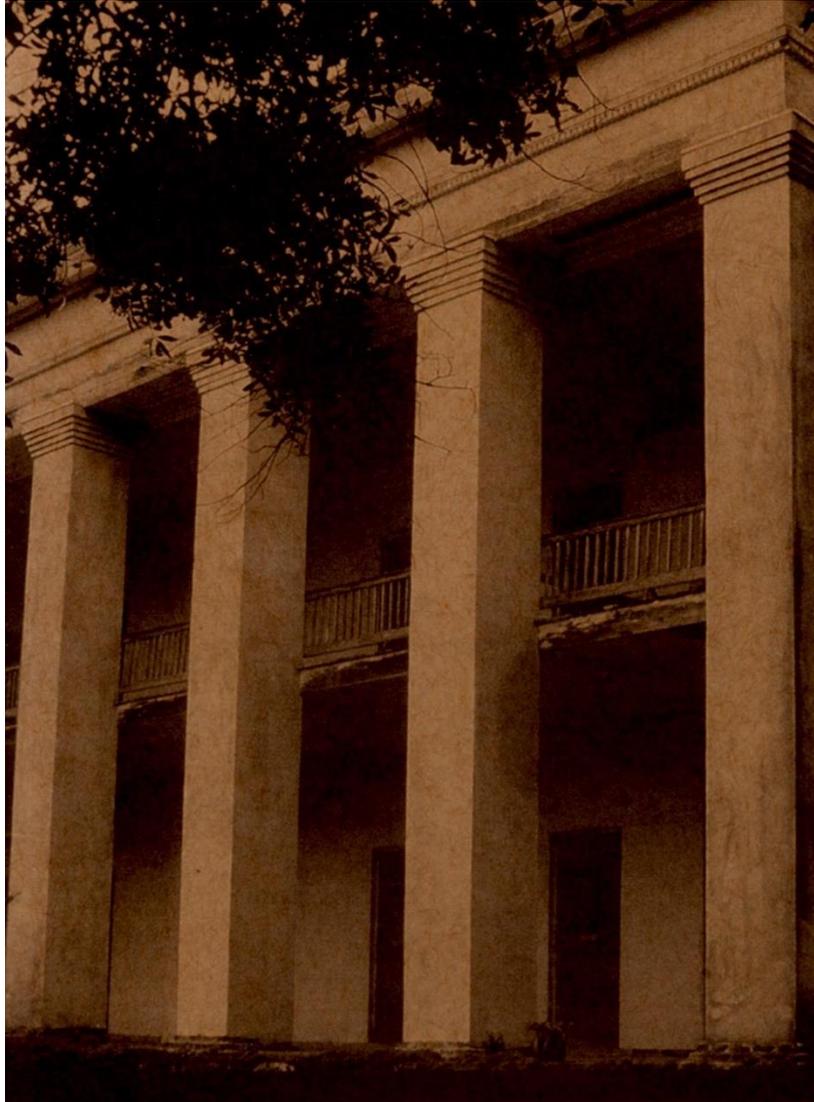


# Beyond the Great House

## *Archaeology at Ashland-Belle Helene Plantation*



Jill-Karen Yarkubik, Earth Search, Inc.

Rosalinda Méndez, Earth Search, Inc.

*Made possible by:* Shell Chemical Company (*Geismar Plant*)

*In cooperation with:* Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism  
(*Division of Archaeology*)

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## Sponsor's Note

In June of 1992, Shell Chemical Company acquired the remaining 102 acres of the Ashland-Belle Helene Plantation, including the plantation great house. This land is immediately adjacent to Shell Chemical's existing Geismar Plant operations in Ascension Parish, and its purchase made possible a major expansion of the location's manufacturing capacity.

As part of the process to acquire the necessary permits to construct and operate the expanded facilities, Shell Chemical worked in cooperation with the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Louisiana State Historic Preservation Office to recover and preserve archaeological artifacts and data from the plantation grounds. Artifacts from the archaeology have been donated to the State of Louisiana, and a detailed report of the data recovery has been produced for the State by Earth Search, Inc. who conducted the archaeology for Shell.

This booklet is an attempt by Shell Chemical, working in cooperation with the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism's Division of Archaeology, to share some of the learnings from this archaeology with the citizens of Louisiana and the general public. Shell Chemical is committed to preserving the plantation great house, but this study has shown us there is much in Louisiana's heritage that is not usually seen from the galleries of the plantation homes. Our hope is that the archaeological studies conducted at Ashland-Belle Helene and this volume will help provide additional insight into the rich history and the heritage of the community where we live and work.

**Ray Torgerson**

*Plant Manager*

Shell Chemical Company

Geismar Plant

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# State Archaeologist's Note

Each year archaeologists undertake research at various sites throughout Louisiana. Through scientific excavation and analysis of the artifacts and ecofacts recovered from these sites, archaeologists work to piece together various aspects of the cultural heritage of the diverse peoples who have occupied this area for more than 12,000 years. The findings from these investigations are reported at professional meetings, in journal articles, in limited distribution site reports, and in Louisiana Archaeology Week programs. Even so, in the past, information from these archaeological site excavations and data analysis projects sometimes reached only a handful of the state's citizens.

A new booklet series, *Discovering Louisiana Archaeology*, now provides a way for more people to learn about recent archaeological projects. *Beyond the Great House: Archaeology at Ashland-Belle Helene Plantation*, is the first volume in the new series of publications coordinated and distributed by the Division of Archaeology. This series gives the reader a concise look at specific aspects of Louisiana's prehistory and history. Each volume will detail the results of a single archaeological investigation.

The Ashland-Belle Helene archaeological project goes beyond early archaeological projects at sugar plantations that focused on the "great houses." Instead, it provides insight into the processing of cane in the sugarhouse and about the life of African Americans who toiled and lived on the plantation. The day-to-day life of slaves, and later wage laborers, is generally not reported in history books. Through archaeological research we can better understand what that life was about.

The Division of Archaeology commends Shell Chemical Company for making this information available to the citizens of Louisiana. The archaeological investigations were undertaken by Shell in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. Shell Chemical Company not only met its compliance responsibilities for its plant expansion project, but also explored ways to share the fascinating history of its property with the public. This booklet is the direct result of Shell's commitment to make the results of the archaeological project available to others.

**Thomas H. Eubanks, Ph.D**

# Introduction

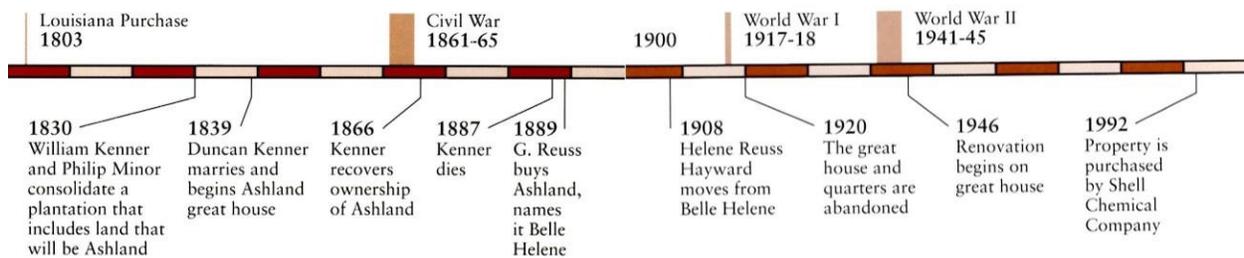
The traveler who follows the meandering Mississippi River through southeastern Louisiana can still view monuments to the state's antebellum (pre-Civil War) culture: the plantation homes of the lands' former owners. These homes, called "great houses," are testimonies to a life of wealth that was unequaled in the South up to that time.

