

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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BLACK SALTS



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LEACHING ASHES

With modern ideas of conservation, it seems shocking to us that during the time of early pioneer settlement, farmers burned off the native trees or forest to clear the land. Lumber was cheap and freight was expensive to ship by wagon before the canal opened. The cost of carrying bulky products to a market was therefore so high it discouraged production. Under such circumstances it was only natural that asheries emerged as profit-making ventures.

Because there were so many trees, not all were needed to construct buildings and the rest became a nuisance which had to be done away with. By burning the logs, valuable chemicals were yielded that could be sold for cash to pay the taxes.

In those days it was not customary for farmers to work for wages since anyone willing to work could own his own land. Therefore, when a job required more hands than the farmer's family he would trade work with a neighbor, or, in the case of a very large job, he would set a day for a "bee". Logging bees were very common. After a settler had cut down the trees on several acres, and had cut the logs into sizes that could be managed, he would send word to all the people for miles around to come to his logging bee. They would come with their teams of oxen and haul the logs into piles for burning.

The ashes that remained after these fires, were carried to "leaches" near a source of water. Water was poured over the ashes and allowed to leach through. The resulting liquid was called lye. Some leaches were built of bark, others were like a large heavy barrel with openings for the lye to run out. The lye was collected in huge iron kettles and boiled until it was red hot. Dipped into smaller kettles or pots and cooled, this would form a lump as hard as stone, called potash. This was taken from the kettles and broken up and packed into barrels for shipment.

A more valuable product than potash was pearl ash or saleratus. Special ovens were required to make it. The process started out the same as for potash with the leaching of ashes and boiling of the lye, but it was not boiled so long. When the black mass was sticky it was called "black salts". It was caustic and had to be handled carefully as it was poured into a trough or dug out log. This could be hitched by a chain to the ring in the ox-yoke, and dragged or carted to the ashery as stated in last week's column about Elder Carpenter back in 1818.

At the ashery the black salts were put into brick ovens and baked, almost burned, until they turned gray in color. When they were taken out and cooled they became pearly white saleratus. There was no baking powder in the stores in those days, but saleratus was used with sour milk for cakes, johnny cake or corn bread, pancakes, and hot biscuits; also with molasses for gingerbread.

In order to produce 100 pounds of potash, about 20 bushels of ashes were required. Ashes from different kinds of trees varied in their value. Elm and maple produced the best; beech, birch and other hardwoods were also of value; pine, hemlock and other softwoods were considered of little value.

The products of asheries were used to manufacture glass, soap, some medicine, and for bleaching cloth. Pearlash, or saleratus, was therefore used as our baking soda is today, although some decried the use of wood ash in their food. Baking soda or sodium bicarbonate acts as a leavening agent because it causes bread and pastries to rise in baking.

Black salts and pearl ash were shipped across the lake to Canada. Later pearl ashes were shipped to England in barrels after the canal was completed. As the virgin timber was depleted, the asheries in our area became defunct.