

EVERY ISLAND'S PLACE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY UNITED STATES SALT INDUSTRY

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Abstract

Petite Anse (now Avery Island) shares a place amongst the “Big Three” [Syracuse (New York), Kanawha Valley (West Virginia) and Saltville (Virginia)] as an important North American salt industrial center during the nineteenth century. Although significantly outsized by the Big Three, salt was produced at Petite Anse during both the War of 1812 and the American Civil War (1861–1865). Early salt production from Petite Anse was by evaporation of naturally occurring salt springs. At the start of the Civil War, salt production was still by evaporation; however, demand started to outpace production, so brine wells were deepened and rock salt was encountered on May 6, 1862. The Petite Anse salt discovery is the second earliest in the United States (Saltville, Virginia, was the first in 1840). For about a year, rock salt at Petite Anse was quarried and used to support the Confederate military campaign.

In 1867, the first mine shaft into the salt at Petite Anse was sunk to a depth of 90 feet. Thus, Petite Anse became the first location for an operating room-and-pillar salt mine in the United States.

The mine experienced a roof failure in 1883 when a hole was inadvertently blasted through the roof salt. Thus, the first sinkhole above the mine was formed. The associated water, sand, and debris inflow into the mine interfered with the underground operation. Consequently, in 1885, the shaft was deepened by 78 feet to approximately 168 feet below surface, and mining was started at the 160-foot level, which established Petite Anse as the site of the first multilevel salt mine in the United States.

By 1898, the large sinkholes that had appeared at the edge of the breaker building and the engine house necessitated the complete abandonment of the original room-and-pillar mine. Subsequently, a new shaft was sunk southwest of the limits of the old workings. This new “Steam Shaft” was completed by approximately 1899, penetrated salt at a depth of 54 feet, was sunk to 518 feet, and remains operational to this day.

This paper presents the history of salt mining at Petite Anse until the sinking of the Steam Shaft. Numerous historical photographs of the pre-1899 mine workings and surrounding features augment the discussion.

Key words: Avery Island, Avery Island Mine, Avery Island Salt Dome, Petite Anse, Historic Mining, Sinkholes