

“Salt Exhibit Highlights an Ancient Southeastern Industry”

by Ashley A. Dumas
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On Saturday, August 27, I had the honor to be part of a team that installed a new exhibit at the Clarke County Historical Museum in Grove Hill, Alabama. It was the final step in a process that began last May with a successful bid for the Southeastern Archaeological Conference Public Outreach Grant. The purpose of the exhibit



was to highlight the salt springs of southwest Alabama and the role that they have played in the prehistory and history of the region. Over the years, a string of explorers have waded through historical documents, piles of artifacts, and the swampy palmetto floodplain of the Tombigbee River in search of salt makers of the past. Although there has been a long-standing interest in the salt springs among historians and archaeologists, we wanted to insure that the general public was aware of these unique and important natural resources. With this goal in mind, Kerry Reid, director of the museum, and I designed the display “White Gold: Alabama’s Salt Through Time.”

The exhibit is made up of a wood and lexan (a clear polymer) case, which will sit on any standard 6-foot long folding table, and a large panel that attaches to the back of the case. The back panel serves as an introduction to the geology and archaeology of the area. A small section “Why is the Water Salty?” explains the geological occurrence of salt springs. The remainder of the panel, entitled “Archaeology: Key to the Past” presents a general description of archaeological research and



how it was applied to learning about the salt springs. Within the case, short titles and accompanying label copy guide the visitor through the production and use of salt

from its beginnings, about A.D. 1000 in this region, to the present. Topics include “The First Salt Makers,” “Salt for Trade,” “Salt for Settlers,” “Salt for the Confederacy,” and “Salt for Industry.” Relevant photographs, drawings, and artifacts recovered from recent excavations at a salt spring are used to illustrate the label copy. The main ideas we wish to express are how the uses and methods of manufacturing salt changed over time. The millennial quest for the valuable resource, however, was often a stimulus for cultural interaction and change.



The Clarke County Historical Museum has an annual attendance of about 3,000 people, and, when the exhibit is loaned to neighboring museums and libraries, we anticipate it to be viewed by another 3,000 people each year. In addition, an article based on the exhibit including more in-depth theoretical and historical background will be published in the winter edition of the *Clarke County Quarterly*, a journal with over 500 individual and institutional subscribers. We were



delighted to have a well-publicized “opening” for the exhibit to coincide with the Alabama Folklife Association’s annual meeting in Grove Hill on October 15. Short evaluation forms

completed by attendees were positive, and we hope that the exhibit will continue to, at the least, increase awareness, and ultimately educate the citizens of southwest Alabama about the remarkable geological and archaeological sites in their midst.