

Think Like an Archaeologist

The Owens Family

The Owens Family were a working-class, African American family who lived at 906 S. Franklin Street in Mobile, AL for three generations. In the early 20th century, they also had a store attached to their house. Students will examine archaeological artifacts, historical records, and maps to learn about the family through time and to make connections to major events in Alabama History.

Time Frame: 2+ Classes

The lessons consist of two parts:

- 1) A timeline of historical documents that students slowly build throughout the school year. Each set of sources corresponds with 5th Grade Alabama State Social Studies Standards, but could also be paired with the discussion of Jim Crow in 4th grade. (Can be incorporated into class time as the appropriate standard is addressed.)
- 2) An archaeology activity where students analyze artifacts that were excavated at site of the family's home to learn more about their lives. (May make sense as either the first or last lesson, but timing is flexible and this lesson can be taught at any point. Can be paired with 4th or 5th grade activities or used in 3rd grade to highlight archaeology.)

Objectives:

- Students will learn archaeology is the study of past people through the things they left behind.
- Students will employ archaeological methods to study the past, understanding the same process is used whether examining artifacts from 50 years ago or 1000 years.
- Students will learn about major historical events, including Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and WWII, by following an average African American family in Mobile over the course of three generations

Relevant Standards:

- 3rd Grade: 7 – Compare and contrast the roles of anthropologists, archaeologists, and paleontologists
- 4th Grade: 16 – Describe how political and social changes of the late 1870s to 1900 affected Black and white Alabamians, including the introduction of Jim Crow laws, sharecropping, voting restrictions, and violence.
- 5th Grade: 1 – Explain how industry and agriculture expanded during the early twentieth century.
3 – Describe Progressive Era social reforms in both the United States and Alabama.
5c – Describe the roles and contributions of Alabamians, including the 167th Infantry Regiment (4th Alabama), to the war effort during World War I.
7a – Explain how the Great Depression impacted Alabamians and the nation, including increased labor tensions.
10 – Describe how Alabamians contributed to the war effort during World War II.

11 – Describe how the United States’ economy grew and American culture changed after World War II.

12b – Trace the chronology of civil rights events in Alabama and across the nation, and summarize how they impacted one another.

Archaeology Activity Supplies:

1. Archaeology Instructions (p. 3-4)
2. Artifact Photos (p. 5-8)
3. House Excavation Map (p. 9)
4. Historical House Map (p. 10)
5. Both Maps (p. 11)
6. Artifact Analysis Worksheet (p. 12-13)

Timeline Activity Supplies:

1. Timeline Instructions (p. 14-15)
2. Primary Sources PowerPoint (Download from our [website](#))
3. Timeline and Family Tree Worksheet (p. 16-17)

Key Terms:

- Archaeology: The study of past human life through things people left behind
- Artifact: Something portable that was made or modified by humans
- Assemblage: A group of artifacts found in association with one another
- Chronology: the arrangement of events in the order they occurred (like a timeline)

Build On with an Exhibit: The Owens Family is one of three families featured in the exhibit *Unwritten: Archaeology and Oral History of Jim Crow Mobile*. Your students can visit the exhibit [virtually on our website](#) or you can request a traveling version of the exhibit (consisting of 6 pop-up banners) by emailing us at cas@southalabama.edu

Got any questions? Have feedback on the lesson? Want to find more opportunities in archaeology? Get in touch with us at cas@southalabama.edu or visit our [website](#).

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Archaeology Lesson

Procedures:

1. Explain that archaeology is the study of past human life through the things people left behind, such as artifacts. One way archaeologists study the past is through analyzing artifacts, which are objects that were made or modified by past humans. Each artifact is a clue that helps us better understand what life was like in the past.

Resource: What is Archaeology? YouTube Video



Note: This video is part of our series “Ask an Archaeologist,” which includes other short videos about key archaeological concepts.

2. Archaeologists excavated 13 sites near downtown Mobile before the widening of the [I-10 Bridge across Mobile Bay](#). At one site, they excavated the former home of the Owens Family, a working-class, African American family who lived in the house at 906 S Franklin Street for three generations. We can learn more about them by studying the artifacts they left behind.
3. Share the Owens House Excavation Map (p. 9) with the students and explain that it shows what archaeologists found when they excavated the Owens House. The archaeologists divided the site into quadrants, or four sections, so they could analyze what happened in each part of the site. Tell students that today they will analyze the artifacts found in each quadrant to better understand past activity at the Owens House.
4. Divide class into 4 groups. Give one page of artifacts to each group (p. 5-8). Each page represents a different area on the Owens Family’s property. Give the group 5-10 minutes to examine their artifacts and discuss the following questions:
 - a. What are your artifacts?
 - b. What materials are they made of?
 - c. What activities happened in this part of the site?

