

Tabby in South Carolina

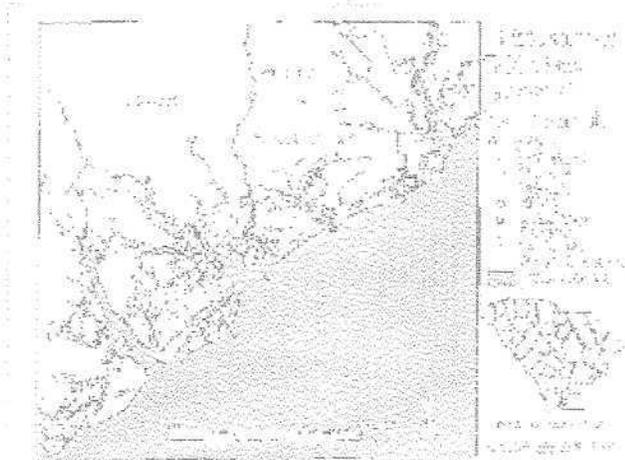
A Versatile Building Material

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The historic use of tabby in South Carolina indicates that it was a versatile building material. This unique composite material of shell, lime, and sand was used in buildings along the coast of South Carolina for over a century.

Going back to the time when colonists first reached these shores, we know that they approached a vast uncharted land with many natural resources. Broad streams along the coast cradled the sea islands. Colonists naturally used the materials that they found in this new land for constructing their buildings. Shell was readily available from shell rings, mounds, and middens. Lime was available from burning those same shells, and sand was also plentiful on the sea islands.

One of these early settlers, Paul Grimball, established his residence on Edisto Island in 1686. This site is known as the earliest tabby in South Carolina (date of construction from National Register Nomination). It is interesting that not only are the foundations remaining, but so is a section of wall at one corner.



Military Uses

As a building type, the earliest resources are the military fortifications, such as Fort Frederick on Port Royal Island, built about 1734, and Fort Lyttleton, also on Port Royal Island, built in 1758. Fort Marion, built in 1807, includes a massive semicircular tabby wall that is 175 feet long, 8 feet in depth, and 8 feet in breadth. All of these fortifications were built to protect the water access to Beaufort, a significant port that is the second-oldest city in South Carolina. The tabby walls at Fort Johnson were built about 1759 to protect the Charleston harbor. A map of 1800 shows these fortifications in ruins. This deterioration appears to have been caused by the changing shoreline, already inland of the walls by 1800. The tabby portion of this fort is no longer extant.

The fortifications at Dorchester, up the Ashley River from Charleston, were built between 1757 and 1760. The Ashley River was an aquatic highway in those days and was faster than overland routes for access to inland properties. The remains of these fortifications are protected as part of the Old Dorchester State Park, maintained by the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism.

The earliest portions of the ground floor wall of the Beaufort Arsenal (1795) are tabby.



Dating from 1787, Tabby Manse in Beaufort, South Carolina, has two-story tabby walls on a raised tabby foundation.

Residential Uses

Residential structures represent the largest category of tabby resources in South Carolina. Tabby was used in residential construction, scattered all along the lower coast, from the last quarter of the eighteenth century through the middle of the nineteenth century. A typical original finish of scored stucco created the image of a very sophisticated masonry building.

Some of the residences have full exterior walls of tabby. Dating from 1787, Tabby Manse in Beaufort has two-story tabby walls on a raised tabby foundation. The work on the tabby walls and foundation at the Barnwell-Gough House (1789), also in Beaufort, is the subject of one of our case studies.

The Tombee Plantation House (1790-1800) and the main house at Coffin Point Plantation (c. 1801) represent the use of tabby for only the foundation of the house. They are the focal points of their respective sea island plantations on Saint Helena Island. Town houses like the John-Mark Verdier House (1795) and Marshlands (1814) also have tabby foundations.

Many of our tabby resources, like the example of tabby foundation ruins on Saint Helena Island at

Land's End Road, are in ruins. Sites like these are important for the information they may yield in how tabby was used as well as how it was originally constructed.

