U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
New Orleans District

History and Archaeology of Babin Place Plantation, Ascension Parish, Louisiana

By:

Donald G. Hunter
Joanne Ryan

Coastal Environments, Inc.
1260 Main Street
Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70802

Preserving Louisiana's Heritage ◈ Four

2021

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
New Orleans District

Serving Louisiana

Since 1803, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' presence in Louisiana has grown from being solely military in nature to advancing the Nation's interests by delivering vital engineering services for flood, hurricane and storm damage risk reduction; navigation; ecosystem stewardship; emergency operations; and in support of our national security. Responsible for 30,000 square miles in south central and coastal Louisiana, the New Orleans District plans, designs, constructs and operates navigation, hurricane and flood risk reduction features, and coastal restoration projects. The District has constructed more than 1,300 miles of levees and floodwalls and six major flood control structures along the Mississippi and Atchafalaya rivers to help improve the quality and security of life in South Louisiana.

Navigation is the oldest Civil Works mission for USACE. In South Louisiana, ensuring safe and reliable navigation along the inland waterways requires the Nation's largest dredging program. Each year, the New Orleans District maintains more than 2,800 miles of navigable waterways and operates 18 navigation locks and control structures. The district's work serves five of the Nation's top 15 ports in total annual tonnage.

By regulating dredge and fill in all navigable waters and wetlands under the Clean Water Act, and by designing projects that reduce the rate of coastal land loss, the New Orleans District demonstrates its stewardship of the environment. Since 1975, the district's beneficial placement of dredged sediment has created more than 35,000 acres of marshland. These newly created marshlands not only furnish wildlife habitat but provide flood risk reduction benefits for the region. The District Commander also chairs the multi-agency Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Task Force, which plans and constructs a variety of projects to restore and protect the state's coastal marshes.

The New Orleans District's historic preservation and cultural resources management program is required by the National Historic Preservation Act. The New Orleans District is strongly committed to communicating the results of its studies to the public, and this booklet is the fourth in our series of popular publications.

The booklet was prepared in connection with the district's Mississippi River and Tributaries Project, an important component of the comprehensive plan for flood risk reduction in the Lower Mississippi Valley between Cape Girardeau, Missouri, and the mouth of the river.

Cover Image: Colorized undated black and white photograph of workers cutting sugarcane in Louisiana.

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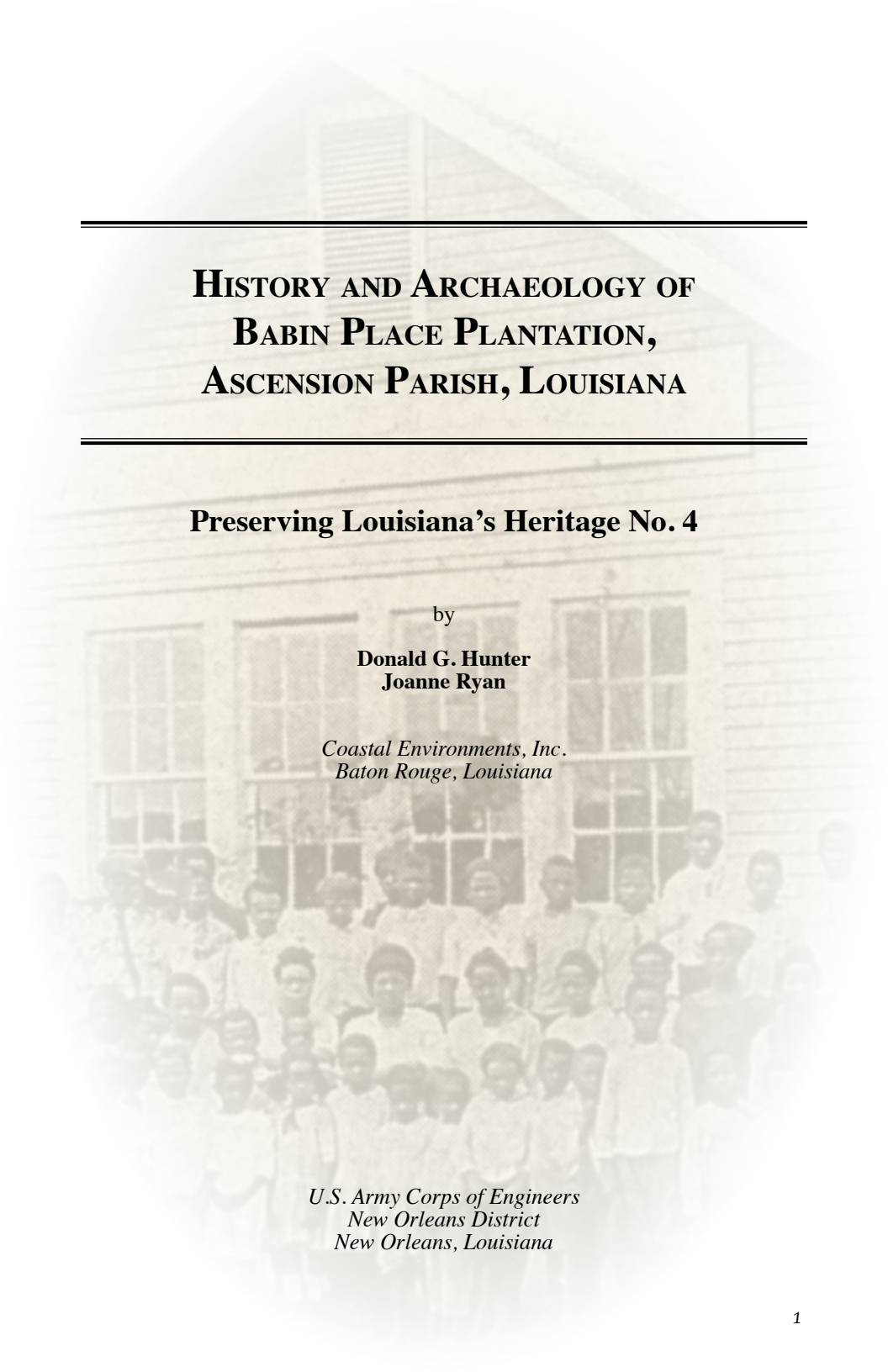

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Image: Babin Plantation Main House
November 30, 2000.

Introduction

Babin Place Plantation, on the Mississippi River just below the small community of Modeste, Louisiana, is about 7 miles above Donaldsonville in western Ascension Parish. In 1999, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New Orleans District, planned a levee stabilization project, and then in 2019, proposed the installation of seepage wells. Both projects threatened archaeological remains on Babin Place. Archaeologists conducted intensive excavations on the riverside portion of the plantation in 2000 to recover archaeological information prior to levee stabilization. In 2020, archaeologists monitored the recontouring of the ditch needed to convey water from seepage wells to disposal pumps on the landside portion of the plantation.

Babin Place originated from two small eighteenth-century Acadian farmsteads in what was known as the Second Acadian Coast or Lafourche des Chetimaches. In the early 1800s, it became a sugar plantation owned by a succession of proprietors, all of Acadian descent. Babin Place continued to produce sugarcane into the early twentieth century until it was sold to a local African-American benevolent society, which renamed it New Africa Farm. For over 100 years, Babin Place was also the location of several rural schools for African-American and white children residing near Modeste.

History of Babin Place Plantation

Scores of French Acadian families were driven out of Nova Scotia by British troops during the French and Indian War (1754-1763). Many were drawn to French-speaking and Roman Catholic Louisiana. In 1765, 200 Acadians arrived in New Orleans from Santo Domingo and were settled on the west bank of the Mississippi close to the city. Later that year, additional Acadians were sent to the Attakapas and Opelousas prairies, in southwest Louisiana, while others settled on the Mississippi, in present-day St. James

Image: Acadians settled between the Germans ("les Allemands") *and the Bayogoula village (*"Bayagoulas"*), on the Mississippi River, in the late 1760s.*

and Ascension parishes, where they established small farms referred to as "habitations."

Babin Place Plantation began as two eighteenth-century Acadian habitations in what was known as the Second Acadian Coast or Lafourche des Chetimaches. Etienne LeBlanc and his family were residing on the first, located on the right descending bank of the river, by 1766. As LeBlanc owned no livestock or slaves, he was probably a recent arrival. LeBlanc died between 1766 and 1769. At the 1777 succession sale to settle his estate, a house on sills (20 feet long by 14 feet wide) and a small storehouse (15 feet long and 10 feet wide), both old and worn out, were located on his land, as well as a new, unfinished house. Etienne LeBlanc, Jr., who bought the property, died in 1796, and his widow, Ozitte LeBlanc, remained on the land until her death in 1808. Her community property, including six slaves–Sophie and her three children, John Luis (14) and Delphine (12 or 13), was sold to Pierre Maximilien Babin.