These great houses were the centerpieces of vast plantations, rich, fertile farmlands which drew people from throughout the South, from the northeastern United States, and from as far away as the Caribbean and Europe. The planters hoped to capitalize on the nation's growing demand for cotton and sugar. Those who were successful acquired riches, and celebrated their wealth by erecting great houses as symbols of their affluence and power.

But there was another life beyond the great house, a life that cannot be understood by glancing at these grand estates from the riverfront roadways. The antebellum plantation was not just a place, it was a way of life. For many people, it was their whole life. The sweat and hard labor of slaves converted the fertile land into wealth and prestige for the planter. To get a true grasp of a plantation and its history, it is important to understand the people and processes that kept the plantation alive. Archaeology can help with that understanding.



**Enslaved peoples harvesting sugarcane.**



Ashland-Belle Helene Plantation is located in Ascension Parish on the natural levee of the Mississippi River. A natural levee is slightly elevated land bordering a river channel. Settlers were attracted by the rich land along the Mississippi River natural levee and the access to markets that the river could provide.

In recent years, the great house has been the only visible evidence of what was once the grandeur of Ashland-Belle Helene Plantation. This house and the surrounding 34 acres were listed on the National Register of Historic Places on May 4, 1979. In 1989, excavations at the property proved that archaeological remains of the quarters complex, where slaves and freedmen lived, and the sugarcane house, where cane was processed into sugar, were also eligible for inclusion on the National Register. In 1992, Earth Search, Inc., of New Orleans, was contracted to excavate in the quarters

and the sugarhouse areas by the current owners of the property, Shell Chemical Company. This study revealed the rich history contained at the site. Information from the excavations makes it possible to go beyond the verandahs and the front door of the great house into the two-room cabins, the sugarhouse, and the lives of the laborers who worked on the plantation.

The site of the sugarhouse, which had been leveled to its foundations, was almost completely excavated with a backhoe and by hand. Although there is a great deal of information on how cane was processed into sugar, and even what the machinery



**A sugarcane cart**

looked like, historians have recorded very little about how the equipment was organized within a sugarhouse. They also provide virtually no information about how sugarhouses evolved through time to accommodate changing technology.

Archaeology at Ashland has provided insight into these issues.

Over 958 sq. ft. of area was excavated by hand at each of the two slave cabin sites. In addition, artifacts were collected and the remains of buildings were mapped throughout the rest of the quarters and around the sugarhouse as these areas were cleared for construction. This phase of the project, called archaeological monitoring, provided an opportunity to examine the remains of 18 cabins, the overseer's house, a blacksmith shop, and other buildings. As a result of this work, insights have been gained into how the land at Ashland was used.

Few plantations exist today with all of their buildings intact. Some maps showing structures on plantations have survived, but these only suggest what a plantation looked like at one particular date. Archaeology is an important means of studying how plantations were organized, and how that organization changed through time. The design and location of buildings were just as important as the architectural plans for the great house. Archaeology also can provide the details of daily life of the common people-- information that is not recorded in history books. This includes what kind of

houses they lived in, what they ate, what kind of dishes they used, and how they spent their leisure time.

## The Founding of Ashland-Belle Helene Plantation

The earliest known owners of the land that would eventually become "Ashland" and later "Belle Helene" were William Kenner, a New Orleans merchant and planter, and his brother-in-law, Philip Minor. By 1830, William Kenner and Philip Minor had consolidated a sugar plantation of more than 1,800 acres, including a portion of the future Ashland tract. After William Kenner's death in 1830, his share of the plantation eventually ended up under the control of his two sons, Duncan F. Kenner and George R. Kenner. The Kenner brothers immediately began to expand their holdings.



**Ashland-Belle Helene great house**

In 1839, Duncan Kenner married Nanine Bringier, daughter of a prominent French Creole family. As a wedding present, he commissioned construction of the great house at Ashland. Construction began in 1840, and the project was completed by

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1842. The Greek Revival great house at Ashland is considered an architectural masterpiece. The quarters and the sugarhouse were built at about the same time the great house was erected. It is likely that the great house, the sugarhouse, and the quarters were all built by the plantation's slaves.

Duncan Kenner bought his brother's interest in the plantation in 1844. He named his property "Ashland" after U.S. statesman Henry Clay's plantation in Kentucky. Kenner eventually expanded his land holdings to over 2,200 acres. His estate included the neighboring Bowden Plantation, complete with its own sugarhouse, which he bought in 1858.

## The Civil War (1861-1865)

Duncan Kenner was an extremely wealthy planter. This wealth allowed him to become increasingly important in local political circles. He served in the Louisiana legislature before the Civil War, then held office in the Confederate legislature. In July 1863, during a recess in the legislature, Kenner was visiting his family at Ashland and narrowly avoided capture by the Union army. One of his slaves warned him that the Federal troops were coming, and Kenner was able to make his escape. All of Kenner's prized racehorses, most of his wine and liquor, and the Kenner family silver were captured by the Federal troops. In 1865, in a desperate attempt to get funding for the southern cause, Kenner undertook a difficult trip to Europe as a minister for the Confederate States. He had the authority to negotiate for financial support from France and Great Britain.

Even though Ashland had been captured by the Union army, sugar was still produced by the estate. The sugarhouse and its machinery were left undamaged. The overseer maintained control of the plantation and its labor force throughout the war. During the last two years of the war, Ashland was rented, and then confiscated by the Freedmen's Bureau, a Federal agency formed to assist the freed slaves. In 1866, Kenner returned from Europe, swore an oath of allegiance to the Union and was repatriated, thereby recovering the ownership of Ashland.

## After the War

Not long after the Civil War, Duncan Kenner moved to New Orleans to pursue his law practice. The workers on Ashland Plantation, probably including Kenner's freed slaves, continued to live in the antebellum quarters. Continued residence in the quarters is partly explained by the nature of labor on sugar plantations in the post-

Civil War period. Following Emancipation, working for wages replaced slavery on sugar plantations. As was the custom on sugar plantations before the Civil War, sugar laborers were organized into groups of workers who performed specific jobs directed by an overseer. On many plantations, the antebellum quarters were used to house these workers. The laborers were paid either in cash or in credits for use at the plantation store. A store, which was probably established soon after the war, was operating at Ashland at the time of Kenner's death.

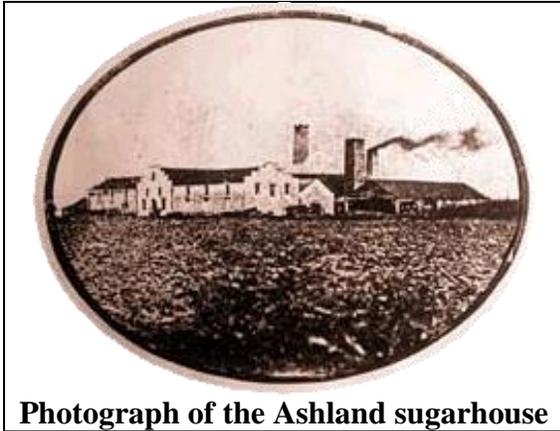
## Ashland in the Twentieth Century

The death of Duncan Kenner in 1887 signaled a period of change at Ashland. In March 1889, Kenner's estate was sold to George B. Reuss, an Ascension Parish planter. The Reuss family moved into the Ashland great house. Reuss renamed the plantation "Belle Helene" in honor of his recently born daughter, Helene. Belle Helene remained a major sugar plantation into the second decade of the twentieth century. The cabins continued to be used by the plantation workers.

