

Villa Gayoso: A Spanish Colonial Administrative Center Near Natchez, Mississippi

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Introduction

From 1779 to 1798, the Natchez District in southwestern Mississippi, formerly part of British West Florida, fell under the control of the Spanish Crown. While the city of Natchez remained the capital of the district, a subsidiary center called Villa Gayoso was established by the Spanish authorities about 20 miles to the north, in order to serve the existing settlements along Coles Creek (Elliott 1989). The general location of this site has long been known, but the exact locations of the buildings were not. A program of remote sensing and systematic metal detecting was conducted in March of 2025 in an attempt to find these buildings and to place this settlement more precisely on the modern landscape.

General Location and History

Villa Gayoso (22Je768) was located on high ground overlooking the Mississippi River, along the main road heading north from Natchez. Based on deed research and local oral tradition, Elliott (1989) narrowed down the location to a 6 ha (15 acre) tract in present-day Jefferson County. Maps made in the early 1800s often showed this settlement (Fig. 1), indicating its importance at the time (Atchison 1802; Bradley 1804; Lafon 1806; Carey 1814; Darby 1816).

Construction of the buildings began in 1791 and continued into the following year (Elliott 1989). The site served as a Spanish administrative center and military garrison until 1798, when the Natchez District was ceded to the United States. Villa Gayoso then became the seat of the newly-formed Pickering County, but a dispute over the land's ownership soon changed its status (Elliott 1989: 287). In 1802, a court awarded the property to a local family, and after that the settlement was largely abandoned. The site was not occupied again until the 1990s, when six hunting camps were built on the same parcel.

A surface collection made on this property in 2006 was dominated by creamware and pearlware (Joseph Frank, pers. comm.) — exactly what one would expect on a site dating to the last decade of the 18th century.

Architecture

In the 1790s, Villa Gayoso consisted of five main buildings — a church, a priest's house, the commandant's house, a barracks, and an undertaker's house — along with several detached kitchens and privies (Diddess 1798; Riffel 1999, 2005; Rowland 1905: 184).

The only surviving map was drawn in 1798 (Fig. 2). Although this sketch map lacked a scale and a north arrow, we were able to reconstruct both using the available clues. A letter that accompanied the map gave dimensions of the buildings, which allowed us to approximate the scale. And it seemed reasonable to assume that the front galleries of the buildings as shown on the map would have faced the main road at the time, a descendant of which still exists today. Such an alignment would also position two privies on the side that faced the bluff edge — again, a placement that made sense. Once the map was scaled and oriented in this way (Fig. 3), we used it as a model that could be fitted to the results of our remote sensing.

As depicted on the 1798 map, the priest's house and the commandant's house were built in a style that was common at the time, with a full gallery across the front and a half gallery in back. The best surviving example of this style is Mount Locust, a contemporary inn on the Natchez Trace only 9 km away (Fig. 4). Such buildings stood on large cypress piers, which would be invisible to remote sensing, but they had brick chimneys, whose bases might be detected.

Remote Sensing

Three methods were deployed in our search for the buildings: ground-penetrating radar (GPR), magnetic gradiometry, and systematic metal detecting. Four grids were laid out opportunistically, in order to avoid modern obstructions: one in the southern portion, an open pasture; one in the central portion, in front of the camps; and two in the northern portion, between the camps and the bluff edge.

The GPR found two anomalies likely associated with the late 18th-century settlement (Fig. 5A). Anomaly 1, located in the south field, appeared to be a rectangular feature, some 1.5-1.8 m deep. Anomaly 2 was a more diffuse disturbance along the bluff edge, near the roots of a large tree and with brick visible on the surface nearby. The many anomalies in our central grid appear to be modern, likely caused by the camps' septic systems. A pipe, probably associated with oil drilling in the 1950s, is clearly visible in our southern grid.

