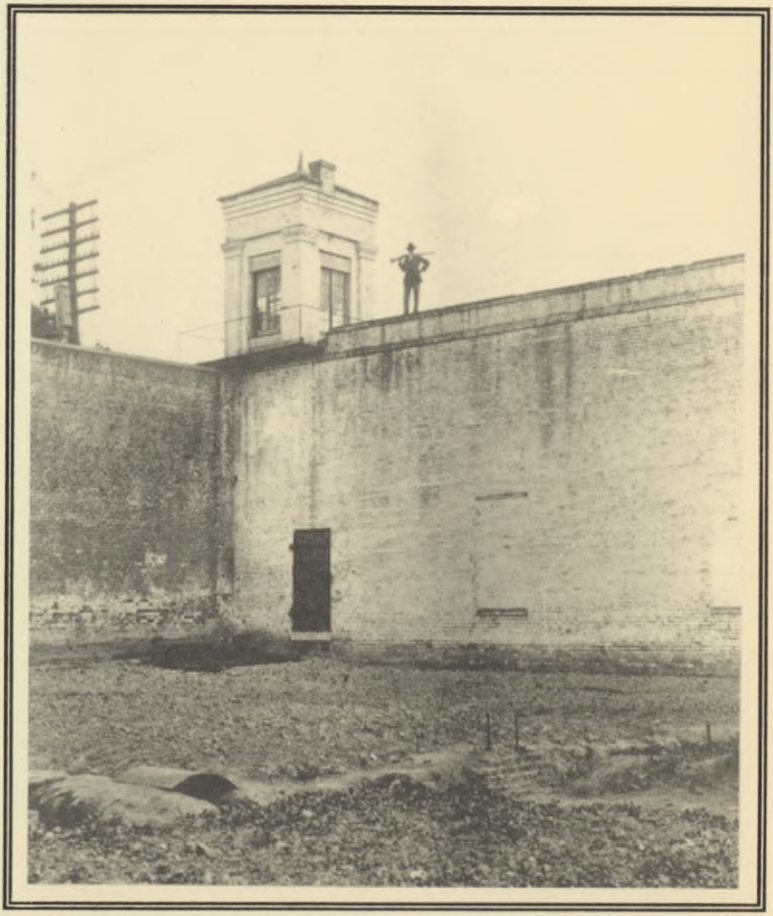
HARD LABOR

HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE OLD LOUISIANA STATE PENITENTIARY, BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA



Guard tower of the Louisiana State Penitentiary (circa 1900).

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by

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Cover photo: Courtesy of the Henry L. Fuqua, Jr., Picture Collection, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

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The average convict life is six years. It would, therefore, be more humane to punish with death all prisoners sentenced to a longer period than six years.
—Daily Picayune 1884.

INTRODUCTION

Prior to 1835, all prisoners incarcerated by the state of Louisiana were sent to the old city jail in New Orleans. The New Orleans jail was described by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831 as a place where "men [were] thrown in pell-mell with swine, in the midst of excrement and filth. In locking up criminals, no thought is given to making them better but simply to taming their wickedness; they are chained like wild beasts; they are not refined but brutalized" (Pierson 1938:622, quoted in Carleton 1971:8).

In August of the following year, the state of Louisiana purchased a tract of land in Baton Rouge for the construction of a state penitentiary (Figure 1). The Baton Rouge penitentiary served the state from 1835 until 1917 when it was replaced by the Angola State Penitentiary at Angola Plantation, Louisiana. During the state penitentiary's 82 years of service, the treatment of prisoners changed very little from what it had been in New Orleans. In 1884 the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* stated that "The average convict life is six years. It would, therefore, be more humane to punish with death all prisoners sentenced to a longer period than six years" (*Daily Picayune* 1884).

Following the final demolition of the penitentiary in 1917, the site was used as a public park. In 1932 a small portion of the park was used for the construction of a new United States Fifth Circuit Court building. In 1990 site preparations began for the construction of the New Federal Building/Courthouse adjacent to the 1932 structure. Recognizing the historical and archaeological importance of the old penitentiary facility, the General Services Administration sponsored archaeological excavations there between 1989 and 1991.

This booklet relates the history and archaeology of the old penitentiary, a complex of buildings occupying an area of three city blocks. The story combines the rich archival records available for the penitentiary with the finds of the modern archaeological investigations. This combination provides intriguing insights into a little-studied component of Louisiana history.

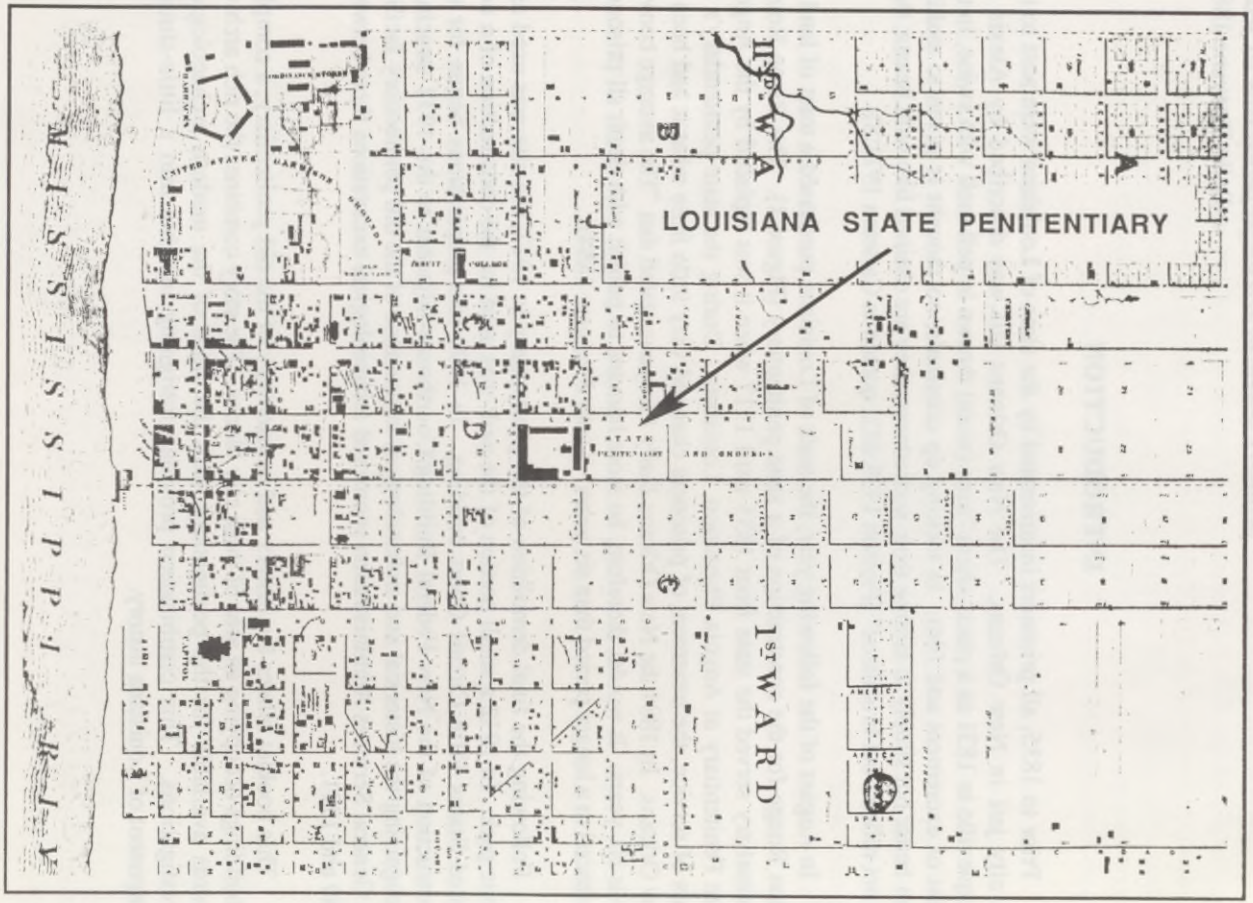

Figure 1. The first Louisiana State Penitentiary, Baton Rouge, in 1855 (source Gill 1855).

. . . the [penitentiary] *building is going to wreck . . . and looks much forsaken and weather beaten, mouldy and dilapidated, but still it is more than amply sufficient . . .*
—Senate Journal 1874:213.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In early 1832 the Louisiana state legislature passed an act to begin construction of a state penitentiary in Baton Rouge. In August of that year the state purchased approximately 8 acres from Raphael Legendre and John Buhler in the Devall Town area of Baton Rouge for $800 (Todd 1950:3). The penitentiary was originally designed to house 100 convicts individually quartered in cells measuring 6 by 3.5 feet at an estimated cost of $50,000 (Wisner 1930:143; Stout 1934:27). However, in late 1832 another legislative act was passed that required the size of the cells to be increased to 7 by 3.5 feet and living quarters added for the prison keeper and his family (Hart 1867:2; Stout 1934:27).

These and other changes to the penitentiary's plan increased the construction costs to $73,000 (Stout 1934:27; Wisner 1930:143). In an effort to reduce these costs, 100 state prisoners sentenced to hard labor in the New Orleans Parish Prison were moved to Baton Rouge to help with the construction (Fortier 1909:296; Wisner 1930:143). A warden, ten guards, and various other assistants were also sent to Baton Rouge to direct and guard the prisoners in their work (Stout 1934:28).

Soon after construction of the new facility began in June 1833 (Stout 1934:29), state inspectors suggested that the convicts could be used as laborers in the manufacture of cotton bagging and that materials produced by the convicts could be sold to help pay for their upkeep. However, the State Legislative Committee believed bagging manufactury would require too much skill; instead, they suggested that the prisoners might be better employed as wheelwrights and coopers (Stout 1934:35-36).

To facilitate the sale of products manufactured by the prisoners, a prison store and a dwelling for the store clerks were added to the prison's design in 1834 (Stout 1934:30). The Upper Cell House, a three-story brick structure for the housing of convicts fronting on St. Anthony Street (present-day Seventh Street), was the first building of the complex to be completed (Fortier 1909:296). Although the Upper Cell House was completed in 1835, additional construction of the penitentiary's main complex continued until 1848 (Fortier 1909:296-297). By the time the original penitentiary buildings were completed (Figure 2), the main compound area consisted of a U-shaped, three-story brick

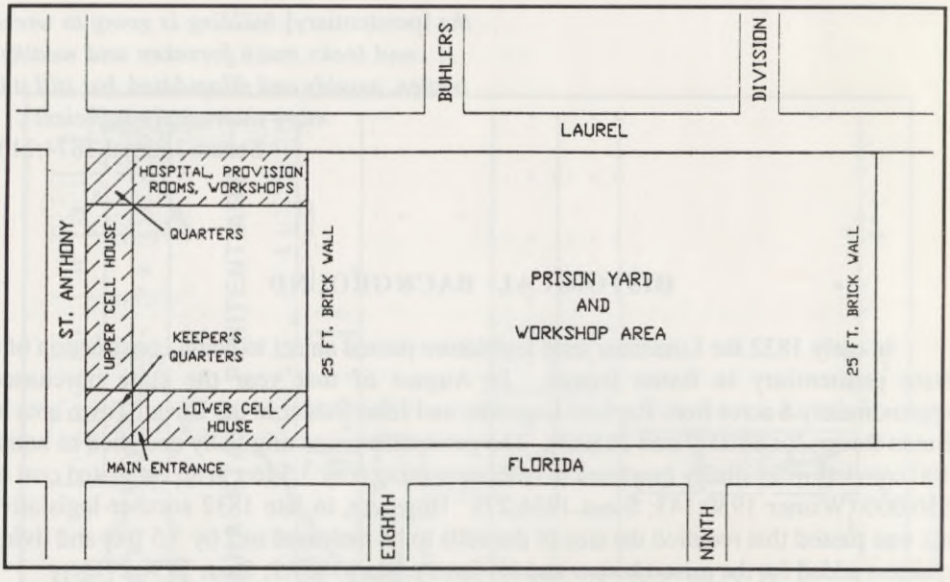

Figure 2. The old Louisiana State Penitentiary during the late 1830s.

structure and a wall to the east (Stout 1934:31-32). According to the 1854 annual report of the Board of Directors (1855:6), the Upper and Lower Cell Houses contained 240 and 200 cells, respectively. Each of the brick-floored cells had a solid iron door with an iron-barred opening of less than 12 square inches. Neither beds nor cots were provided to the prisoners (Board of Directors 1855:6), even though the cells were poorly ventilated and virtually unheated in the winter (*Daily Picayune* 1901).

About the same time the prison opened, Raphael Legendre and John Buhler sold an additional 8 acres immediately east of the penitentiary to the state (Todd 1950:3). This additional land was eventually incorporated into the penitentiary grounds and was used as a prison yard, garden, and workshop area.