Helene Reuss moved from the Ashland-Belle Helene great house soon after her marriage in 1908. However, other members of the Reuss family lived there until sometime in the 1920s. The house had deteriorated significantly by the time a restoration effort began in 1946. Although it subsequently fell victim to further decay and haphazard renovation, the house is being stabilized by its present owners, Shell Chemical Company.

As was the case with almost all the other great Louisiana plantations, Ashland passed into anonymity along the banks of the Mississippi. The quarters fell silent, the sugarcane collapsed, and the land was divided and sold. Much of the former Ashland-Belle Helene Plantation tract currently serves as the site for major chemical production facilities owned by Shell Chemical Company and the Vulcan Materials Corporation.

# The Sugarhouse and Sugar Production at Ashland



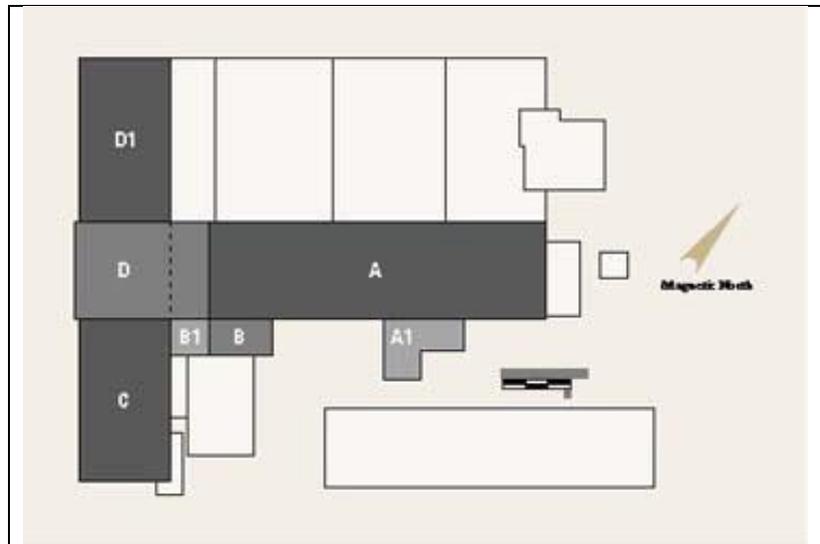
**Photograph of the Ashland sugarhouse**

Throughout the period before the Civil War and well into the twentieth century, the methods of harvesting sugarcane in the fields remained almost unchanged. However, once the cane was cut, the process by which it was manufactured into crystallized sugar went through a dramatic transformation. The transition was from animal-powered cane mills and open sugar kettles to fully mechanized, steam-powered machinery.

Only the wealthiest planters or those with access to very large amounts of borrowed capital could undertake sugar manufacturing with the latest equipment in the period after 1835. Kenner probably could have afforded to use the most efficient innovations, and the structural remains uncovered during archaeological excavations showed that Kenner made very rapid improvements to the sugarhouse during the initial years of its operation. However, the Ashland sugarhouse foundations indicate that Kenner failed to update the equipment with the latest technological advancements in the years just preceding the Civil War, since no evidence of newer technology was found during excavations. It is likely that between 1859 and 1862, Kenner shifted all or part of the processing of his Ashland cane to Bowden Plantation, which had newer machinery.

The structural remains discovered during archaeological excavations at the sugarhouse provide evidence of the construction sequence of the building. It is likely that the sugarhouse was built during the period 1836-1839. During excavations, the original dimensions were found to be 140 ft. east/west by 45 ft. north/south. The building was modified several times over a relatively short time period. While documenting the sugarhouse these alterations were seen in areas where brick masonry patterns abruptly changed or where walls touched, but were not bonded together. At least as early as 1846, the structure was lengthened to 200 ft. to make room for a new mill for crushing the cane

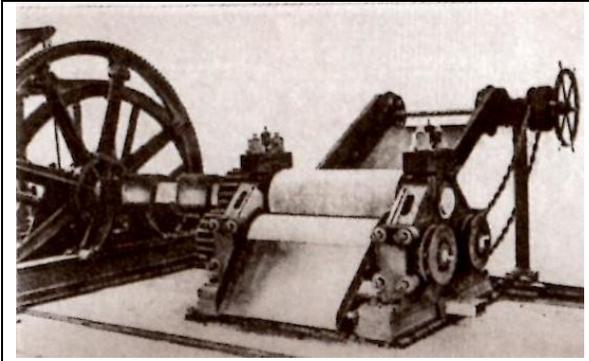
stalks. Thus, major alterations to the Ashland sugarhouse were made within 10 years of its original construction. Later, two long wings measuring approximately 80 ft. north/south by 39 ft. east/west were added. This expansion was necessary to keep up with the increased production capacity brought about by new technology which Kenner introduced in the early



**Simplified plan showing areas of use in the Ashland sugarhouse: A. Sugar Mill, A1. Boilers, B. Vacuum Pan, C. Purgery, D. Centrifugals, D1. Lump Room**

years of the plantation. Thus, archaeology shows how the sugarhouse evolved into its final, T-shaped form. A simplified plan is provided above to illustrate the layout of the building and the placement of machinery.

In Louisiana, the sugar harvest was a race against frost. It was important to avoid any delays in the milling and processing of the cane once the harvest had begun. After the cane was cut by the workers in the fields, it was laid on the ground in stacks. It was put in wagons or two-wheeled carts to be carried to the sugarhouse, where the cane was processed into sugar. Both two-wheeled carts and wagons were used at Ashland to carry cane from the fields directly to the sugarhouse. Kenner also was one of the first Louisiana sugar planters to use rail cars on a set of portable tracks for transporting cut cane. Light-gauge rails and metal cross-ties for a portable system were recovered next to the westernmost wall of the sugarhouse during archaeological excavations.



