
◆

The Preservation Post

The Quarterly Bulletin of The Southern Historic Preservation Society

ISSN 2025-0001

Number 17

Spring 2025

Tabby: The Forgotten Material

Oyster Shell, Lime, and the Architecture of the Coastal South

by Dr. William Hargrave

If you have ever walked the grounds of an old plantation on the Georgia or South Carolina coast, you have likely encountered tabby — even if you did not know its name. It is that heavy, rough-textured material, studded with fragments of oyster shell, that forms the walls of slave cabins, the foundations of great houses, and the floors of sugar works from Beaufort to St. Augustine.

Tabby is one of the most distinctive building materials in the American architectural vocabulary, and one of the least understood. A composite of oyster shell, lime (burned from oyster shell), sand, and water, it is a kind of concrete that predates Portland cement by centuries. Its origins are debated — some scholars trace it to the Moors of North Africa, others to West African building traditions, still others to Spanish colonial practice in the Caribbean.

Whatever its origin, tabby became the signature material of the coastal South. Between roughly 1700 and 1860, it was used for nearly every type of construction — from the modest walls of slave quarters to the imposing fortifications of Fort Frederica on St. Simons Island. Its virtues were practical: the raw materials were abundant and free for the gathering, and the finished product was remarkably durable, capable of withstanding the salt air and hurricane winds of the coastal environment.

The making of tabby was labor-intensive, requiring the burning of oyster shell in kilns to produce lime, the mixing of lime with sand and whole shell, and the pouring of the mixture into wooden forms. This work was performed overwhelmingly by enslaved people, whose skill and knowledge made the material possible. The tabby structures that survive today are monuments not only to an ingenious building technology but to the forced labor that produced them.

"The tabby structures that survive today are monuments not only to an ingenious building technology but to the forced labor that produced them."

Conservation of tabby presents unique challenges. The material is porous and susceptible to moisture damage, biological growth, and the freeze-thaw cycles that occur even in the relatively mild coastal climate. Inappropriate repairs — particularly the use of Portland cement patches — can cause accelerated deterioration by trapping moisture within the historic fabric.

The Society's Tabby Conservation Workshop, held annually at our Savannah headquarters, trains preservation professionals in appropriate repair techniques. Our approach emphasizes the use of compatible materials — lime-based mortars and renders — and the importance of understanding the original material's composition before attempting any intervention.

We are also working with the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission to document surviving tabby structures along the coast, many of which are on private property and have never been surveyed. This partnership reflects our commitment to understanding tabby not merely as a building material but as a cultural artifact — a physical expression of the knowledge, labor, and experience of the communities that created it.

Field Report: Natchez, Mississippi

Documenting the Antebellum Mansions of the Bluff

by James Beaumont

In February 2025, a team of five Society volunteers traveled to Natchez, Mississippi, to conduct photographic documentation of eight antebellum mansions along the bluff overlooking the Mississippi River.

The properties surveyed include Stanton Hall (1857), Longwood (1860, never completed), Dunleith (1856), and five lesser-known structures that have received little scholarly attention. Our team produced over 2,000 high-resolution photographs and detailed condition assessments for each property.

The most urgent finding concerns the Mercer-McDowell House (c. 1845), a Greek Revival mansion on Pearl Street that has been unoccupied since 2018. Rising damp, roof failures, and vegetation intrusion have caused significant structural damage. Without intervention within the next two to three years, the building may be beyond economical repair.

The Society has written to the City of Natchez and the Mississippi Department of Archives and History urging immediate stabilization of the structure. We are also exploring the feasibility of an emergency grant to fund temporary roof repairs.

Full documentation from the survey will be added to our digital archive and made available to researchers. A summary report will appear in a future issue of The Preservation Post.



CONTENTS

Tabby: The Forgotten Material	1
Field Report: Natchez, Mississippi	5