The magnetic gradiometry also picked up Anomaly 1, and confirmed that the rest of our southern grid was devoid of major features (Fig. 5B), except for the modern pipe. The massive magnetic anomaly in the central area is likely caused by a concrete septic tank made with steel rebar.

We also conducted systematic metal detecting as time allowed, covering one 20-m square in the southern grid (Fig. 5C). Most of the finds were cut nails, consistent with the former presence of wooden buildings in the 1790s.

Interpretation

We suspect that Anomaly 1 was a brick lined cellar (Figs. 6, 7), examples of which are known from other roughly contemporary sites (O'Hear et al. 2000; Lawson 2004). Anomaly 2 was probably one of the privies.

The 1798 map, scaled and oriented as in Figure 3, can be readily fitted to our remote sensing results, with the priest's house located next to Anomaly 1 and a privy near Anomaly 2 (Fig. 5D). This places the church just west of our southern grid, where its traces may still survive in the woods. The commandant's house and barracks were likely damaged by construction of the hunting camps, but remnants may yet be present in the gaps between the modern buildings. Archaeological traces of the undertaker's house were probably destroyed by oil drilling in the 1950s. All these predictions should be tested with additional field work.

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Figure 1. Detail from an 1802 manuscript map showing the location of Villa Gayoso on the bluff road north of Natchez (Atchison 1802).

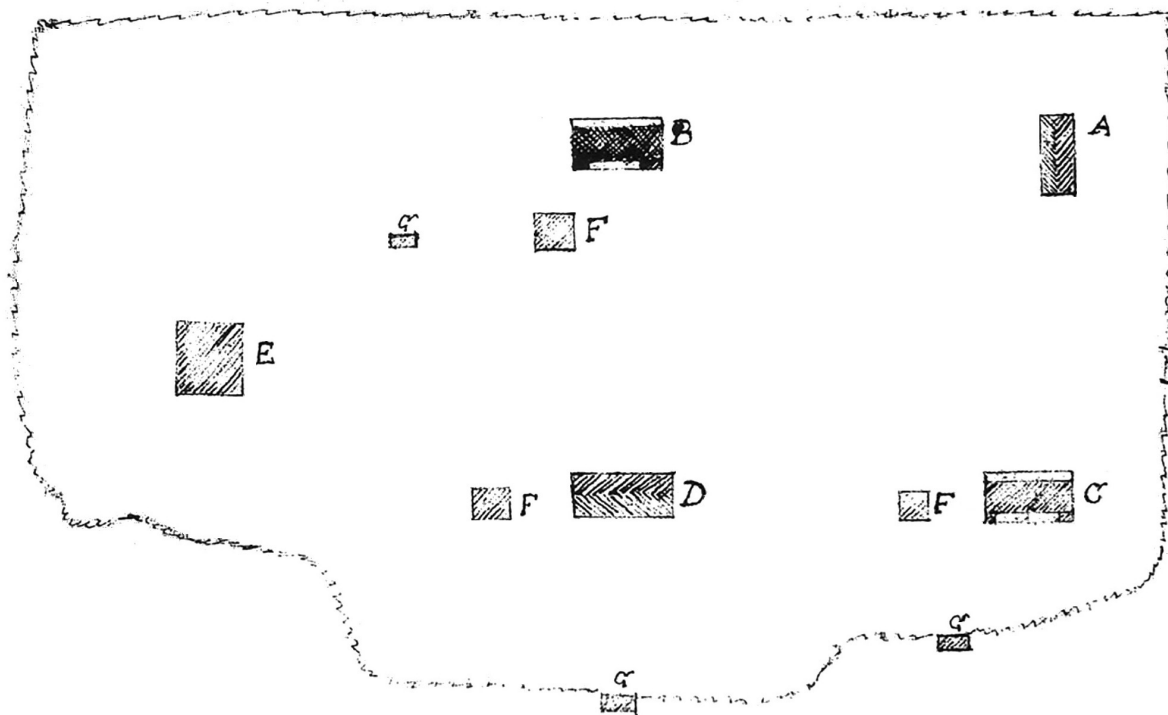


Figure 2. Sketch map of Villa Gayoso made by U.S. Army Corporal Archibald Diddes in 1798 (after Riffel 1999: 76). Key: (A) chapel, (B) priest's house, (C) commandant's house, (D) barracks, (E) undertaker's house, (F) kitchens, (G) privies.

