was spectacular—firemen were in dress uniforms, their fire-engines and equipment were decorated with floral arrangements. (See photo below; used courtesy of the University of South Alabama Archives.) There was also a blue ribbon awarded to the best decorated fire engine. People came from all over to watch the fireman’s parade, including former President Martin Van Buren (in 1842) and then-President Millard Fillmore (in 1854).^{21}

![Photo of a parade](image)

Enough cannot be said to emphasize the importance of these fire companies in Mobile’s society; in many cases they were more important socially than the various mystic societies. These volunteers worked for no pay—it was done strictly for the prestige. Serving as a fire warden reflected a high level of responsibility, and their authority was reflected by the eight-foot long red poles with a gold ball on top that they carried around with them.^{22} Painter John B. Todd, a native of Massachusetts, was particularly involved in Mobile’s fire companies. From 1842 until 1859, he served as Fire Warden of the 4th Ward, Chief Engineer of the Fire Department, and President of the Fire Department Association.
Women in the Building Trades …

Historically when thinking of southern antebellum women, one thinks of the household and the responsibilities women had in raising the family. Current research shows that notion to be not completely accurate. There were many working women in Mobile in all areas of life from clerks in department stores or offices, as waitresses, as building trades workers, and as prostitutes. The 1850 and 1860 census records give a better picture of women in the work place than do City Directories because the focus of the City Directory was to list the head of the household and not all the individual family members.

Several women were found working in building trades in the 1860 census. Mary Wootan is listed as a carpenter while her husband William is unemployed. The plausible reason would be that he was injured on the job or was ill and could not work. One suspects that she picked up her husband’s tools to keep food on the table and a roof over her family’s heads. Josephine Cain worked as a plasterer to help support her family while her younger brother was in school. She lived with her mother Julie, widow of Joseph Cain, out on Spring Hill Road.

Another widow who was forced into the work field was Mary Gaitley. An Irish immigrant, she worked as a tinsmith while her son Martin worked as a plasterer. Bertha Hafter is also shown as an eighteen-year-old tinsmith with $13,000 in personal property and $8,000 in real estate in the 1860 census records. She appears to be living with other relatives and one can only speculate where and how she got her fortune. Martha Havens worked as a carpenter while living with a younger woman, Emily Havens, who was not employed. Possibly the two were sisters or sisters-in-law. There is a one-year-old boy in the home but it is unknown which woman was his mother or whether she was ever married or not. While not important today, it would have been quite scandalous for an unmarried woman to have a child in 1860.
There were also women of color working in the trades. Ella Cardello, a seven-year-old mulatto, is listed in the 1860 census as being a carpenter. Normally, this would seem questionable except that she and her father, a laborer, are shown living with another group of free black ship carpenters. It is possible that she was an apprentice learning a trade for her future.

When examining the 1861 Mobile City Directory the name of a female coppersmith, Elizabeth Roberts, stands out in the middle of all the males. Looking back to 1859, her husband, Israel Roberts was running a coppersmith business in downtown Mobile on Water Street. Israel Roberts came to Mobile from Pennsylvania after having worked in Philadelphia as a coppersmith in 1825. He first appears in the Mobile City Directory in 1838 and last appears in the 1859 city directory. Finding out what happened to Israel after 1859 became like a search for the Holy Grail. There was no record of his death locally, and his name could not be found listed in the Sexton records or in any cemetery records. However, research eventually revealed that Israel died during a visit home to Philadelphia in 1860 at the age of 55 of a stomach ailment. His family ties back in Pennsylvania were evidently strong or his widow was not financially able to bring him back to Mobile because he was buried Philadelphia. Apparently, Elizabeth took over the family business.
Mobile has three cemeteries that were used throughout the antebellum period: the Church Street Graveyard, Magnolia Cemetery, and the Catholic Cemetery. All three were allowed to fall into disrepair before community support organizations took over and brought them back to life. While burials stopped in the Church Street Graveyard in the 1890s, both Magnolia and Catholic Cemeteries are still active today. Unfortunately, the Catholic Cemetery no longer has an office on-site to assist visitors, but their records were moved to the Radney Funeral Home. The Magnolia Cemetery has an on-site office with individuals who are both knowledgeable and helpful. They have recently produced a three-volume publication that lists all those buried there, at least all those for whom they have records. As with other cemeteries burying individuals during this time period, there are always interesting surprises to be found within their boundaries.