While the prisoners were at first limited to jobs as simple mechanics, by 1840 business operations at the prison expanded to include cloth manufacturing, tailoring, tanning, manufacturing of side-saddles, carpentry, cabinet making, joinery, painting, forge work, and gun and watch repairs (Stout 1934:36-37). Local merchants soon became irate at the state's use of the essentially free prison labor force to produce goods cheaper than they themselves could produce and demanded that the practice be stopped. While the local merchants were not immediately successful in closing down the prison's business operations, many of the ventures were temporarily suspended following a fire in the northern wing of the prison complex in November 1841. The fire caused $10,000 in

damage to the structure and its contents. The damage was so extensive that the northern wing was demolished and replaced by a new and slightly smaller structure of bricks, which were made on site by the prisoners (Stout 1934:32, 38).

In 1844 the state prison system experienced dramatic changes that had profound effects for the next 57 years. These changes began with the Louisiana legislature bowing to pressure from local merchants and passing an act that forbade the sale of convict-manufactured goods that competed directly with goods produced outside the prison. This act meant that the prisoners could no longer produce many of the saleable items that contributed to their upkeep. This change, combined with the expenditure of $450,000 by the state to operate the prison between 1832 and 1844 (Wisner 1930:147), enticed state legislators to look for alternate methods of reducing the state's financial burden. Hence, in October of that year, the state leased the prison facility and all of the prisoners therein to James A. McHatton and William Pratt for a five-year period at a cost of $25,000 (Wisner 1930:147).

Since McHatton and Pratt could no longer have the convicts produce an array of saleable items, they searched for other means to create a return on their investment. The most profitable work that could be found for the prisoners, which did not upset area merchants, was levee construction along the Mississippi River and her tributaries and distributaries. While levee construction was, and still is, a necessity in Louisiana, during the nineteenth century it required extremely arduous work involving long hours of labor under extremely unpleasant, if not hazardous, conditions. Levee work was so hard on laborers that many died from overwork and exposure. Because of this, many Louisiana planters did not allow their slaves to engage in levee construction and instead hired immigrant workers. Hence, the availability of cheap laborers for levee construction in the form of prison convicts was welcomed with open arms by Louisiana's populace. McHatton and Pratt did very well with the leasing of convicts for levee construction, and the practice continued until the twentieth century under a variety of lessees.

Substantial changes were made to the prison facility in 1844 as well. The most important of these changes was the construction of a wooden cotton-bagging factory, the first in the state, in the prison yard (Stout 1934:56). Although in the prison yard, the factory was almost immediately abandoned because it was outside the main prison compound, was a fire hazard to the whole facility, and was poorly ventilated (Stout 1934:36). In its place, a steam heated, two-story brick building was erected in 1846-1847 to the east of the three original buildings (Stout 1934:36, 58). The new structure required the eastward enlargement of the main compound by approximately 120 feet so that it could be enclosed within the walls of the yard area. The new building housed shops for making rope on the first floor and shops for spinning warp and filling bagging on the second floor (Fortier 1909:296-297). In 1853 a third floor was added to the building and the structure was given a slate roof (Fortier 1909:297).

When McHatton and Pratt's lease expired in 1849 the lease was picked up by McHatton, Ward & Co. (Carleton 1971:11). The new five-year lease, which was to have begun in 1850, was not ratified until 1852 and stipulated that the state was to receive 25% of all annual profits realized by McHatton, Ward & Co. or $1,000 per annum, whichever was greater (Carleton 1971:11; Wisner 1930:149). The treatment of the convicts under these leases was to be the same as if they were under the immediate control of the state. However, the welfare of the prisoners was of little concern to state legislators and may be best summed up by a Natchitoches senator who stated "without some means to make the prisoners stand in fear, it would be utterly impossible to maintain any discipline or subordination, and we know of no mode of punishment less cruel, and more effective, than a proper amount of flogging" (*Senate Journal* 1852:128).

A new five-year lease was signed by the state with J.M. Hart and W.S. Pike in 1857. Apparently the state believed it had been short-changed in previous leases, for the 1857 agreement stipulated that all prison-generated profits be split evenly between the lessees and the state (Carleton 1971:11).

The prison compound had continued to grow during these leases (Figure 3) and by 1858-1859 there were 622 male convicts incarcerated there (Mouledous 1962:69). Since most blacks during the ante-bellum period were slaves and were punished by their owners, few were incarcerated in the penitentiary. Hence, most of the convicts within the state prison system during this period were whites (Carleton 1971:13). While the lessees were no longer able to sell prison-manufactured goods in direct competition to local merchants, inmates not working on levees still found themselves toiling in the prison's weaving room, shoe and tailor shops, carpentry shop, cooperage, foundry, brick manufactory, and blacksmith's shop (Board of Control 1858:12-18).

The lessees employed 28 workers, including 14 guards, in 1858 to oversee the prisoners in their work. The income of the guards ranged from $25.00 to $125.00 per month. Total employee wages for the prison for January 1858 amounted to slightly less than $1,000 (McHatton, Pike & Co. 1858).

Convict leasing was abruptly ended by the onslaught of the Civil War. On April 1, 1862, Hart and Pike turned the prison facility and its inmates over to the state (Hart 1862:1). During the Civil War, state convicts were moved back to the old New Orleans Parish Prison, a facility that had originally been constructed in the late-eighteenth century. In an effort to protect the state's investment in the expensive machinery installed in the penitentiary, much of it was shipped to Clinton, Louisiana, for safe storage. Despite these precautions, a large portion of the machinery was destroyed in Union raids (*State Times* 1959).

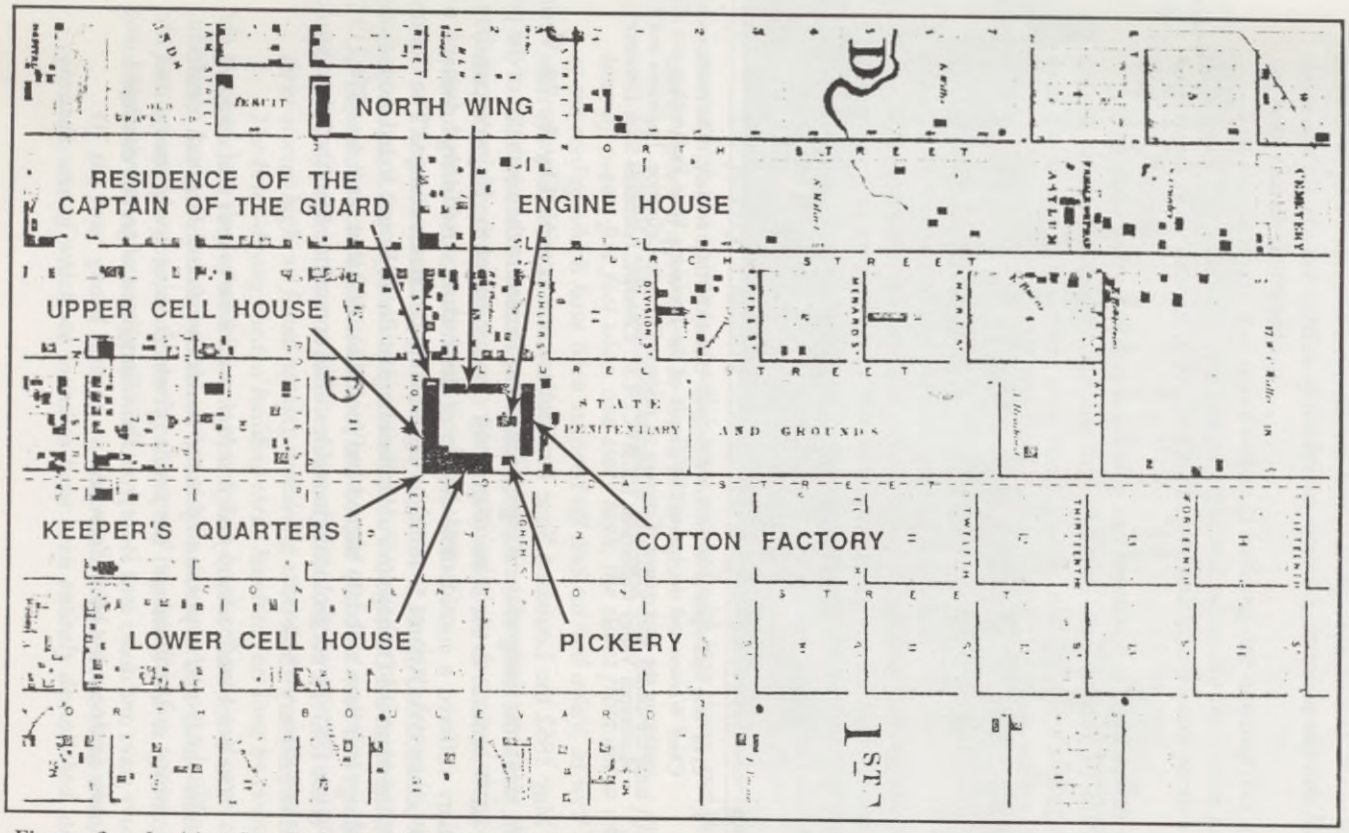

Figure 3. Louisiana State Penitentiary in 1855 (source Gill 1855).

Figure 4. Civil War encampment of the 1st Wisconsin Battery of light artillery. The residence of the Chief Warden and the Lower Cell House of the Louisiana State Penitentiary are clearly visible in the background (Courtesy of Andrew D. Lytle Collection, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections [LLMVC], LSU Libraries, Louisiana State University).

In May 1862 the Louisiana State Penitentiary was occupied by the 7th Vermont Regiment, while the camp of the King's Battery was located to the southeast of the prison and the 1st Wisconsin to the south (Figure 4). As a result of the Union occupation, the penitentiary suffered a considerable degree of destruction. Additional damage to the complex occurred on August 5, 1862, during the Battle of Baton Rouge. The Committee of Examination on the Damage to Public Buildings at Baton Rouge found the majority of the buildings had been so badly burned and looted in 1862 that there was $74,219.25 in damage (Hart 1867:3), not including movables. The committee described the complex as it existed in February 1866:

> *The brick wall, twenty-four feet high, which surrounds and encloses the prison yards and a portion of the grounds, we found in good condition, excepting at the openings, the jambs of which being broke away, and the heavy gates and doors torn loose from their hangings and greatly damaged, and in some cases carried off or destroyed.*

The cotton factory, a building two hundred and eighty-six feet long by forty-three feet wide, and three stories high, having been burned, the walls torn down and the greater portion of the bricks removed, consequently this building has been entirely destroyed.

The engine house and sizing rooms, a building one hundred feet long by forty-three feet wide, and two stories high, and adjoining the cotton factory, has lost all of the sashes, doors and partitions, and also a good portion of the joist and flooring.

The three story building adjoining the residence of the Captain of the Guard, which building is one hundred and sixty-six feet long by thirty feet wide and is used as a kitchen, store-room, guards' and prisoners' dining-rooms, library, chapel and hospital, has been stripped of all the doors, sashes, frames and partitions, the outside and inside stairways, the floors in many places burned and otherwise injured, the large boilers and the extensive cooking range in the kitchen removed, and the bake ovens demolished.

The carpenter's shop and press-room, a building joining the above, ninety-one feet long by thirty feet wide, and three stories high, of which we found nothing remaining but the walls and the roof, the two tiers of joist and flooring, the partitions, stairs, door and window frames, doors and sashes, had all been removed.

The pickery, a building seventy feet long by thirty feet wide, and two stories high, the openings of which were secured with iron doors and shutters, and of those but a few are to be found fit for use.

The foundry and finishing shops, a building one hundred and fifty feet long by twenty-five feet wide, one story high, the slates from about one half of the roof of which have been stripped off and carried away, as well as the most of the window shutters and doors.

The cotton warehouse, a building of the same dimensions as the last described, has been injured only in the removal of the doors and shutters and some slight damage to the brick-work and the roof.

The stables, a building one hundred feet long by thirty feet wide, and two stories high, has suffered to the extent of the destruction of the greater portion of the subdivisions of the stalls and feed troughs and door and window shutters.

The female prison, a building seventy feet long by thirty feet wide, and three stories high, we found nothing remaining excepting the walls and roof.

The brick-drying shed, a building three hundred feet long by twenty-five feet wide, the roof of which was supported on brick columns and covered with slates, has entirely disappeared, as has also an extensive wooden building used for the same purpose, and covering a space of two hundred feet square, and of which there is not a vestige of it left.

Of the four guard houses on the walls and overlooking the prison grounds, one of which we found to have been entirely demolished, and the

other three stripped of joist, flooring, stair-cases, sashes, frames and door, and also the iron galleries which extended around the buildings, leaving only the walls and roofs, the dimensions of each being ten feet square (on plan) by twenty-eight feet high.