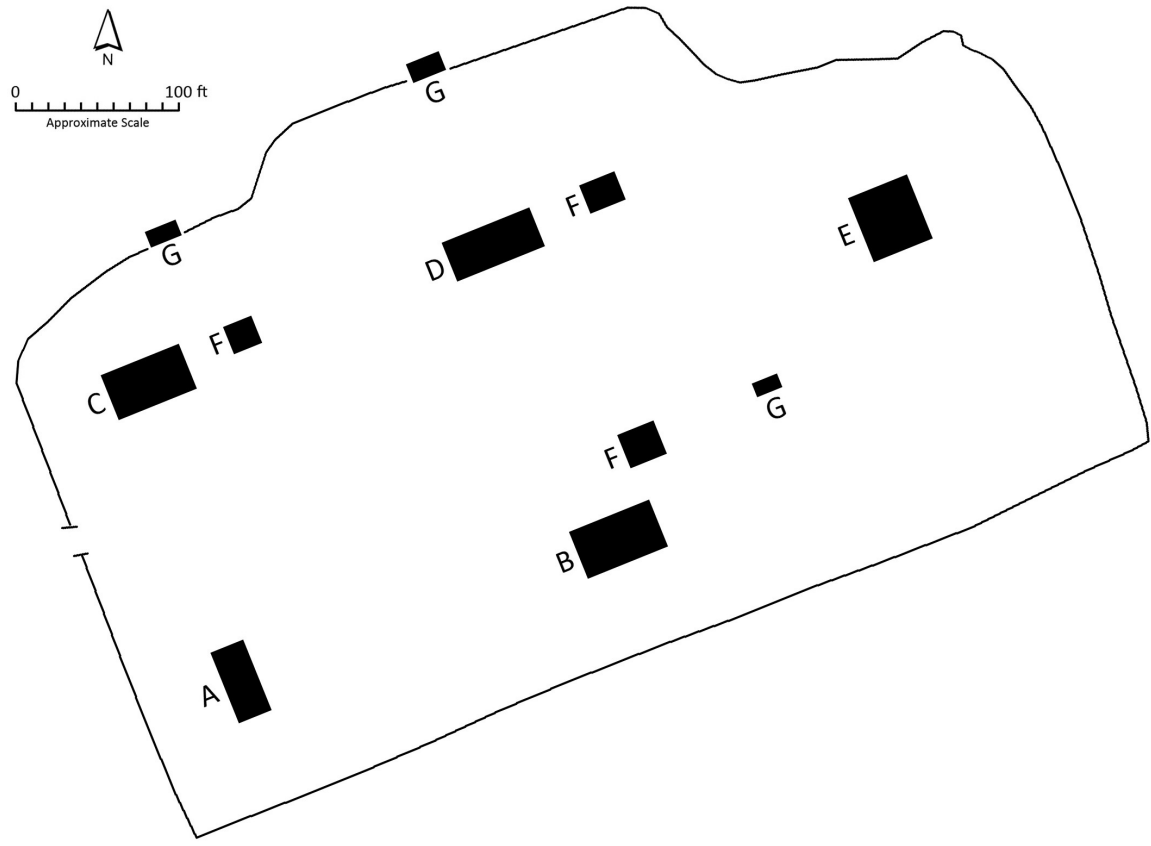


Figure 3. The Diddess 1798 map, with scale estimated from building dimensions and oriented toward road.



Figure 4. Mount Locust, a contemporary building showing the style of architecture used at Villa Gayoso.



