Tabby is a type of building material used in the coastal Southeast from the late 1500s to the 1860s. Historians disagree on whether its use originated along the northwest African coast and was taken to Spain and Portugal, or vice versa. The Spanish brought the concept of tabby to the New World and used it extensively in Florida. African enslaved people used their own knowledge of the material to construct the Castillo at St. Augustine in the seventeenth century, the British Fort Frederica on St. Simons in the eighteenth century, and planters' homes, slave dwellings, barns, and other outbuildings in the nineteenth century.

African American enslaved people of the North End Plantation built a causeway to the shell midden at Cane Patch a mile away, where they exploited several acres of shells from oysters consumed by Native Americans over five thousand years.

True tabby is made of equal parts of lime, water, sand, and oyster shells mixed together to create an inexpensive material similar to concrete. Tabby proved to be a sturdy, weatherproof material that kept heat out in the summer and held warmth in during the winter. The dwellings on the North End Plantation were lived in for over one-hundred
forty years and proved their durability by surviving the fierce hurricanes of the 1890s.

The end of slavery; the depletion of the middens; and the introduction from England of Portland cement (made by burning limestone and clay) led to the decline in the use of tabby.

Starting with a 4-foot hole in the ground, then setting a fire a kiln of oyster shells and heart pine logs in alternating tiers removes the moisture from the shells by driving off the carbon dioxide. This leaves calcium oxide or quicklime, the binding ingredient for tabby. When water is added back to the cooked shell, the shell dissolves and the result is calcium hydroxide, the binder which holds the shells, sand and water together. A lime pit was found on Ossabaw Island by the University of Tennessee Archeology Field School in 2012.

Equal parts of shell, lime (burnt shell), water, and sand are mixed together, and then poured into the wooden form. The form encompassed the entire perimeter of the building. The spreader pins gave the stability of the formwork. The tabby mixture was poured into the form, tamped and leveled by hand and allowed to set. Once set the pins were removed, the form detached and placed on top of the newly poured layer and reassembled for the next layer, more tabby was mixed and poured into the form and so on till the desired height was achieved.

In one week, six men collected shells, created the quicklime binder by burning oyster shells, and poured two rows of tabby. The Ossabaw Smoke House and tabby houses took approximately five to six weeks to erect.

The difference with Skidaway's tabby is it appears that the same clay used to make bricks or what we call Savannah Grey bricks was mixed into the tabby mix making it harder and pinker than just straight oyster shell tabby. Perhaps this was an 18th century way of creating the coastal concrete called tabby.

Elizabeth DuBose

Executive Director

Ossabaw Island Foundation

February 2017