The second habitation belonged to Anseleme LeBlanc, Ozitte LeBlanc's brother. Their parents had arrived in Ascension Parish by at least 1770. Anseleme LeBlanc died in 1797, and his 1801 succession gave his widow, Marie Magdelaine Babin, use of the estate. It included a house on blocks (20 feet long and 12 feet wide) with galleries on the front and the rear, an old storehouse, one slave cabin, and five slaves–Catari-

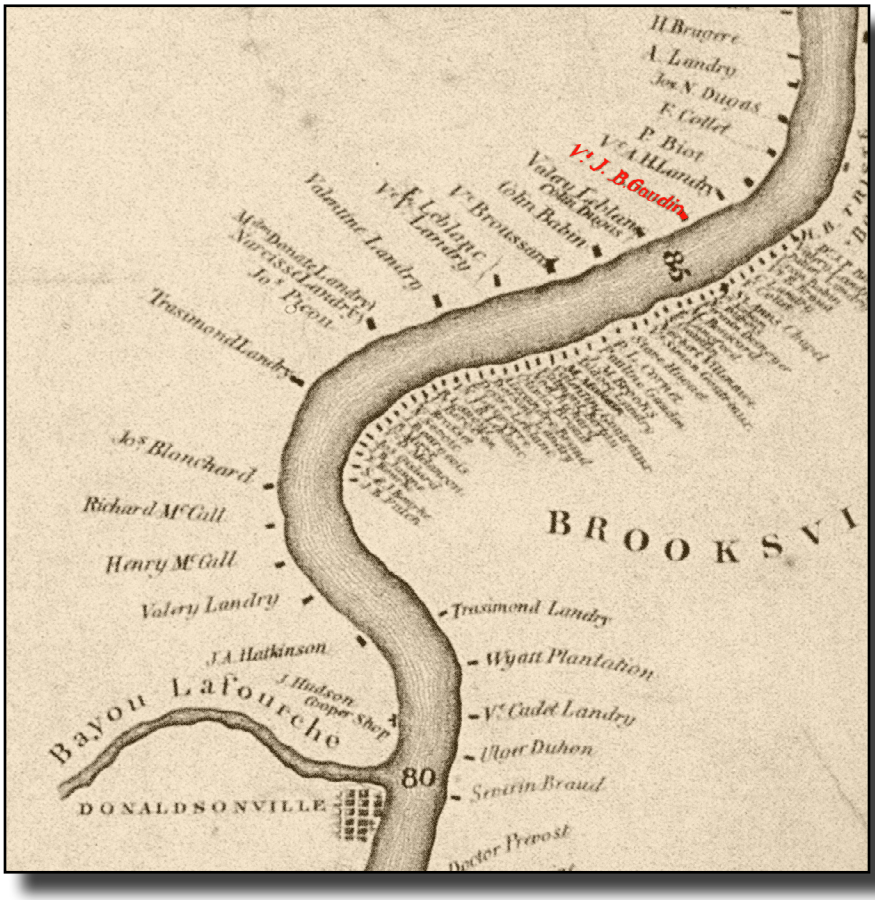


Image: Babin Place and Home Place Plantations owned by the Widow Jean Baptiste Gaudin in 1847.

na (20) a Creole; her son Domingo (3) and daughter Festista (2 months), Antonio (30) "suitable for a house servant," and Louis (80). Antonio and Louis were both African, "from the Congo Nation." Anselme LeBlanc's wife died in 1839, and the property was sold to her grandson, Siffroid Blanchard.

Pierre Maximilien Babin bought the Etienne LeBlanc tract in 1808. He first raised cotton and corn and, beginning in 1828, sugarcane. In 1829, Babin Place made 17 hogsheads of sugar in a sugarhouse with an animal-powered sugarcane grinder. (Hogsheads were large wooden barrels that generally held from 1,000 to 1,200 pounds of sugar apiece.) In 1831, "P.M. Babin & Co." produced 25 hogsheads of sugar. Working on his sugar plantation ("habitation sucrerie") in 1832 were 11 slaves–Laurent (45), Daniel (35), Alexandre (21), John (26), Luis (35), Tacka (15), Adam (17), Baptiste (7), Polly (45), Indique (22), and Lucy, a

Image: Adelard Landry and wife, Marie Ursule Gaudin.

mulatto (40). On the plantation when Babin died in 1837 were a main house, sugarhouse, cotton mill, and eight slaves. Siffroid Blanchard bought the plantation from the Babin estate in 1840 and added it to his LeBlanc land.

Blanchard died a few months after buying the Babin tract. His widow sold Jean Baptiste Gaudin the property, which contained a main dwelling, sugarhouse, cotton mill, gristmill, slave cabins and stores. Also a part of the sale were 12 slaves–Joseph (35), Ned (23), Dominigise (15), Joe (21), Emanuel or Mack (21), Sally (21), Osbau (24), Jean-Louis (21), and Nannette (30) with her children Rosalie (5), Anaise (13), and Amidé (14 months).

Jean Baptiste Gaudin was born in 1790 in St. James Parish and owned Home Place Plantation, just downriver from Babin Place. The LeBlanc family remained on and operated Babin Place under Gaudin's ownership. In 1844-1845, Joseph LeBlanc produced 85 hogsheads of sugar on Babin Place, while Home Place yielded 292 hogsheads. These large outputs suggest that both plantations' sugarhouses had steam-powered sugarcane grinders by that time. The following season, Joseph LeBlanc & Mrs. A. Landry produced 124 hogsheads on Babin Place, while Home Place yielded 264 hogsheads. LeBlanc and Landry, both Babin relatives, were apparently managing Babin Place for the Gaudins during these years.

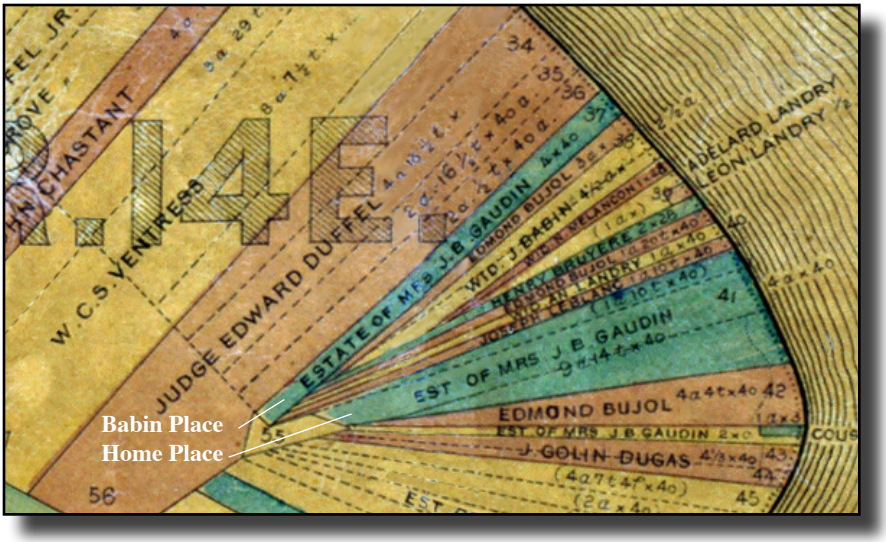
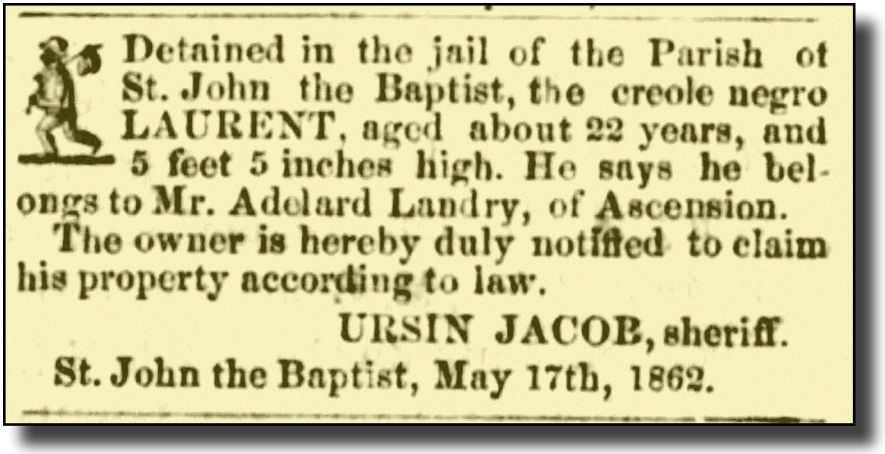


Image: Babin Place and Home Place Plantations owned by the estate of the Widow Jean Baptiste Gaudin in 1859.

When Jean Baptiste Gaudin died in 1845, his son-in-law, Adelard Landry, managed both Home Place and Babin Place plantations. Landry had married Marie Ursule Gaudin in 1840. In 1850, 25 slaves worked on Babin Place's 230 improved and 60 unimproved acres, which yielded 2,000 bushels of corn and 114 hogsheads of sugar. The 51 slaves on Home Place produced 2,000 bushels of corn, 65 hogsheads of sugar, and 4,000 gallons of molasses on that plantation's 350 improved and 70 unimproved acres. The plantations increased their output to roughly 250 hogsheads apiece by 1854. In 1860, Home Place and Babin together encompassed 690 improved and 344 unimproved acres estimated to be worth $82,720. The 102 slaves on both plantations lived in 26 cabins and produced 250 hogsheads of sugar, 15,000 gallons of molasses, and 3,500 bushels of corn.