**Typical three-roller horizontal cane mill, intermediate gearing, and engine**

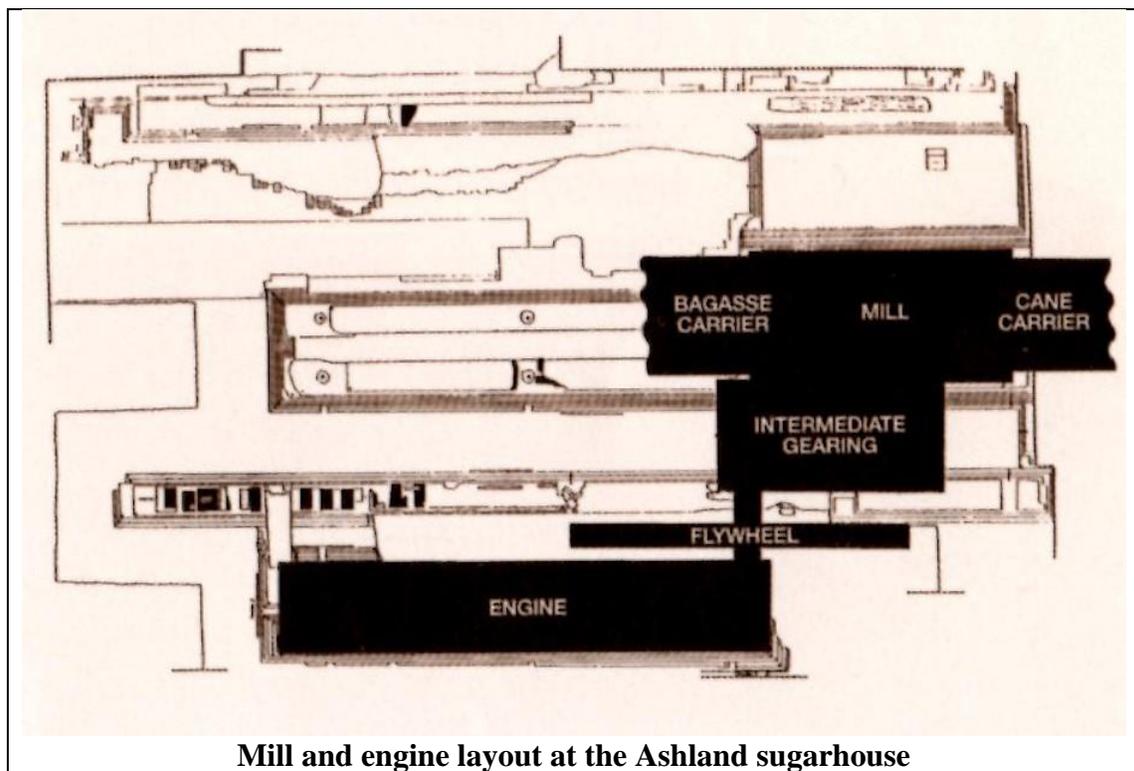
When the cane arrived at the sugarhouse, the stalks were thrown onto the "cane carrier." This was a kind of conveyor belt which carried the cane to the mill. A gear wheel from the cane carrier chain drive was found at the sugarhouse site in Area A (refer to plan) where the carrier was formerly located.

From the cane carrier, the stalks

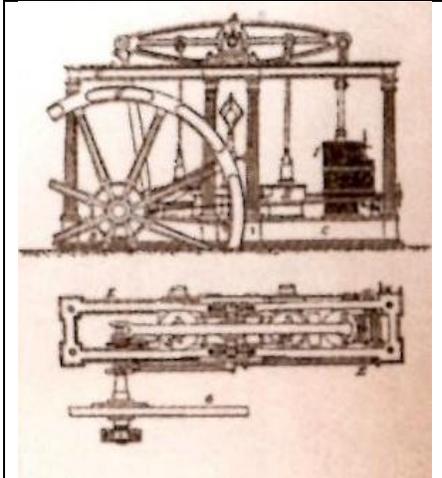
passed through the horizontal, cylindrical rollers of the mill. This process squeezed the juice from the cane stalks the way a wringer washing-machine squeezes water from clothes. During excavation, the location of the mill was identified in Area A. The mill frame at Ashland was approximately 7 ft. wide. The top of the mill frame would have stood close to 7 ft. above the base of the frame, where it rested upon a heavy timber bed.



**Cane carrier drive wheel found at the Ashland sugarhouse**



**Mill and engine layout at the Ashland sugarhouse**



**Schematic drawing of a typical cane mill engine**

The large steam engine that powered the mill was also located in Area A. This was determined by using the recorded dimensions of the engine to identify the brick foundations on which it sat. The frame of the engine measured 4 ft. 6 in. in width and over 20 ft. in length. The entire apparatus probably stood an impressive 25 ft. tall.

The steam used to power the machinery was created by boilers. The typical boiler had a firebox at the end of the boiler shell or shells where wood and dried cane stalks were burned. The boiler shells contained water. The firebox heated the water in the boilers,

producing steam. During excavation, the foundations for three sets of boilers and actual boiler shells were discovered. The foundations, or "boiler settings" were all located in Area A1. One of the boiler settings measured approximately 40 ft. 9 in. long and 14 ft. 3 in. wide. This provided room for 30-ft.-long boiler shells.

After the stalks were milled, the juice from the cane ran out the bottom of the mill through a strainer into a tank. This started a number of processes generally called "clarification." During clarification, impurities were removed from the cane juice, and the liquid was thickened by evaporation. First, the cane juice in the tank below the mill was pumped into another container called the juice-heater. From the juice-heater, the warmed liquid was conveyed to a set of evaporators.



**A boiler shell found at Ashland**

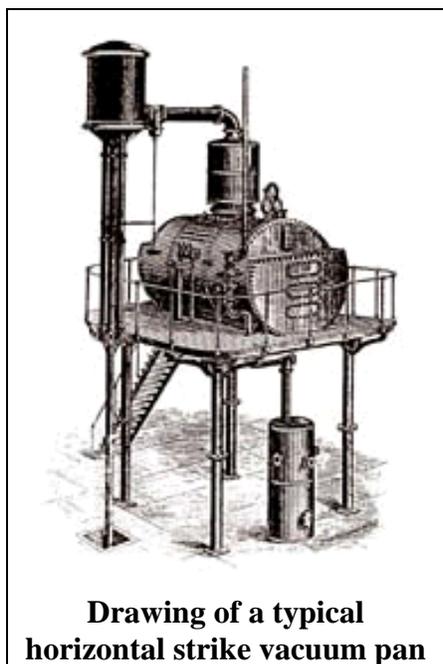
Evaporators were large vessels where the heated juice was further concentrated. When the juice was thickened, the syrup was put in steam-heated vats, known as clarifiers, where impurities were eliminated by adding lime to the syrup and then straining the mixture. Clarification at Ashland took place in Area A.



**Vacuum pan foundation discovered during excavation**

The clarified, strained syrup or molasses was then placed in a closed vessel known as a vacuum pan, where it was boiled until the sugar in the syrup was crystallized. The vacuum pan operated with steam running through copper tubing inside the pan to heat the juice. During excavation, the location of the Ashland vacuum pan was identified in Area B. A number of

indentations in the floor of this area showed where the cast-iron columns which supported the vacuum pan were located. Also, plates that had secured the copper tubing within the vacuum pan were found. Long brick foundations also suggested the possible location of pumps, additional engines, and other machinery associated with the vacuum pan.



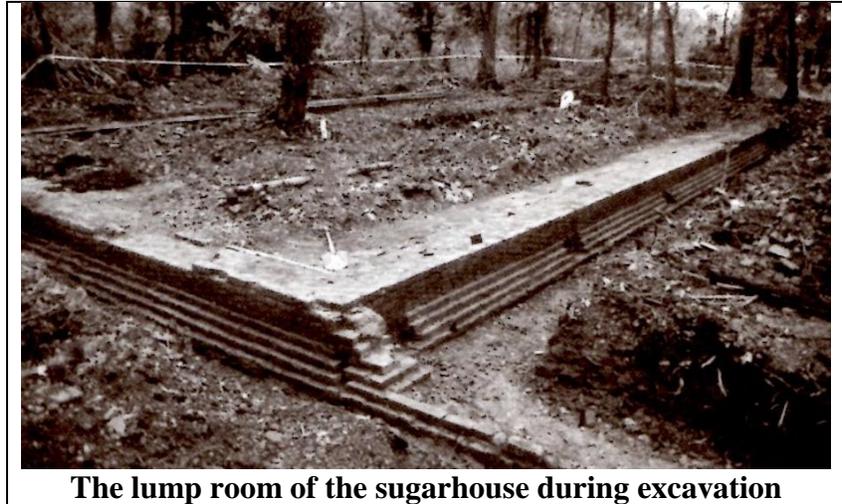
**Drawing of a typical horizontal strike vacuum pan**

The next stage of the sugar-manufacturing process was called "purging." During purging, the crystallized sugar was cooled and then separated, as much as possible, from any remaining molasses. In contrast to milling and boiling, cooling and purging required little structurally other than the provision of adequate space.

