

I'm standing in a graveyard, and it's hotter than the hinges of hell. This isn't a cemetery of headstones and crypts but a boneyard of thwarted ambition containing the remains of a town that doesn't exist anymore. The streets that made up this territorial capital no longer boast any houses or other structures. Trees rise where taverns stood, and the once-swarming population is no more—replaced by teeming insects.

I've come on a sun-baked July day to Old St. Stephens Historical Park in southwestern Alabama, situated on the limestone bluffs above the Tombigbee River, roughly an hour north of Mobile. My guide is Jim Long, the park director and a gifted raconteur. Through his animated descriptions, St. Stephens' main drag comes to life: Tall pines and oaks morph into a crowded thoroughfare called High Street filled with hotels, a theater, a bank, and a federal land office bustling with settlers.

"You can't tell the story of Alabama without starting here," he says. It's a pioneering tale from when this was the Wild West—a story distinctly different from the narrative "built on the backs of slavery" for which the state is better known.

Long stoops to pluck a fragment of blue-and-white china from the dirt road—a sherd of tableware, perhaps, from the Globe Hotel, focus of an ongoing series of digs overseen by an archaeologist from the University of South Alabama. Teams of volunteers sifting through the soil have uncovered abundant artifacts of high living: bone-handled cutlery, goblets, parasol parts, even a silver pen.

St. Stephens quickly developed from a frontier outpost into a brick-and-mortar town of 2,500, and was named capital of the Alabama Territory in 1817. Flaunting a patina of sophistication and a "prevailing indifference to anything that savored of religion," as a former resident recalled, it just as swiftly fell to ruin. By 1825, the combined effects of politics, upriver expansion, and yellow fever epidemics had reduced its population by two-thirds. Some blame the curse of itinerant preacher Lorenzo Dow, run out of town in 1820, who proclaimed "the bats and owls will inherit the city and make it their home." St. Stephens was abandoned in the 1850s, proving Dow right.

About 70 miles to the northeast, in the center of the state, lies another lost capital called Old Cahawba, now an archaeological park. Located where the gentle Cahaba River empties

**Top:** An iron key unearthed at St. Stephens. **Bottom:** The grave of Amelia (Mealy) Starke in Old Cahawba's Negro Burial Ground



# The Lost Capitals

**BY**  
**BETSY CROSBY**  
**PHOTOGRAPHY**  
**BY JEFF HALLER**





Archaeologists  
and historians are  
rediscovering and  
reimagining two  
long-abandoned  
Alabama towns



**Top:** The 1854 St. Luke's Church, recently relocated to Old Cahawba. **Middle:** Jim Long, director of Old St. Stephens Historical Park. **Bottom:** Glazed fragments recovered from an archaeological dig at St. Stephens

into the muddy Alabama, it was carved out of the wilderness by Gov. William Wyatt Bibb, and served as the new state's first permanent capital from 1820 to 1826, before the honor migrated to Tuscaloosa and eventually on to Montgomery.

Once known for rampant gunplay, Cahawba developed midcentury into an elegant and prosperous cotton port with some 5,000 residents. But a devastating flood in 1865 and the removal of the county seat to nearby Selma one year later led to its downfall. Today the landscape is nearly as barren as that of St. Stephens, with only a few stately columns, grave sites, and outbuildings left to suggest that wealthy planters maintained lavish lifestyles here, constructing palatial homes as evidence of their prosperity.

Both lost capitals, St. Stephens and Cahawba, were witnesses to Alabama's birth. And yet, as groundwork is being laid to celebrate the anniversaries of historic events under a statewide program called "Becoming Alabama," the parks are struggling for the recognition crucial to their survival.

History and legends aside, the sites suffer from relative obscurity. Yes, they are popular with naturalists, archaeologists, genealogists, and school groups, but neither has the standing structures to attract busloads of casual tourists. State funding keeps the doors open—barely—but drastic budget cuts since 2003 have undermined potential improvements that could bring more visitors. And despite critical support from a few saviors in the private sector, such as Daniel Meador, a Cahawba descendant and head of the Cahaba Foundation, more help is needed. The viability of both sites depends on whether they can capture a new brand of enthusiast—one who will appreciate



**Left:** Linda Derry, director of Old Cahawba, on the grounds of Castle Morgan. **Right, top to bottom:** the surviving Barker Slave Quarters at Old Cahawba; a historical marker at St. Stephens; and the location of one of the digs at the site. **Opposite:** the fabled limestone cliffs of St. Stephens



both the landscape and the wealth of history that lies beneath this sun-baked soil.

**Most of Old Cahawba's** largest commercial buildings and homes, including the 26-room Perine Mansion, were razed around the end of the 19th century and their building materials salvaged. Only a few ruins remain, scattered across the 1,000 acres that once comprised a bustling town.

Linda Derry, Old Cahawba's director and an archaeologist by training, sees the town's blank slate as a distinct asset. A pristine reconstruction, she argues, would limit the way history is interpreted, bringing only one perspective to life. "What's unique at Cahawba is that there are so many layers ... We encourage visitors to imagine all of them."

Derry and I are standing at the town center, the intersection of Vine Street and Capitol Avenue, where five centuries of his-



tory converge. At first glance I see little but moss-draped trees in a parklike setting at the river's edge. But listening to her compelling narrative, I begin to trace the outlines of a Mississippian mound village and wonder, as many historians have, whether this was Mabila, where Hernando de Soto slaughtered the forces of Chief Tascalusa in 1540. In 1860, a cotton merchant chose this spot to warehouse bales of cotton awaiting shipment on the steamships plying the Alabama River.

