





The Other Colonial Coast

America's Eastern Seaboard welcomed some of the earliest European colonists, who made their homes in settlements such as Jamestown and Plymouth. **But for some Europeans, another coast offered their first view of the new land.** Further south and west than the more famous settlements, the **Mississippi Gulf Coast** was also home to generations of early Americans.

~~~~~ By Nancy Mann Jackson ~~~~~

# When King Louis XIV decided

that the French crown should make a more permanent stake in the area, Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville, was commissioned to plant a colony somewhere near the mouth of the Mississippi. In October 1698, he set sail from France with about 200 colonists and arrived at Biloxi Bay six months later. The Mississippi Gulf Coast, once home to the Biloxi Indians and later to d'Iberville's French, changed hands countless times over the centuries. With each new flag, a new culture was infused. Today's visitors can visit beaches, golf courses and casinos—as well as see and touch remnants of a rich Colonial history.

Though Hurricane Katrina left its destructive mark on the area in 2005, including damage to a number of historic structures, today's visitors can still enjoy a unique early American experience in Mississippi. "The Mississippi Gulf Coast offers more than 300 years of history, and some of our Colonial-era buildings are still standing," says Janice Jones, manager of media relations for the Mississippi Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau. "The genuine Southern hospitality surprises many visitors. Most people expect good customer service but don't expect to be treated like a friend or member of an extended family."

As visitors enjoy the local hospitality, they can also soak up three centuries of history. Here are suggestions for some of the most interesting stops on your tour.

**HISTORIC OCEAN SPRINGS.** In 1699, soon after arriving in America, d'Iberville selected the site of present-day Ocean Springs to build Fort Maurepas for the first French settlement in colonial French Louisiana. The fort was established as a foothold to prevent Spanish takeover of France's colonial claims, and it was maintained until well into the 18th century. Hurricane Katrina destroyed a replica of the fort, but the community, known for its focus on history and the arts, continues to celebrate its historic founding with annual re-enactments depicting d'Iberville's landing.

The name Ocean Springs was coined in 1854 by Dr. William Glover Austin, who believed the local springs had healing qualities. Thanks to his influence, Ocean Springs became a prosperous resort town. Since Colonial times, the community of Ocean Springs has enthusiastically celebrated its local seafood. The abundance of seafood allowed French and French-Canadian explorers and settlers to thrive within the Fort Maurepas area. In the late 19th century, the development of ice plant industries along the coast increased seafood sales. Locals and tourists can still purchase freshly harvested shrimp, fish, crabs and oysters in the area.

**BEAUVOIR.** Built from 1848 to 1852, Beauvoir's raised, Louisiana-style architecture may be the reason it's one of the only National Historic Landmark homes still standing on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, says Rick Forte, acting director. Although the house stands on a 52-acre site overlooking the Gulf of Mexico, "it was built 10 feet off the ground for the water to go under it in a hurricane, which it did, and to let air come in and cool the house," Forte says.

Visitors can still tour Beauvoir in its original condition, thanks to the wisdom of its first owner, James Brown, a Mississippi planter who built the structure as a summer home for his family and served as his own architect. "We found out [that Brown drew his own architectural plans] when we were doing renovations," Forte says. "He was off on some of his measurements, but they worked."

Brown constructed a cottage on each side of the house, one as a guesthouse and the other as a schoolroom for his 11 children. The home's third owner, Jefferson Davis, who retired to the home in 1877, converted one of the cottages to his library and wrote his memoirs there. As the former president of the Confederacy, Davis, who lived there until he died in 1889, lends another interesting story to the history of the home.

"Other than just being president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis was also the secretary of war under Franklin Pierce, and he developed a lot of major battlefield technology: rifle artillery and rifle muskets, for example," Forte says. "He was also a hero in the War of Mexico in 1846, a senator from Mississippi, and a driving force behind the creation of the Smithsonian Institution. He was a very educated man and an authority on the Constitution and American law. A lot of [historians] think if the secession hadn't happened, he would have been the U.S. president; he was that well-known in the North and the South."

## Spirited Adventures



Mary Mahoney's Old French House, which specializes in local seafood, is one of the most popular stops on the walking tour, especially if you can catch **Bobby Mahoney** in a storytelling mood.



