Archaeologists are digging under the historic Cabildo

By The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — If you can't go up, go down. Including the first Cabildo building.

With the start of work to rebuild the Cabildo's fire-destroyed third floor still weeks away, the Louisiana State Museum has decided to learn what it can from the ground under the city's most historic building.

The museum commissioned a New Orleans archaeological firm, Earth Search Inc., to dig up the courtyard behind the Cabildo and see what can be learned about the history of human activity on the site.

The area is sometimes known as the Calaboose because both civil and military prisons stood there during the 18th and early 19th centuries. So little of life in colonial New Orleans, and this site will yield different material than we'd find at one that was always residential," she said.

Among the most interesting items were a large group of marbles, which the archaeologists think may have been used for gambling, and a half-dime produced in 1839 at the Old U.S. Mint, now also part of the state museum.

Also found were buttons, pipe stems, jewelry fragments, pieces of wine bottles, ceramic and glass shards, handles of eating utensils, and bones of cows, pigs, mice and rats.

The biggest surprise, said Jill-Karen Yakubik, president of Earth Search, has been that material was found just beneath the surface of the courtyard, which was covered in recent years by flagstones.

The diggers have found extensive remains of what they think were 18th century prisons that stood on the site, including partially intact brick walls of a civil prison built around 1730. Other bricks, larger and thicker, are thought to date from rebuilding of the site after the great fires of 1788 and 1794 that destroyed much of the French Quarter.

The museum has decided to learn what it can from the ground. Yakubik said that is "plenty of time" to uncover all that can be learned from the site, with a final report to the museum due by June. The team expects to dig six pits in the courtyard.

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