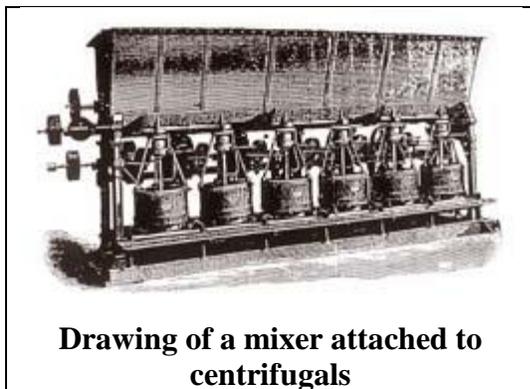
Purging began with the removal of the crystallized sugar from the vacuum pan by releasing the crystallized sugar and molasses into hand carts or sugar wagons. The sugar was then transferred to the coolers. The coolers were long, flat troughs that were located in what was known as the "lump room" of the Ashland sugarhouse.

Descriptions in the 1852 Ashland Plantation record book led to the identification of Area D1 as the lump room. After cooling, the solidified cakes of sugar were difficult to remove from the troughs. The harder the cakes became, the better the sugar they

produced. Workers broke up the cakes with shovels, picks, and crowbars. The sugar was then spaded out of the cooling troughs and packed directly into large barrels, called hogsheads. The barrels had holes in one end which were plugged with pieces of sugarcane.



The filled barrels were then set on the floor over a large cistern in Area C, called the "purgery," because here the molasses was purged or removed from the sugar. The molasses remaining with the crystallized sugar would drain out of the barrels through the cane plugs into the vat. The purgery vat at Ashland was actually a mortar- or cement-covered floor sloping towards its center where the molasses would collect. Workers then filled barrels with the molasses using long-handled scoops.



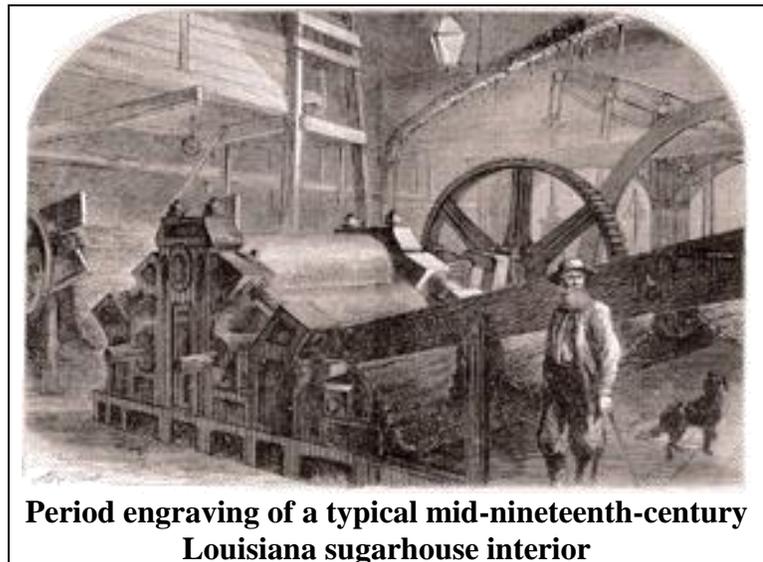
The purgery needed to be a sizable area, since hundreds of barrels could accumulate over the course of the weeks the sugarhouse was in operation. The sugar was then shipped in the barrels, which varied in final weight from 700 to 1,200 pounds.

Before the Civil War, Duncan Kenner added centrifugals to help separate the sugar from molasses. Centrifugals spun out the molasses by centrifugal force, much like a washing machine spin cycle. Pieces of centrifugal mesh were found during excavation in and around Area D, so the centrifugals were probably once located in this area.

During sugar production, the ideal was to have the whole process working constantly, day and night, with no back-ups or bottlenecks along the way. Evidence of the hectic around-the-clock operations of the sugarhouse include the lamp wick ports and lamp glass recovered during excavations. In Louisiana, it was usual to operate the sugarhouse 24 hours a day during the harvest, stopping only when necessary to clean boilers and fireboxes. The slaves worked in shifts to keep the process going. Many

planters attempted to instill in their slaves or workers a competitive spirit to pursue record sugar production with each crop. Obviously, the planter had his own interest in mind by maximizing production, although slaves may also have taken pride in the status conferred by large production. During the harvest season, the slaves enjoyed the extra food and drink supplied by some masters. Slaves might have been expected to work quickly so that the intensive workload of the harvest season would be finished sooner rather than later. A visitor to a Louisiana sugar plantation observed that the entirety of the slave force; men, women, and children, worked for 18 hours a day during the harvest season.

As one might guess, engines, mills, pumps, and other machinery, with their wheels, gearing, and leather or chain belting, combined with the feverish round-the-clock activity of sugar processing, produced a potentially hazardous workplace. Slaves, sometimes young boys, were stationed around the mill to keep the mechanism free of tangled stalks and to throw imperfectly ground cane back onto the conveyor for regrinding. It was not uncommon for the workers to be injured or killed when caught in flywheels, gears, and other moving parts.



**Period engraving of a typical mid-nineteenth-century Louisiana sugarhouse interior**

Then too, sometimes tools would get caught in machinery and break it. It is possible that some of these "accidents" were in fact intentional resistance by the slaves and freedmen to their working conditions.

The complex machinery also demanded a skilled work force. Historical records state that the 8-to-12 hands usually at work in the sugarhouse during the 1852 sugar processing season were the plantation carpenters. While carpentry skills are not directly related to sugarhouse operations, this group of slaves was probably the largest single group of artisans on the estate. Consequently, they may have held a special status as skilled laborers. It seems that the "less skilled" work of harvesting cane was left to the field hands, while the no less taxing but more sophisticated work in the

sugarhouse was performed by the artisans.

The primary research goal of the Ashland sugarhouse excavations was collecting information on the machinery and architecture of Louisiana sugar production. This objective was successfully met. The archaeological record has substantially increased the information on where machinery was placed and the kinds of foundations needed to support them. This investigation was successful in identifying not only different use areas within the sugarhouse, but also the association of specific features with documented equipment. The excavation of the Ashland sugarhouse has been the only one of this scale in Louisiana to date. The information produced by this investigation will help future researchers understand the layout and the function of features in a typical mid-nineteenth-century Louisiana sugarhouse.

## Daily Life in the Quarters

In contrast to the harsh working conditions in the fields and in the sugarhouse, slaves and freedmen did enjoy a limited social life. Because their mobility was limited, social interaction and family life was more, rather than less important to slaves and freedmen. The quarters and the relative privacy they provided from the direct supervision of the master and overseer was vital to their sense of family and provided them with a small measure of independence. The cabins were also the place where traditional beliefs were practiced and passed on from parents to children. There are virtually no objective written accounts of the daily life of slaves and freedmen. By determining the kinds of food they ate, the things they owned, and the games they played, archaeology can give a better understanding of the life of African-Americans in the nineteenth century.



**Saddlebag double quarter cabin similar to those at Ashland (example from Welham Plantation, St. James Parish, ca. 1835)**



**Woman with child in a quarters setting**

By the 1830s, slave owners with large plantations had become more concerned with the design and uniformity of their quarters housing. The cabins, which were probably built by the slaves, were constructed according to a strict European-American style. The cabins often conformed to a conventional range of size and design and showed little evidence of direct African influence. After 1825, typical slave housing on large Louisiana sugar plantations was the single- or double-family frame cabin. This was the type of cabin used at Ashland.