The two brick clamps, each one hundred feet long by thirty feet wide, and twelve feet high, we found to be entirely demolished, and the bricks of which they were built have been removed.

The substantial plank (with posts and rail) fencing, which enclosed the three sides of the garden attached to and belonging to the prison, has been carried away, as also another portion of plank fencing of two hundred running feet by nine feet high, which portion enclosed the female prison and the washing and drying yards.

The two family residences, situated on the south-west and north-west angles respectively, of the prison quadrangle, and designed for the use and occupancy of the Chief Warden and the Captain of the Guard, were found to be almost without doors, window-sashes and blinds, the staircases greatly damaged, the hand-railings broken off, the fire-grates taken out, the floors in many places burnt, and other portions of joist and flooring cut out and taken up, and the plastering on the walls and ceilings, and also the door and window jambs and casings very much broken and defaced. The same statement is applicable, and in even a greater degree, to the condition of the clerk's office and residence, a two story building with kitchen, servant rooms, stables, etc. This property is detached from the prison buildings, and like the two other residences above mentioned, appears to have been substantially build and well finished.

The two extensive buildings, each two hundred feet long by forty-five feet wide, and equal to three stories high, within which the cells for prisoners are constructed, and containing together four hundred and forty separate compartments, each seven feet long by three feet six inches wide, and seven feet high, and suitably secured with (grated) iron doors, we find more than one half of the locks and fastenings greatly damaged, the brick jambs and walls in which the fastenings were anchored having been cut away, the joist and floors of all the lower tier of cells removed, as well as many of those on the second tier, and the window-sashes of the opening on the outer walls of main building taken away. The ceiling also over the upper tier of galleries of cells taken down, and the brick pavements around the cells taken up or otherwise destroyed. We find also that the gas pipes which extended throughout the entire buildings have in many places been disconnected and much of it removed, and all chandeliers and other fixtures for illuminating purposes within the residences and elsewhere, have been carried away or otherwise destroyed [Hart 1867:1-3].

Although the prison was in poor repair, state prisoners were soon moved back to the facility. By January 1, 1867, there were 228 convicts residing within its walls and by June 1868 there were 291 prisoners within the prison system. The typical prisoner during this period was a black male laborer under 25 years of age serving a sentence of four months to one year after being convicted of a crime involving property theft (Carleton 1971:14-15). These prisoners undoubtedly spent a great deal of their time undoing the damage to the facility caused by the Union troops, such as rebuilding the Cotton Factory. All of the brick buildings at the penitentiary were erected and repaired using bricks manufactured by the prisoners in the penitentiary's brick kilns located in the prison yard. Clay for the bricks was excavated from the prison yard and the surrounding area (Todd 1950:3).

Operation of the prison in 1867 alone cost the state $61,838.88. This was apparently too much for state legislators to bear and the leasing of convicts began anew in 1868 when John Huger and Colonel Charles Jones signed a lease for the penitentiary and the accompanying convicts. Although the lease was ratified by the Louisiana General Assembly in January 1869, it was vetoed by Governor Henry C. Warmoth because it provided the lessees with too much power at the expense of the rights of the convicts. At Warmoth's insistence, the Louisiana Board of Control was given power over the health and religious education of the convicts and the lease was finally legalized in March 1869. Almost immediately after the lease became legal, Huger and Jones sold their company to James, Buckner, and Company for more than $100,000 (Carleton 1971:15-17).

Major Samuel L. James, C.B. Buckner, and T. Bynum of James, Buckner, and Company did not receive state authorization to manage the penitentiary until January 1870, although this did not stop them from working the convicts (Carleton 1971:17-18). By November 1869, Major James had made almost $100,000 from $150,000 worth of unauthorized levee construction work performed by state convicts (Carleton 1971:29-30). Interestingly enough, while Major James was using most of the prisoners for levee construction, textile machinery was acquired and skilled mechanics were hired to teach the convicts. Even more oddly, the new mill required 550 laborers while there were only 350 convicts (Mouledous 1962:62).

Major James leased the prison from the state from 1870 until his death in 1894. During this period, conditions within the prison system declined dramatically. The living conditions of the prisoners were not particularly enhanced by the Board of Control during this period. While the board legally had control over the welfare of the prisoners, by 1894 its members were on the lessee's payroll and had no real desire to protect the interests of the convicts (Carleton 1971:17).

James and his associates believed in working their convict laborers to the fullest extent in an effort to generate the most income possible. In fact, when state legislators

inspected the prison in 1873, the facility was nearly deserted (Carleton 1971:21) for all of the prisoners were busy building levees and railroads and working in agricultural fields. In 1874 one senator commented:

> *It is true the* [penitentiary] *building is going to wreck in many particulars, and looks much forsaken and weather beaten, mouldy and dilapidated, but still it is more than amply sufficient for all that is going on within its walls or inclosures* [sic]. *Almost all the convicts are now constantly farmed out - sent promiscuously, it seems, to different portions of the State to work in competition with free labor - so that there would seem scarcely any use any more for any Penitentiary building at all, and if matters go on for a few more years as they have been going on . . . we shall have none, except as a den or hiding place for owls, bats, and reptiles* [Senate Journal 1874:213].

In September 1879 a storm blew the roofs off of several penitentiary buildings and knocked down one of the prison's walls (Governor's Correspondence, LLMVC). A second storm struck the prison on July 6, 1891, severely damaging the northern wing of the complex and killing twelve inmates (Board of Control 1892:4). The majority of the damage to the buildings was undoubtedly repaired by prisoners using prison-made bricks.

Convicts were worked so hard at the hands of the lessees that many died of overwork. A speech by Joseph Ransdell in 1898 or 1899 noted that "a gentleman told me that in 1885 or 1886, he saw 42 convicts buried at one camp, on the Pecan Grove levee, and the death [sic] were nearly all caused by overwork, exposure and brutality. If he saw 42 convicts buried how many do you suppose, were buried that he never saw?" (Ransdell Papers, LLMVC). It has been estimated that up to 3,000 prisoners died during Major James' and his estate's leases, between 1870 and 1901 (Carleton 1971:46). Major James, on the other hand, lived very well, leaving behind an estate valued at $2.3 million (Carleton 1971:76).

Following Major James' death, the prison lease was turned over to the estate's executors and Samuel L. James, Jr. (Carleton 1971:76). The new lessees operated the prison with more heed to the law than had Major James. While Major James had paid the state less than $175,000 between 1870 and 1891, the new lessees paid the state $278,688.96 of the $350,000 owed between 1895 and 1901 (Carleton 1971:76). There is probably some correlation between these payments and the fact that convict deaths increased during this period, reaching a high of 216 in 1896 alone (Carleton 1971:77).

Public awareness and disapproval of the convict leasing system grew during the 1890s. In 1898 a new state constitution was passed which forbade the leasing of convicts to private firms or individuals after 1901 (Carleton 1971:79). In 1900 the *Senate Journal* reported that there were 989 convicts in the penitentiary but that the structures (Figure 5)

were inadequate for their needs (Wisner 1930:163). The Board of Control described the penitentiary in 1901 as:

> . . .*simply a relic of the past. When we* [the state] *took charge the large Factory Building was filled with rusting and decaying machinery, spindles and looms of obsolete type that have not been operated for a quarter of a century. It was absolutely worthless except for junk . . . The power plant, a large and valuable one, which the State turned over to the lessee had disappeared* [Board of Control 1902:37].

A newspaper article in 1901 noted that after failing to have the prisoners successfully produce yarn, shoes, and refrigerators, the lessees attempted to make tailors of the prisoners (*Daily Picayune* 1901). Toward these ends, the third floor of the old Cotton Factory was cleared of all old machinery and 100 new sewing machines installed.

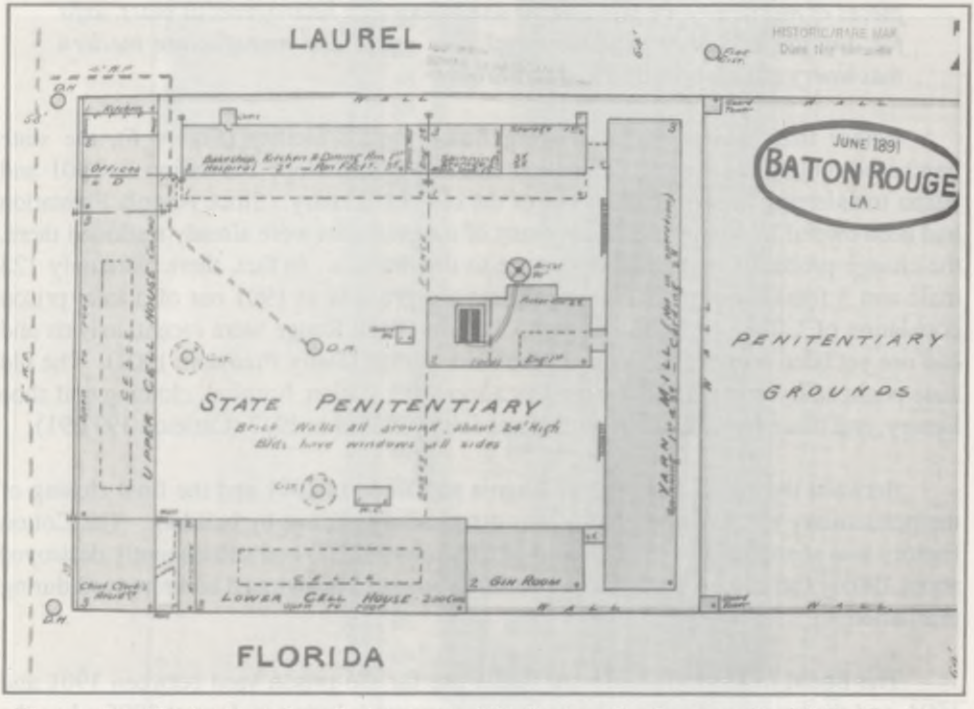

Figure 5. The Louisiana State Penitentiary in 1891 (Sanborn Fire Insurance Co. 1891). The Cotton Factory was converted to a yarn mill and pants manufactory prior to 1891 and the Engine House to a chapel in circa 1895.

Power for the sewing machines was provided by a steam engine on the first floor of the Cotton Factory. Power was transferred from the engine to the sewing machines via a series of gears and drive belts.

Although used very little during the late-nineteenth century, the prison's numerous sewing machines were pressed back into service in 1901 to produce an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 suits of clothing and 5,000 to 6,000 pairs of shoes annually for the prisoners (*Daily Picayune* 1901). The article went on to note that the machinery removed from the third floor of the Yarn Mill was dumped onto the first floor of the building and that by 1901 was:

> *. . . a pile of old junk, which will one day be sold for perhaps a hundred dollars, and that is ALL THAT REMAINS TO SHOW FOR THE EXPENDITURE of hundreds of thousands of dollars. Looms, spindles, carding machines, bolts, rods, bars, pieces of shafting, belting, and various pieces of machinery are piled on the damp floor in a heterogeneous mass, unfit for any use except to melt the metal over again and manufacture modern machinery out of it* [Daily Picayune 1901].

Rather than maintaining the aging Baton Rouge facility (Figure 6), the state purchased 8,000-acre Angola Plantation and 2,800-acre Hope Plantation in 1901 and began transferring prison facilities out of the old penitentiary. Since Angola Plantation had been owned by Major James and many of the prisoners were already stationed there, the change probably made little difference to the inmates. In fact, there were only 123 male and 5 female prisoners on the penitentiary grounds in 1901 out of a total prison population of 1,014. Most of those who were in Baton Rouge were recent arrivals and had not yet been transferred to one of the work camps (*Daily Picayune* 1901). The old state penitentiary continued to be used as a receiving station, hospital, clothing and shoe factory, and place for executions until it was finally closed in 1917 (Carleton 1971:91).

Between the state's purchase of Angola and Hope in 1901 and the final closing of the penitentiary in 1917, the facility was dismantled building by building. The Cotton Factory was abandoned in 1901 (Board of Control 1902:37) and subsequently destroyed about 1905. The engine house/chapel building was also abandoned and removed during this period.

The Board of Control could not find a use for the prison yard between 1901 and 1904, and the process of selling the penitentiary grounds began in August 1905 when the entire yard area was sold to George Hill for $20,000 (Board of Control 1906:33; Todd 1950:3). Over the next few years, ownership of the prison yard changed hands several times. The old prison workshops in the yard area, however, remained standing until at least 1916, even though the 25-foot-high wall around the yard had been dismantled by

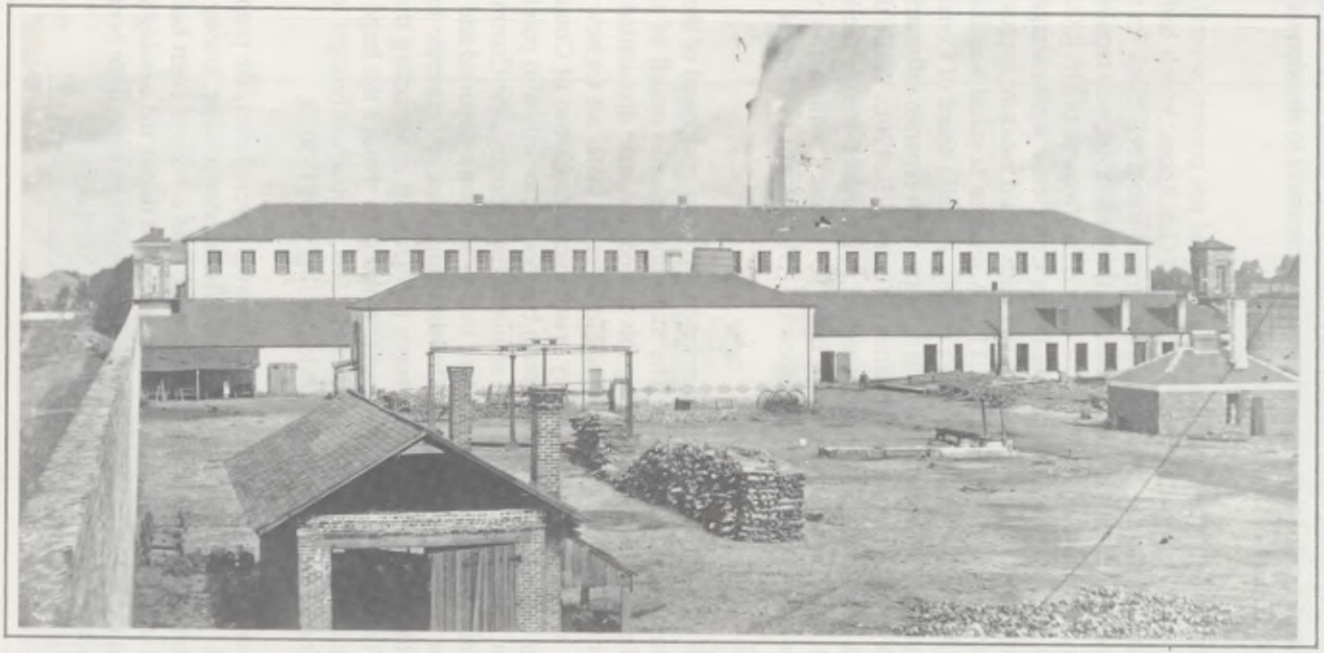

Figure 6. Cotton Factory, sheds, and workshops in the 1890s as viewed from the southeast guard tower (courtesy of Andrew D. Lytle Collection, LLMVC).

1908 (Figure 7). The money garnered from the sale of the yard area was to have gone towards improvements to the main penitentiary compound. Soon after the sale, however, the Board of Control decided that it would be more economical to abandon the penitentiary compound entirely (Board of Control 1906:33).

The decision to close the Baton Rouge facility did not prevent several changes and improvements from being made. By 1908 the old Gin Room, which had not been in operation since at least the late 1890s, was transformed into a cell block for women. The Lower Cell House, which had been abandoned in the mid-1890s, was repaired in 1909 to serve as a dormitory (Board of control 1910:13). At the request of Dr. L.G. Stirling, the prison physician, the individual cells of the Upper Cell House were enlarged in 1910 or 1911 by removing alternating cell walls so that each would measure approximately 7 by 8 feet (Board of Control 1910:114; 1912:11). A modern hospital was installed at the penitentiary in 1910 or 1911 at Dr. Stirling's request as well (Board of Control 1910:114; 1912:10). The facility was designed to treat convicts, with separate infirmaries for blacks and whites; such was the climate of the times (Wisner 1930:176). While these changes would suggest a sizable population of prisoners at the Baton Rouge facility, between 1908 and 1911 there were on average only 93 inmates within the walls of the penitentiary, out of a total prison population of 1,992 (Board of Control 1910:70, 88; 1912:78, 95).

In 1916 the city of Baton Rouge purchased the main compound of the prison from the state of Louisiana for $45,000. The state maintained control of the property, however, until January 18, 1918. During this period, the state dismantled many of the penitentiary's remaining buildings and used the salvaged materials for new construction then under way at the Angola and Oakley prison facilities (Board of Control 1918:18). One year after gaining possession of the main compound, the city also purchased the old prison yard area. Shortly after the city acquired the property, the Community Center complex was constructed over the remains of the main prison compound and Victory Park established in the old prison yard area. The numerous brick and concrete foundations of the prison's buildings and walls posed many problems in constructing the community club and park (Todd 1950:3). Rather than attempting to remove the large foundations, some of which extended to depths in excess of 5 feet, contractors brought loose soil into the site and the foundations were buried under the fill (Todd 1950:3).

Since the remains of the old prison facility were covered over, the property has seen a variety of uses. Portions of the prison grounds have been used as, among other things, a park, a community center, a school, a post office, and a Federal court building. Many of the structures related to these functions were removed during the ensuing years to make room for new construction. Several of these later buildings have since been removed to allow for the erection of the New Federal Building/Courthouse.

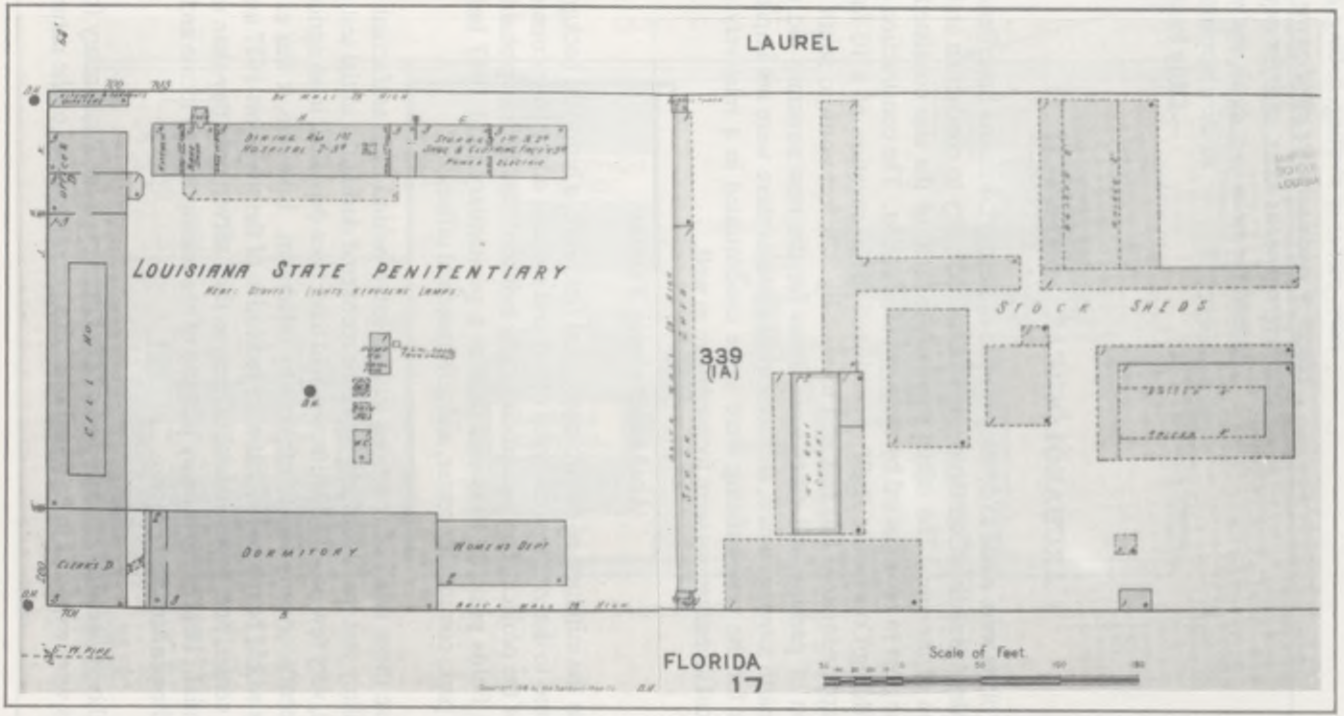

Figure 7. The Louisiana State Penitentiary complex in 1916 (Sanborn Fire Insurance Co. 1916).

Looms, spindles, carding machines, bolts, rods, bars, pieces of shafting, belting, and various pieces of machinery are piled on the damp floor in a heterogeneous mass, unfit for any use except to melt the metal over again and manufacture modern machinery out of it
—Daily Picayune 1901.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

When plans were made to develop the site of the old Louisiana State Penitentiary for the New Federal Building/Courthouse, it became necessary to conduct an archaeological investigation of the site. The initial stage of research of the site consisted of limited testing in the area to be impacted by the new construction. The construction of the New Federal Building/Courthouse itself necessitated the excavation of a 10-foot-deep pit measuring approximately 180 feet east to west by 328 feet north to south (Figure 8). Construction of parking and other work areas for the new structure did not require substantial earth moving; hence, archaeological remains there were not impacted. Since excavations for the new building were to be concentrated in a relatively small area, archaeological investigations were focused there as well.

Archaeological Testing

Prior to the initiation of the archaeological fieldwork, a historical background study was conducted to determine what types of cultural remains might be encountered during the course of the project. The background study indicated that this site probably served as agricultural fields prior to 1833 and then as a penitentiary until 1917 before finally becoming a park, community center, and governmental offices.

Because these types of functions tend to leave behind little artifactual material, it seemed unlikely that many artifacts would be recovered during the initial testing. As can be imagined, very few pre-1833 artifacts would have been deposited in an agricultural field by an eighteenth- or early-nineteenth-century inhabitant. Likewise, it was expected that few artifacts would be recovered that were indicative of the site's post-1917 use as a park, community center, and governmental offices, as they served only day-time usage rather than residential. Hence, the primary purpose of the testing was to locate archaeological remains of the penitentiary complex.

Even though the site was occupied by the Louisiana State Penitentiary for 84 years, few artifacts were expected to be found from this period because of the nature of prison

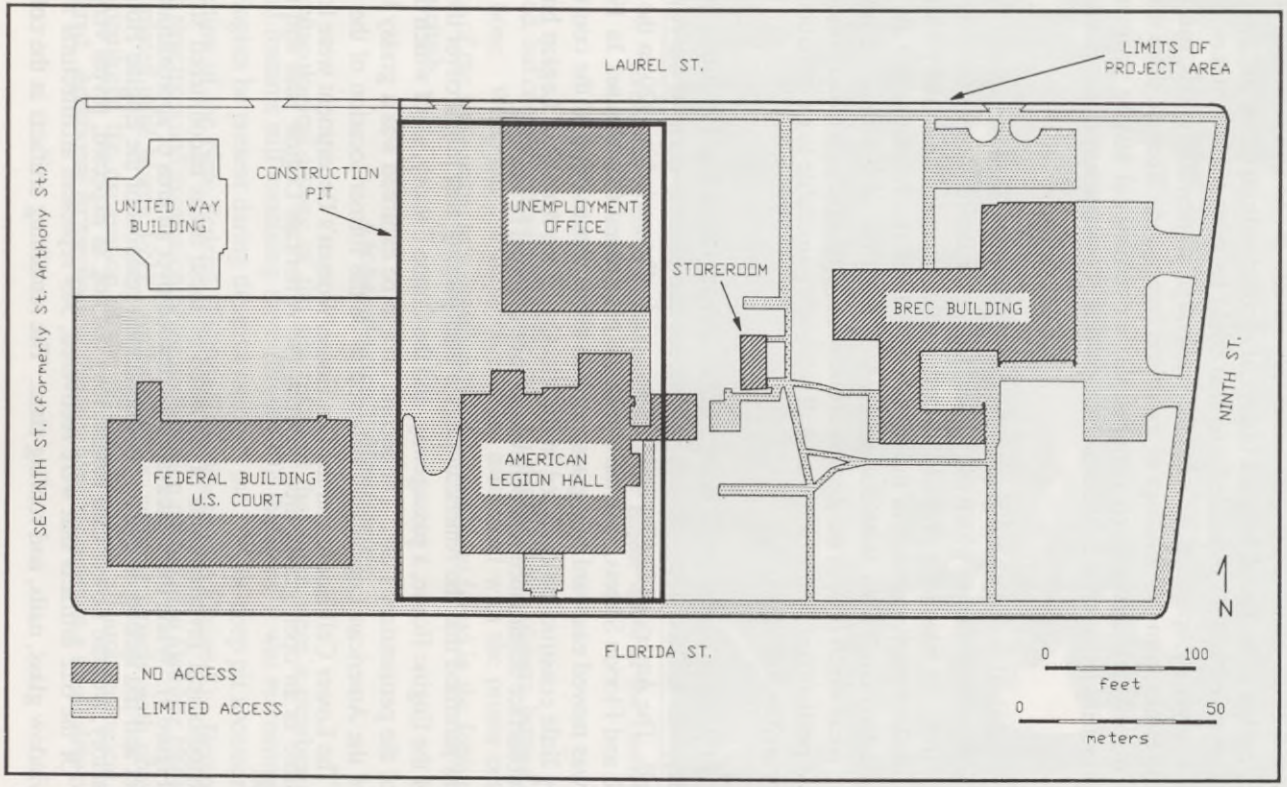

Figure 8. Standing structures on the site of the Louisiana State Penitentiary in 1989.

life. It seemed unlikely that convicts, who were seldom in the prison compound anyhow, would have had many disposable goods to leave behind in the archaeological record. Even machinery and other goods that might commonly remain in the abandonment of a site were not expected to be found because historical records indicated that the prison was carefully dismantled and all reusable items that could be salvaged were taken to other places. This salvaging operation included the removal of all movable goods, machinery, and even the bricks from the buildings of the prison compound. Because there was little chance of discovering artifact-rich features, the archaeological testing program was designed primarily to locate architectural features (e.g., foundations) of the penitentiary complex.

Archaeological testing was greatly limited by the presence of several modern buildings and parking lots, to which the project had no or limited access (see Figure 8), and by oak trees, to which the project had only partial access. While the parking lots made it difficult to excavate much of the site, these features also helped to seal the earlier archaeological remains from later disturbances. Bearing the accessibility restraints in mind, those areas which offered the greatest chance of finding structural features associated with the old penitentiary, and which were still reasonably amenable to examination, were selected for archaeological testing.

The first area of interest, both for its archaeological possibilities and its accessibility, was located in the modern parking lot immediately north of the American Legion Hall. The American Legion building was originally erected in 1920 on the corner of Seventh and Florida Streets, now the site of the old Federal Courthouse. In 1932 the structure was moved eastward to a grassy area to allow construction of the courthouse. Since very little construction occurred in the vicinity of the American Legion building, minimal subsurface disturbance was believed to have occurred in this area.

It was surmised that the American Legion Hall parking area might cover the intact remains of the Engine House, a passageway, and the Cotton Factory, all of which dated to the time of the penitentiary's use. The second area to be explored was a grassy lawn to the east of the American Legion Hall believed to be the former location of the Cotton Factory. The Lower Cell House and the Gin House/Women's Department were found to be accessible in an open grassy area between the American Legion Hall and the old courthouse.

Archaeological investigations of all three of these areas encountered structural remains (Figure 9). While these excavations extended over an area of approximately 200 square feet and did indeed encounter the foundation remains of the Engine House, the Cotton Factory, and the Lower Cell House, they did not, as expected, reveal very many artifacts. Of the 622 artifacts that were recovered, 309 represent architectural material such as window glass, nails, and roofing slate. The remaining artifacts in the collection

Figure 9. Excavation of the engine foundation of the Engine House at the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

are varied, but consist primarily of bottle glass, unidentified iron objects, burned coal, and animal bone. While most of these objects are associated with the prison occupation, evidence of the site's usage as a community center was also found in the form of plastic eating utensils.

Archaeological Monitoring

Archaeological testing of the site revealed that there were a number of intact structural features still remaining there (Figure 10); therefore, it was recommended that archaeologists be present during the excavation of the 10-foot-deep pit necessary for the construction of the New Federal Building/Courthouse (see Figure 8). Demolition of standing structures and excavation of the construction pit began in October 1990 and was not completed until March 1991. Archaeologists, working closely with construction crews, monitored the excavation of the pit and recorded all archaeological features encountered. Additional archaeological features were recorded in a small strip of land to

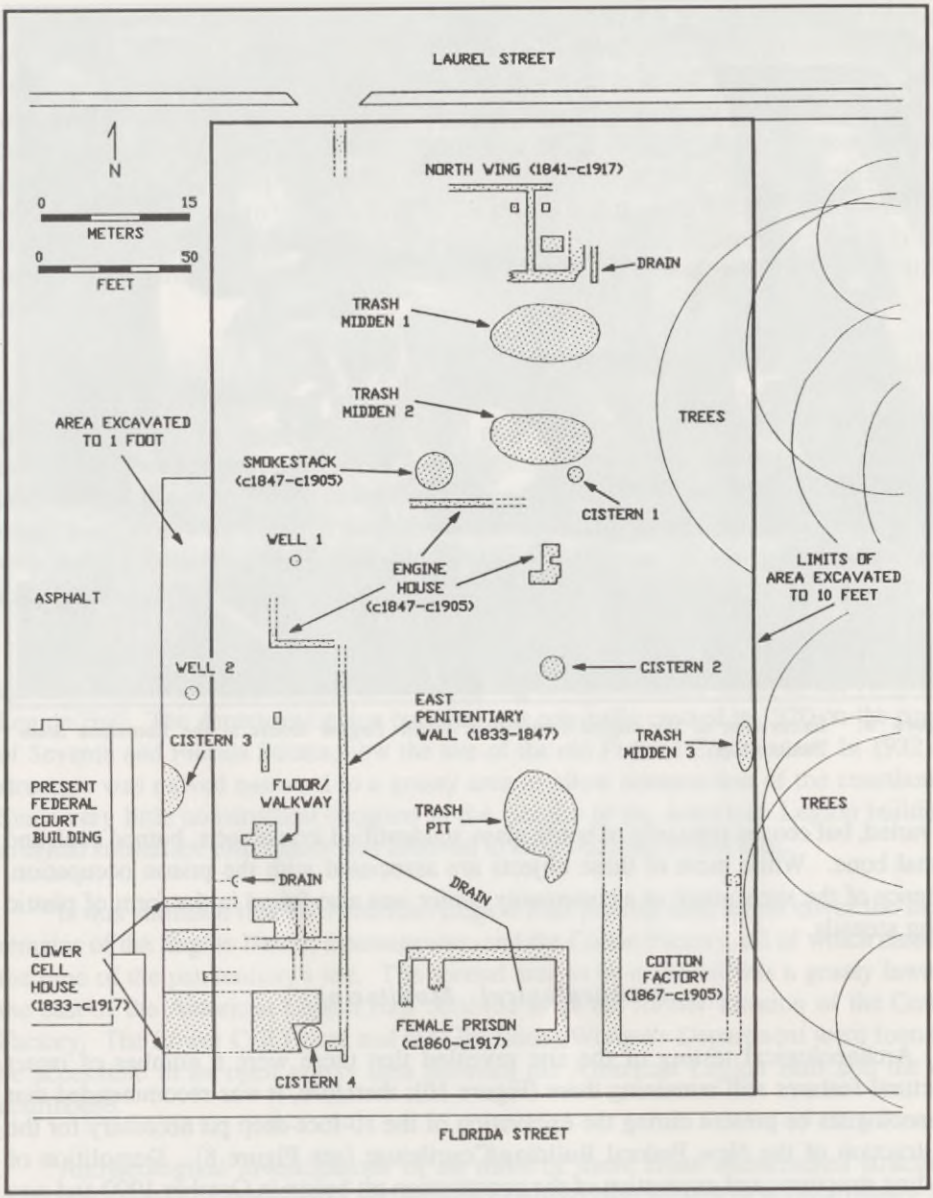

Figure 10. Archaeological features discovered at the site of the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

the immediate west of the construction pit when that area was excavated to a depth of approximately 1 foot (see Figure 10).

Structural Features

As was expected, the excavation of the construction pit revealed a number of brick foundations representing the remains of the penitentiary.

Buildings

The structural remains of five buildings were uncovered during pit excavation. The archaeological remains of the northern wing of the complex (1841 to circa 1917) consisted of several wall foundations, column supports, and a small brick-lined pit of unknown function. Structural remains of the prison's Engine House (circa 1847 to circa 1905) were represented by the brick base of the 90-foot-high smokestack (Figure 11), several segments of wall foundations, and portions of the supposed engine foundations originally discovered in 1989. While only a very small portion of the Cotton Factory

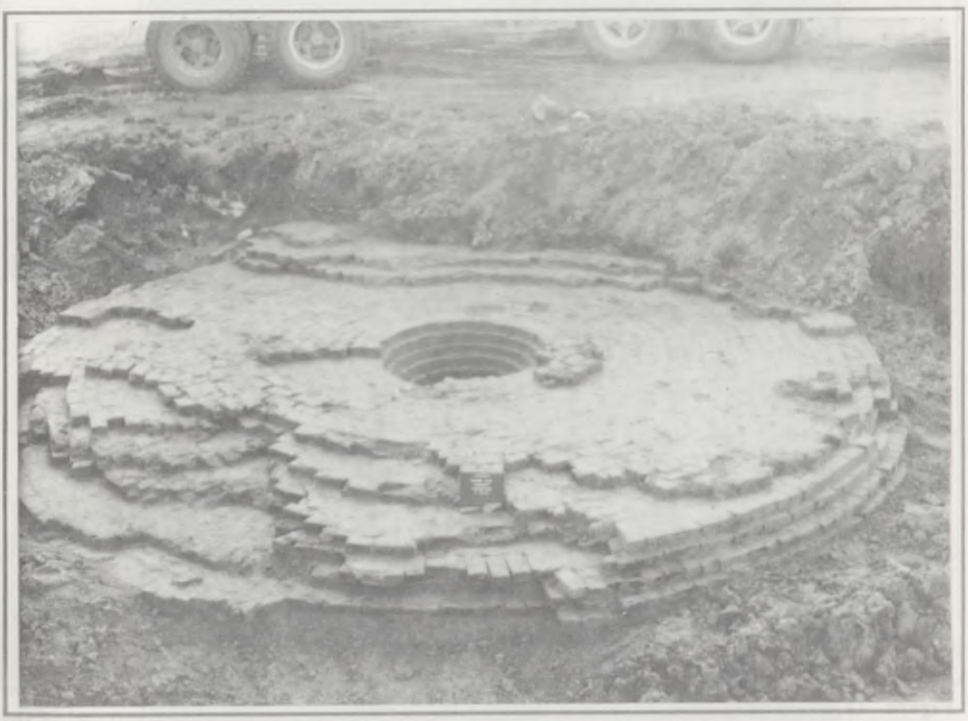

Figure 11. Foundation of the 90-foot brick smokestack of the penitentiary Engine House.

(1867 to circa 1905) was examined in 1989, the 1990-1991 excavations exposed a substantial portion of its foundation. Like the Cotton Factory, additional remains of the Lower Cell House (1833-circa 1917) were discovered in 1990-1991, including wall foundations and brick floors. Finally, portions of the wall foundations of the Female Prison (circa 1860 to circa 1917), a portion of which served as a gin room for a short period, were exposed as well.

Water Supplies

Four subterranean cisterns and two wells similar to the one depicted in Figure 12 were examined during the 1990-1991 excavations (see Figure 10). Two of the cisterns, Cistern 1 and 2, were located adjacent to the Engine House and were apparently used to operate the boilers located there. Neither of the cisterns associated with the Engine House contained artifacts other than brick rubble and small quantities of wood. Cistern 3, a very large cistern containing only brick rubble, was apparently fed by runoff from the roof of the Lower Cell House. The fourth cistern, Cistern 4, would have been located

Figure 12. Late 1890s photograph of a well near the northern wing of the main compound of the Louisiana State Penitentiary (Courtesy of Andrew D. Lytle Collection, LLMVC).

within the Lower Cell House. While Cistern 4 also contained a large quantity of brick rubble, it also yielded portions of several leather shoes.

