

Tabby: The Building Material That Helped Shape Coastal Savannah

While exploring Savannah's historic buildings, it is easy to focus on elegant architecture, grand staircases, decorative ironwork, and beautiful interiors. Yet hidden within many of these structures is a much older and less familiar building material that played an important role in the development of Savannah and the coastal South: **tabby**.

Tabby is a concrete-like building material made from a mixture of lime, sand, water, and oyster shells. Although it became especially associated with the coastal regions of Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida, the story behind tabby reaches much farther back in history.

Ancient Origins of Lime

The key ingredient that makes tabby possible is lime.

People have used lime as a building material for thousands of years. Its use can be traced back roughly 10,000 years to early settlements, including communities along the Nile River in Africa.

The discovery of lime may have occurred somewhat accidentally. Stones containing calcium carbonate were commonly exposed to intense heat from cooking fires. When heated to sufficiently high temperatures, calcium carbonate changes into calcium oxide, or quicklime. When properly processed and mixed with other materials, lime can act as a binding agent.

This simple chemical transformation eventually became the foundation for many types of mortar, plaster, and early concrete-like construction.

The Development of Tabby

By the 15th century, Spanish and Portuguese expansion and trading activity along the African coast contributed to the development and spread of building techniques involving lime and shell aggregate.

The material that became known as tabby combined readily available ingredients:

- Oyster shells
- Lime
- Sand
- Water

Oyster shells were particularly important. They could serve as aggregate within the mixture, while shells could also be burned at high temperatures to create the lime needed to bind the material together.

Once mixed and allowed to harden, tabby produced a remarkably strong material resembling primitive concrete.

Tabby Comes to Coastal America

With Spanish colonization, tabby construction eventually spread into what is now Florida, Georgia, and the coastal Carolinas.

The coastal environment was ideally suited for its production. Oyster shells were abundant, while sand and water were readily available. Instead of transporting expensive building materials over great distances, builders could make tabby using resources found nearby.

Durability was another major advantage.

This became particularly important as tensions developed between Spanish-controlled Florida and British territories farther north. Georgia was established partly as a buffer between these competing colonial powers, making strong and durable construction especially valuable.

Tabby consequently became an important building material throughout coastal Georgia.

The Human Cost Behind Savannah's Tabby

There is another part of tabby's history that is essential to understanding the material.

Its use in Savannah is closely connected with slavery.

Producing tabby was extremely labor-intensive. Oyster shells had to be gathered, transported, burned to produce lime, and then combined with sand, water, and additional shell material. The mixture then had to be transported, poured, shaped, and incorporated into buildings.

Enslaved people of African descent likely performed much of this work on plantations and construction sites throughout the coastal South.

Their labor contributed not only to individual residences but also to the broader infrastructure and development of places such as Savannah.

When we admire historic structures today, it is therefore important to recognize the people whose forced labor helped construct them.

Tabby at the Owens-Thomas House

One particularly interesting Savannah example can be found at the Owens-Thomas House & Slave Quarters.

Tabby was incorporated throughout the property because of its strength and durability. These characteristics were particularly valuable in supporting one of the home's most remarkable technological features: its sophisticated multi-level indoor plumbing system.

The Owens-Thomas House is often admired for its architecture and engineering, but looking more closely at materials such as tabby adds another dimension to its story.

The walls and structural elements tell us not only how the building was constructed but also something about the society that constructed it.

Oyster Shells Tell a Much Larger Story

Today, a piece of tabby may simply look like rough concrete filled with fragments of oyster shells. But those shells connect us to centuries of history.

They tell a story of ancient discoveries about lime, African and European building traditions, Spanish colonization, coastal resources, architectural innovation, and the growth of Savannah.

They also tell a more difficult story about slavery and the enslaved people whose knowledge, skill, and physical labor contributed to the buildings and infrastructure that remain part of Savannah today.

That is what makes tabby so fascinating.

It isn't simply an old construction material.

Tabby is a physical record of the people, cultures, resources, and history that helped build coastal Georgia.