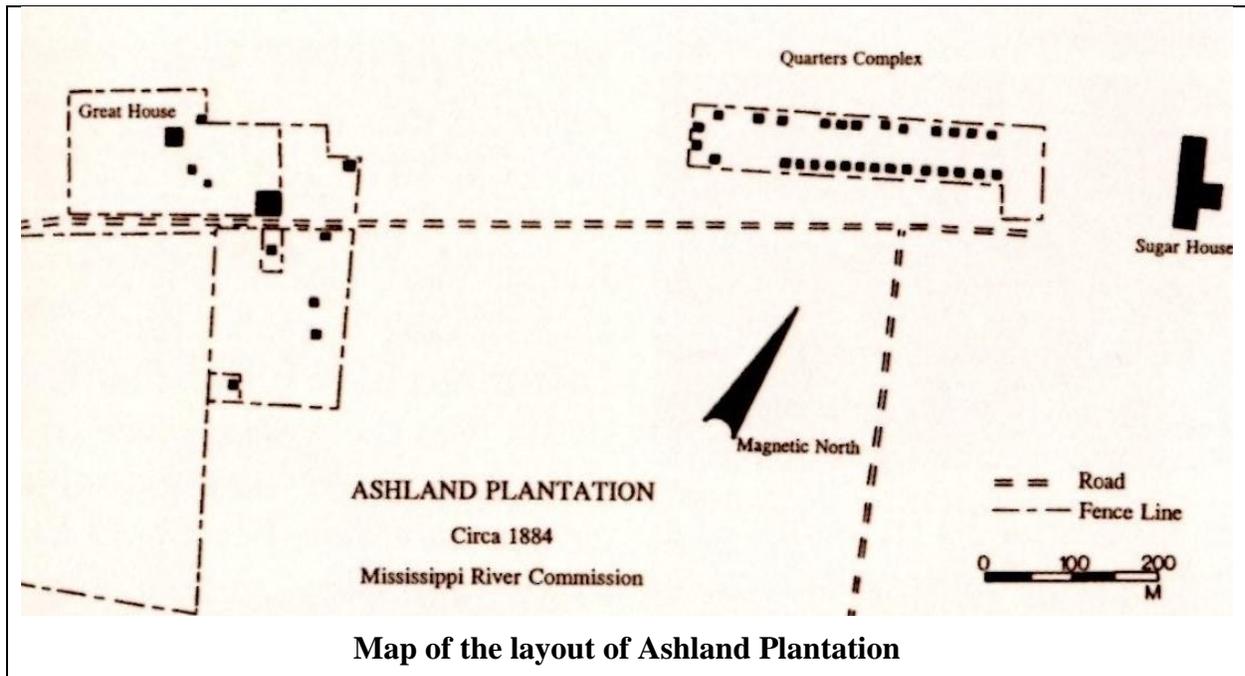
No documents report exactly when the quarters at Ashland Plantation were built. Artifacts found during excavation suggest that the cabins were probably built when construction began on the great house. In Louisiana, the quarters complexes of large plantations were generally arranged in the linear plan or the block

plan. Ashland followed the linear model, with the great house located close to the Mississippi River and the quarters cabins running in two rows toward the sugarhouse, which was located approximately 3,772 ft. from the mansion. An 1884 map of the plantation shows that the Ashland quarters consisted of about 30 cabins in two parallel rows separated by a road. The quarters were located between the great house and the sugarhouse.

The layout of the cabins was confirmed during archaeological field work. It was observed that the cabins were very similar in size, averaging 20 ft. x 40 ft. Fifteen chimney bases with double fireplaces were found, and these were also very similar in construction. This suggests that the cabins were built according to a single plan. Most of the cabins were spaced fairly regularly, with approximately 72 ft. between their chimney centers, so that the cabins stood about 32 ft. apart.

Two cabin sites in the northern row were selected for extensive non-mechanical excavations. Both sites had ceramics that dated both before and after the Civil War, and both sites had a central mound, which was assumed to mark the location of the chimney base. An area surrounding each mound was fenced to protect the site during construction to expand the adjacent chemical manufacturing site. This fence encompassed both the cabin area and the surrounding yard. A total of 89 1 x 1 meter units, or 958 sq. ft. of area, were excavated at each of the cabin sites. While excavations were taking place at the two cabin sites, archaeological monitoring was performed in the construction area. As areas were cleared and stripped of vegetation, archaeologists watched to see if artifacts or foundations were being uncovered. When

features or artifacts were found, construction stopped until the archaeologists documented the area and collected the artifacts.



The cabins sites selected for excavation were designated Cabin 1 and Cabin 2. Based on the location of the remains of the brick support piers found during excavation, Cabin 1 measured approximately 40 by 20 ft., or 800 sq. ft. Cabin 2 also measured 20 ft. wide north/south, but its east/west dimensions were uncertain because the remains of piers were not found on the east and west sides. Both cabins had central chimneys with double fireplaces that would have served two rooms. Thus, the cabins likely had at least two rooms, each measuring 20 ft. x 20 ft. At most plantations, each half of the cabin would house one family.



**Double chimney foundation discovered during excavation in the quarters area**

In some cases, the locations of former piers could only be determined by depressions and/or concentrations of architectural debris. Evidence of brick rubble landings, or "mud steps," were found in front of the doors of both cabins. This means that the cabins were probably constructed without porches, possibly with overhanging eaves. Not only were the cabins at Ashland large relative to cabins found at other



**Archaeological crew excavating  
Ashland quarters Cabin 2**

southeastern Louisiana plantations, but flat glass collected at both cabins indicate that the cabins had glass windows even before the Civil War. The cabins were evidently whitewashed, because fragments of dried whitewash were recovered at Cabin 2.

The United States census reported that Kenner had 117 slaves in 1840 and 169 slaves in 1850. This suggests that Kenner only had four to six slaves living in each

cabin. Historians have noted that five or six was the average size of a slave household, so the double cabins may have been used by single families.

Artifacts found at the cabin sites indicate how long the quarters were occupied. Based on the objects that were found at the different cabin sites, the quarters began to be abandoned in about 1885, and probably all the cabins were unoccupied by the 1920s. The north row of cabins was deserted more rapidly than the south row. Bricks from the abandoned cabins were removed from their piers and chimneys, probably for reuse in the cabins that continued to be occupied.

The distribution of artifacts found during monitoring indicated changes in the use of different areas over time. For example, domestic trash such as ceramics, glass, and animal bone found in combination with structural remains in the vicinity of the sugarhouse showed that a few households lived outside of the quarters during the late-nineteenth century. It is unlikely that these new living areas were established merely because all habitable cabins within the quarters were occupied. Additional cabins could have just as easily been built within the quarters complex. Instead, these residential areas near the sugarhouse may be evidence of African-Americans who resisted living in the quarters as they had as slaves.