Figure 5A. Remote sensing results: ground-penetrating radar, showing anomalies from presumed 18th-century and modern features.



Figure 5B. Remote sensing results: gradiometry, showing anomalies from presumed 18th-century and modern features.



Figure 5C. Remote sensing results: systematic metal detecting, showing the locations of cut nails found in a 20-m square.



Figure 5D. Remote sensing results: the Diddess 1798 map overlaid on the modern landscape, with anomalies 1 and 2 shown in blue.

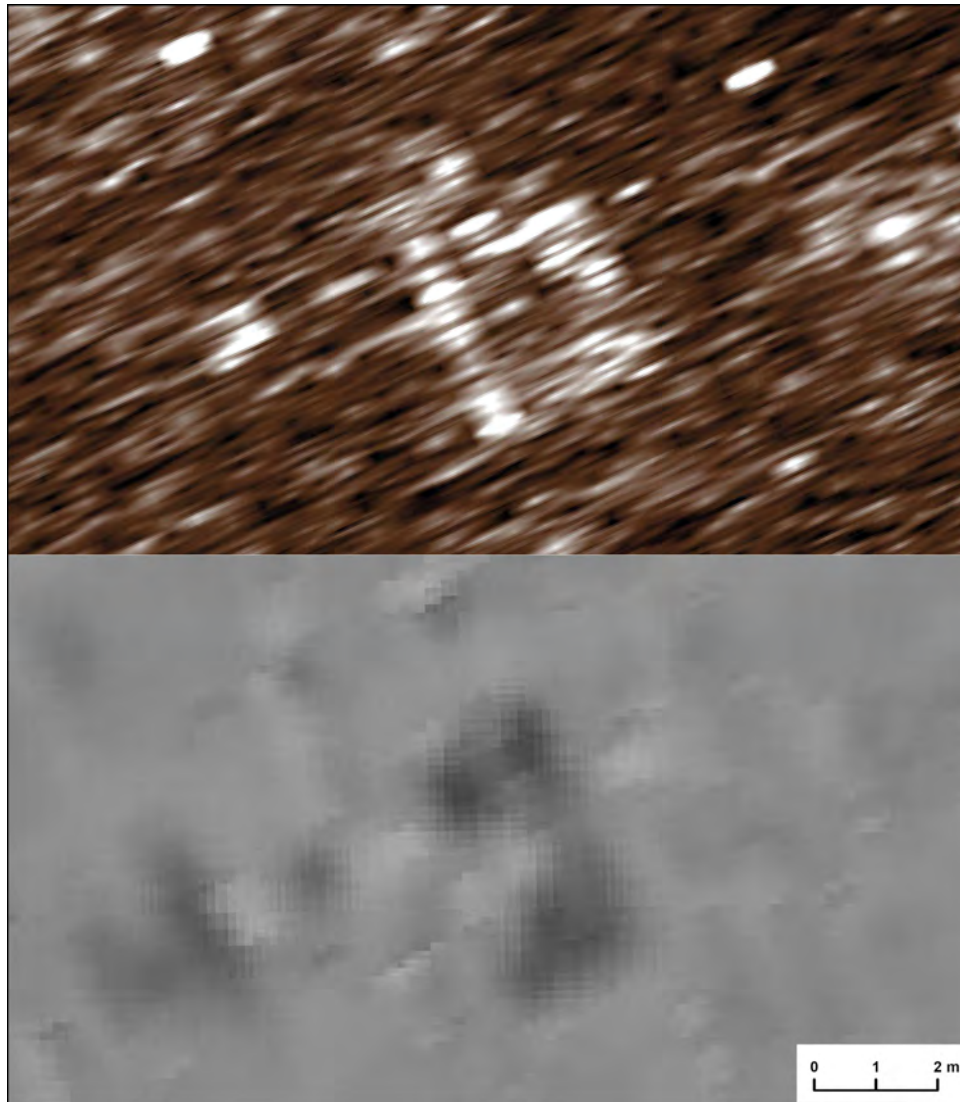


Figure 6. Plan view of Anomaly 1, likely a brick-lined cellar, as revealed by GPR (top) and gradiometry (bottom)