## Spirited Adventures

**SHIP ISLAND AND FORT MASSACHUSETTS.** Located on West Ship Island, Fort Massachusetts was one of the last masonry coastal fortifications built in the United States, and it was named for the Union ship that was more or less permanently docked at the island. Construction began before the Civil War, but soon after the war started, Confederates seized the unfinished fort. By late 1861, federal forces regained control of the fort and used it as a prisoner-of-war camp. In 1862, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers resumed construction of the fort, completing it in 1866. “Although Fort Massachusetts fell victim to advancing military technology, its beauty and craftsmanship remain as symbols of a strong, yet passive coastal defense,” Jones says.

West Ship Island is one of five barrier islands off the Mississippi Coast, which are some of the last undeveloped coastlands in the country. A 70-minute ferry trip takes you to the island, where visitors can take a park ranger-guided tour of the fort, observe natural beach wildlife and explore undisturbed beaches. The ferry service, started by Croatian immigrant Peter Skrmetta in 1926, is still run by the Skrmetta family for the National Park Service.

**DOWNTOWN BILOXI.** No trip to the Mississippi Coast is complete without taking Biloxi’s Historic Walking Tour. The visitors’ center offers detailed directions and historic information for a self-guided tour, which takes about 70 minutes to complete, according to Kay Miller, downtown services manager for the city of Biloxi. The tour includes stops at a number of historic homes dating to the 1840s, early churches, a fire station, a theater and the Magnolia Hotel, built in 1847 and the only pre-Civil War hotel left in Mississippi. The 62-foot Old Biloxi Lighthouse, which has led seafarers and fishermen to safe harbor since 1848, is among the earliest cast-iron lighthouses built in the country and now stands in the middle of a busy roadway.

Known at one time as the “Seafood Capital of the World,” Biloxi still celebrates its fishing heritage. Mary Mahoney’s Old French House, which specializes in local seafood, is one of the most popular stops on the walking tour, “especially if you can catch Bobby Mahoney in a story-telling mood,” Miller says.



### Where to Stay

Check out the **Blessy House**, a new B&B opening soon in Biloxi. [Call the Biloxi Visitors Center for details at (228) 435-6339.] The **Oak Crest Mansion Inn** (see photo at left) [(228) 452-5677, [www.oakcrestmansion.com](http://www.oakcrestmansion.com)] is “rich in mafia history,” says Janice Jones of the Mississippi Gulf Coast CVB. The **Magnolia Plantation** [(800) 700-7858, [www.magnoliaplantationms.com](http://www.magnoliaplantationms.com)] is “more like a country inn and is a little off the beaten path,” Jones says, and the Gulf Hills Conference Center [(866) 875-4211] offers visitors proximity to a golf course as well as plenty of Elvis Presley history.

### Where to Eat

Built in 1737 (depending on whom you ask), **Mary Mahoney’s Old French House** in Biloxi [(228) 374-0163, [www.marymahoneys.com](http://www.marymahoneys.com)] is a can’t-miss dining spot for history buffs, specializing in local seafood, steaks and chops. (See photo at left.) Reservations are requested. In Gulfport, **Confusion** [(228) 604-4617] is “a unique fine dining restaurant in a 1920s cottage,” Jones says.

While the restaurant was founded by his mother in 1964, Bobby Mahoney says part of the home in which it operates was built during the 1700s, while the main house was completed in 1835. Every room in the restaurant has a story to tell, and Mahoney enjoys sharing those stories with his guests. For instance, the oak tree in the courtyard is more than 2,000 years old, and Mahoney can point out the waterlines on his walls from Hurricanes Camille and Katrina. The restaurant also features more recent history, including a telegram Mahoney’s mother received from John Kennedy in 1960, thanking her for campaigning for him; a 1979 invitation to visit the White House from President and Mrs. Carter; and a photo of Mrs. Mahoney “feeding Reagan on the lawn of the White House,” Mahoney says.

Along with telling stories, Mahoney takes pride in serving the fruits of the coastal land he calls home. “I always tell people those crystal blue waters in Florida just don’t yield the seafood we have here,” he says. “Some of our specialties are stuffed snapper, lobster Giorgio, and Sisters of the Sea au gratin, but we have shrimp, crab, oysters and beaucoups of fish. There’s a lot going on in that mud.” 🍤

*Nancy Mann Jackson explored Louisiana’s Oakley House Plantation for the July/August 2008 issue.*