Soon after the 1862 Federal occupation of New Orleans during the Civil War, six of Adelard Landry's slaves escaped but were recaptured in St. John the Baptist Parish. During the 1861-1862 growing season, Babin Place made 266 hogsheads of sugar, while Home Place made 340. The plantations yielded 266 and 485 hogsheads, respectively in 1867, despite post-war shortages and deprivation. However, by 1869, the steam-powered cane grinder on Babin Place was out of operation and an animal-powered grinder employed instead. Open kettles were used to boil the cane juice. The wooden sugarhouse on Babin Place yielded just 102 hogsheads that season, while Home Place made only 100 hogsheads. Clearly, strained finances and the emancipation of the slaves crippled production on both properties. In 1870, Babin



Detained in the jail of the Parish of St. John the Baptist, the creole negro LAURENT, aged about 22 years, and 5 feet 5 inches high. He says he belongs to Mr. Adelard Landry, of Ascension.

The owner is hereby duly notified to claim his property according to law.

URSIN JACOB, sheriff.

St. John the Baptist, May 17th, 1862.

Image: 1862 Advertisement for a runaway slave belonging to Adelard Landry.

Place made 111 hogsheads of sugar and 7,700 gallons of molasses.

Landry was apparently a shrewd manager, as the quarters on Babin Place were full of African-American workers at a time when other planters faced labor shortages and strikes. In 1870, 57 workers lived on the plantation in 15 single-family dwellings. Landry later established a school for black children on the plantation. A chance to educate their children probably made Babin Place more appealing to workers than other plantations.

To settle their parents' successions, the Gaudin heirs put Babin Place up for public sale in January 1872. The sale included:

> *all the buildings and improvements thereon, stubble and seed cane, sugar-house, steam mill and engine, etc., etc., twenty-one (21) mules, carts, plows, cultivators, corn-planters and other implements of husbandry, two (2) skiffs, carpenter's, cooper's and blacksmith's tools, block and tackle, a lot of bricks, sugar kettle, a lot of lumber, shingles and pickets, eighty (80) cords of wood, a horse mill, hay, corn and other accessories used on said plantation.*

Adelard Landry purchased Babin Place, while four of Gaudin's children bought Home Place. By 1872, Babin Place had a steam-powered cane grinder and open juice kettles in its wooden sugarhouse and produced an average of 135 hogsheads per year into the 1880s. In 1882, it was said that Landry made the "best open kettle sugar in the state." During the 1890s, Landry continued to expand Babin Place and improved the sugarhouse. By 1891, a steam train and an open strike pan were used to boil cane juice at Babin. This increased production significantly to roughly 722 hogsheads, although the average an-

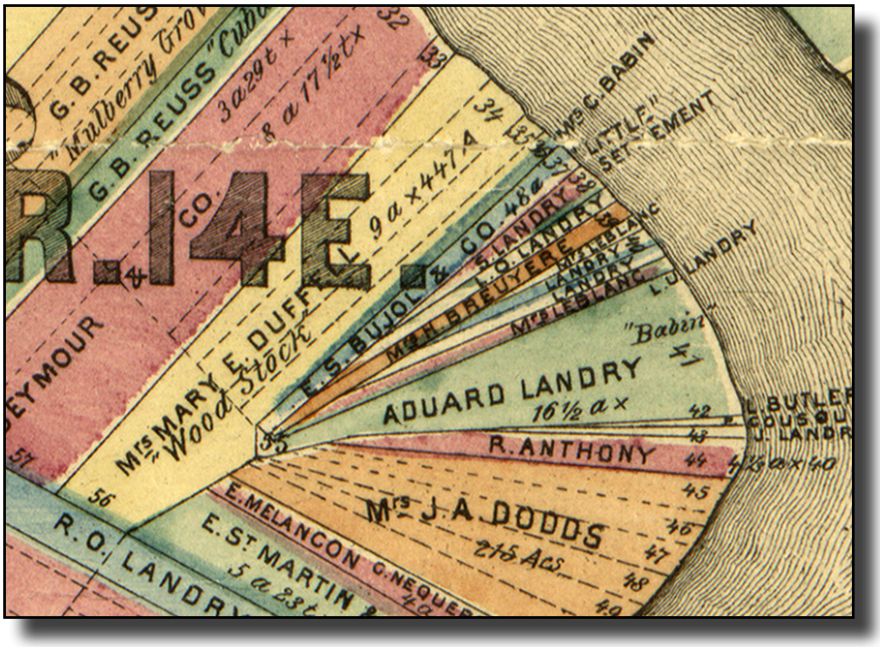


Image: Babin Place Plantation owned by Adelard Landry in 1883.

nual production in the 1890s was 309 hogsheads. In 1899, centrifugal machines, for separating sugar from molasses, were added to the sugarhouse to further increase its capacity. The Babin Place sugarhouse processed its last crop in 1901, when, Landry, then 83, sold the plantation to his children. However, sugarcane was still grown on the property by family members or lessees. Landry died in 1909 at the age of 90.

In 1911, Landry's heirs sold Babin Place to the General Grand Independent Order of Brothers and Sisters of Love and Charity of North and South America, Liberia and Adjacent Islands (GGIO), an African-American benevolent society headquartered in Houma, Louisiana. Benevolent societies consolidated resources, primarily by collecting monthly dues and seeking donations, to help families during hard times. Typically, they provided funds for medical expenses and burials, but also offered social and educational benefits. As reported in the *Donaldsonville Chief* in 1913:

> *Evidence of the successful management of financial enterprises by negroes was demonstrated here last Monday when a mortgage note of $4080.63, due on the Babin plantation, was paid by the General Grand Independent Order of Brothers and Sisters of America, a fraternal organization composed of leading negroes of the state. The Babin plantation, formerly owned by the late Adlard* [sic] *Landry, a pioneer planter, was*

Image: Dr. John Harvey Lowery

purchased two years ago by the negro society, which paid most of the purchase price cash, the balance being represented by the note liquidated Monday. The financing of the place is said to have been done by S. W. Wade and Dr. C. L. Robert, of Cheneyville, and Dr. J. H. Lowery and Prof. E. D. Wright of Donaldsonville. The plantation is now known as the New African Farm and was planted in rice for the past two seasons by the new owners, who report having made fine and profitable crops.

John Harvey Lowery, one of the financiers, was the African-American son of a bricklayer and midwife from Plaquemine, Louisiana. Born in 1860, Lowery received a degree from Straight College in New Orleans, and subsequently attended the Medical College at New Orleans University, where he received his degree in 1894. He returned to Donaldsonville where he practiced medicine for 45 years, operated a drugstore, and farmed rice and sugarcane. Lowery was also a staunch Republican, serving on the state's Republican Committee and attending every national convention between 1884 and his death in 1941. An officer of the GGIO, Lowery was instrumental in founding a training school for African-Americans in Ascension Parish, established in Port Barrow and named in his honor.

In 1920, when the benevolent society put the plantation up for sale, it contained "two splendid residences," 30 houses for laborers, a large store building and barn, plus a mammoth stable capable of accommodating 150 mules.

The GGIO did not sell the plantation but did mortgage it at least once to make other financial investments, as the minutes of one of their meetings in 1927 indicate.

Ten years ago, the Order borrowed $8,000 on the New Africa Farm; today I hold in my hand Brothers and Sisters the canceled Note showing to you that $8,000 have been paid, we have proven ourselves worthy and reputable, notwithstanding this fact, thousands of members have been added to the Order and thousands of dollars in the Endowment Department

Who Wants This Plantation

We Offer the New Africa or Babin Place CHEAP and on EASY Terms---Act QUICK if You Want It!

The place is situated in the parish of Ascension, on the west bank of the Mississippi river, about seven miles above Donaldsonville and contains 510 arpents of good, well drained land, with two large dwelling houses and thirty small buildings, large store, first-class barn and mammoth stable capable of accommodating 150 mules, all in good condition.

BANNER CROPS OF RICE HAVE BEEN MADE ON THIS PLACE

THE SOIL IS SUITABLE FOR RICE, CANE AND CORN

An opportunity of a lifetime for some one to acquire a large plantation, provided with all necessary residence buildings for owners and laborers, at a bargain.

FOR PARTICULARS, APPLY TO R. J. CHAUVIN, ATTORNEY AT LAW, DONALDSONVILLE, LA.

Image: 1920 Advertisement for the sale of New Africa or Babin Place Plantation.

with all Claims paid to date. A Burial Department with thousands of dollars on credit, a 400 acre plantation of fertile land of which prospects deem great in days to come and with a Publishing House estimating [to be worth] *over $15,000.*

The GGIO also leased plantation land to the Calcasieu Oil Company, for $1.50 an acre, and also to African-American tenant farmers belonging to the order. Dr. Lowery, then an officer and Chairman of the GGIO Endowment Board, bought New Africa Farm from the order in 1933. The sales price was $17,500, the same amount the benevolent society had paid for it in 1911. After Lowery's death in 1941, the plantation was sold by his heirs.

Rural Education at Modeste

For over a century, Ascension Parish residents in the First Ward, on the west bank of the river above Donaldsonville, educated their children in a series of rural schools built between Smoke Bend and Hohen Solms. Several were located on or near Babin Place, including the Modeste School, opened in the early 1920s to serve the needs of the black community.

Historic records indicate that public education in the Modeste area began in March of 1852 when Rosalie Dugas, Jean Baptiste Gaudin's widow, donated a 1-arpent tract on Babin Place to the Public Board of Education. The land was located near where her son-in-law, Adelard Landry, lived on the plantation's upriver boundary. The School Board constructed a school for white children, as prevailing law prevented the education of slaves. It is possible that this school was destroyed during the Civil War, as a Union Lieutenant stationed in Donaldsonville reported that a building used as a schoolhouse in that area had been set on fire. In any event, a school building stood on this property by December of 1871.

