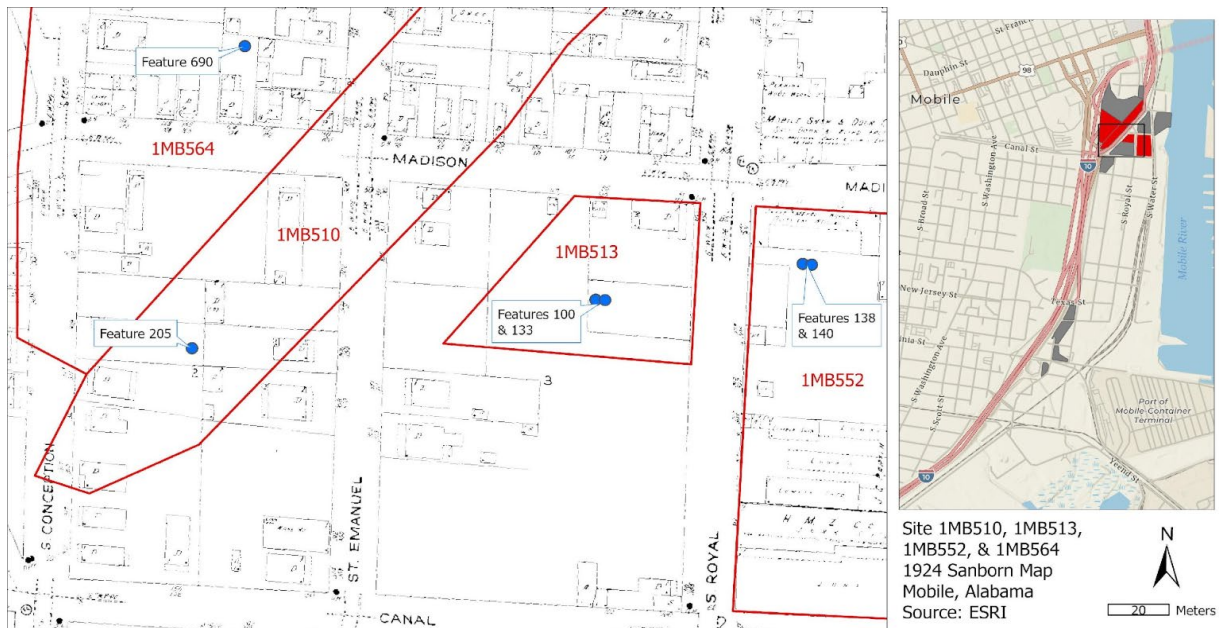


Privies Down by the River: Chronology, Form, and Site Formation

Hamilton H. Bryant, III

The Mobile River Bridge (MRB) project is conducting mitigation of 13 sites in downtown Mobile, Alabama. Occupations range from the colonial period through the mid-twentieth century. Privies are one of the most common feature types encountered. Prior to the development of municipal waste management services, privies, or outhouses, were the primary method of waste storage and management. Studying privies in context of their placement on a site in addition to analyzing recovered assemblages sheds light on health/sanitation practices, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, subsistence, as well as understanding site formation.



Select privy features excavated for the MRB project.

Chronology

While detailed analyses of the privy assemblages has yet to be completed, field observations provide a general idea of the period of backfilling at the least. Almost all of the privies appear to date to the later half of the nineteenth century, and were backfilled in the twentieth century. Form appears to have little to do with period of construction.

Form

Privy construction method changed over time as understanding of germ theory led to improvements in sanitation. After the London cholera epidemic of the 1850s was tied to water pollution (Stottman 2000:42), privies were generally instructed to be brick-lined.



Privy construction method changed over time as understanding of germ theory led to improvements in sanitation. After the London cholera epidemic of the 1850s was tied to water pollution (Stottman 2000:42), privies were generally instructed to be brick-lined. To date, only one brick-lined privy has been found, the majority are wood-lined, and very few are completely unlined. Privy vault lining in downtown Mobile appears to be a function of available space which is in turn the result of socio-economic status. The type of lining is likely tied to economics.

All but one of the excavated privies are single shafts. The privy from industrial site 1MB552 appears to have been a side-by-side double privy. Possibly segregated or gendered bathrooms given the function of the site.



Site Formation

Three centuries of habitation and use result in a very complex urban historical archaeological record. The deconstruction of I-10 further complicates the remains of what was a densely occupied residential neighborhood and industrial waterfront. If the average depth of a privy shaft is seven feet, then between two and five feet of archaeological deposits are missing from any given MRB site based on the average depth of MRB privies.



Privy fill involves very little human waste. Rather, most contain various episodes of secondary, tertiary, etc. refuse disposal/infilling. The backfill in residential lots seems to be a mixture of I-10 demolition debris rather than occupant filling. The industrial privies have capping episodes of clay, possibly to deodorize the privies.



References Cited

Stottman, M. Jay (2000) Out of Sight, out of Mind: Privy Architecture and the Perception of Sanitation, *Historical Archaeology* 34(1):39-61.