Mentioned earlier, Elizabeth Mulligan Roberts, a young Irish immigrant, was married to Israel Roberts and kept his coppersmith business going in the years after his death. The work must have been hard and the hours long, taking her away from her younger children who were in their early teens. She had a stroke and died just a short four years after Israel’s passing. She is buried in Magnolia Cemetery with the inscription “Relict of the late Israel Roberts, died April 7, 1864, aged 47 years” on her tombstone.  

Life was not kind to the Roberts family. Buried beside Elizabeth is her 23-year-old daughter, Maggie who died in 1872, just a brief few years after her marriage to John Ulrick in 1868. Like her father, Maggie’s passing is mysterious; the sexton’s records show no cause of death. The Roberts’ family gravesite was a casualty of Hurricane Ivan—the headstones were knocked down by fallen limbs. (See photo above
by author.) Their section and lot are in the first group to be restored when the Friends of Magnolia have raised sufficient funds to do so.

While viewing the Roberts’s plot, a portion of a small tombstone was discovered that belonged to Joseph O., son of Israel and Elizabeth Roberts (photo by author at right). This child was not listed on any census records. The cemetery had no knowledge of the child even being buried there. His birth year was 1842, and death records show that he died on June 27, 1847 at the age of five-and-a-half years. His cause of death is unknown.

The Roberts family was not the only tradesman family buried in Magnolia Cemetery, nor were they the only family with tragic stories revealed among the headstones. Cemeteries provide valuable information on families. Like the Roberts family they show children who died young, and like the William March family they point out spouses who passed early. (Photo of March burial plot at right, by author.) Architect Charles Fonde is buried with his second wife, Lyndia Wragg, but his first wife, Camilla, is buried beside them. Carpenter John King and his wife, Christina, are buried side-by-side. But buried with Christina, according to her headstone, are her five infant children: Charles, William, Catharine, John, and Seymour.

Several mulattos and people of color were buried in Magnolia. Edward Chastang and his wife Mary, he died in 1895 and she died in 1916, were buried in the main cemetery along with several of their children. Also, Isadore Fournier, son of mulatto
bricklayer Noel and his wife Victorine, was buried in the Church Street Graveyard in 1855. None of Mobile’s cemeteries were segregated.

Because of our current thinking that both the Church Street and the Magnolia Cemeteries are “historic” cemeteries where city officials and war heroes are buried, we often forget that everyday people are buried there, too. Over thirty tradesmen and/or their family members were buried in the Church Street Graveyard, close to 130 are found in Magnolia Cemetery, and the Catholic Cemetery has almost forty in their midst. Of course, these numbers are very low because there are numerous unmarked graves, especially in the Church Street Graveyard and the Catholic Cemetery. Also, not all tradesmen were buried locally. Builder James Barnes was taken back to his home state for burial.

Photo above: Church Street Graveyard (Photo by John Sledge)

Photo below: Magnolia Cemetery (Photo by John Sledge)
1891 Map of the Church Street Graveyard
(Used courtesy of the University of South Alabama Archives)
1891 Map Magnolia Cemetery
(Used courtesy of the University of South Alabama Archives)
Living In Mobile …

There were crowded living conditions throughout Mobile in the years leading up to the Civil War. Mobile was booming with boarding houses and several had only tradesmen living in them. One of the most well known was the Mechanic’s House (later Jacobson’s). Located at 121-123 Dauphin Street, it was a large, three-story building with numerous windows that had a bird’s-eye view of Bienville Square. Originally owned by James Moore, the lot was willed to Margaret Moore and James McBride, a cabinet maker. Since they were later married, one can surmise they were engaged at the time of her father’s death. The property was passed around quite a bit between the Moore and McBride families in the years leading up to the Civil War.

In 1859 the Mechanic’s House, owned by Margaret McBride, was run by Elizabeth Renth, a 33-year-old who was raising three children. Like the other stories found here, Ms. Renth’s story is puzzling. She has three younger people with the same last name living with her in 1859. In the 1850 census, these children are listed as belonging to John and Evel (sic) Renth and living in New Orleans; no Elizabeth is listed as even living with the family. The logical explanation would be that Elizabeth was the older John’s sister and she took the children in after their parent’s death. One of the older Renth’s sons, Henry, was a tinner while one the other son, William, worked as a laborer. Unfortunately, this beautiful building was later “renovated,” and the outer façade was completely changed. It was recently converted into office space and condominiums, but the new owners failed to return the outer façade to its antebellum glory.