While the Federal Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands established a few rural schools for black children in Ascension Parish beginning in 1865, many more were established locally to answer the demand from the black community, including the Adelard Landry School. In 1866, freedmen began requesting that an education clause be added to their labor contracts. As a result, plantation schools were usually financed by ex-slaves and only a few by planters. However, most planters remained strongly opposed to Negro education. In January of 1868, John H. Burroughs, Sub-assistant Commissioner of the Freedmen Bureau's Donaldsonville Office, reported that public sentiment towards black schools in Ascension and St. James Parishes was "to crush them out of existence."

Adelard Landry apparently intended to establish a school for black children on Babin Plantation by March of 1866, as Landry's workers paid him a school tax, amounting to about 5 percent of their monthly pay. However, no further evidence of the Landry school or school tax appears in later Freedmen Bureau documents from October 1866 through February 1868.

By September 1871, the 12 public schools in Ascension Parish were staffed by 17 teachers. At least two of those schools, then in need of fireplaces and other repairs, were in Ward 1 and served between 90 and 95 students. It is not clear if any of these students were black. However, in December of that year, Ward 1 School Board Director C.N. Lewis sought to hire a young man "to assist a white gentleman in

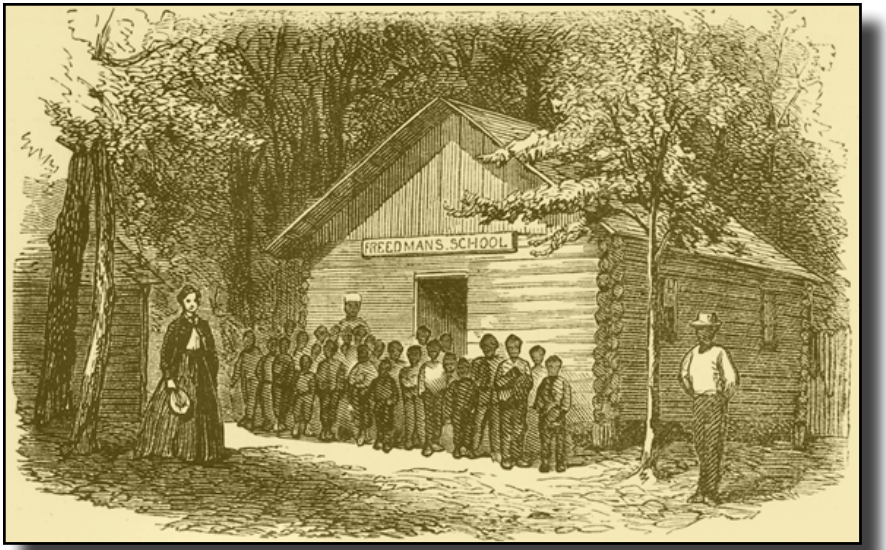
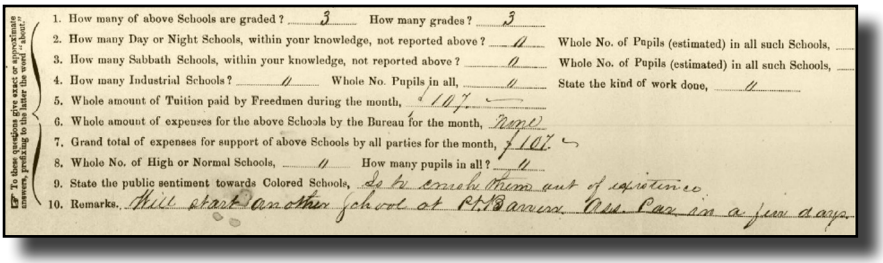


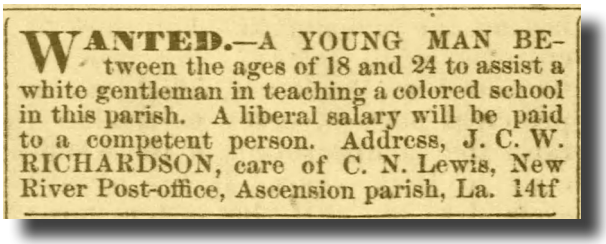
Image: Freedmen's school in 1868.



☞ To these questions give exact or approximate answers, prefixing to the latter the word "about."

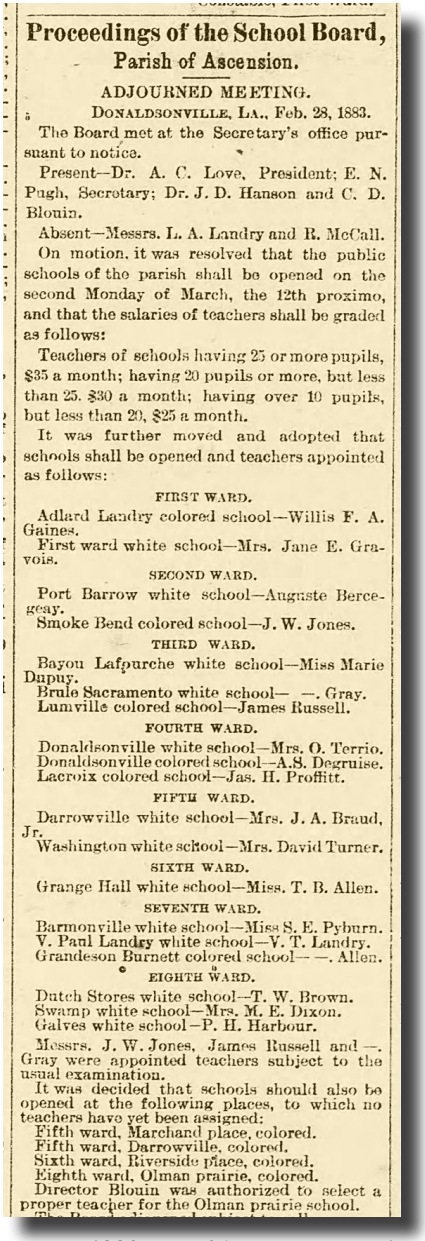
1. How many of above Schools are graded? 3 How many grades? 3
2. How many Day or Night Schools, within your knowledge, not reported above? 0 Whole No. of Pupils (estimated) in all such Schools, ___
3. How many Sabbath Schools, within your knowledge, not reported above? 0 Whole No. of Pupils (estimated) in all such Schools, ___
4. How many Industrial Schools? 0 Whole No. Pupils in all, 0 State the kind of work done, 0
5. Whole amount of Tuition paid by Freedmen during the month, $ 10 ~
6. Whole amount of expenses for the above Schools by the Bureau for the month, None
7. Grand total of expenses for support of above Schools by all parties for the month, $ 10 ~
8. Whole No. of High or Normal Schools, 0 How many pupils in all? 0
9. State the public sentiment towards Colored Schools, Do to much them out of existence
10. Remarks. Will start another School at Pt Bavers. Ass. Can in a few days.

Image: 1868 Freedmen's Bureau District Superintendent's monthly school report for St. James and Ascension parishes.



WANTED.—A YOUNG MAN BETWEEN the ages of 18 and 24 to assist a white gentleman in teaching a colored school in this parish. A liberal salary will be paid to a competent person. Address, J. C. W. RICHARDSON, care of C. N. Lewis, New River Post-office, Ascension parish, La. 14tf

Image: 1871 Advertisement for a teacher's assistant in Ascension Parish.



Proceedings of the School Board,
Parish of Ascension.

ADJOURNED MEETING.

DONALDSONVILLE, LA., Feb. 28, 1883.

The Board met at the Secretary's office pursuant to notice.

Present—Dr. A. C. Love, President; E. N. Pugh, Secretary; Dr. J. D. Hanson and C. D. Blouin.

Absent—Messrs. L. A. Landry and R. McCall.

On motion, it was resolved that the public schools of the parish shall be opened on the second Monday of March, the 12th proximo, and that the salaries of teachers shall be graded as follows:

Teachers of schools having 25 or more pupils, $35 a month; having 20 pupils or more, but less than 25, $30 a month; having over 10 pupils, but less than 20, $25 a month.

It was further moved and adopted that schools shall be opened and teachers appointed as follows:

FIRST WARD.

Adlard Landry colored school—Willis F. A. Gaines.
First ward white school—Mrs. Jane E. Gravois.

SECOND WARD.

Port Barrow white school—Auguste Bercegeay.
Smoke Bend colored school—J. W. Jones.

THIRD WARD.

Bayou Lafourche white school—Miss Marie Dupuy.
Brule Sacramento white school— —. Gray.
Lumville colored school—James Russell.

FOURTH WARD.

Donaldsonville white school—Mrs. O. Terrio.
Donaldsonville colored school—A.S. Degruise.
Lacroix colored school—Jas. H. Proffitt.

FIFTH WARD.

Darrowville white school—Mrs. J. A. Braud, Jr.
Washington white school—Mrs. David Turner.

SIXTH WARD.

Grange Hall white school—Miss. T. B. Allen.

SEVENTH WARD.

Barmonville white school—Miss S. E. Pyburn.
V. Paul Landry white school—V. T. Landry.
Grandeson Burnett colored school— —. Allen.

