Angola archaeology unravels rich history before prison

Scientists discuss legends, science, reality at symposium

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ANGOLA — One legend that circulated around the Louisiana State Penitentiary was that inmates are buried in the levees.

That’s just one myth that archaeological digs at Angola have dispelled, said Stephanie Perrault, an archaeologist with the LSU Museum of Natural Science.

“We’ve had the opportunity to learn fact from fiction,” Perrault said Saturday afternoon during a symposium called “Angola Archaeology: 70 Years of Legend, Science and Reality.”

The symposium brought together archaeologists from various organizations including LSU and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers who discussed significant archaeological sites and projects that have taken place at Angola since the 1930s.

“One thing we’ve been able to do is trace the development of archaeology,” said Perrault, who has been involved with the excavation and examination of 41 sites on the prison grounds during the past eight years.

She said the earliest excavations in the 1930s started as a simple search for relics; by the 1970s the work had progressed to using a scientific and historical approach.

Angola has housed inmates since the late 1800s and now covers approximately 18,000 acres. Perrault said about 9,000 acres have been examined.

“It’s fertile ground,” she said. Before it was a prison, the area included at least seven plantations in the antebellum area, and prehistoric Native American groups lived in the vicinity.

Perrault said this makes the area rich archaeologically, and it also means that there’s no typical type of artifact found on the grounds.

“Along the creek beds, it’s common to find flints and arrowheads,” she said.

On other sites, though, it’s common to find evidence of plantation life, including abandoned burial sites.

Perrault said one of the biggest surprises that archaeologists have found is evidence of thriving plantations with intensive farming built on the flood plain.

“That’s not an area that we’ve typically looked,” she said, “That means we may need to reconsider our methodology.”

One of the most interesting recent finds was the discovery of a mastodon in a hillside. While excavating this prehistoric site, workers exposed human remains above it.

Rebecca Saunders, also with the LSU Museum of Natural Science, was involved with excavating and examining the human remains.

An initial examination of the remains indicated the remains were not prehistoric. Further examination revealed that the bones were those of an adult woman. Cut nails indicated there had been a casket, Saunders said. Ethnicity couldn’t be determined.

“Local legend says that there were slaves buried here, but we couldn’t determine that,” she said.

Angola Warden Burl Cain was at the symposium that’s held annually. He said he’s personally interested in archaeology and sees Angola as a rich source of history.

According to literature at the symposium, the Angola area was at one time the confluence of the Mississippi and Red rivers. This means that travelers have been using the area since prehistoric times to get to the Gulf of Mexico. Travelers used a portage known as Portage de la Croix to shorten the journey.

Other significant sites include Panola Plantation from the antebellum period as well as other plantations; a former train depot and the L&A Railroad tracks headed toward New Orleans; original inmate camps; Native American burial grounds at Bloodhound Hill and Native American mounds.

“We need to preserve our history. The older I get, the more interested I am in this kind of thing,” Cain said.