Note: if time allows, students can rotate and examine all four groups of artifacts. If time is limited, students can examine one group of artifacts and then present what they found to the rest of the class.

If students are only examining one group of artifacts, pass out the Artifact Analysis Worksheet (p. 12-13) to help guide their observations. If they examine every group of artifacts, you might consider having them fill out the worksheet at the last station they visit.

5. After students have examined the artifacts, share the Owens House Historical Map (p. 10). This map shows what the Owens House looked like in 1915. Then share both maps to show how the excavations align with the map of the house (p. 11). Ask students to use this map to interpret what types of activities happened in each area of the site. An explanation of each quadrant is below:
 - d. Northwest Quadrant: According to the map, this was the back part of the house and part of the back and side yard. The large trash pit was at the very edge of the property boundary. The family would have discarded their trash there before trash pickup was provided by the city. That's why we find broken or used items, like empty bottles and broken pottery.
 - e. Northeast quadrant: The "S" label on the map indicates the structure is a store. (The 1907 City Directory, included in the timeline activity, lists it as a grocery store.) The trash pit behind the store included artifacts related to clothing, like buttons and clasps. Most fabric is made of organic material, like cotton, and decays through time, so we only find items made of more durable materials, like glass and metal. We also know Lillie worked as a seamstress, so she may have operated her business from the store too.
 - f. Southwest quadrant: This area was under the house in 1915, but it may have been part of the backyard before the house was expanded. We found kids toys, like porcelain dolls and marbles, that would have been used in the backyard. We also found animal bone, like chicken, pig, and cow. This area may have been right outside of the kitchen, and the family may have thrown remains from their meals out the door when cooking.
 - g. Southeast quadrant: This area was the front yard and front part of the house. We found very few artifacts in this area, likely because the Owens Family kept the front of their house clean and tidy. There were terracotta flower pot fragments, which suggests they had potted plants in front of the home, and there were also building materials, like brick and nails, left behind when the house was demolished.

6. At the end of the activity, ask students:
 - h. Did your interpretation of what happened at this site change when you saw the Owens House Historical Map? If so, how did they change?
 - i. What can you learn about the Owens Family from their artifacts?
 - j. If archaeologists excavated your home, what artifacts do you think they would find and what would they tell us about you?

Northwest Quadrant Trash Pit



Tea Cup Fragment



Horseshoe



Medicine
Bottle



Slate Fragment



Ink Well



Jug Top



Plate Fragment



Children's
Tea Cup



Cold Cream Jar

Northeast Quadrant:

Back of Store



Buttons



Beads/Rhinestones



Rivet from Clothing
(possibly overalls)

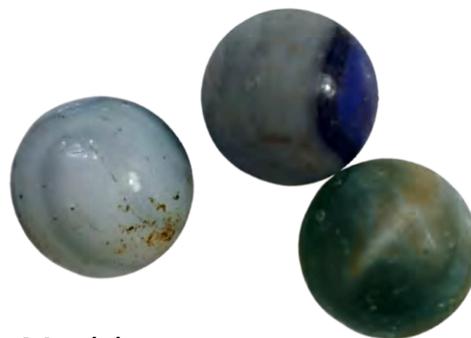


Holberg Mineral
Water Bottle

Southwest Quadrant: Backyard



Porcelain Doll



Marbles

Chicken Bone



Pig Bone



Cut Cow Bone



Southeast Quadrant:

Front Yard



Terra Cotta
Flower Pot Fragments



Nails



Tile Fragments

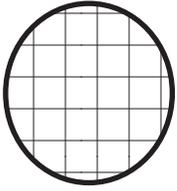


Brick Fragments

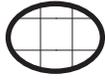


Owens House Excavation Map

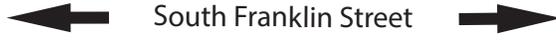
Northwest Quadrant



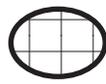
Northeast Quadrant



906



Southwest Quadrant



Southeast Quadrant



LEGEND



Foundation Post



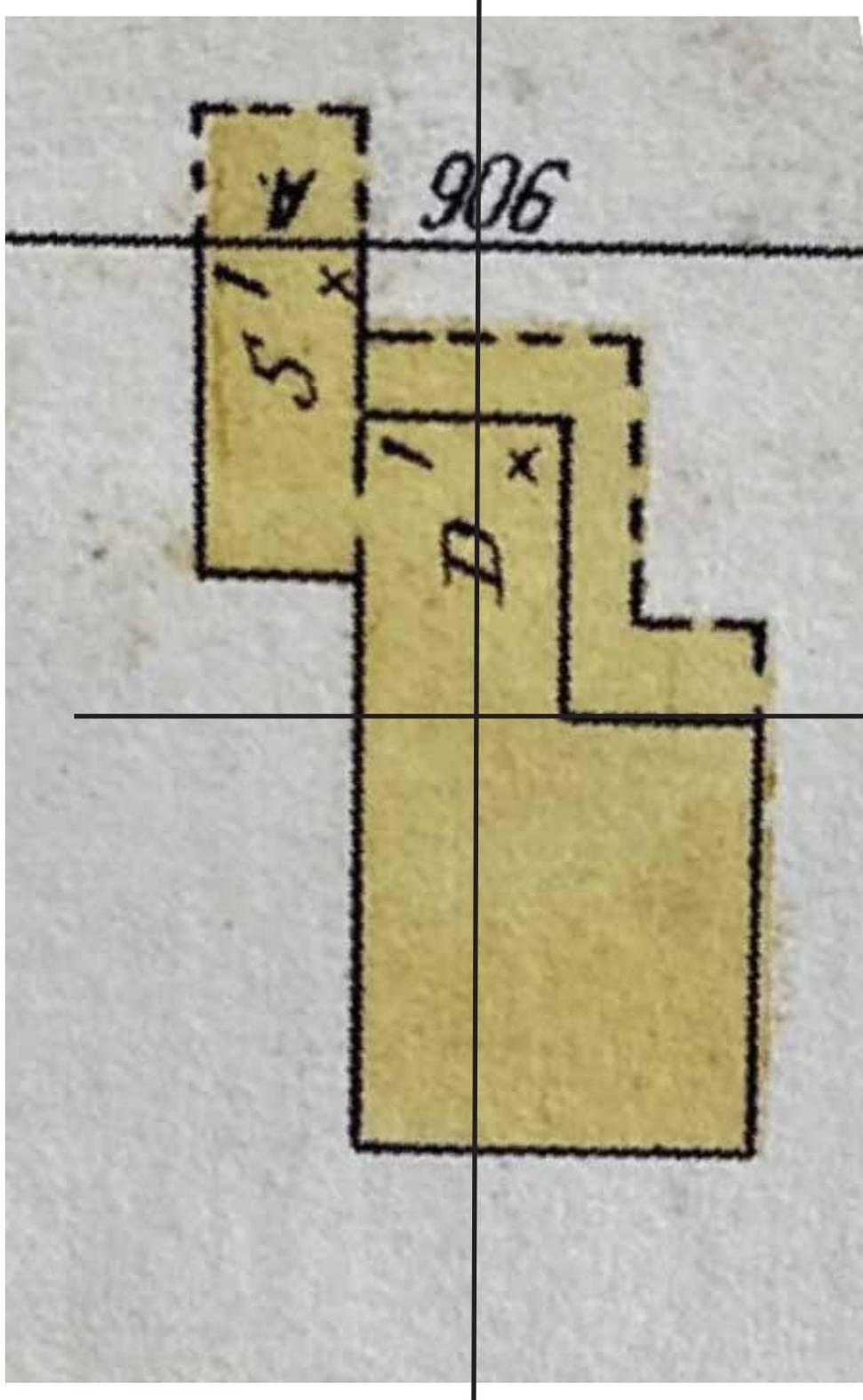
Trash Pit



Scale



Owens House Historical Map (1915)