The Isaac Fripp house (c. 1800) is an example of a ruin of a residence that had full-height tabby walls. From sites like this, we are able to understand more about the framing and other construction details of tabby residences. The actual size and profile of wood members that are let into the tabby are often evident once those members have been lost through fire or deterioration.

The three-story Habersham house (1797) in downtown Beaufort may be the tallest tabby residence in South Carolina. The current condition of the tabby is rather fragile, and the building has suffered from the removal of the front and rear tabby walls of the first floor. These long tabby walls of the upper levels are supported by steel columns and beams at the first floor.

Outbuildings

Outbuildings on many of the sea island plantations were built of tabby. A tabby hearth remains from a kitchen outbuilding (c. 1800) at Orange Grove Plantation. It is set very near the plantation cemetery, which is enclosed by a tabby wall.

The slave houses (c. 1805/40) at Haig's Point Plantation on Daufuskie Island were constructed of tabby. The palmetto tree growing at this site is located very close to the tabby wall. While this may not be a problem for this particular property, vegetation often causes tabby to deteriorate. Of more concern would be the vines that wrap the ruins of the outbuildings (c. 1800/50) at Riverside Plantation on Saint Helena Island.

Bleak Hall Plantation provides us with some later examples (1840) of outbuildings, like the smokehouse. Other tabby from Bleak Hall includes a large outbuilding foundation and the icehouse. The icehouse has charcoal between the exterior and the interior tabby walls. This charcoal is said to have been included to act as insulation.

The tabby well at the Saint Helenaville archaeological site represents another use of this versatile material for ancillary structures. A similar use in Saint Helenaville is the tabby cistern.

Agricultural Uses

Tabby was also used for agricultural buildings. The large tabby structure at Bleak Hall may have been used for grain storage. A tabby barn (c. 1800) at Frogmore Plantation is still in use. The cotton gin foundation at Sunnyside on Edisto Island in Charleston County is interesting as a postbellum example, dating from about 1870.

Industrial Uses

Tabby structures also had industrial uses. The bread from Hepzibah Jenkins Townsend's tabby ovens (c. 1815) on Edisto was sold in the Charleston market.

Indigo was an important crop in early South Carolina. The ruins of the tabby indigo vats at Burlington Plantation in Beaufort County are stained from the indigo processing.

Use in Religious Buildings

Religion has remained very important to South Carolinians from the days of the early settlers. The Saint Helena Chapel of Ease (c. 1740) was established in the days when travel to Beaufort may have taken most of a day. This early building has tabby walls with brick columns and brick arches over the window openings.

The use of tabby can illustrate the connection from one historic resource to another. Hepzibah Jenkins Townsend built her ovens of tabby and also endowed the building of Edisto Island First Baptist Church (1818). The original section of this church rests on a tabby foundation. The later addition stands on a brick foundation. Even more unique is the early baptismal pool (c. 1818), also built of tabby.



The Saint Helena Chapel of Ease (circa 1740) features tabby walls with brick columns and brick arches over the window openings.

Sams Tabby Complex

The Sams Tabby Complex represents the full range of versatility of tabby as a building material. The site contains a number of buildings that were used in a variety of ways. The Sams family began building the complex about 1790 as the seat of their sea island plantation. The ruins of the main house, which is quite large, show the original core with two large wings creating an unusual rambling plan for the completed house.

Outbuildings include the dairy house and enclosure as well as the kitchen. The large tabby chimney that remains standing was part of the original kitchen. Excavations at the kitchen site have also unearthed the tabby foundations for the walls.

The chapel was an integral part of plantation life. Not only were the walls of the chapel constructed of tabby, but the cemetery was also enclosed by a tabby wall. One could even say that the members of the Sams family lived with tabby from cradle to grave.

Tabby was a versatile building material, giving up nothing to the other materials available at the time (stone, brick, or wood) in its ability to adapt to a variety of uses. It is hoped that this presentation will expand your experience with the variety of structures and buildings built of tabby in South Carolina.