EIGHTH WARD.

Dutch Stores white school—T. W. Brown.
Swamp white school—Mrs. M. E. Dixon.
Galves white school—P. H. Harbour.

Messrs. J. W. Jones, James Russell and —. Gray were appointed teachers subject to the usual examination.

It was decided that schools should also be opened at the following places, to which no teachers have yet been assigned:

Fifth ward, Marchand place, colored.
Fifth ward, Darrowville, colored.
Sixth ward, Riverside place, colored.
Eighth ward, Olman prairie, colored.
Director Blouin was authorized to select a proper teacher for the Olman prairie school.

Image: 1883 List of Ascension Parish teachers.

teaching a colored school." The contact person was J.C.W. Richardson, principal of a Ward 1 school located above Modeste, on Elise Plantation at Dominique's Landing.

In February 1872, a second school opened in Ward 1, under Principal Louis Butler, an African-American police juror and later school board director and state representative. This may have been the Adelard Landry School on Babin Place. If so, it was very likely located on the same tract of land as the 1852 school founded by the widow Gaudin. By September 1873, Richardson had moved his school to Linwood Plantation in Ward 6, leaving just one school in Ward 1, presumably the Landry school. It was in need of repairs and had low attendance due to "prevailing sickness among the children" and the teacher's reported "excessive use of intoxicating liquor" making him "so obnoxious to the people that daily average attendance…is only about fifteen." In October 1873, Richardson resigned from the Ward 6 school due to his health and the difficult commute, and soon reopened his former Ward 1 school at Dominique's Landing.

By 1875, J.C. Braud was teaching white children in the Ward 1 "upper school" at Dominique's Landing, which was reportedly "in better condition than ever before." The Adelard Landry, or "lower school," then had an enrollment of 70 black pupils under the tutelage of Cornelius Bryan, an African-American who formerly taught in Wards 4 and 5. By 1878, Willis A. Gaines had replaced Cornelius Bryan at the Adelard Landry School, sometimes referred to as the Ward 1 "Lower Colored School."

Image: The Bayou Paul Colored School, a plantation school built around 1900, is still standing in Iberville Parish, Louisiana.

An African-American, Gaines lived just below Babin Place in 1880 and may have worked on the plantation as a teenager. Gaines submitted his monthly reports to the school board for publication in the *Donaldsonville Chief*. In June of 1881, 41 boys and 48 girls were enrolled, with an average daily attendance of 70. Courses taught at the school were alphabet and primer, first through fourth reader, speller, mental arithmetic, written arithmetic, and geography. G.W. Keller operated the ward's second black school, at Dominique's Landing, by 1881. Gaines and Keller both earned $35 a month.

In February 1881, Adelard Landry petitioned the School Board to relocate the school on Babin Place from the plantation's upper limits to its lower border. He complained that the building, located near his home and quarters, was being used for "all conceivable purposes except the one for which it was made" and proved a great annoyance to his family and laborers. Landry exchanged the 1-arpent tract given by the Widow Gaudin in 1852 for another parcel and agreed to move the schoolhouse and use the bricks from its two chimneys to make piers to support the building. He also consented to repair the two dilapidated galleries and replace the posts and shingles. The school board agreed to reimburse Landry for labor and materials. In late May 1882, Gaines reported that the Landry schoolhouse had been moved and was undergoing repairs. Meanwhile, he was holding classes in the St. Philip Baptist Church at Modeste, which he noted had "been placed at my disposal gratis." Some 67 pupils (39 boys and 28 girls) were then enrolled with an average daily attendance of 56.

Image: Rural black school in 1939.

Ascension Parish had at least five other schools devoted to the education of African-American children by 1885. These included Lumville, under D.C. Nelson with 96 students; Smoke Bend, taught by J.W. Jones with 85 pupils; Darrowville, run by A.S. Stephenson and having 79 children; and Ashland, instructed by Miss A. Butler with an enrollment of 52. That year, however, school board funds were exhausted by the middle of July, and all schools closed after five months. The board recommended that they not reopen until January, because many of the children would be needed in the sugarhouses during grinding season.

Established by 1889 on Babin Place, possibly on its upper border, was a white school, also referred to as Adelard Landry. Mrs. J.A. Dodds taught there from 1889 until 1892. After 1892, this school is not mentioned in historic records. However by 1894, Mrs. Dodds was operating a white school on Home Place Plantation, and did so until 1897. William Ware was schoolmaster at the "Lower Colored" Adelard Landry School in the late 1880s and Joseph Reddix for part of 1886. Gaines returned to the school in the early 1890s and was followed by Miss Lellar Flateau (1893), J.W. Jones (1896 & 1897), Dan C. Nelson (1898 & 1900), E.D. Wright (1901 & 1903), and S. Shallowhome (1904).

The lower Adelard Landry school started falling into disrepair by 1901, and the school board appointed a committee to investigate its condition. The board apparently decided not to make repairs, and in 1902, sold the building

Image: The Modeste School, also known as the Community Colored Rosenwald School of Modeste, on New Africa or Babin Place Plantation in 1932.

and property to the Union Benevolent Association of Ascension Parish. The school operated for at least another two years, probably with support from this society. The lower Adelard Landry school was consolidated with the African-American school at Hohen Solms (formerly Dominique's Landing) in December 1904. Other parish schools for black children were then located in Smoke Bend, Lumville, Donaldsonville, Cofield, Burnside, Darrow and Mt. Olive, while more than 19 public schools were available to the parish's white children. By 1910, that ratio was 6 to 24, with between 80 and 115 students attending each black school.

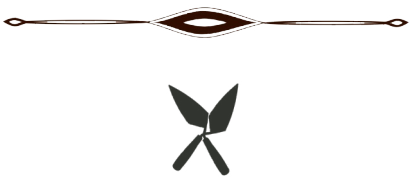
In May 1920, the new owners of Babin Place, the GGIO, donated a 1-acre tract on New Africa Farm to the Committee of the Colored School of the First Ward of the Parish of Ascension, "with the view of encouraging and providing facilities for the education of the colored children of the parish of Ascension." Located on the upper limits of the plantation, the tract was described as "the same one-acre… parcel of land on which the school for colored children is presently located," implying that the GGIO had been operating a school on New Africa Farm for some time, possibly where the white upper Adelard Landry school once met. The donation mandated that the school be used exclusively for black children and that the committee maintain the property and hold school for a number of months each year. The New Africa institution became known as the Modeste School.

Within two years, the Modeste School was flourishing, with two teachers and 91 pupils taking courses through the seventh grade. In 1922, eight other African-American schools

operated in Ascension Parish, one each in Prairieville, Donaldsonville, Burnette, Marchand, A-Bend, Port Vincent, Sorrento, and Dutchtown. Fifteen black teachers taught 843 African-American children enrolled parish wide. As 2,643 educable (i.e., between 6 and 18 years of age) black children lived in Ascension Parish in 1922, only 32 percent were enrolled in public schools. The highest grade offered to black children was the eighth, and that was available only in Prairieville.

By 1929, the length of the school term for African-Americans in Ascension Parish was only 91 days, compared to 177 for white students. The average expenditure for educating each black child was $4.98, as opposed to $30.37 for each white student. Even considering that African-American teachers taught half as long as white teachers each school term, their salaries were disproportionate. The average salary for white teachers was $5.15 per day, while black teachers earned $2.64.

Despite these disparities, the Modeste School strove to meet the educational needs of the community's black children, with both day and night classes, through the 1920s and 1930s. Staff members included Mamie and Irene Williams (1926), Evelyn LeBlanc and Alice Fletcha (1928), and Evelyn LeBlanc and Claudia M. Breau (1929). The school building was moved when the levee was set back to its current location in 1933. The school persisted until 1951, when local rural schools were consolidated into facilities in Donaldsonville. Once abandoned, the Modeste School building fell into disrepair and was eventually torn down.



Archaeology of Babin Place Plantation

In the Modeste area, the Mississippi River has meandered to the west during most of the historic period, forcing the levee to be set back at least twice, first in 1895 and then in 1933. Workers' quarters, the overseer's house, the main residence, the school and other buildings on Babin Place were moved behind the 1933 levee. However, the archaeological sites associated with those buildings remained on the river (or batture) side of the levee and were gradually buried by flood sediments.

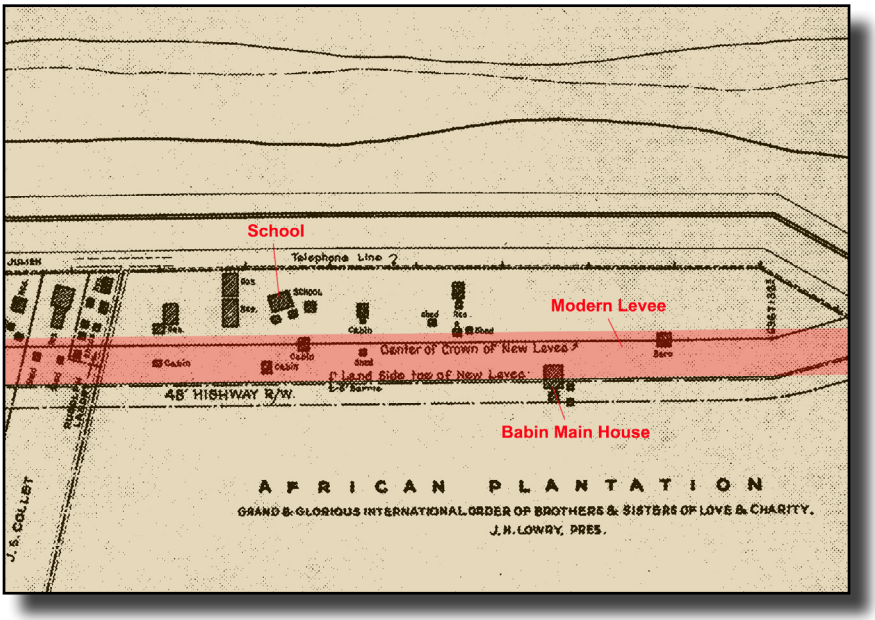


Image: The Modeste School and other buildings on the front of Babin Place or New Africa Farm in 1932.

