

Pre-Visit Activity #2: Journals from French Mobile



Background Information:

Several of the early French colonists kept journals about their travels and life in the New World. These journals are some of the best sources that tell what life was like for people in the early colony. The Museum of Mobile has the journal of a French sailor, named Bertet de la Clue, on display in our main exhibit, *Old Ways, New Days: The Story of Mobile*. The purpose of this activity is to provide students with some background information on the French Colonial period in Mobile so that they have a better understanding of the early history of the city before their visit to the museum.

Objectives:

After reading an informational handout on the French Colonists in Mobile, participating in a class discussion, and writing a creative journal entry about life in the early French colony at Mobile, students will have an impression of what life was like in the early French colony at Mobile.

This activity supports the objectives of the Alabama Course of Study listed below.

Social Studies

4th Grade

2. Relate reasons for European exploration and settlement in Alabama to the impact of European explorers on trade, health, and land expansion in Alabama.

5th Grade

5. Explain the early colonization of North America and reasons for settlement in the Northern, Middle, and Southern colonies, including geographic features, landforms, and differences in climate among the colonies.

Materials required: copies of *The French in Mobile*, *Journal Entries*, and *Writing a Journal* for each student, pencils or pens, crayons or markers*

The Lesson: Hand out copies of *The French in Mobile*. Read aloud or have students take turns reading aloud. Discuss early living conditions with students. Describe the wilderness that would have existed in North America prior to the arrival of the European colonists. Ask them to imagine that they are colonists and have them list things that they would have to do without. Hand out *Writing a Journal* and *Journal Entries* handouts to students. Read the journal entries aloud to the students. Then tell the students to imagine that they are one of the French colonists that first came to the Mobile area. Tell them to write about what they think the journey on the ship was like, what life in the colony was like, or what the area might have looked like when they arrived. They could even make up a story about meeting the Native Americans in the area.

***A variation of this activity for younger students:** Lead a discussion about what it would be like to go and live in a new place where there is nothing but wilderness. Tell students that the French started the city of Mobile 300 years ago. When they arrived, there was nothing living here but plants and animals. Ask them to think about the things that would not have been here back then. Explain that the French had to bring the things that they needed with them on the ship. Give them a blank sheet of copy paper, and have your students make a drawing of what they think the colony, landscape, bay, fort, or people would have looked like.

Journal Entries

Several of the French colonists kept journals about their travels and adventures in the New World. These journals tell us what life was like for people in the colony. Here are some entries from the colonists' journals. You can see the journal of Bertet de la Clue on display at the Museum of Mobile.

March 15, 1702:

A master tanner, whom I brought to this country, got lost in the woods two weeks ago. He was found by two of our hunters on a beautiful hill, at the foot of a tree, beside a grave he had dug for himself; at the end of it he had set up a cross, on which he had written his experience. He no longer looked like a man, having gone without food for twelve days, taking only some water.”

Spring, 1711

At the beginning of this year, Fort Mobile and the residents' settlement near the fort were so inundated by the overflow of the river that only high places were without damage. Dartaguet and de Bienville, seeing that, according to the accounts given them by the savages, we should often be in danger of such floods, decided to move Fort Mobile. They chose the place where we had located the Chaqtos savages, at the cove on Mobile Bay, on the right. The savages... were given another place to live, two leagues below on our right doing down to the sea, on the bank of the Dog River.

From:

Fleur de Lys and Calumet, Being the Penicaut Narrative of French Adventure in Louisiana, translated and edited by Richebourg Gaillard McWilliams, p. 128.

July 16, 1720:

Our captains permitted us to go ashore at all times while the vessels remained in this country. As for what we did there, we took the prettiest houses to be found there and we could choose because the inhabitants of Dauphine Island had gone to establish another colony and had left their houses, although it would have been possible to transport them as they are made of wood. There remained on Dauphine Island only one officer with about twenty soldiers and two inhabitants who had gardens where they had some vegetables which they sold to us at high prices....

...There are snakes in this country which are very large and their bite is deadly. The savages cure it with an herb but if it is not on hand there is no remedy. I saw one which was fifteen inches in diameter and 25 feet long. They have at the end of the tail something that sounds like small bells. They are called rattlesnakes.

There are many crocodiles and I have seen some while hunting. They hide themselves in the rushes. There is a large quantity of other animals such as wild cattle, bears, lynxes, foxes, beavers, otters, bobcats, deer, wild turkeys, and wild horses.

From:

A Voyage to Dauphin Island in 1720: The Journal of Bertet de la Clue, translated and edited by Francis Escoffier and Jay Higginbotham, pp. 61 – 62.

The French In Mobile: 1702–1763

On orders from King Louis XIV of France, the Canadian-born explorer Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville and a small group of colonists and soldiers, arrived on the Gulf Coast in 1699 to start a French colony.

When the French arrived at Mobile Bay, they saw the Mobile River as a good starting point in a great north-south river network leading deep into the North American continent. At the time, most of North America was wilderness, with only scattered groups of Native Americans.

Mobile was founded in 1702 at Twenty-Seven Mile Bluff on the Mobile River just north of the bay. It was the first capital of the French colony, "La Louisiane." It was also the first European settlement in the state we now call Alabama.

Iberville went back to France to report to the king and left his younger brother, Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, in charge of the new settlement. In 1702, under Bienville's direction, Charles Levasseur, a military engineer, designed and built Fort Louis de la Louisiane, a wooden stockade fort that contained barracks, a chapel, and a warehouse. Unfortunately, the river tended to over-run its banks and often flooded Old Mobile. In 1711, the town was moved south and rebuilt on the site of present-day Mobile.

Life in the colony was difficult. Ships bringing supplies were often late. The colonists had to make do with what they had. They got most of the things that they needed from the land, the bay, and from trading with the Native Americans in the area.

The French built houses out of the things they could find here. They first made a wooden frame for the house. The shingles on the roof were also made of wood. The walls were made of braided cane from the bay. They plastered the walls with a mixture of crushed shells, sand, and clay. When the plaster dried it was almost like concrete.

In 1711, when the settlers of Old Mobile moved down-river because of flooding, they built another wooden stockade fort. Twelve years later, they built a sturdy brick one and named it Fort Condé in honor of the Duke de Condé, King Louis XIV's brother.

Fort Condé had four bastions (corner platforms for cannon) and walls more than six feet thick. A long wooden pier called the King's Wharf ran from the fort out into the Mobile River beside a reef of oyster shells. Boats bringing trade items for the Native Americans and supplies for the colony had to stop and tell French officers what they had. They had to pay a tax on the items. Only then were they allowed to continue up the river to trade.

There were not many women in the colony at first. In 1704 twenty-three women from French orphanages and convents arrived in Mobile Bay aboard the supply ship Pelican. The young women had been sent from Paris by the French government so that the men in Mobile could marry, build homes, and have children.

The French controlled the Mobile area from 1702 until the end of the French and Indian War in 1763. France and Great Britain fought the war for control of North America. France lost the war to Great Britain. France lost all its land east of the