Derry then gestures to a depression in the ground, identifying a remnant of the stockade built when the cotton warehouse was converted in 1863 to the Confederate prison dubbed Castle Morgan. "Our largest visitor base is the descendants of nearly 9,000 Union soldiers who were incarcerated there," she

**"THERE ARE SO MANY LAYERS HERE... AN INDIAN VILLAGE, THE SITE OF THE OLD STATEHOUSE, A CIVIL WAR PRISON. IF WE REBUILT ONLY ONE PERIOD, WE'D BE CLOSING THE DOOR ON ALL THE OTHERS."**  
—LINDA DERRY

ter: White believes that a building with exhibition space, archaeological labs, artifact storage, and a small auditorium will help tell the "whole story" and attract repeat visitors.

Some supporters of the park also advocate the return of frame buildings floated by barge to Selma when most white residents departed after the 1865 flood. St. Luke's Church, which was dismantled and removed around 1880, has been brought back to a new flood-safe location through the efforts of the Cahawba Advisory Committee, the Alabama Historical Commission, and Auburn University's Rural Studio. There is now talk of turning it into a reunion center for Cahawba's large network of black and white descendants.

After days spent touring Cahawba and St. Stephens with Linda Derry and Jim Long, I see how vividly they can bring dead towns to life, but neither of them has access to funds that would guarantee guided tours for every visitor.

As a result, both directors have turned their focus to the segment of the tourist population that may better appreciate the dual concepts of conservation and archaeology—nature lovers. "We need to disguise ourselves as nature centers," says Derry. Colonial Williamsburg, with its scores of recon-

structed buildings, is struggling, she explains, "but visits to nature centers are going up."

The bats and owls and other wildlife residing in St. Stephens, once emblematic of its destruction, are now the key to its resurrection and a chief asset in Jim Long's marketing plan. During warmer months, more than 30,000 visitors file through the gates of the 600-acre park, attracted by a crystal-clear quarry lake, campsites, and trails for hikers, birdwatchers, mountain bikers, and horseback riders. "We wouldn't be here without the recreational component. It's the lifeblood of the park," admits Long. An information kiosk at the trailhead makes sure that outdoor visitors also know they are welcome to tour the historic town.

Though Old Cahawba's recreational component is less developed, its pristine natural heritage has attracted environmentally focused champions. Last year, The Nature Conser-



says. Many prisoners who survived the waist-deep floodwaters in 1865 perished later when the steamship *Sultana*, bearing them home after their release, exploded near Memphis.

Across Vine Street is the site where the Marquis de Lafayette was lavishly entertained on his 1825 tour of the American South. Steps away stood the courthouse where slaves were auctioned during the antebellum period. Later, during Reconstruction, the building hosted black U.S. Rep. Jeremiah Haralson as he sought reelection. Many American towns have watched history unfold, but few have seen so much within such a short period of time.

"History is not the challenge at Old Cahawba," says Frank White, state historic preservation officer and executive director of the Alabama Historical Commission, which owns the site. "It's size. A property this big is challenging to interpret." The commission recently selected an architect for a new visitors cen-



vancy helped Forever Wild, Alabama's trust fund for preserving natural resources, purchase a 3,000-acre nature preserve on the park's borders, an area threatened by riverfront development. Since about 40 percent of Old Cahawba's acreage remains in private hands, a goal of the conservancy is land acquisition within the park.

"We want to try to support the park in whatever way we can," says Chris Oberholster, Alabama director of The Nature Conservancy. Old Cahawba, he explains, is one of the best remaining examples of the "blackland prairie" that once covered the coastal plains. (Today, only 1 percent of the ecoregion survives.) Added to that is the biological importance of the Cahaba River, where several rare and imperiled species thrive. Finally, says Oberholster, the cultural heritage consists of a tremendous array of stories in a compact area: "I was stunned to learn about the synergies sitting there at Old Cahawba. Once I saw the raw materials, I realized it was a diamond in the rough."

Derry wants to attract more visitors in search of passive recreation—"human propellers" who will canoe the river, hike to observe bald cypress trees and indigo buntings along the nature trail, or stroll the old house sites and cemeteries in search of antique roses, spirea, and daffodils. She's had enough

A column from Old Cahawba's Crocheron Mansion. "It was never stuccoed," says Linda Derry. "The family owned a brickyard and wanted to show their wares."

of the motorized fishermen who pollute Cahawba's waterways and are indifferent to its cultural heritage.

"It's a fine line," says Chris Oberholster, "to attract people to love these places, but not to love them to death." And yet providing a memorable experience for visitors—triggering their imaginations while protecting the integrity of the artifacts—is what will keep enthusiasm for preserving these sites alive.

Recently, Oberholster brought his family to Old Cahawba for the first time. At the Negro Burial Ground, originally a slave cemetery, they were moved by the stories about those interred. Suddenly, they noticed blooming nearby a rare wildflower—the lance-leaf trillium. The beauty and peacefulness of the site affected them all.

"We're going to come back," he declares. "We've promised ourselves." They are, as Derry well knows, just the kind of tourists she's after. 

---

*Betsy Crosby, a freelance writer in Atlanta, reports on the decorative arts, travel, and historic preservation.*