Image: The batture at Modeste, Louisiana.

Image: Block excavations at the Modeste School.

Image: Trash deposit Feature 19 at the Modeste School.

Archaeologists used a mechanical excavator to expose the old ground surface on the batture in areas where historic maps indicated that the Babin Plantation main house and the Modeste School once stood. Exploratory trenches were expanded into block excavations consisting of 2-meter (6.6-foot) square units. The field crew hand excavated these units to examine the building foundations and features discovered and collect the artifacts associated with them.

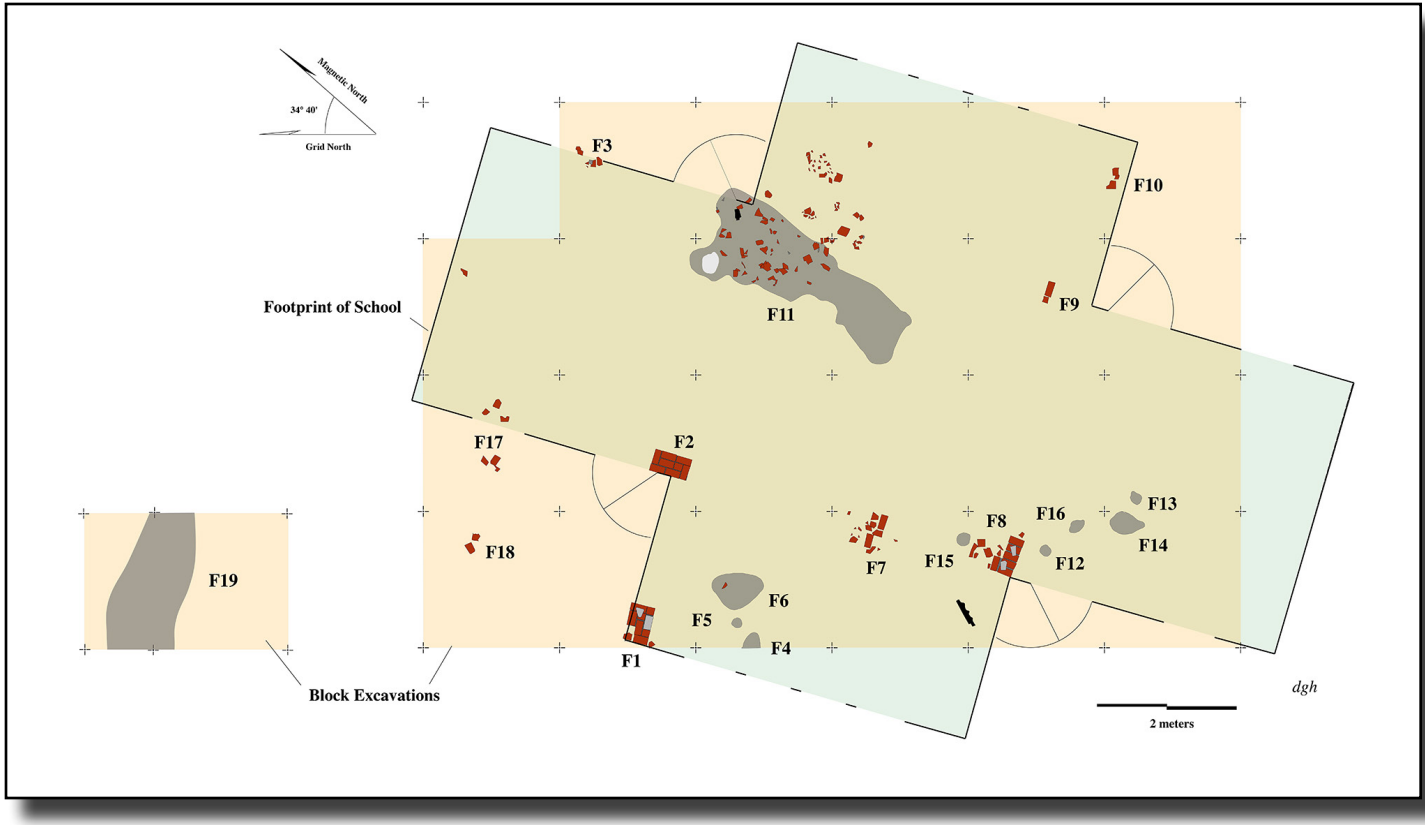


Image: Plan of the archaeological excavations at the Modeste School.

Image: Artifacts recovered from the Modeste School.

The Modeste School

Found at the former location of the Modeste School were a thin trash deposit full of artifacts (Feature 11), another small trash pit or old ditch filled with artifacts (Feature 19), and eight brick piers made of hand-made brick apparently recycled from an earlier building. A 1932 photograph of the cross-shaped school was used to estimate the building's size, given that windowpanes of the period were typically 11 inches high. The central portion of the building measured approximately 16 feet wide, which corresponded to the distance between the two piers (Features 2 and 8) at the rear of the building. Another pier (Feature 1) supported the corner of the building's rear wing. Pier Feature 9 indicated that the school's side wings were approximately 12 feet, 6 inches wide. No chimney appears in the photograph, and none was found during the excavations. According to former students, a wood-burning stove heated the building in winter, and children collected scrap and driftwood along the levee to fuel it. Local inhabitants also remembered that the school's two side wings served as classrooms, while the center room was used as a kitchen/dining room with a class area to the rear. The photograph shows a rear building to the right, which possibly is one of two outside toilets, one for boys and another for girls, that are shown on the 1932 levee setback map.

Artifacts found at the Modeste School include pieces of ceramic plates, cups, saucers, bowls, and mugs; plus glass plates, pitchers and wine glasses; soda, mineral water, medicine, perfume, liquor and milk bottles; and canning and Vaseline jars. Also recovered were parts of kerosene lamp burners, suspender buckles, stick pins, finger rings, Catholic holy medals, buttons, beads, plastic comb fragments, animal bone, carved bone, a slot machine token, metal cartridge casings, lead bullets, and shotgun shell bases.

Most of the artifacts date to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and appear residential in nature. However, the fragments of writing slates, slate pencils, and wooden pencil eraser bands found are more characteristic of a school. The large quantities of glass, relative to ceramics, found suggest that the area was used as a dump until around 1920 when the school opened, and again after the school building was moved in 1933. The ammunition could be the result of target practice at the dump, possibly aimed at glass bottles. Likewise, the animal bone found includes a lot of non-food species, like rats, toads, and frogs, which may have scavenged the dump for food and possibly become shooting targets themselves.

The Babin Main House

Found along the toe of the levee at the former location of the Babin Main House were three brick piers (Features 4, 10 and 14) made of hand-made bricks that were probably recycled from an older building. They supported the back wall of the home. The rest of the building's foundations were likely destroyed by a borrow pit dug to build the current levee.

Image: Bottles and bottle stoppers recovered from the Modeste School.