LEGEND

S Store



Wood Structure

D Dwelling

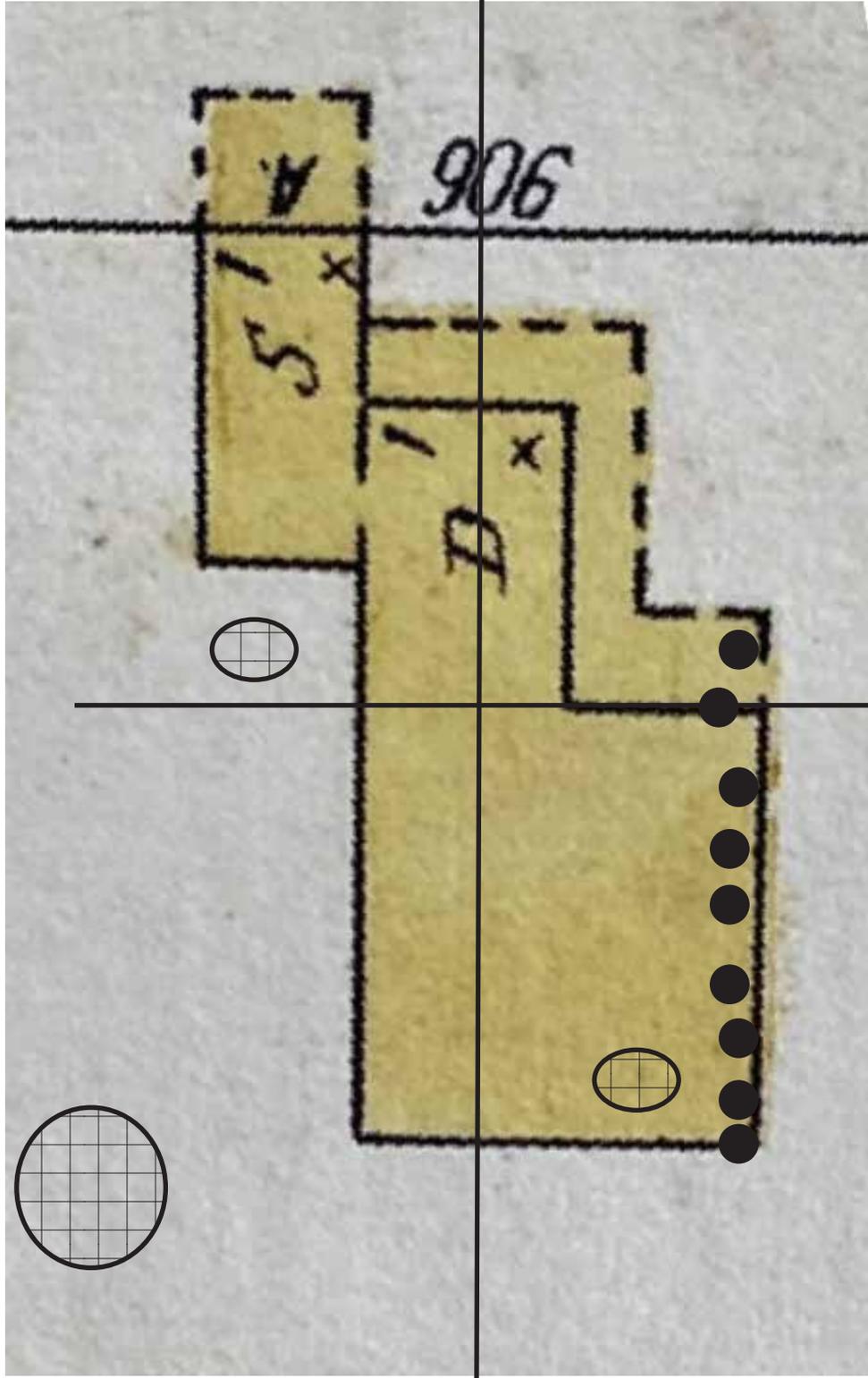


Porch

Owens House Excavation and House Maps

Northwest Quadrant

Northeast Quadrant



Southwest Quadrant

Southeast Quadrant

South Franklin Street

906



LEGEND

- Foundation Post
- (with grid) Trash Pit
- S Store
- D Dwelling
- Wood Structure
- Porch

Name: _____

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Analyzing Artifacts

The Owens Family lived at 906 South Franklin Street from 1897-1962. Archaeologists excavated their home in 2022 and divided the site into quadrants, or four sections. Examine the artifacts found in one quadrant of the site and analyze them to learn more about the Owens Family's activities in this part of their property.

1. Write the name of the quadrant you are investigating: _____
2. Group the artifacts from your quadrant into categories. Give each group a name and then count the artifacts. You can add more categories if you want.

Category 1

Number of Artifacts

Category 2

Number of Artifacts

Category 3

Number of Artifacts

Category 4

Number of Artifacts

3. Make a bar graph using the artifact categories and counts from Question #2. Write your categories along the bottom of the graph and then draw a bar to show how many artifacts you counted in each category.