Of the two wells that were uncovered during these investigations, only Well 1 was examined in detail (Figure 13). Well 2 was not examined in full because it was located outside the construction pit. Like the cisterns, Well 1, which was excavated to a depth of approximately 16 feet through the use of a track hoe, contained a quantity of brick. Unlike the cisterns, however, Well 1 also contained numerous small scraps of wood molding and shavings from an apparent renovation, nails, ceramics, glass vessels, leather

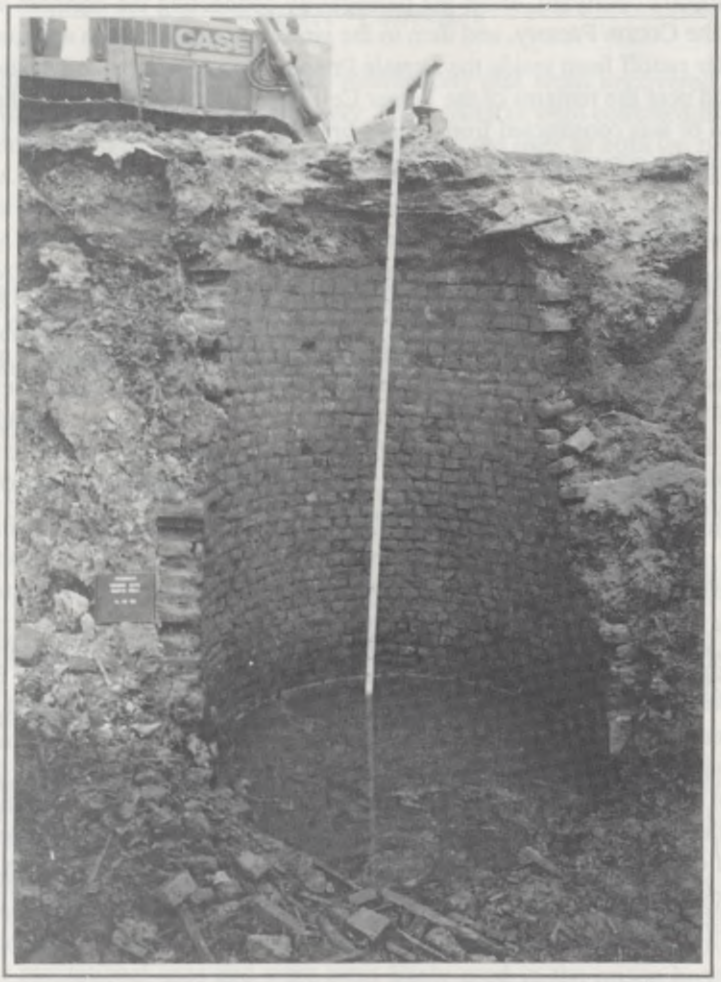

Figure 13. Well 1 during excavation. Note water in bottom of well.

goods, and various metal items. The majority of the material recovered from Well 1 dates from the early-1890s to the very early 1900s. The presence of several medicine bottles and wood molding and shavings suggest that Well 1 may have been abandoned and filled when the new hospital was added to the penitentiary in 1910 or 1911.

Drainage

Portions of three brick-lined drains were discovered during the excavation of the construction pit (see Figure 10). The northernmost drain apparently channeled rain water out of the prison's courtyard, under the passageway connecting the northern wing of the complex to the Cotton Factory, and then to the street. A smaller drain apparently served to carry water runoff from inside the Female Prison. It is unclear as to whether the third drain, located near the remains of the Lower Cell House, was in use during the operation of the prison or was constructed from reused bricks during the late-1910s or 1920s when the same area was occupied by the Community Club dance hall.

Other Brick Structures

A portion of the original east wall (1833-1847) of the penitentiary was discovered in the southern half of the project area along with a small portion at the northern extreme of the excavation pit (see Figure 10). This wall was removed in 1847 when the main prison complex was extended eastward for the construction of the Cotton Factory. Several small segments of brick paving were discovered throughout the project area, particularly in the vicinity of the Lower Cell House. The brick paving apparently served as walkways between buildings and various work areas. These walkways were only one brick thick as compared to the 5-to-22-course-thick foundations.

Trash Deposits

Three trash middens (layers of accumulated trash) and one large trash pit were uncovered during the course of the excavation of the construction pit (see Figure 10). Trash Midden 1, covering an area measuring 18 by 40 feet, consisted almost entirely of scraps of leather left over from the manufacture of shoes. A second trash deposit measuring approximately 15 by 35 feet was designated as Trash Midden 2 and was composed of brick rubble, ceramics, glass vessels, and machinery parts. Trash Midden 3, located on the eastern extreme of the construction pit, contained brick rubble and small quantities of ceramics, glass vessels, and metal. The material from both Trash Middens 2 and 3 suggests that they were formed about the time of the demolition of the Cotton Factory in circa 1905.

The large trash pit discovered near the Cotton Factory contained a variety of materials, including stoneware medicinal jugs, glass bottles, sewing machines,

wheelbarrow wheels, pulleys, gears, barrel hoops, pots, pans, metal drinking cups, and the remains of magazines. Most of the material recovered from the Trash Pit dates to the turn of the twentieth century and was undoubtedly deposited when the Cotton Factory was dismantled in 1905. It is interesting to compare the types of machinery recovered from this pit to the 1901 newspaper article which mentions that looms, spindles, carding machines, bolts, rods, bars, pieces of shafting, etc., that were unfit for further use were dumped onto the first floor of the Cotton Factory. The journalist who visited the facility in 1901 undoubtedly viewed many of the same types of items uncovered some 90 years later during site preparations for the New Federal Building/Courthouse.

Artifact Collection

In addition to the numerous brick foundations that were uncovered during the archaeological investigations, approximately 2,000 artifacts were collected from the site. These artifacts include a variety of goods that express the lives of both the prisoners and their guards. The variety of items recovered from the site during the excavation of the construction pit was unexpected given the function of the site and the salvage operations mounted by the state when the penitentiary was abandoned. It should be noted that most of the recovered artifacts represent items discarded by the prisoners or the prison workers because they were no longer of value. In the following discussions, the artifact collection is considered under several major headings: (1) ceramic goods, (2) glass vessels, (3) metal, (4) faunal material, and (5) leather goods.

Ceramic Goods

Since ceramic tableware could conceivably be used as a weapon by a desperate prisoner, little was expected to be recovered from the site and, indeed, very little was. As expected, most of the ceramics recovered from the site of the old penitentiary represent storage or utilitarian-type vessels. Wares of these types would largely have been used in three areas: the kitchen for the preparation and storage of food, the hospital area for the storage of medicines, and the employee residence areas for sanitary purposes. The majority of the ceramic tableware recovered was undoubtedly used by the prison employees rather than the prisoners.

Although pieces of ceramic vessels were discovered throughout the study area, most were found in the Trash Pit, with lesser quantities recovered from Well 1 and Trash Midden 2. Portions of at least 13 stoneware jugs ranging in size from one to two gallons and dating between 1880 and 1910 were recovered from the Trash Pit. Three of the jugs bore the mark of I.L. Lyons & Co. (Figure 14A), a New Orleans wholesale druggist. While the contents of these jugs are unknown, their large size suggests that they were intended for institutional uses and were most likely used in the prison hospital. Also recovered from the Trash Pit were portions of several pieces of ceramic tableware,

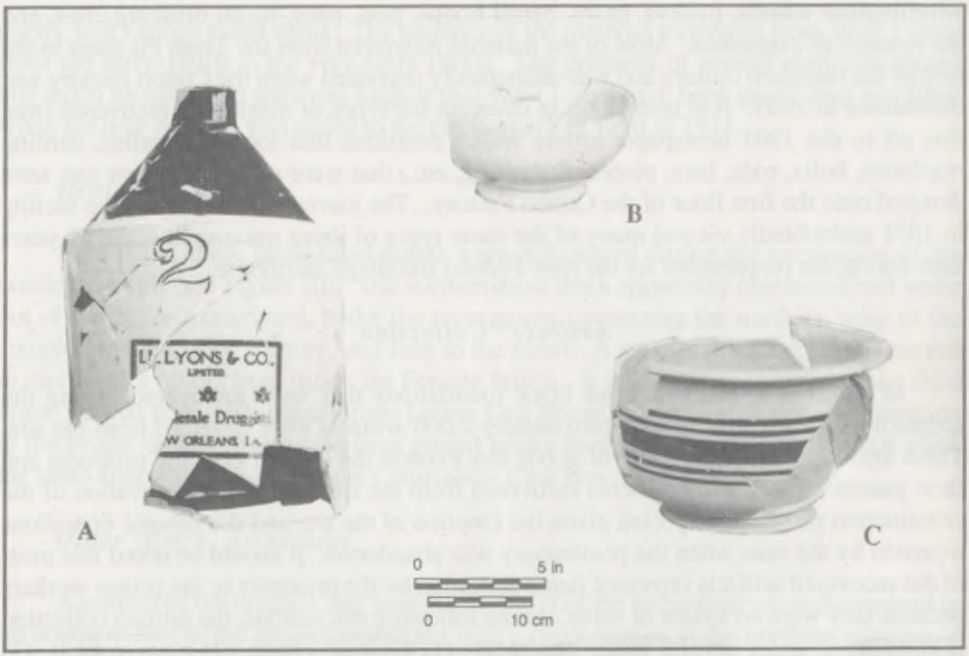

Figure 14. Ceramics recovered from the Louisiana State Penitentiary: A) stoneware jug; B) whiteware serving bowl; C) yellowware chamber pot.

the most complete being a small, undecorated serving bowl (Figure 14B) manufactured by Taylor, Lee & Smith Co. in 1900 or 1901 (Gates and Ormerod 1982:267). Most of the ceramics recovered from Well 1 represent the remains of five yellowware chamber pots (Figure 14C). Trash Midden 2, like the Trash Pit, contained a variety of ceramics, including portions of stoneware jugs, yellowware chamber pots, and small quantities of tableware.

Glass Vessels

Glass, like ceramics, could have been readily used by a convict as a weapon; its distribution must have been tightly controlled in the penitentiary compound. Therefore, it was assumed prior to excavation that most of the glass recovered from the prison site would represent vessels used for food storage and preparation and for medicinal containers. Other types of glass, such as drinking glasses and beverage containers, recovered from the site were expected to be associated with the prison employees. However, the recovery of these latter types of vessels was anticipated to be relatively low because there were few prison employees and their trash would likely not have been disposed of in a place accessible to the convicts.

Surprisingly, glass vessels were discovered throughout the site, with relatively large quantities coming from the Trash Pit, Trash Midden 1, and Well 1. Even more surprising than the quantity of glass recovered were the variety of vessels they represent. In addition to the expected presence of various medicine bottles, numerous alcohol bottles were recovered, particularly from Well 1. The presence of large glass alcohol bottles and ceramic jugs at the site might be expected since liquor was often used as a pain reliever. In fact, in September 1863 a New Orleans physician requested that a Captain Mitchell, a Union Army commander stationed in New Orleans, ". . . order one gallon Whiskey, for the sick and invalid convicts" (O'Bryan Papers, LLMVC) for the state's prisoners then held in the old New Orleans Parish Prison. However, since most alcohol used for medicinal purposes in an institutional setting would have likely been purchased and stored in bulk containers, it is improbable that the small liquor flasks (Figure 15A) that were recovered were used as medicinal items. Rather, these flasks were probably used by the guards and other prison personnel as a means of coping with their jobs.

In addition to the hard liquor bottles (Figure 15B) and flasks that were retrieved from the prison's trash deposits, several wine and at least one champagne bottle (Figure 15C)

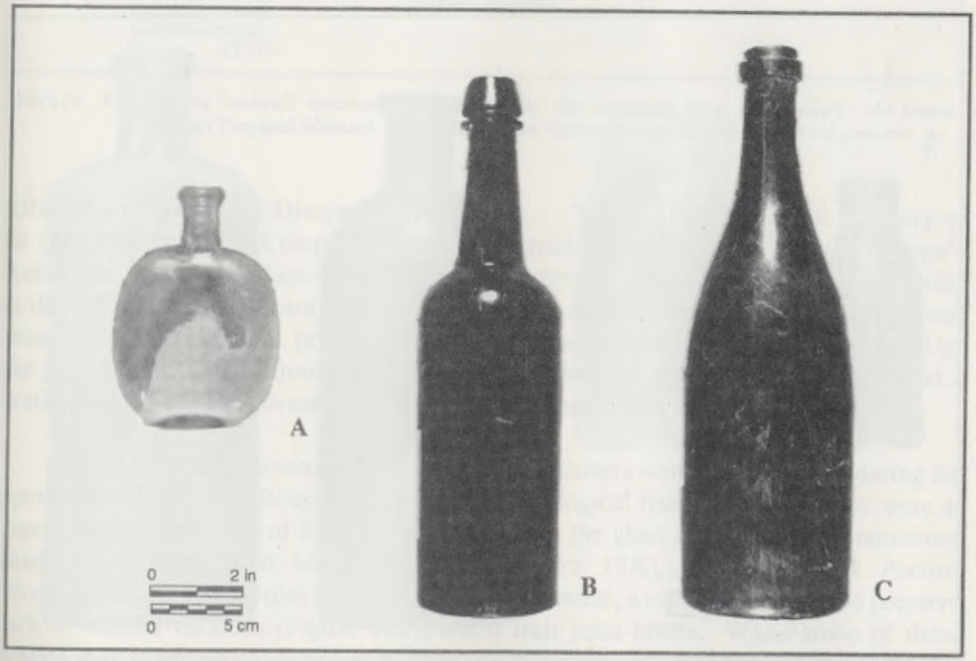

Figure 15. Glass alcohol vessels recovered from the Louisiana State Penitentiary: A) liquor flask; B) liquor bottle; C) champagne bottle.

were recovered. While these vessels may have contained drinks consumed by the warden or other prison officials, they may merely have been bottles that were reused by prison personnel for the storage or serving of condiments. However, several glass items, glass ink wells for example, were almost certainly used by prison personnel. Although the prisoners occasionally wrote personal letters, it is unlikely they had sufficient leisure time or had access to writing implements outside the prison offices.