There were also taverns that were combination boarding house, drinking house, and restaurant. As a rule, these catered to men. Swiss tavern-owner Fredrick Hegensekedan and his French wife Sophia ran one such establishment where only tradesmen resided. Another one was operated by Dominque Poumer. The exact locations of these taverns are unknown. Only the entry in the census records lets us know they existed because they are not listed in the city directories.
While available city directories give names, addresses, and the various occupations of the people in Mobile, pins on a map reflect few patterns in regards to the living arrangements of tradesmen and craftsmen. Families are found living together even if their trades varied. Interestingly, in some trades people lived near their work. Though carpenters lived in all areas of the City, brick makers lived near each other, close to the brick ovens. For example, about five miles west of downtown Mobile on Springhill Avenue stood the little community of Summerville. This was where various brick men had a clay pit and brick company. Daniel T. Rea (MA) followed in this model by allowing his painters to reside at his business on Dauphin Street.

Life did not necessarily run smoothly for these antebellum citizens. Cabinetmaker John A. Dege, a Prussian immigrant, ran into difficulties with his second wife—what happened to his first wife is unknown. She is not mentioned in death or divorce records.
in Mobile County. According to statements in his divorce papers, Dege went to Europe in search of a nanny for his children and returned home with a Maria Schamaker (aka Mary Elizabeth, marriage records and divorce records differ on the name but that can be explained away by cultural pronunciations of “Mary”). Two months later Dege married Maria. Within months she had fled to New Orleans where one of his friends saw her working in a house of ill-repute. Needless to say, the friend does not explain what he was doing there. Dege was quickly granted his divorce based on abandonment and adultery. 

Apparently, some do not learn their lesson—the 1860 census records finds Dege living with a 28-year-old Prussian woman named Charlotte, and 1870 Census records show him living with a 34-year-old Prussian woman by the name of Chaunette. To make it more interesting, in the 1880 census records he is living with a 48-year-old Prussian woman by the name of Johanna. Since the Mobile County marriage records show Dege marrying Johanna N. Gotte in 1856, one can only ponder the fascinating lifestyle of John Dege—and the various and assorted women in his life.

Perhaps one of the best success stories belongs to William March (photo at right; used courtesy of the University of South Alabama Archives), a native of Wirtemberg, Germany. He arrived in Mobile in the late 1850s and worked as a marble cutter. While he never became a U.S. citizen, he did enlist in the Confederate Army—his name can be found on the monument erected in Magnolia Cemetery by the Raphael Semmes Camp #11 in honor of those Mobilians who were Confederate veterans. After the war, he returned to his career in marble work. He married Mary Jane Baker, also a native of Wirtemberg, in September, 1868. An interesting note is that the 1870 census shows they had four children at that time, William, born in 1856; Lena, born in 1858; John, born in 1863; and George, born in 1866—all born before William and Mary Jane were married in Mobile. It is possible, however, that the couple was married in Germany before coming
to Mobile, but since there were not citizens they decided to marry again in the United States to protect their children’s citizenship and their own growing business interests. There was also another son, Edward, born in 1876.

March went into business with the McDonald family forming the McDonald, March & Company Marble Dealers in 1870. His first wife, Mary Jane died in 1876, just four months after the birth of their son, Edward. (Photo of her tombstone by author pictured above on left.) His company’s skill in the marble works business is evident by the beauty of his first wife’s tombstone. March married his second wife, Sarah Markham in 1880. By the 1890s, March had branched out into the lumber business. Along with some of his partners from McDonald, March & Company, March formed the Yellow Pine Lumber Company along with a sawmill at State Line, Mississippi and the Gulf City Sawmills located at the head of Water Street on One-Mile Creek. He was truly a force in the business world of Mobile.

It is evident that March’s children cared deeply for his second wife. She is listed as “mother” on their joint monument. (See above photo on right by author.) March and his family lived a simple life in the 6th ward. They attended Government Street Methodist Church, where his funeral was held in 1902. He and both of his wives are buried in Magnolia Cemetery in the March plot located in Section 7.

Other tradesmen found Mobile a welcoming place, too. Richard H. Jones, a Welch carpenter and builder, also found a good life in Mobile. He married Mary Joiner of Maryland in 1854 and became a naturalized citizen in 1856. Also living in the 6th
ward, he died in 1884. Plasterer Perry Ryals came to Mobile from New York prior to the 1850 census. He served in the Independent Scouts, Company G, 8th Alabama Regiment. Ryals married the widow Eliza Jane James in 1863. A marker with only the name “Ryals” can be found in the Catholic Cemetery.