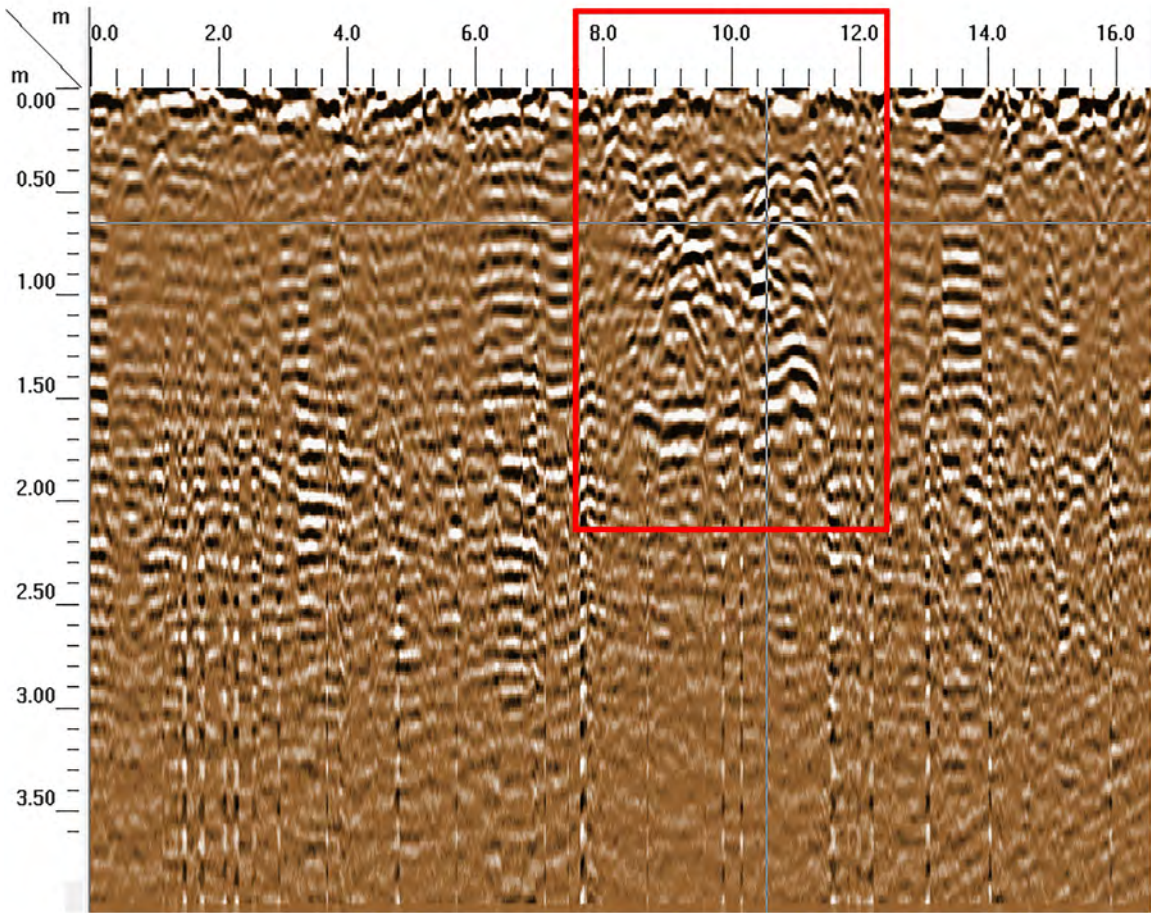


Figure 7. Profile of Anomaly 1 along a north-south transect, as revealed by GPR.