**Mud step during excavation of the  
Ashland cabins**



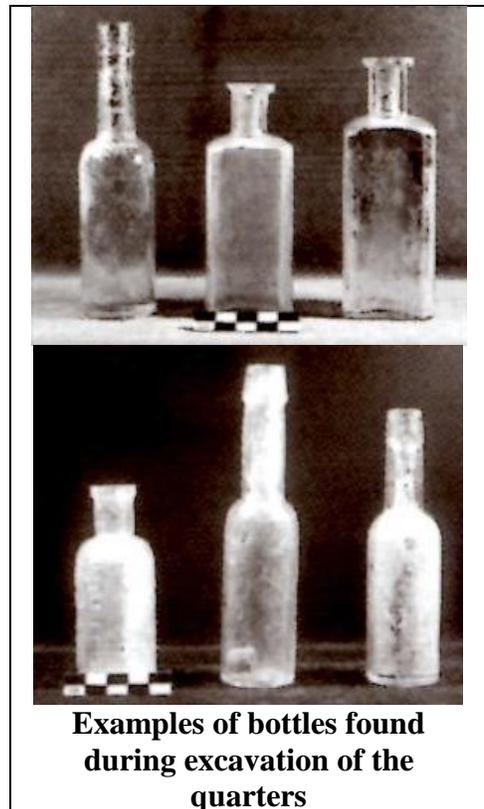
**Hoe blade from Ashland**

Excavation of the cabin sites and their surrounding yards provided a unique view of the lives of the people who kept the plantation alive. Historical records indicate that most slave holders, including Duncan Kenner, allowed their slaves to have gardens. Vegetable gardens were generally located inside fenced yards. Archaeological evidence of a fence that may have encircled a garden was found at Cabin 1. The fence may have also been a pen for animals. In addition to growing such vegetables as

black-eyed peas, collards, cabbages, and turnips, slaves often raised poultry, rabbits, and hogs. They occasionally sold the surplus to their own masters, providing the slaves with much-needed cash.

In addition to the monetary incentive of having a garden, it also allowed the slaves to vary their diet. Information is limited on the diet of African-Americans living on plantations, because most excavations have focused on great houses rather than on the quarters. Historical records state that the foundation of the slave diet was cornmeal and salt pork, issued by the slave owner. The average ration was about three and one-half pounds of pork and eight quarts of cornmeal per week for each slave. Slaves at Ashland were also regularly provided with molasses. Obviously, without the addition of vegetables, this diet would be far from nutritious.

Without supplemental meat, their diet would have also become monotonous. At Ashland, most of the animal bone found in the quarters was pig and cattle, which was likely supplied by the planter. Cuts of meat from both cows and pigs were primarily from the head, or in the case of cows, from less meaty parts of the body. The types and cuts of meat used at Ashland were typical of those consumed at other southeastern Louisiana plantation quarters sites, such as Elmwood, Destrehan, and Beka plantations. This may indicate that the diet of slaves was fairly standardized in this region. However, the archaeological evidence demonstrates that slaves added significantly to their diet by fishing, trapping, and hunting. The bones of raccoon, opossum, rabbit, and wild birds were also recovered. Fish bone found during excavation in the cabins included freshwater drum, gar, catfish, sunfish, and mackerel.



**Examples of bottles found during excavation of the quarters**



**Samples of ceramic fragments found at the Ashland quarters**

These wild species made up almost half of the animal remains found at Cabin 1 and Cabin 2.

Meals were a time when the community or family came together. Ceramics found during excavation show the kind of tableware they used. Interestingly, similar ceramic patterns were found at a number of different cabin sites. This suggests that the African-Americans at Ashland were probably getting their tableware from the

same source, most likely the Ashland Plantation store. The fact that many items listed in the store inventory were found at the cabin sites provides further evidence that the African-Americans made many of their purchases at the Ashland store.

Additionally, the artifacts from Cabins 1 and 2 exhibited a great deal of similarity in the kinds and proportions of objects in the collections. The similarities between the collections from the two cabins illustrate how a planter might continue to control the African-Americans' access to goods, even after Emancipation. The plantation store provided everything needed, but the variety of goods stocked was limited. Thus, it appears that the freedmen's possessions at Ashland were affected by limited market access.



**Archaeological crew excavating quarters Cabin 2**

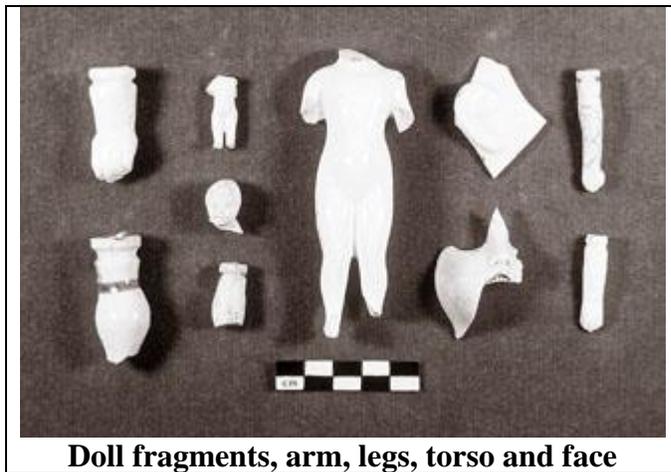


**Pipe bowls from Ashland**

The quarters were where the African-Americans on the plantation spent their limited leisure time. "Leisure" no doubt is a relative term. In the context of the Ashland quarters, this presumably was one area of the slaves' lives over which the master had little or no control. However, despite the difficult lives they led and the constant demands of the master and overseer, slaves did not surrender all of their independence. During

their leisure time they played games, smoked, or made music, and they participated in their own social festivities and rituals.

Children in particular had a wide variety of activities they engaged in around the cabins. Although some slave children were already working by the age of 10, field labor usually began at about age 12. It was common for younger children to be left in the quarters during the day. An elderly woman was in charge of the smaller children. Nursing children were kept in a special building in the quarters and visited by their mothers a number of times a day to be fed. Older girls helped to watch their younger siblings.



**Doll fragments, arm, legs, torso and face**

Playing marbles was a favorite pastime of both children and adults. Ceramic, glass, and limestone marbles were collected during excavations at both cabin sites at Ashland. Most of the ceramic marbles were "commies," or common earthenware marbles. These unglazed, earth-toned marbles were manufactured until the late 1920s. Based on historical records, marbles were the only toy sold at the Ashland

store at the time of Kenner's death. Numerous marbles and china doll fragments found in the Ashland quarters provide evidence of the plantation children's activities.

A large number of buttons were found scattered across the yards surrounding both cabins. Buttons are usually abundant on sites where African-Americans lived, and large numbers of buttons have been found at other sites in Louisiana, such as Orange Grove and Oakley plantations. The large number of buttons found by archaeologists in and around quarters areas might be related to any number of games played by African-American children where pawns, tokens, or "forfeits" were used. These games had names like Uncle Tom, Jack in the Bush (also known as Old Gray Mare), Hold Fast to What I Give You, and Truth or Dare. Buttons could have also been used as counters for the African game Mancala. Buttons were also carried in the pocket for good luck, and they may have been strung as necklaces or bracelets for the purpose of adornment.



**Examples of buttons found at Ashland**

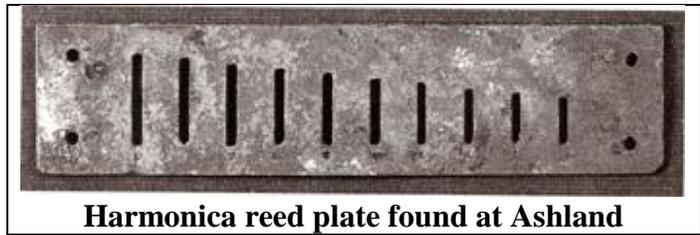
The slaves' musical instruments were usually homemade. The banjo was an instrument of African derivation. The fiddle, which also had West African



**Drawing of a fiddler**

counterparts, was probably the most popular instrument throughout antebellum rural America among slaves and whites. However, the popularity of most folk wind instruments fell victim to the harmonica, often called a "French Harp" in the deep South. Hand-manufactured harmonicas, imported from Germany, were introduced in America before 1830. Costing 10 cents in 1850, harmonicas were already common in the United States prior to the Civil War and were even frequently traded to Native Americans on the frontier. The instruments began to be mass-produced in 1867, and one could be bought for 5 cents until about 1900. The Ashland Plantation store sold harmonicas. Several harmonica reed plates were found during excavation at both Cabins 1 and 2.