Some tradesmen came to Mobile for one project and ended up staying here. William Edward Smith was a Lieutenant in the Engineer Corps and was sent to Mobile in the 1830s with a Major Ogden to build the new fort at Mobile Point. The second son of a doctor back in Philadelphia, he fell in love with Mobile. He and his wife lived at 12 N. Warren. After his death, his wife had several portraits made of him by their friend Charles Fonde. One hangs in the Oakleigh House along with a Duncan Phyfe table the couple brought with them from Philadelphia. One of their sons, William Draper Smith, died at the Battle of Murfreesboro and is buried with his parents in Magnolia Cemetery.27

Carpenter, cabinet maker, and contractor, Henry Sossaman was another who came to Alabama for a specific job, only to stay. In 1826, he was first employed to do the woodwork on the state capitol that was then located in Tuscaloosa. After it was completed in 1828 he moved to Pickens County where he built the Carrolton Hotel. He was in Mobile in 1837 when the first City Directory was published. He died of the yellow fever in 1843 and according to Mobile County Burial Records is buried in the Church Street Graveyard. Henry’s son Blount continued his father’s cabinetry and contracting work. Blount and his son William were
known for their woodwork not only in Mobile but also New Orleans.28

Another of the more interesting stories is that of Claude Beroujon (pictured at right; photo used courtesy of the USA Archives). Bishop Michael Portier, the first Catholic Bishop of Mobile, brought seminarian Beroujon from France in approximately 1833 to design the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. While he was the architect of this building, he did not stay long in the seminarian program—he left it in less than a year. He married Margaret O’Neal, a young woman from Monaghan, Ireland. They had eight natural children and one adopted daughter.29 He was also responsible for the design of the first original building at Spring Hill College which was later destroyed by fire.

It would appear that Beroujon had the perfect life and great success. Looks can be deceiving though. The available City Directories from 1837 to 1867 show his dramatic descent. His professions included: owning a carpenter shop (1837-38), builder (1839-1844), architect (1850-51), and undertaker/cabinetmaker (1860s). While it was not a far stretch (and quite common, too) building both cabinets and coffins, why his professions changed so much over the years is unknown.

Lawsuits might have been behind the changes in fortune for this talented and creative gentleman. Several lawsuits were found in the Mobile Circuit Court and Chancery Court—some he initiated, others were initiated against him. Perhaps the most serious charge against Beroujon was brought by Philip Rodgers of Montgomery. Rodgers accused Beroujon of fraud for a $5,000 mortgage.

Beroujon died in 1875 and is supposedly buried in the Catholic Cemetery. There is a Beroujon family plot where his wife
and all his children are buried. However, it was Mr. Beroujon’s
dying wish to be buried back home in France. Family legend has it
that his body was snuck into France in a wine cask and was buried
in his hometown.30

There were many interesting “family” combinations
found throughout the 1850 census records. One example is the
household of William Henning, a carpenter born in Maine. Also
listed as residents of his home were H.N. Gould, a three-month old
male infant; merchant Seth B. Parker who was a native of Virginia;
Ann Carver, six-months old infant; twelve-year-old Thomas Reid;
and another six-month old infant, Frances Sheffield. All of the
children were born in Alabama. How this group came to be
together we will probably never know. They were no doubt all
related in some manner, but it boggles the mind to think how two
working men managed to care for three infants and one youth
without a woman in the house. An even more interesting twist to
this is the fact that H.N. Gould was a slave owner.

Below: Infant of D.W. Patridge, Tinner
(Photo used courtesy of the University of South Alabama
Archives)
Slave Labor …

Much has been speculated about the working relationships of whites, slaves, and free blacks. It has long been rumored that slave labor built both Oakleigh and the Bragg mansions. Unfortunately, there is no positive proof either way. The Georgia Cottage, located at 2564 Spring Hill Avenue, was built in 1840 by slave laborers brought from Georgia. The property belonged to Col. John Murrell and was originally part of a Spanish land grant. This Creole-style home is located close to the end of Park Lane, built beside an avenue of oaks. Upon his death, the land was split between his son Joseph C. Murrell, and the children of his daughter, Mary Murrell Del Barco. Mary J. Del Barco received the lot where the Georgia Cottage now stands. The property was purchased in 1857 by Augusta Evans, in her father’s name, after the financial success of her book Beulah.

Photo above: Georgia Cottage (Used courtesy of the University of South Alabama Archives)

There were tradesmen who were slave owners. There were also several contractors and subcontractors who worked both whites and black men. Considering there was little-to-no racial violence during this period in Mobile, one can only speculate that the races, at the very least, put up with each other and worked together or side-by-side. For the free blacks and whites, there was money to be made in the building trades. It is also questionable as to how skilled the slave labor actually was in the art of building.
crafts. Had there been sufficient skilled slave labor available, there would not have been the need for either native-born or foreign-born white skilled workers.

