

## Three Barrel Wells of Mobile County, Alabama

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### Barrel Wells – A Brief Overview:

Barrel wells typically consist of a well shaft lined with wooden barrels. The barrels are often stacked several high. To create a well, this construction technique is particularly useful in sandy, wet soils, and seems like it would be well-suited to a region with a shallow water table such as Mobile County, Alabama. In a practical sense, it's also a technique that lends itself to the small homestead, since such a well could readily be constructed with simple tools, without specialized knowledge, and could feasibly be completed in a few days. Certainly it would be much less costly and need less technical expertise than constructing a brick-lined well.

However, barrel wells are a feature type rarely found in Mobile County, and have only turned up in Colonial contexts. Likely, despite the previously mentioned advantages, barrel wells are fundamentally maladaptive to the local geology, and even in Colonial times better solutions were quickly found. A few archaeological sites in the region have been found to have barrel well features: 1MB221 (Port Dauphin), and on two neighboring sites in Downtown Mobile: 1MB510 and 1MB513.

Runoff from animal husbandry, poor public sanitation practices that might encourage the spread of diseases such as cholera that spread through human fecal contamination of water sources, and a known phenomenon in the downtown Mobile area of brackish water from the Mobile Bay intruding into the shallow water table during times of higher demand (during which water is withdrawn from the aquifer via wells and pumping, and not replenished quickly enough by rain,) might lead to the water from a shallow well suffering from deteriorating taste and quality (Robinson, Powell and Brown, 1956, Pg. 45).

### A Brief History of Water in Mobile, Alabama:

In 1711, French Colonists who had originally settled at the site that is now called 'Old Mobile', the original seat of capital of French Louisiana at Twenty Seven Mile Bluff relocated to the mouth of the Mobile River, where the river flows into Mobile Bay. One priority for the colonists was finding an uncontaminated, tasty, convenient source of water.

The northern portion of Mobile Bay is formed by the confluence of the Mobile River and the Tensaw

*local streams, which are directly dependent upon local precipitation and ground-water storage; and (3) the local ground-*

**1MB221 (Dauphin Island):**

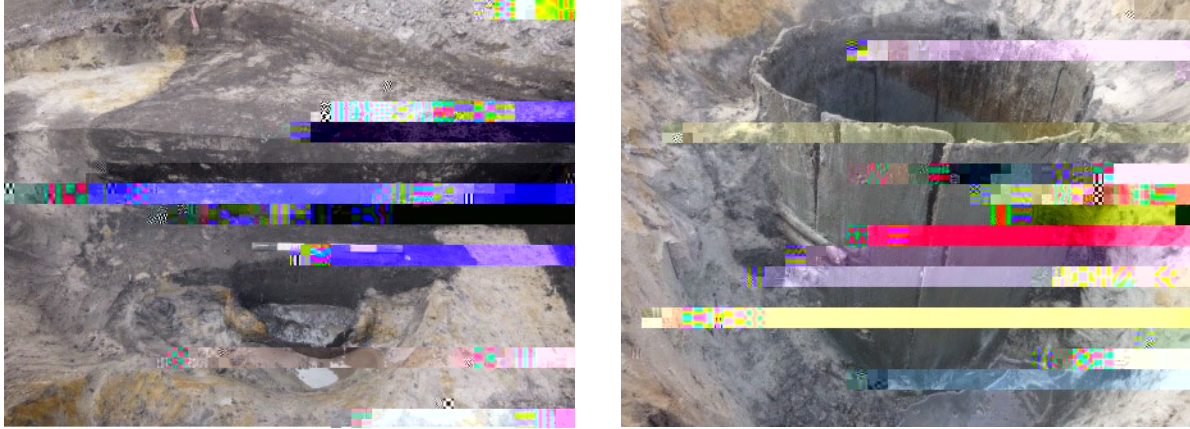
In 1997, the Center for Archaeological Studies conducted excavations at the location of one possible structure at the Village of Port Dauphin (1MB221) –

Dr. Gregory Waselkov excavates Feature 144 at 1MB221

**1MB510:**

Like the 1MB221 barrel well, the barrel well found at 1MB510 was found near the archaeological remains of a structure.

*"The barrel well (Feature 69) was found on the west side of the deeper basin part of the Feature 52 structure. Based on location and artifact content, the well was in use during occupation of the structure*



Two views of Feature 69 at 1MB510

### 1MB513:

Feature 372 was a newly discovered barrel well at site 1MB513. It presented initially as a dark oval stain about 165cm by about 145cm, revealed during mechanical stripping. The central portion of the stain showed evidence of burning, including large pieces of charcoal. Colonial-era artifacts such as faience sherds were obvious on the surface. Upon excavation, the feature was revealed to be a column of many slumped-in moderately well-defined layers of feature fill. At the water table, about 94cm below the stripped surface, the bottom edge of the rotten barrel became evident as curving stains in the sand on the lower, outer edge of the feature fill. Below that, surviving fibers from the rotten barrel staves could be observed. Colonial-era artifacts continued sparsely to the water table. At that point, hand-excavation became too difficult, and mechanical excavation was employed – the remains of a partially-rotted barrel were pulled up in pieces.



South profile of Feature 372 at 1MB513 showing the extent of the feature from the ground surface down to the water table

Faience plate found broken in half in the upper portion of Feature 372

The abundant nature of the artifacts indicates that, unlike the other barrel wells found at 1MB510 and 1MB221, after abandonment this well was used as a receptacle for household trash. Also, the filling/abandonment phase of the feature may have been fairly brief.

The analysis of the artifacts retrieved from this feature is still in its preliminary stages but promises to offer interesting insights. Why was

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Riccio, Joseph F. and Gazzier, Conrad A.

*History of Water Supply of the Mobile Area, Alabama*, Circular 92, Geological Survey of Alabama,