Even though articles reflecting leisure activities, such as smoking, games, and music were collected from the quarters, they were not plentiful compared with the number found at nineteenth-century urban



**Harmonica reed plate found at Ashland**

residential sites. Both African-American and European-American lower- to middle-class households in New Orleans generally have a higher proportion of artifacts reflecting leisure pursuits in their collections. This probably indicates that African-Americans on plantations had both less leisure time and less access to these items.

Traditional religion and beliefs were an important element of slave culture. African cultural beliefs and practices were not forgotten under American slavery or following Emancipation. Although African-Americans may not have had access to objects or materials used for ritual practices in Africa, archaeological research has shown that they used and reworked common items to help maintain their belief system. These items could have been used in ritual practices, despite pressures from European-Americans to erase all African cultural beliefs and heritage. Similarly, using common European-American objects could serve to camouflage forbidden ritual activity.

The more exotic and less understood system of beliefs held by the plantation slaves was generally known as "Hoodoo." This set of beliefs played an important part in the slaves' commitment to the folk aspect of their religion and their spirit of resistance to the master's culture. Many masters attempted to prevent their slaves from participating

in folk practices, such as wearing charms or amulets. The beliefs of the slaves survived despite the efforts of their masters to stop them. However, because these beliefs and practices were largely forbidden, they are poorly documented in historical records. Archaeology is an important means of gathering evidence of these practices.

A large number of objects were used as charms or amulets. A partial listing includes herbs and roots, the feet of animals, such as rabbits or raccoons, thimbles, needles, nails, human hair or nail parings, pierced silver coins, buttons, beads, polished stones, worked bones, pieces of ceramic, bottles, and seashells. Examples of nearly all of these objects that do not deteriorate rapidly have been recovered from Louisiana archaeological sites associated with African-American occupations.



**Pierced Spanish medio real coin from Ashland**

Often, African-Americans wore dimes on a string around their ankles or necks to prevent "Hoodoo." Evidence of this practice at Ashland was found at Cabin 1, where a 1793 Spanish *medio real* was recovered. The silver coin was about the size of a dime and was embossed with the profile of Charles IV. There was a hole drilled in it, suggesting it may have been worn as a necklace or charm. This pierced coin was found near two long, tubular black glass beads. The close association of the beads and the coin may suggest ritual activity, or that the beads and the coin together were

used as an amulet. Thus, archaeologists must look at not only individual objects, but also the association of objects with each other in order to discover evidence of traditional practices and belief systems.

Smoothed, rounded, and polished pebbles were collected from several cabin sites at Ashland. Only one smoothed pebble was collected from Cabin 1, but Cabin 2 yielded three polished stones. Polished stones are associated with ancestor veneration and coping with bad luck. Shells are also associated with ancestors. For instance, in the religion of the Kongo peoples, shells represent the sea, which is where the Kongo ancestors reside.



**Examples of shells found at the Ashland quarters**

Shells were recovered from both Cabins 1 and 2, and a cowrie shell was collected from another cabin at Ashland during previous excavations. In Africa, cowrie shells had a variety of uses including money, charms, and religious symbols.



**Examples of shells  
found at the Ashland  
quarters**

The coin, beads, shells, buttons, and smoothed stones were found more frequently near the hearths than in other parts of the cabins or in the yards. This may reflect ritual activity centered on the hearth. Alternatively, it may indicate that ritual activity occurred within the house where it could be hidden.

The principal difficulty in interpreting the significance of many of the objects mentioned above is that some of them, such as buttons, needles, or thimbles, are common. These ordinary items may take on a greater cultural meaning in the context of their use. Some objects, such as pierced coins and seashells, have a more obvious symbolic explanation associated with them in African-American traditions

## Conclusions

The archaeological investigations at Ashland-Belle Helene Plantation have served to bring life once again to this silent monument. Modern excavation has uncovered the life that existed on the plantation, but was rarely meant to be seen. The work at Ashland-Belle Helene was unique in that it provided the opportunity for extensive investigation and interpretation of the areas in which the African-Americans of one plantation lived and worked. The great house was peripheral to this effort.

Instead, the focus of the study was the individuals who built the great house, the sugarhouse, and their own residences. It was the labor of these individuals in the fields and in the sugarhouse that provided the means to establish and to maintain the plantation. However, the living conditions and the material culture of the slaves cannot be fully comprehended without consideration of the planter. Although Ashland Plantation would not have been possible without the African-American slaves of the estate, Kenner was the ultimate authority. The vast majority of what the slaves possessed was theirs because it was in the planter's best interest to provide it to them.

The plan and organization of the land, along with the architecture of Ashland Plantation, show the planter's use of the landscape to convey his dominance, wealth, prestige, and control. It was no accident that Duncan Kenner selected a prominent architect to build a magnificent Greek Revival great house. Surrounded by formal gardens, the great house reflected Kenner's power. The quarters were placed on line with, but approximately 1,640 ft. back into, the fields from the great house, and relatively close to the sugarhouse. This separation was for a practical reason; it placed

the slaves close to the areas where they worked. It also positioned the quarters out of direct view from the great house. Finally, it symbolized the social distance between planter and slave.

The planter's world was that of grace and luxury, while the slave's purpose was to provide the labor to produce the goods that enabled the planter's way of life. In this way, the slaves' closeness to the fields was not only practical but also symbolic of their role in the plantation community. Similarly, while the closeness of the sugarhouse to the quarters emphasized the slaves' position as laborers, the huge scale of the sugarhouse illustrated that the output of this factory belonged to the planter. The fact that the massive structures flanking the quarters were built and operated by the occupants of these modest cabins made the contrast all the more overwhelming.

The cabins themselves provide evidence of Kenner's paternalistic care of the slaves. They were relatively large, and they had glass windows. Providing adequate housing for the slaves was in Kenner's best interest. This enabled the work force to stay healthy and productive.

Excavations at Ashland-Belle Helene have provided a much fuller and more detailed view of a Louisiana sugar plantation than usually can be found in the documentary record. While there are many descriptions of how nineteenth-century sugarhouses operated, this was the first time that archaeologists in Louisiana had examined how equipment and machinery actually fit in a structure. This allowed an examination of the organization and flow of the work. Most of the sources on the daily lives of African-Americans both before and after Emancipation are incomplete and/or biased, so extensive excavations at two cabin sites yielded important tangible details about the activities and diet of nineteenth-century African-Americans. Finally, archaeological monitoring allowed all of the subsurface remains within the quarters and sugar production areas of the plantation to be mapped.

This was the first time in Louisiana that such a large area of a plantation was intensively examined archaeologically, and it permitted a look at changes that took place in these areas over time as structures were erected, used, and eventually abandoned. This research will help the visitor to a Louisiana great house envision the rest of the plantation. Much of Louisiana's history is preserved in the ground, and only through protection of archaeological sites and scholarly research can one gain a more complete understanding of the past.

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