Many immigrant tradesmen routinely traveled between free states and slave states and found their personal notions of liberty could not be reconciled with slavery. Some immigrants despised both slavery and the blacks who were forced laborers. After having faced prejudice themselves in the North, some took up the flag of slavery and styled their lives in that of a southern-born slave-owner. This could explain why so many immigrants took up arms as soldiers in the Confederate Army. The Civil War would be the end of Mobile as the antebellum tradesmen knew it.

Below: Oakleigh Mansion
(Used courtesy of the University of South Alabama Archives)
Whether Arthur Scully, author of the book on Dakin, understood or appreciated or even recognized the talents of this group of outstanding Mobilians who made their living in the building trades, their legacy remains. The tradesmen were, at one point, a large part of the governing class in Mobile. Unfortunately, that all changed after the Civil War.

There were financial difficulties that arose in those years leading up to the War and the following Reconstruction. The City of Mobile went bankrupt, and out of the ashes the Port of Mobile was created. The election of 1874 was a watershed not only in American politics but also in Mobile’s politics. Determined to keep black and Republican voters from the polls, local Democrats used political terrorism to ensure their victory. After an investigation by Congress it was decided that while abuses took place, it was in the best interests of the City to allow the election to stand.

The election of George Gillespie Duffee in 1878 started a chain of events which would shake the foundations of Mobile. There were whispers by 1879 that Mobile would default on its financial obligations. Several Mobilians, including lawyers Hannis Taylor, Peter Hamilton, and John Little Smith, put together a plan by which Mobile could avoid a court takeover.

This group sought to repeal the City’s charter, and in the process getting rid of the City’s elected government and all the assorted administrative officials. They wanted the governor to appoint three commissioners who would take charge of Mobile’s assets and collect all the back taxes. The name of the City would change to the Port of Mobile. Legislators would select eight commissioners to act as administrators; the group would be called the Police Board. Their duties would be similar to that of a city council.
Despite the petitions filed by Mayor Duffee, the State passed this plan and it went into effect early in 1879. The only change made was that the Police Board commissioners would be elected rather than appointed. When the election was held only those on the Democratic ticket were elected, the majority of those elected were lawyers. A trend was developing not just in Mobile, but across the country as local politics became controlled by political machines. No longer could every “John Doe” run for office and hope to be elected to represent his neighborhood.

Another blow to the power of the tradesmen was the creation of a City-run fire department. The various fire companies across the city had been volunteer and now the City changed to professional firemen—those who were paid for their services. This ended a period of time in Mobile when the City was governed by common men out to do their jobs, creating an environment that would enable growth for their families, their businesses, and for the City they made their own.

It is easy to romanticize the antebellum period in Mobile’s history. The years after the American Revolution and before the Civil War seem almost serene through our eyes—lazy days strolling along the river, visiting with friends and families. In all reality, this was a stress-filled life and people were struggling to survive. Those who came from other countries wanted to create a home where they could merge their lifestyles with those they found in America. Both native and foreigner, new Mobilians strove to make a life better than their parents had achieved for themselves. That idea is still carried forward today.
Acknowledgements …

This work would not have been possible without the aid and assistance of numerous people. Most importantly, this publication was funded through grants made by the Sybil H. Smith Charitable Trust and The Mitchell Foundation. Their understanding of the significance of historical preservation cannot be overstated.

Thank-you is also in order for the following locations whose personnel assisted me with my research:

- The Mobile Historic Development Commission
- The University of South Alabama Department of History
- The University of South Alabama Archives
- The City of Mobile Archives
- The Local History Branch of the Mobile Public Library
- The Mobile Genealogical Society

Church Street Graveyard (photo by John Sledge)


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End Notes

1 Notes from Dr. Michael Thomason’s History of Mobile Class
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20 Notes from the Kirkbride files at the Minnie Mitchell Archives located at Oakleigh House.
21 Notes from the Can’t Get Away Club files at the Minnie Mitchell Archives located at Oakleigh House.
25 John A. Dege v. Mary Elizabeth Dege, Case #01979, the 13th Judicial Circuit Court of Alabama.
27 Notes from the William Edward Smith files found in the Minnie Mitchell Archives located at the Oakleigh House.
28 Notes from the Sossaman Family files found in the Minnie Mitchell Archives located at the Oakleigh House.
30 Conversation with Lisa Baldwin, USA Archives—information per a Beroujon family researcher.