Archaeology digs reveal rich history

Slave life studied at Evergreen Plantation in Edgard

By STACEY PLISANCE
Associated Press writer

EDGARD — Emancipated slaves in southeastern Louisiana may have been extremely poor, but they managed to afford small luxuries such as perfumes, china, and toys for their children.

Remnants of porcelain and perfume bottles were among the hundreds of artifacts found when archaeologist instructor Scott Simmons and about 600 helpers began excavating the grounds of a 19th-century Louisiana plantation home. Simmons and bored of fourth-grade to college-age students, community members and researchers uncovered artifacts revealing detailed information about life in the Quarters at Evergreen Plantation.

The project began in May, when Simmons, who teaches at both Tulane and Southeastern Louisiana University, took a group of 13 students to visit the plantation as part of a history lesson.

Upon the estate about 30 miles upriver from New Orleans, they were invited by plantation owner Matilda Stream and curator Jane Boddie to return and organize archeological dig in the Quarters — the name given to the area where slaves once resided.

"More people lived in the Quarters than in the plantation itself, but we have such little information on them," Boddie said. "I was looking at hiring an archeologist when I met Scott and his students."

Among the remnants found was a dime dated 1889, which helped Simmons and his assistants date artifacts that were found in the same strata. Most of the remnants found were dated after the Civil War, he said.

"Everything has helped us learn more about the people who lived here. We now know more about what they ate and what their children played with," he said.

Medicine bottles were recovered that likely contained "potions" for healing. "They were probably 80 or 90 percent alcohol," Simmons said.

Pieces of bone China found near one of the 22 cabins in the Quarters could mean that the residents received hand-me-downs from the planters.

"We noticed that the patterns on the china did not match, so they were likely either passed down or purchased a little at a time," Simmons said. He plans to dig closer to the house to see if he can find matching china patterns.

Unearthed bones helped determine what residents ate.

"After the Civil War, we know they not only ate typical domestic animals such as pigs and cows, but they were also hunting coons and 'possum, catching turtles, gar fish and oysters," he said.

Simmons recovered wild boar teeth and shotgun shells, along with scales from a gun. He said the slaves were either purchasing fish and meat from a local butcher or hunting and fishing themselves.

"There's still so much work that needs to be done. We've only scratched the surface," he said. His crew will soon excavate other areas to make comparisons with the first cabin. They also hope to find more artifacts from years prior to the Civil War and emancipation.

Simmons was awarded research support funds from the Louisiana Endowment for Humanities in May. With financial assistance, he was able to involve more members of the community and students from surrounding schools.

"We want descendants to come forward and tell stories about their families so we will have information to accompany the artifacts that are found," she said. "We want to know about the ways they cooked and how they raised their children."

Now director of the Greater New Orleans Archeological Program at the University of New Orleans, Simmons said the project is expanding as more artifacts are found and more participants get their hands dirty.

"This is a very intense, hands-on way of learning about archeology, and the Quarters is an area with great research potential," Simmons said.

October and November were the busiest digging months.

"The field work helped everyone get to understand what archeology is all about, how it's done and how it can help us understand the past," Simmons said. "Our biggest goal was not only to learn about the people who lived in the Quarters, but also to clear up any misconceptions about archeology."

Simmons and his volunteers are now processing, categorizing and cleaning the hundreds of artifacts.

The most significant remnants will be showcased at the plantation after they are processed and cleaned at a UNO laboratory.