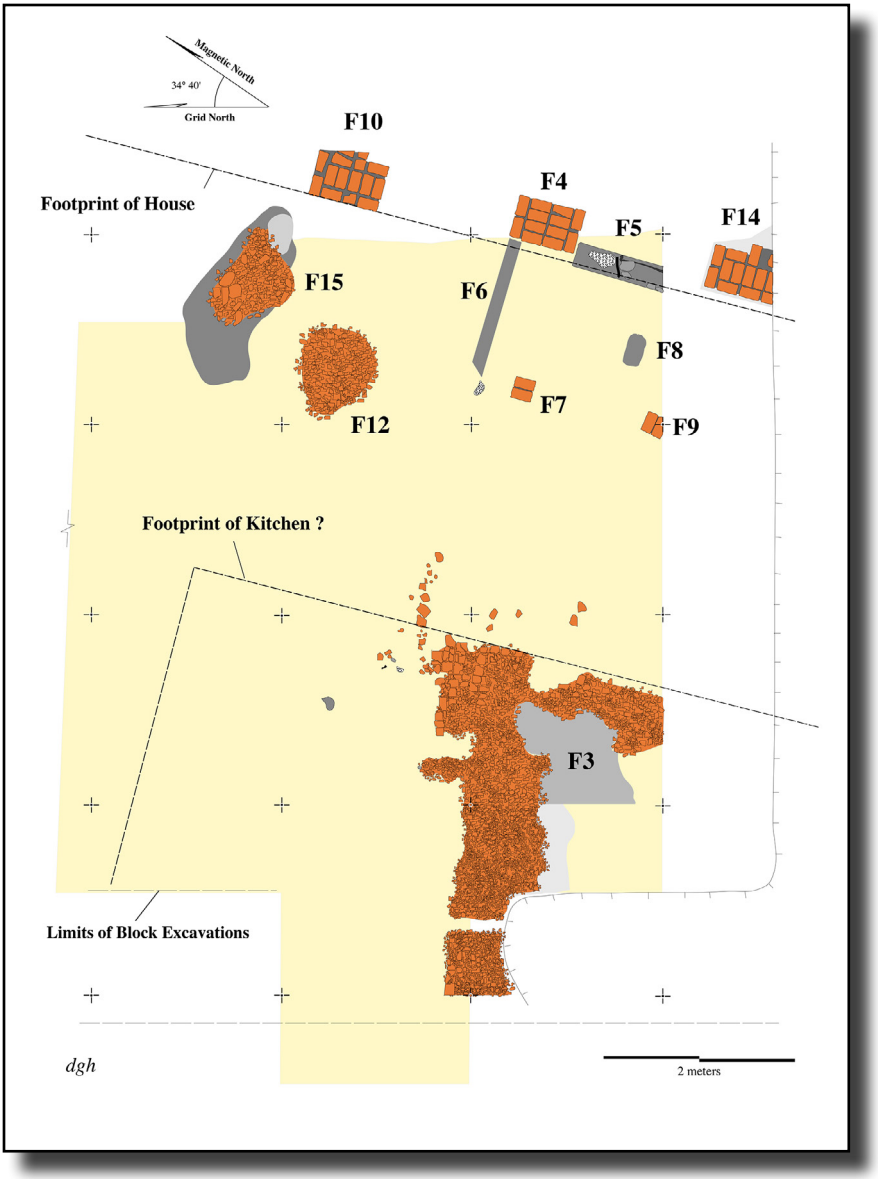


Image: Plan of the archaeological excavations at the Babin Place main house.

A linear stain (Feature 6), perpendicular to the row of piers, was likely the decayed remains of a ground sill associated with the house's rear entrance. Another larger sill (Feature 5), parallel to the piers, projected out slightly from the rear wall line. Two brick pads (Features 7 and 9), were probably also associated with the home's rear entrance. A partial brick

Image: Excavations at the Babin Place main house.

Image: Oyster shell dump Feature 2 at the Babin Place main house.

Image: Artifacts recovered from the Babin Place main house.

floor (Feature 3), likely from a detached kitchen, was surrounded by a trash deposit full of animal bone and other residential-type artifacts. Two trash pits (Features 12 and 15) contained domestic refuse, while a small oyster shell dump (Feature 2) constituted meal debris, perhaps from an important event such as a wedding or christening.

Artifacts found at the Babin Main House include portions of ceramic bowls, plates, cups, and jars, plus glass bowls, tumblers, stemmed ware, and wine/liquor, perfume, sauce, and medicine bottles. Metal finds include a boot heel plate, sliding eyeglass temple, harmonica reed, lead bale seal, Jew's harp frame, ink pen point, pocket watch charm, mosquito bar rings, jewelry,

Image: Artifacts recovered from the Babin Place main house.

Image: Babin Place main house prior to demolition in 2009.

Image: Babin Place main house heavy timber-framed construction with mortise-and-tenon joinery securred with wooden pegs, bousillage walls, and cypress siding.

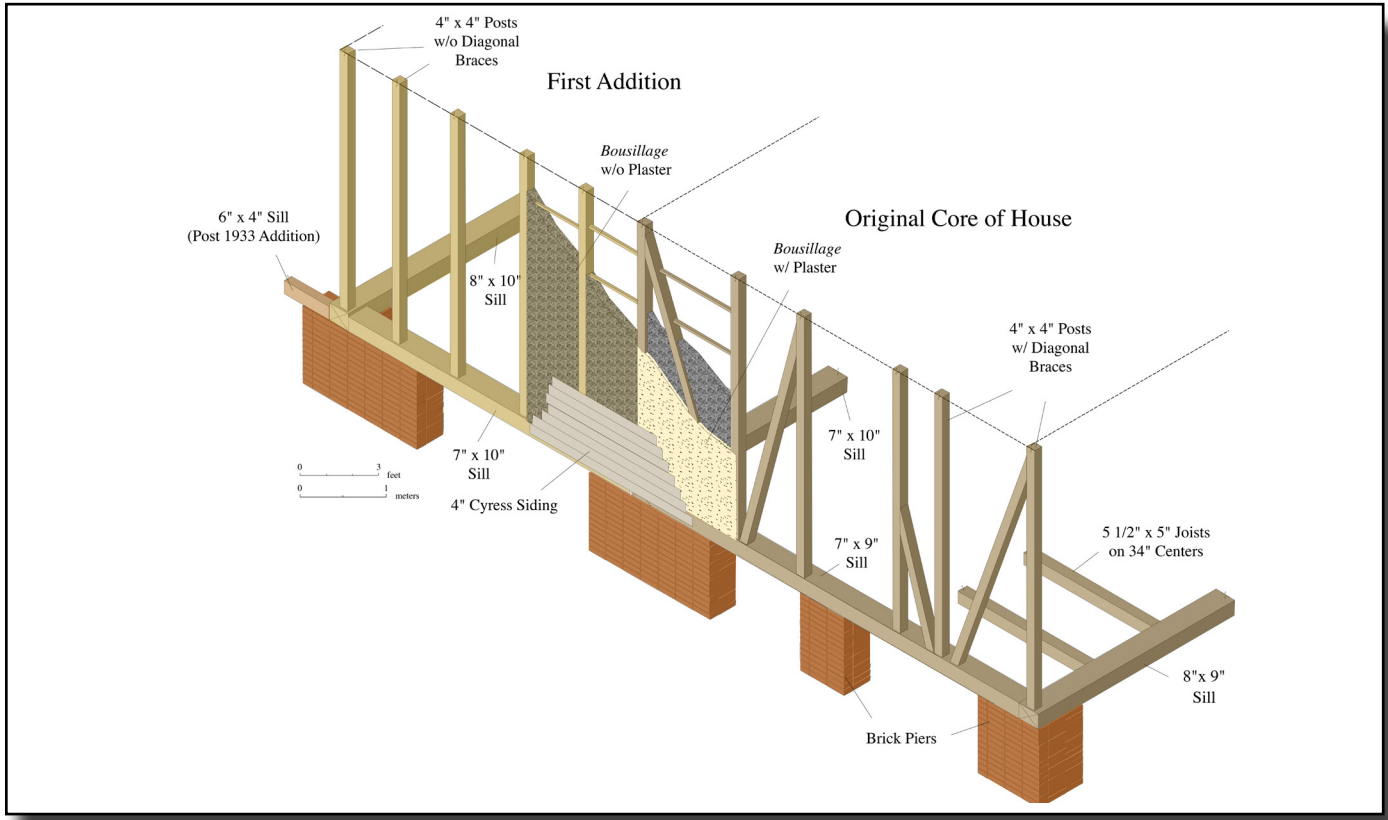


Image: Babin Place main house construction details.

watch keys, suspender buckles, and cartridge casings. Gunflints, smoking pipe fragments, carved bone, beads, and marbles were also found. Butchering patterns evident on the animal bones indicate that the beef was purchased from a butcher, while the pork was probably raised and slaughtered on the plantation, as were some chickens and sheep or goats. Wild animals consumed at the main house included fish (gar, catfish, and freshwater drum), turtle, waterfowl, quail, mourning dove, opossum, rabbit, raccoon, and squirrel. Two buttons and a lead olive oil bottle seal have French markings reflecting the Babin House occupant's Acadian French descent. Artifacts indicative of the African-American slaves on Babin Place before the Civil War, and the black workers afterwards, include a cowry shell and a hen's egg. The egg and five straight pins were intentionally buried beneath the kitchen floor. Cowry shells and hens' eggs were often associated with fertility rituals and other West African belief systems.

The Babin Place main house artifacts indicate that the home was likely occupied by Pierre Maximilien Babin, who acquired the land in 1808. Adelard Landry moved into the house in about 1846, and it was abandoned in the 1890s, probably when the levee was set back in 1895. The building itself was moved, and set back again, when the modern levee was built in 1933. Known locally as the "Africa House," the home stood to the west of the Babin Main House site until it was sadly demolished in 2009.

A typical Acadian-style cottage, the home was built with heavy cypress timbers, and mortise-and-tenon joinery secured with cypress pegs. The spaces between the wall timbers were filled with bousillage, a mixture of mud and Spanish moss. It probably had front and rear galleries. The core of the house was formed from two smaller houses built earlier in the eighteenth century. Traces of plaster beneath the cypress siding indicate that the smaller structure once had plaster covering its exterior bousillage walls. It is uncertain, but entirely possible, that one of these smaller homes was the new house under construction on Babin Place at the time of the 1777 estate sale of Etienne LeBlanc, Sr. The two-room house was assembled in about 1808 and a two-room rear addition added later. The window glass recovered from the excavations suggests that the addition was built around 1850 when the Gaudins acquired Babin Place.