As noted earlier, a variety of medicinal bottles were expected to be recovered from the prison site, as there was an operational hospital on the premises during much of the facility's existence. While many of the medicinal bottles had no identifying embossing, their forms indicate usages such as bitters, elixirs, cold creams, hydrogen peroxide, etc.

Identified medicinal bottles retrieved from the prison include Emerson Drug Company's Bromo-Seltzer (Figure 16A), a drug made to relieve indigestion; Saxlehner's Hunyadi Janos Bitterquelle, a natural laxative (Fike 1987:41); Horlick's Malted Milk (Figure 16B), a product used to increase appetite for weight gain; and Buffalo Lithia Spring Water, for use "In Uric Acid Diathesis, Gouty Rheumatic Conditions,

Figure 16. Medicinal vessels recovered from the Louisiana State Penitentiary: A) Emerson Drug Company's Bromo-Seltzer; B) Horlick's Malted Milk; C) Oakland Chemical Company Hydrogen Peroxide; D) Maguire's Pharmacy of Baton Rouge.

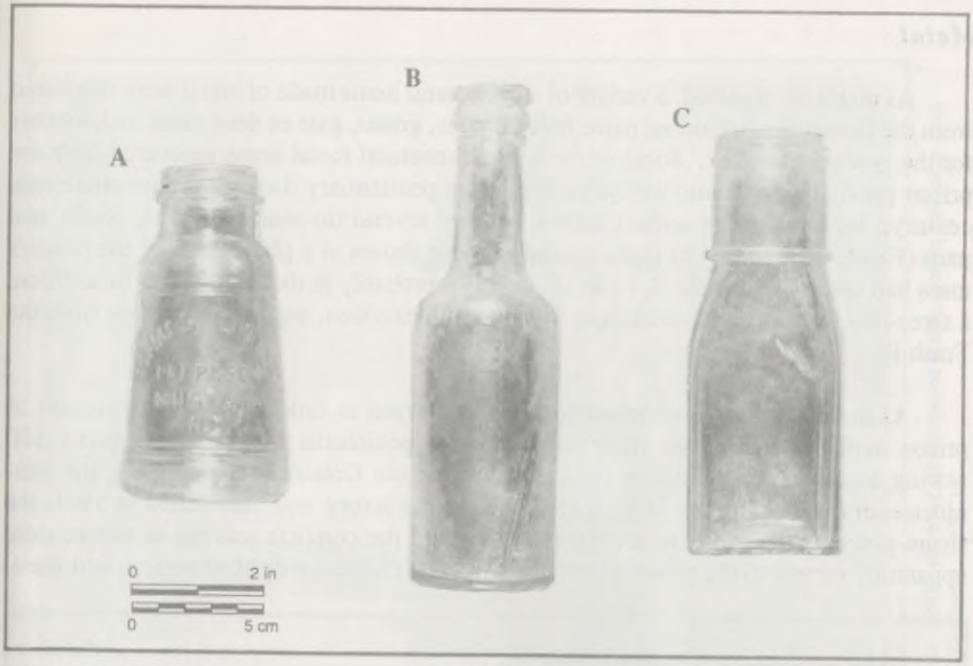

Figure 17. Glass foodstuff containers recovered from the Louisiana State Penitentiary: A) James Cinart Prepared Mustard; B) Lea & Perrins Worcestershire Sauce; C) pickled preserve jar.

Albuminuria of Bright's Disease and Pregnancy. . . " (Fike 1987:242). The recovery of an Oakland Chemical Company Hydrogen Peroxide (Figure 16C), a Dr. Tichenor's Antiseptic, and several Vapo-Cresolene bottles suggest that antiseptics were quite popular at the prison during the turn of the century. In addition to these national and regional brands of medicinal items, prison officials also patronized area druggists, as indicated by the presence of a bottle from the Sherrouse Medicine Co., Ltd., of New Orleans and a bottle from Maguire's Pharmacy (Figure 16D), a Baton Rouge druggist.

While the historical records indicate that the prisoners were poorly treated during the operation of the Baton Rouge facility, the archaeological record indicates they were at least provided a variety of foodstuffs. Included in the glass collection were numerous James Cinart Prepared Mustard bottles (Figure 17A), several Lea & Perrins Worcestershire Sauce bottles (Figure 17B), catsup bottles, a multitude of pickled preserve jars of various varieties (Figure 17C), and a fruit juice bottle. While some of these bottles may represent consumption by the prison employees rather than the prisoners, the sheer number of mustard and pickled preserve bottles suggests that the majority were used in the prisoners mess hall.

Metal

As might be expected, a variety of architectural items made of metal were recovered from the prison site, including nails, bolts, hinges, grates, gate or door fasts, and anchors for the prison's iron bars. Some of the non-architectural metal items recovered from the prison provide insight into everyday life in the penitentiary during the late-nineteenth century. Included in the artifact collection were several tin-enameled cups, bowls, and pans (Figure 18A and B) of types similar to those shown in a photograph of the prison's mess hall taken by Andrew D. Lytle (Figure 19), probably in the late 1890s. In addition, a three-tine fork was recovered from Well 1 and a cast iron, tripodal bake oven from the Trash Pit.

As noted earlier, some prisoners were employed as tailors in the manufacture of prison uniforms. To make these uniforms, the penitentiary had approximately 100 sewing machines operating on the third floor of the Cotton Factory during the late-nineteenth century (Figure 20). When the Cotton Factory was abandoned in 1901, the steam-powered, belt-driven, sewing machines and the convicts serving as tailors were apparently moved to the prison's northern wing and clothing manufacture resumed there.

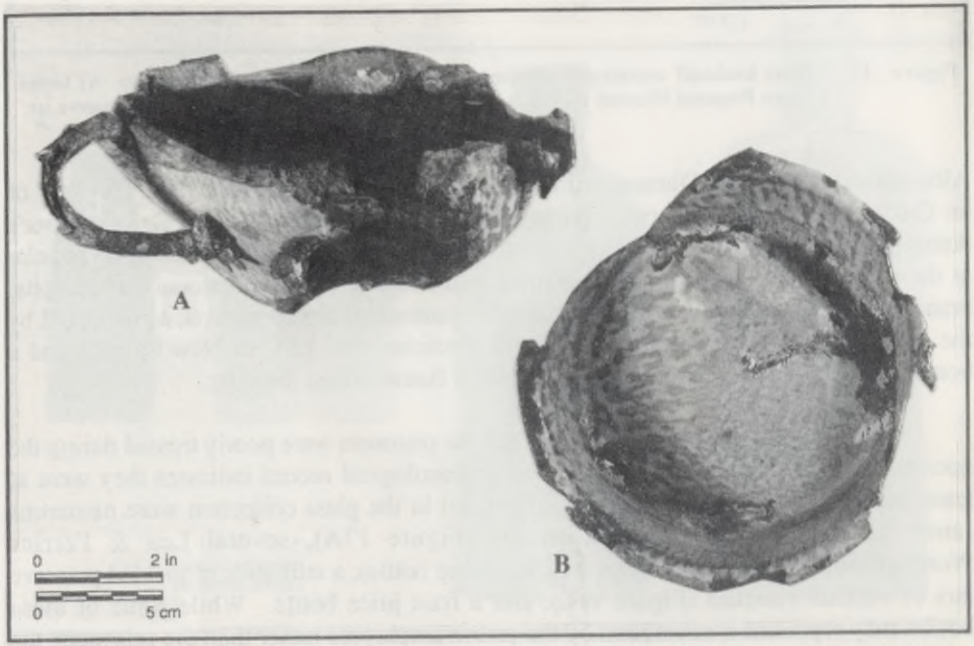

Figure 18. Metal tableware recovered from the Louisiana State Penitentiary: A) tin-enameled cup; B) tin-enameled plate.

Figure 19. Louisiana State Penitentiary mess hall, probably during the late 1890s, showing tin-enameled plates, bowls, and cups used by the prisoners (courtesy of the Henry L. Fuqua, Jr., Picture Collection, LLMVC).

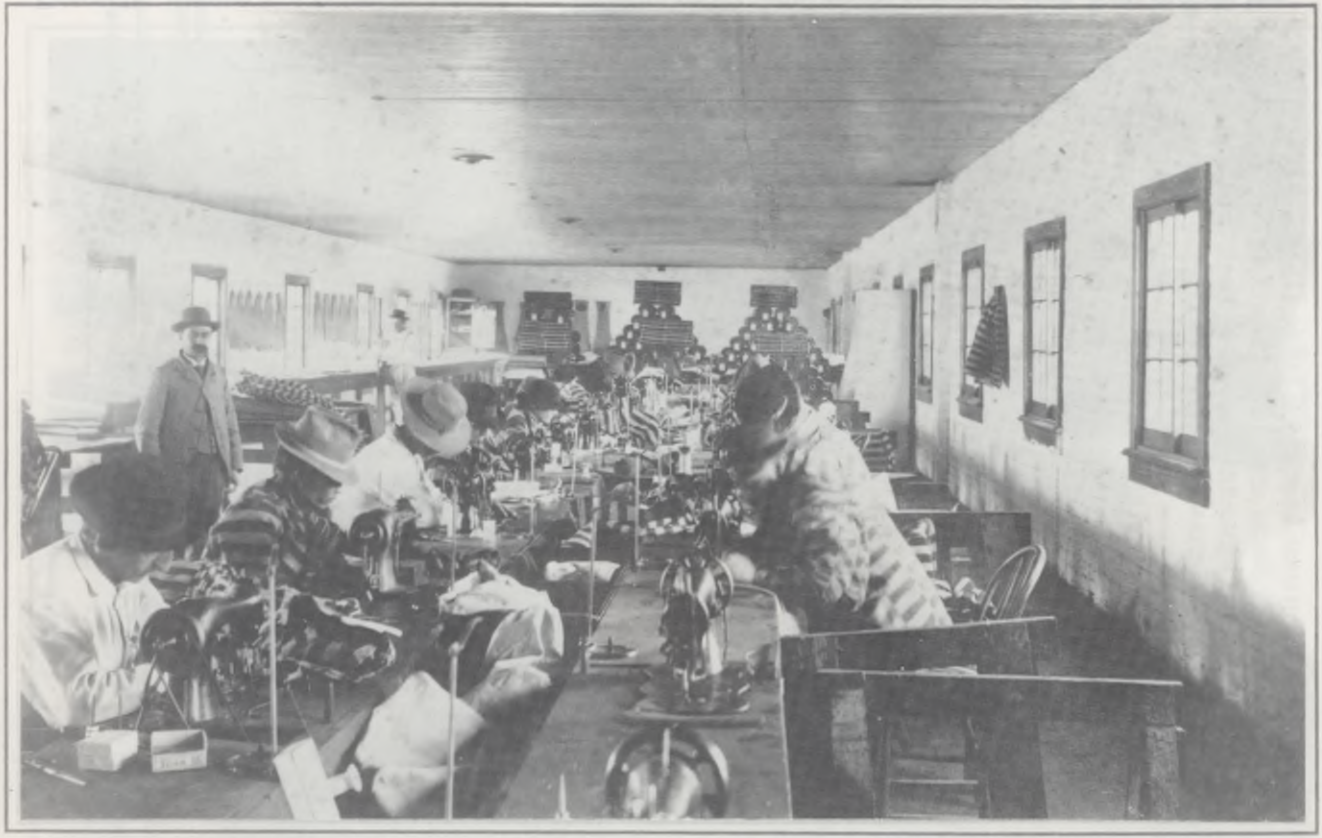

Figure 20. "The Clothing Factory" of the Louisiana State Penitentiary (courtesy of the Henry L. Fuqua, Jr., Picture Collection, LLMVC).

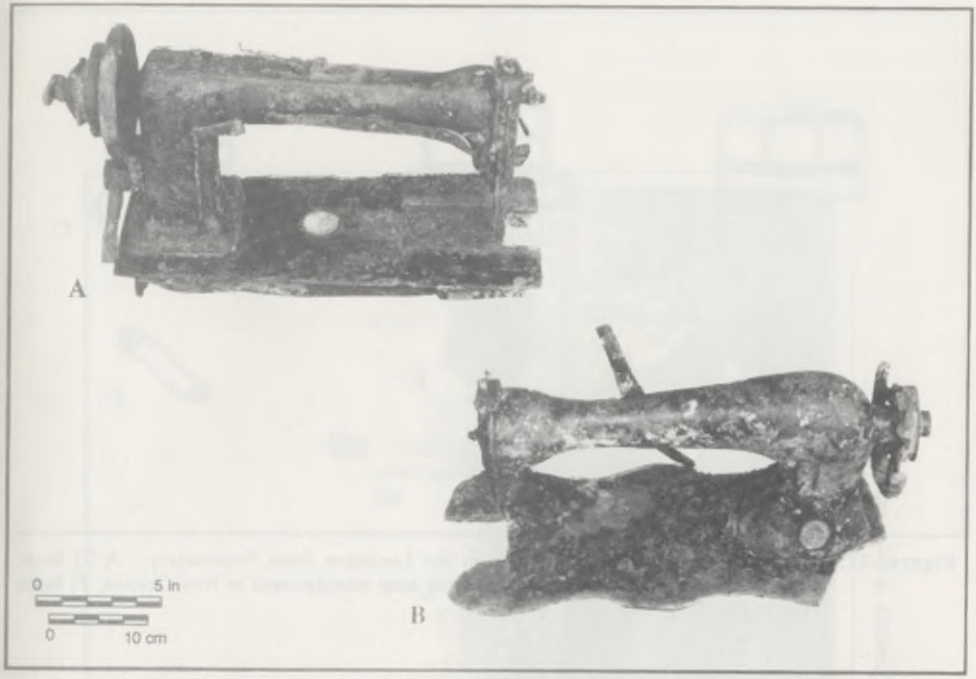

Figure 21. Sewing machines recovered from the Louisiana State Penitentiary: A) manufactured by Wheeler & Wilson Mfg. Co.; B) manufactured by Singer Mfg. Co.

