

# Archaeology at Old St. Stephens

## October 2011 Newsletter

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## Next Volunteer Dig Saturday November 12

### September Dig

A dozen volunteers turned out on a beautiful cool day for our first fall dig. We continued the work on the slave yard. Excavation on this large area started in 2003 and we only have a few units to complete the work. My goal is to finish this area in December so we can move on in the spring. Finds in September included the usual items such as ceramics, glass, nails, smoking pipes, a copper/brass thimble, as well as an ornate cast brass “collar” that may be part of a cane or umbrella. How spoiled we become. On a mediocre day our site ranks well above the norm and we always make some interesting finds.



**Saturday volunteers at work in the slave yard**

We'll meet at St. Stephens about 8:30 or so and we quit before 4:00. If you arrive late you can drive on down the dirt road to the site. Remember no experience is necessary and we have no age limit on participants. Come and leave as you need to. We will provide water and all the tools, but bring your own lunch.

### Funding Crisis Update

As you may know from previous newsletters St. Stephens was “zeroed out” of the 2012 state budget, primarily because it is considered a “historic” site. Although the St. Stephens Historical Commission protects and preserves an important historic site (50 acres), the parks recreational

component (600 acres) is significantly larger and serves a more diverse and larger group. I reported last month that the legislature and the governor's office promised some funds. We filed grant applications with the Alabama Historical Commission and the Department of Tourism. As of now it appears that the AHC did not fund our grant request and it seems that we will get 25 thousand from tourism, but this is all a bit unclear. What a mess!!! Does the governor and the legislature expect St. Stephens to survive on about 12% of their regular allocation?

Obviously the fact that Old St. Stephens was the Alabama Territorial Capital and the first Capital of Alabama is not important to our elected officials, nor is the parks 600 acres of recreational facilities. The next nearest state park is over 100 miles away.

St. Stephens is a **State Park** just like any other. The park is administered by a board, but they serve and function under the name and under the control of the State of Alabama. The only difference is that most recreational state parks fall under the Division of State Parks and most historic sites of size are administered by the Alabama Historical Commission. These two state agencies will also have to share in the burden of cuts experienced by all of state government. But these cuts range from 10% to a high of 30%, **not nearly the 88% cut imposed on St. Stephens State Park.**

The Alabama Historical Commission administers historic parks such as Fort Toulouse near Montgomery, Cahawba State Historic Site near Selma, and Fort Morgan on Mobile point. These are all significant historic sites. They all occupy significant plots of land. They all offer some recreational component. How is Old St. Stephens any different?

St. Stephens is arguably one of the most significant and important late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century historic sites in Alabama history. The Spanish governor established Fort *San Estaban* in 1788 to provide some security to the many new settlers along the Tombigbee River. In 1799 the American flag was raised at Fort St. Stephens, the first to fly over what would become Alabama. The US established the Choctaw Trading post in 1803 and a Federal Land Office was located in St. Stephens in 1805. For two decades thousands new settlers would come to St. Stephens to purchase land from the government. Included were doctors, lawyers, judges, skilled artisans, farmers, and future governors. By 1815, following the end the Creek War and improvements to the Federal Road from Georgia to the Tombigbee, hundreds of settlers began to flock to the region. St. Stephens grew rapidly. By 1818 the town boomed to almost three thousand, three times the size of Mobile. Estimates place the number of buildings at about 450, many of stone and some of two stories. The town boasted three hotels, twenty stores and other businesses, doctors, lawyers, and the shops of many artisans. There was a theater, a race track, a school, a bank, and a newspaper, but no church. One the first shallow-draft steam boats at the dock on the river. In 1817 St. Stephens became the Alabama Territorial Capital. The First Alabama State legislature met in St. Stephens as the territory became a state. But, in the 1820s as the flow of new settlers slowed the town declined. By the 1840s only a few citizens remained and by the Civil War St. Stephens was completely abandoned to the woods of Washington County.

No student of Alabama history would challenge the significance of St. Stephens. Cahawba would become the State Capital for a few years from 1821 until 1826, but St. Stephens was where the first State legislature met. The first words in the legislative record are, "*In St. Stephens...*" Huntsville would become the second capital while Cahawba was being built. After Cahawba there was Tuscaloosa and then Montgomery. In all Alabama has had five state capitals, but the

first was St. Stephens. One cannot argue the historic significance of Fort Toulouse, Cahawaba, or Fort Morgan, but St. Stephens is no less significant to the history of the State of Alabama.

If I were “king for a day” or say, the governor of Alabama, I would incorporate St. Stephens into the sites managed by the Alabama Historical Commission with a reasonable budget, subject to the same across-the-board cuts imposed on all other important sites. St. Stephens deserves the same sound staffing and management afforded to these other sites. And possibly most of all St. Stephens needs to be protected and preserved for our posterity. It has been impacted by a limestone quarry, logging, river erosion, and outright looting. The land lease is in the name of the State of Alabama. It could be lost. Alabama needs to step up and assume its responsibility to do the right thing.

The next step remains unclear. I may need to ask for your help. If you know anyone in state government please tell our story. Otherwise we may be forced to ask the governor “Where do we leave the keys?”

### **St. Stephens Web Site Archive – [oldststephens.com](http://oldststephens.com)**

Just to repeat a note from a previous newsletter many old newsletters are now posted on our web site and we now have up the *Old St. Stephens Historical Records Survey*, a great volume of research by Jackie Matte, Doris Brown, and Barbara Waddell. We also have posted *The Streets of Old St. Stephens: An Examination of the Plats of Three Towns; Franklin, Rodney, St. Stephens* by Jack Elliott, Jr., a methodical study to reconstruct the lost plat of St. Stephens from deed and other records. Also included is the “dead letters” listing from the newspaper as well as a bibliography of Old St. Stephens records. Next we will be posting the recollections of Mary Welsh, an excellent first person account of her live in Old St. Stephens during the 1830s. We also plan to post a list of all the resident files we have for Old St. Stephens. If you see a relative listed feel free to email me. Also please send me your contributions to this list.

### **Volunteer Tuesdays**

We still have a dedicated group of volunteers at the lab every Tuesday morning from 9:00 am until noon. We continue to work on St. Stephens’s ceramics. Come join us!!!



**Tuesday Volunteers**