Closing

Prior to this research, no other rural school in Louisiana had been examined archaeologically. From the brick piers found at the site of the former Modeste School, archaeologists were able to determine the form, size, and orientation of the building. Oral historians, working with the archaeologists, also recorded interviews with local residents to learn how the interior of the school was arranged and used over time. The excavations revealed artifacts likely associated with the school, such as writing slates, slate pencils, and wooden pencil eraser bands. Other artifacts indicated that this rural black school was erected on a former trash dump, and that this dump was reused after the school building was removed in 1933. The school was apparently erected on land not considered valuable enough for any other purposes–possibly reflecting the low opinion of African-American education, prevailing in Louisiana at the turn of the twentieth century.

Excavations at the former location of the Babin Place main house allowed archaeologists to determine that the timber-framed Acadian cottage, known as Africa House, then standing elsewhere on Babin Place, was actually the Babin Main House, which had been moved twice since it was assembled in the early nineteenth century. An architectural historian, working with the archaeologists, discovered that the core of the building actually consisted of two, small, late-eighteenth-century cabins, which had been joined together. The dimensions of the cottage matched those of the architectural foundations the archaeologists uncovered on the riverside of the levee. From the trash deposits excavated near those foundations, archaeologists could identify the wide variety of animals eaten, and could tell what animals were raised on the plantation, caught wild, or bought from town butchers. Other artifacts, like the French buttons and bottle seal, and the African-inspired cowry shell and hen's egg, reflected the ancestry of the people who lived and worked in and around the Babin Main House.

Using information gathered from the excavations and archival research, archaeologists were able to shed light on the lives of some of the residents of, and visitors to, Babin Place Plantation. Those people came from different backgrounds, some free and others enslaved. Although the original owners of the items recovered at Babin Place could not be positively identified, the marbles likely belonged to children, the tobacco pipes and pocket watch charm to men, and the jewelry and beads to women. Other items, like the eyeglasses, ink pen, clothing items and musical instruments, may have been used by anyone. All were objects of everyday life, touched and used on Babin Place, and help us understand what it was like to live, work, and study on the plantation over the last 200 years.

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Cover. Colorized undated black and white photograph of workers cutting sugarcane in Louisiana. Digital file no. det 4a27004 http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/det.4a27004. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

p. 2. Colorized black and white photograph of the Babin Place Plantation main house, November 30, 2000, courtesy of Mr. Donald G. Hunter, Baton Rouge.

p. 4. Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville 1752 *Carte de la Louisiane*. The Historic New Orleans Collection, ID. No. 1957.26 i,ii. Barry Lawrence Ruderman, Antique Maps Inc., LaJolla, California. https://www.raremaps.com/gallery/detail/55010/carte-de-la-louisiane-par-le-sr-danville-dressee-en-mai-17-danville

p. 5. Charles J. Pike *1847 Coast Directory*. The Historic New Orleans Collection, ID. No. 1953.3.

p. 6. Courtesy of Mrs. Karen M. Jarreau, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

p. 7. William McCulloh 1859 *Map of the Parishes of Pointe Coupee, West Baton Rouge and Iberville Including Parts of the Parishes of St. Martin and Ascension*. Louisiana State Land Office, Baton Rouge.

p. 8. *Le Meschacebe* [Bonnet Carre, Louisiana] 24 May 1862:1.

p. 9. C.H. Dickinsons 1883 *Map of the Parishes of Iberville, Most of West Baton Rouge and Including Parts of the Parishes of St. Martin*s [*sic*]. *Ascension and Pointe Coupee*. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, Map No. G4013.I3 1883 .D5.

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p. 11. *The Donaldsonville Chief* [Donaldsonville, Louisiana] 13 March 1920.

p. 13. 1868 engraving of "James's Plantation School." North Carolina Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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p. 13 *The Donaldsonville Chief* [Donaldsonville, Louisiana] 23 December 1871:3.

p. 14. *The Donaldsonville Chief* [Donaldsonville, Louisiana] 3 March 1883:3.

p. 15. Bayou Paul Colored School, Iberville Parish, Louisiana. Courtsey Mr. Donald G. Hunter, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

p. 16. Marion Post Wolcott 1939 photograph of the interior of a black school in the Mississippi Delta. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USF34-052319-D.

p. 17. *The Donaldsonville Chief*. 1999. *A Pictorial History of Donaldsonville*. D-Books, Marceline, Missouri.

p. 19. Louisiana Board of State Engineers 1932 *Map Showing Area of Land Used or Damaged in the Construction of the U.S. Philadelphia New Levee, Ascension Parish*. Map No. LD4-1164-1. Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, Baton Rouge.

Acknowledgements

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The GGIO (General Grand Independent Order of Brothers and Sisters of Love and Charity North America, South America and Adjacent Islands) documents were provided by the River Road African American Museum from the John H. Lowery Collection.

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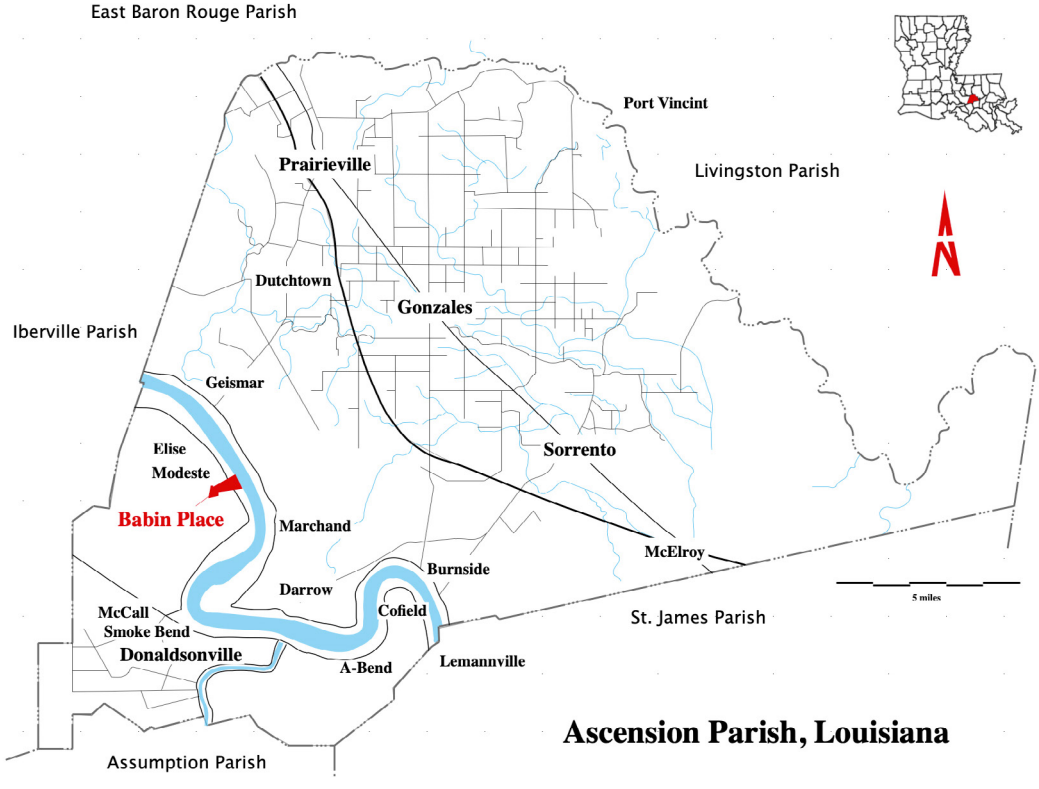
What is Archaeology?

Archaeology is a branch of scientific study that examines how people lived in the past, while a person who uses the methods of archaeology to study past peoples is called an archaeologist. To learn about people from the past, archaeologists search for archaeological sites, which are places where people once lived or worked long ago. Sites may be thousands of years old, such as prehistoric camps where early Native Americans may have once hunted or fished, or more recent sites such as Babin Place, which represents the remains of a Mississippi River sugar plantation established over 200 years ago.

To be considered an archaeological site, a location must contain artifacts or features. An artifact is anything small that was made or used by people, such as an arrowhead, a clay pot, or a glass bottle. A feature typically is larger than an artifact and represents the remnants of something built by humans, such as a building or an Indian mound. At Babin Place, archaeologists uncovered features, such as brick piers, cisterns, and trash deposits. They also recovered artifacts, such as fragments of plates, bowls, cups, bottles, and other items used by the people who once lived on the plantation.

Often, artifacts and features are located beneath the ground surface, and archaeologists have to dig in order to find them. At Babin Place, most of the buildings were either set back or torn down when the modern levee was built after the 1927 flood. The foundations of those buildings, left on the batture (river side) of the new levee, were later buried by many layers of alluvium deposited by the river during annual periods of high water. Archaeologists carefully dug down to find and study the remains of those earlier buildings (features) and the items that the people who used them left behind (artifacts).

It takes years of study and training to learn how to do archaeological work the right way. The archaeologists who worked at Babin Place all went to college to study archaeology, and also attended a field school. A field school is often an extra class, usually taken during the summer, where college professors teach students how to do archaeology properly by excavating at an archaeological site. Proper training is important, because digging an archaeological site the wrong way can destroy it forever.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Port Vincint
Prairieville
Livingston Parish
Dutchtown
Gonzales
Iberville Parish
Geismar
Elise
Modeste
Babin Place
Marchand
Sorrento
McElroy
Burnside
Darrow
Cofield
McCall
Smoke Bend
Donaldsonville
A-Bend
Lemannville
St. James Parish
5 miles
Assumption Parish
Ascension Parish, Louisiana