When the prison was abandoned, many of the sewing machines, presumably those that were inoperative, were left on site and thrown into a large pit. Portions of 24 of these sewing machines were recovered from the Trash Pit during the excavation of the construction pit. Of these 24 machines, 8 were manufactured by the Wheeler & Wilson Mfg. Co. of Bridgeport, Connecticut (Figure 21A), and 10 were produced by the Singer Mfg. Co. of New York (Figure 21B). The remaining 6 were too fragmentary to identify. The scalloped base plate and rounded shaft of the Singer sewing machines that were recovered from the Trash Pit are identical to those shown in Lytle's photograph (see Figure 20) and may indeed be the same machines. In addition to the sewing machines themselves, a portion of a large bobbin spool similar to those depicted in Figure 20 was recovered from Trash Midden 2. Imprinting on the spool end indicates that it held thread manufactured by the Merrick Thread Company.

In addition to the sewing machines used to make the convict's clothing, numerous other artifacts that reflect the apparel worn by the prisoners and their guards were recovered. Several brass and steel vest and suspender buckles (Figure 22A-C), buttons

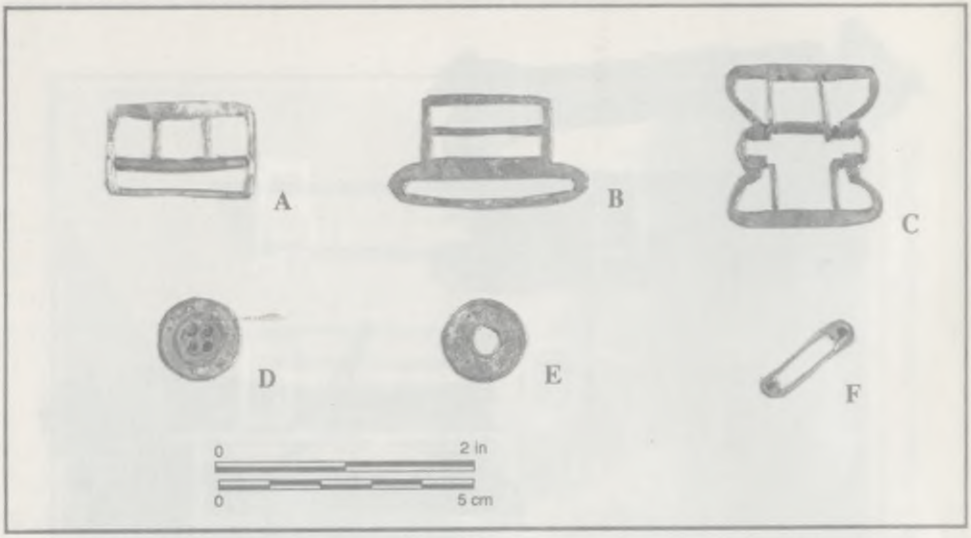

Figure 22. Metal clothing items recovered from the Louisiana State Penitentiary: A-C) brass clothing buckles; D) brass button; E) brass snap manufactured in New Orleans; F) brass safety pin.

(Figure 22D), and snaps (Figure 22E) were recovered from Well 1. In addition, a single brass safety pin (Figure 22F) was recovered from the same well. Other metal artifacts recovered from the well include parts of several Faber fountain pens and a portion of a harmonica reed.

Although not abundant, some of the harsher aspects of prison life were found in the archaeological record. Six iron wheel barrow wheels (Figure 23) identical to those used by prison laborers in levee construction work (Figure 24) were recovered during the excavation of the Trash Pit. Although rather innocuous artifacts in and of themselves, these wheels represent a form of labor that was particularly hard on the convicts—levee construction. Joseph Ransdell noted in an 1898 or 1899 speech that "a gentleman told me in 1885 or 1886, he saw 42 convicts buried at one camp, on the Pecan Grove levee, and the death [*sic*] were nearly all caused by

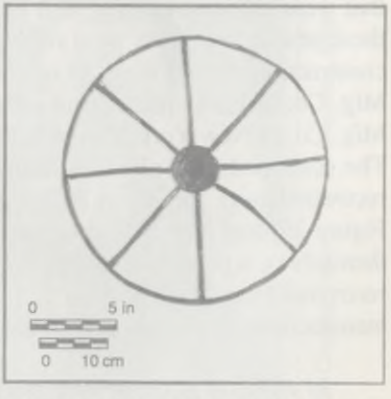

Figure 23. Iron wheel barrow wheel recovered from the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

Figure 24. Convicts building a levee in the Atchafalaya Basin (courtesy of the Henry L. Fuqua, Jr., Picture Collection, LLMVC).

overwork, exposure and brutality" (Ransdell Papers, LLMVC). Thousands of convicts died while using wheel barrows similar to these to build levees under the various lessees.

Perhaps the artifact that provides the most tangible image of life at the penitentiary, however, is the barrel of a 12 gauge double-barreled shotgun (Figure 25) recovered near Trash Midden 2. Although the maker of the gun remains unknown, it is undoubtedly similar to the one carried by the prison guard shown in one of Lytle's turn-of-the-century photographs of the penitentiary (see cover).

Figure 25. Shotgun recovered near Trash Midden 2.

Faunal Material

A small quantity of faunal material (animal bone) was recovered from the penitentiary site, particularly from Trash Midden 2. The recovery of faunal material from this area was not unexpected since a portion of the nearby northern wing of the penitentiary functioned as the prison's mess hall. Most of the faunal material represents the remains of cows and pigs that were apparently butchered at the prison and then used in stews and soups. Since bone was probably readily available and easily worked, prisoners no doubt made great use of this resource. Evidence of their workmanship was found in the form of a single hand-carved die (Figure 26A) that was undoubtedly much used by the prisoners and, probably, their guards. Further evidence of their work is seen in a hand-carved bone toothpick (Figure 26B) recovered from Well 1.

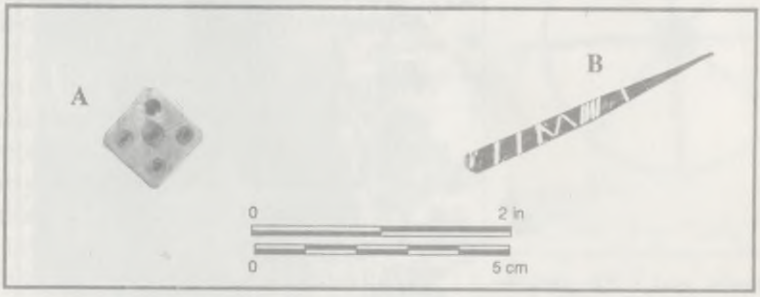

Figure 26. Hand-carved bone items recovered from the Louisiana State Penitentiary: A) die; B) toothpick.

Leather Goods

Throughout most of the operation of the penitentiary in Baton Rouge, some of the prisoners were employed as shoemakers. While shoes produced by the prisoners were initially sold to the general public, area merchants forced the practice to be discontinued since they could not compete with the prison's cheap labor. However, this did not prevent the lessees from having the prisoners produce their own shoes, which they did until the early-twentieth century. Evidence of their craft was abundant at the site in the form of dozens of shoes (Figure 27A) and large quantities of leather scraps. In addition to making shoes, prison laborers also made leather hats (Figure 27B) and belts.

Figure 28, a photograph of the prison's shoe shop taken in the late-nineteenth century, depicts several facets of shoe production in the shop. Based on the historical and archaeological evidence, the lessees purchased sheets of cured cow hide which was then cut in the shoe shop using a variety of templates as guides. The production of leather goods from the raw material created large quantities of unusable scrap leather. Much of this scrap leather was encountered during the archaeological investigations, particularly in Trash Midden 1, which consisted almost entirely of scraps of leather left over from the production of shoes.

Although virtually all of the stitching of the shoes was done by hand, the presence of at least one Singer sewing machine (Figure 28) in the shoe shop indicates that at least some work was done there using sewing machines. After the uppers of the shoes were stitched together, they were attached to the soles by stitching and tacking. Completed shoes were then piled to await distribution.

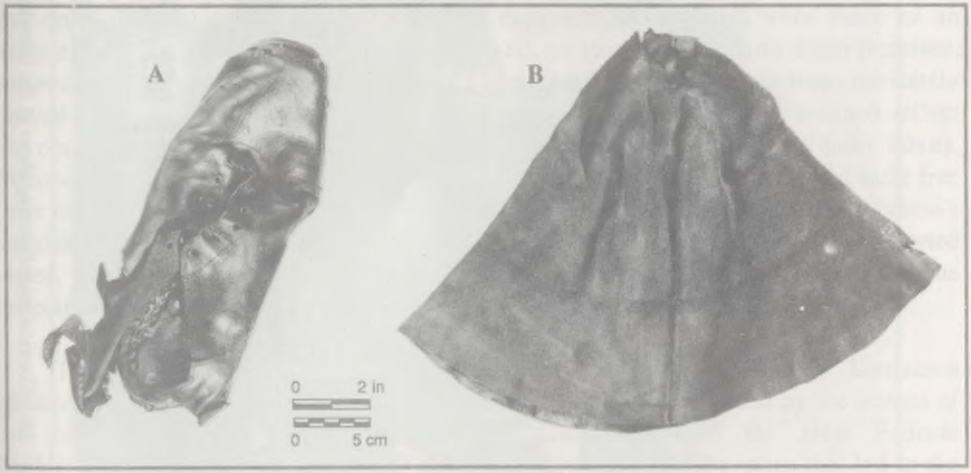

Figure 27. Leather goods recovered from the Louisiana State Penitentiary: A) shoe; B) hat.

Figure 28. Convicts manufacturing shoes at the Louisiana State Penitentiary (courtesy of the Henry L. Fuqua, Jr., Picture Collection, LLMVC).

. . . we know of no mode of punishment less cruel, and more effective, than a proper amount of flogging
—Senate Journal 1852:125.

CONCLUSIONS

Although many studies have addressed penal reform and social conditions of the Louisiana penitentiary system, few have examined the system's physical plant from a historic perspective. This study of the 1833-1917 Louisiana State Penitentiary provided an almost unique opportunity to examine the physical remains of the state's penal system. While numerous parish prisons have been erected in the state, only two major facilities housed state prisoners during the nineteenth century.

When Louisiana entered statehood in 1812, state prisoners were housed in the New Orleans Parish Prison. The New Orleans prison was used to hold state convicts until the Baton Rouge facility went into operation in 1835. The Baton Rouge penitentiary was the first prison in the state to be built solely for the housing and employ of state prisoners. In continuous operation until 1917, the prison was finally abandoned and all state convicts were moved to Angola Penitentiary and to the various work camps around the state. The abandonment of the Baton Rouge Prison and now the construction of the New Federal Building/Courthouse have opened the site to the present archaeological research.

When the present study was begun, it was assumed that few items indicative of the prisoners' personal lives would be recovered due to the very nature of prison life. Indeed, the only archaeological remains that were expected to be found were those of an architectural nature. While the original excavations seemed to confirm these premises, excavation of the construction pit yielded a variety of artifacts ranging from intricately carved bone toothpicks to industrial sewing machines. Still, few of these artifacts reflect the convicts' personal lives; rather, they provide evidence of the convicts' daily labors. Prisoners were required to work from sun up to sun down, and were allowed little free time of their own. Because they spent so much of their time working in the prison's various shops and because they probably had few true personal possessions, the assorted shoes, wheelbarrow wheels, and sewing machines discovered at the site are in fact, a true reflection of their everyday lives.

This study provides a unique glimpse into a nineteenth-century Louisiana penitentiary. The examination of prison life presented here was enabled by the actions of the judicial system; in this instance the construction of the New Federal Building/Courthouse. Ironically, 160 years ago it was a judicial system that led to the establishment and construction of the penitentiary at Baton Rouge.

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