4. Based on the artifacts, write down two or more activities you think the Owens Family did in this quadrant.

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Timeline Activity

Procedures:

1. Explain the difference between primary and secondary sources. Primary sources provide a first-hand account of an event or time period, such as letters, diaries, or records. Secondary sources are produced using primary sources, such as textbooks.
2. Tell students we have many primary sources about the Owens Family and we will be learning about them all semester through these historical documents.
3. Create a timeline at the front of the classroom using magnets or strings and clothespins.
4. As you move through the semester, when you begin a new unit, you can introduce the primary sources dating to the corresponding period by using the Timeline PowerPoint. Ask students to analyze each source to determine:
 - a. What is the source?
 - b. Which family member(s) are mentioned in this source?
 - c. What time period is this source is from?
 - d. What can we learn about the Owens Family from this source?
5. After analyzing the primary source, add it to the class timeline in chronological order.
6. Optional: Students can build their own timeline and family tree as you move through the semester by filling out the Timeline Worksheet (p. 16-17).

Standards and Primary Sources:

1 – Explain how industry and agriculture expanded during the early twentieth century.

- Primary Sources: 1890 Marriage License, 1900 Census
- Talking Points: Introduce the Owens Family, a Black family who moved to Mobile during the Reconstruction era and ask students to create a family tree using the 1900 census. The marriage license demonstrates that Jessie and Lillie Owens were married in Pike, Georgia in 1900, but had moved to Mobile by 1900, when they are shown in the census with their two children.

3 – Describe Progressive Era social reforms in both the United States and Alabama.

- Primary Sources: 1915 Sanborn Map, 1907 City Directory
- Talking Points: The 1915 Sanborn Map shows a store attached to the Owens Family's house, and the 1907 City Directory lists Jesse Owens as a grocer. The Owens Family ran a store out of their house. This was a common job for African Americans during the Jim Crow era, because they didn't have to rely on others to give them a job. They were their own bosses.

5c – Describe the roles and contributions of Alabamians, including the 167th Infantry Regiment (4th Alabama), to the war effort during World War I.

- Primary Sources: 1918 WWI Draft Card

- Talking Points: Nathan K. Owens, the son of Jesse Owens, served in WWI. At that time, US Troops were segregated and most African Americans were limited to serving in labor battalions. Nathan K. Owens served in the 340th Labor Battalion and was deployed to France from 1918-1919.

7a – Explain how the Great Depression impacted Alabamians and the nation, including increased labor tensions.

- Primary Sources: 1926 Building Record, 1930 Census
- Talking Points: The store is no longer shown in the 1926 building record. The record tells us a lot about the Owens House. The 1930 census shows that Jesse and Lillie Owens have a boarder, or a person renting a room. This extra income would have been useful in the 1930s during the Great Depression. The 1930 census also shows that Nathan Owens has a wife, Estelle, and four sons.

10 – Describe how Alabamians contributed to the war effort during World War II.

- Primary Sources: 1942 WWII Draft Cards
- Talking Points: All of the Owens grandsons had to enlist in the draft for World War II. Their father, Nathan Owens Sr., served in the military, as did Nathan Owens Jr. His brother, Jessie W. Owens supported the World War II effort by working at Pinto Island, where military ships were built by Alabama Dry Dock Shipbuilding Company.

12b – Trace the chronology of civil rights events in Alabama and across the nation, and summarize how they impacted one another.

- Primary Sources: 1957 Yearbook Photo, 1958 Newspaper Article
- Talking Points: In 1958, Nathan K. Owens Jr., grandson of Jesse Owens, graduated from Loyola University in New Orleans with a Law degree. He entered school four years after Norman Francis became the first African American admitted to the law school in 1952. This was two years after the Supreme Court ruled that white Universities must admit Black students when comparable graduate programs didn't exist at Black Universities (and two years before Brown vs. Board of Education declared segregation unconstitutional). As the 1958 newspaper demonstrates, Nathan Owens Jr.'s law degree made him an important figure in his local community.

11 – Describe how the United States' economy grew and American culture changed after World War II.

- Primary Sources: 1961 ALDOT Right of Way Map, 1962 Mobile Register Article
- Talking Points: In the 1960s, Alabama (and other states across the country) built Interstate highways. These freeways were often built through African American neighborhoods, like the Owens Family's neighborhood Down the Bay. When the state built Interstate 10, they forced Clovice Owens, the grandson of Jesse Owens, to leave the house. He and his neighbors had to move to other parts of Mobile, and the Owens Family's home was demolished. The map shows the path of I-10 (the house outlined in red is the Owens House) and the 1962 Mobile Register article includes an advertisement about a cement company who is paving the new Interstate.

Name: _____

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Owens Family Timeline

The Owens Family lived at 906 South Franklin Street from 1897-1962. Primary sources help us learn about people in the past. Create a timeline of the Owens Family history using primary sources. For each source, write the year of the source and what it tells you about the family. Use the back of the worksheet to create a Family Tree as you find new family members in the primary sources.

Major Events:

Primary Sources:

