Excavation seeks to determine use of buildings that flanked Ashland Belle Helene Plantation stands. The archaeologists wipe sweat from their faces, put on more repellent and continued to dig at their site.

Unlike many archaeological sites that are in the middle of a soybean field or wooded area, looming in the background of this dig was the imposing facade of Ashland Belle Helene plantation. Where hoop skirts and elegant dinners once prevailed, shorts and sneakers and a quick sandwich were now the rule.

David Babson, LSU archaeologist in charge of the project, and his student assistants were looking for artifacts to establish whether the structure that used to stand as a flanker to the big house was a kitchen or a garconniere, where the young men of the house lived.

"Two buildings, symmetrically balanced, used to stand as flankers to the main house," Babson explained. One was torn down many years ago, and a parking lot was built over the site; the other was razed in the '50s, and that's where the archaeological work was being conducted.

It would make sense for the kitchen to be separate from the house, Babson said, because it was "fairly common for support facilities to be separate from the main house. The cooking fire produced heat, which would not have been desirable in the house, especially during the summer, and the cooking fire would have been a fire hazard."

An argument in favor of the kitchen's having been in the left wing, Babson said, is that "entering Belle Helene through the main door on the west side, the pantry and dining room are on the left. It would make sense for the kitchen to be on that side" for convenience in serving.

However, once the project was finished, Babson concluded that "if the..."
building had a domestic use, it was later. I can't make a definitive decision about it based on the artifacts. It probably served as a garconniere, kitchen and barn during the 110 years the building existed.

Ashland Plantation was designed and built by Duncan Kenner (Confederate Minister Plenipotentiary to France and England), one of the wealthiest planters in the South, in 1837-41. It faces the Mississippi River in Geismar, 25 miles from Baton Rouge, surrounded now by chemical plants. When the property was purchased in 1889 by John B. Reuss, he renamed it Belle Helene, in honor of his granddaughter.

In addition to excavating possible kitchen quarters, Babson wanted to investigate two areas some distance from the main house, hoping to locate slave quarters and excavate artifacts that would reveal something about the lives of the plantation's slaves. At the height of its sugar production, the plantation encompassed 3,700 acres with 170 of the 473 slaves owned by Duncan Kenner.

"About 50 years before Belle Helene was built, the slave quarters would have been up here" near the main house, Babson said, describing the typical plantation of the late 18th century. "By the 1840s, people wanted slaves a bit more separate, farther away. Industrial facilities such as this sugar plantation employed a lot of people. The owners would have wanted to display their wealth with a large formal house and elaborate plantations."

Clusters of slave cabins at a distance from the house gave slaves the opportunity to develop their traditions, to form a close community, Babson said. Trying to study traditions of Africans and African-Americans is one of the things that interest archaeologists and anthropologists.

Many questions remain to be answered. A lot of materials were collected in Babson's samplings, but more extensive work at the site would undoubtedly reveal more. "We did not intend to find much," Babson explained, "but we did what we set out to do. Our sampling showed that there are significant remains."

It will take much more extensive work over a longer period of time than Babson's crew was able to spend to develop the site.

Babson's project was funded by a Survey and Planning Grant from the National Park Service, through the Department of the Interior and the State Division of Archaeology, Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, administered by Kathleen Byrd, state archaeologist. Charles E. Oser was principal investigator. The grant was restricted to testing the archaeological resources at Ashland Belle Helene, not for extensive excavation. Matching funds were provided by LSU and the Ashland Belle Helene Corporation.

In addition to the farm hands at the plantation, the owners would have required an extensive household staff to prepare meals, do the laundry and take care of the elaborate dresses and hair styles effected by the women of the day. Some slaves may have been quartered in the flunker buildings, Babson theorized.

As he talked, students were carefully scraping soil from a test pit in the foundation of the flanker. The upper layer was brown silt, overlaying gray clay. The soil was pushed through screens to catch any small artifacts that might be hidden in the lumpy clay. Pieces of glass, buttons, ceramic pieces, flatiron handles, metal hinges, a scythe blade (the wooden handle had long since rotted) — a motley assortment of items came out of the pit near the big house.

Carol Crapenzano sorted nails found in the pit, separating machine-cut, square nails made between 1830 and

EXCAVATION — Test pits are marked out near Ashland Belle Helene plantation house, far left; Rocky Sexton sprays water on side of brick wall feature so it can be photographed by David Babson, center top; Dan Olmann and Babson push dirt through screen, looking for tiny artifacts, center; Kate Lochelt relieves the heat with a refreshing drink, bottom; scythe blade, top; stamped brick from foundation, above.
1890 from modern mass-produced wire nails. "It’s not every state that has plantation houses like this or the quality of plantations like this," Babson said. His goal in doing this work is to put the entire site on the National Register of Historic Places. The house is listed for future archaeological investigation.

Working from two maps, one a Mississippi River Commission map from 1864 and the other a survey map of 1891, Babson was able to locate the rubble of smaller buildings. Walking a considerable distance from the plantation house, through pastures in which horses grazed and scrub trees crowded, hummocks of brick gave testimony to earlier habitation. They were the remains of fireplaces in the old quarters. But were they slave quarters or structures of more recent vintage?

Slaves sometimes continued to live in slave quarters after they had been freed, Babson said, though "Freedmen didn’t want to live in slave quarters. For some, it brought back bad conditions of work and scrub trees crowded, hummocks of brick gave testimony to earlier habitation. They were the remains of fireplaces in the old quarters. But were they slave quarters or structures of more recent vintage?

Excavations of datable bottles and ceramic sherds confirmed his belief. The bottles were probably in use at the turn of the 20th century. Babson picked up a piece of a broken dish, and the glass on the inside of the dish was made between 1800 and 1880. It probably had gone out of use by 1900. We found pieces like these in the six quarters structures out there are early 20th century.

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"If I’d had more time, I would have opened more units," Babson said. Projects come to an end just as they begin to get exciting, he said.

"I’ve found some buttons, some tiny blue beads and nails," Schwab said. "Dan found a brass crucifix in his pit." They were working in pits in one of the quarters areas. The cabin had been built in two rows, one row on each side of a street. Those are believed to be the slave quarters. The six newer houses were built in what was the street between the earlier rows of cabins. The beads were made from the 1500s to the 1800s and were used as trade items, particularly to Indians and African-Americans, Babson explained. The beads were used to decorate clothing or perhaps had some religious significance.

"Most Africans, after they’d been in Louisiana a while, became Catholic," Babson said, "so they would have had rosaries. We also found a brass straight pin. We might be dealing with the house of a seamstress," he inferred.

Another explanation for the presence of a brass crucifix, rosary beads and fragments of what were possibly wine and olive oil bottles is the influx of Sicilian immigrants to work the plantation in the late 1800s.

"We have several wine bottle necks and a couple of olive bottles. The bottles were blown by mouth, and this type was usually used for olive and other cooking oils. Before World War II, cooking with olive oil was pretty much confined to cuisine of Italians and Sicilians. It’s a strong ethnic marker of their having been here," Babson said. But he does not know exactly where they lived.

"The buttons are brass, mother of pearl, perhaps porcelain and glass," Schwab said.

Artifacts found by screening dirt include buttons, nails, seashells, ceramic pieces and beads. rain flooded the units and hindered the progress of the excavations. It rained for weeks on end, making it impossible to work. "The day sticks together and won’t go through the screen," Babson said.

One of the other pits in the quarters area turned up horse harness and a padlock outside but buttons and domestic items inside. Pieces of bone were found, apparently the remains of meals.

The foundation of the plantation’s sugar mill lay not far from one cluster of house ruins. The sugar plantation was still in operation in the 1830s, records indicate.

Local residents frequently stopped by the site to see what the LSU team was digging up and to share their family’s stories about Belle Helene. One visitor was Henry Marchand, who said he remembered egg hunts at the plantation when he was a boy, a time when land sold for 25 cents per acre and corn was raised to feed the horses and mules that worked the sugar cane.

Marchand added that "my grandfather lived to 96 and said there was a sugar mill and that there were people coming in from Sicily all the time when land sold other movies have been used the old house as a setting. "In one scene for Fletch Lives, flames blew up under the eaves and into the attic. There is also smoke damage in one of the rooms from filming The Long Hot Summer. The worst damage was caused by students partying here in the late ’60s. The black Italian marble mantels were broken to pieces.”

The house is open for tours, but there is no floor — only a lowered, dirt one — in the first-floor rooms. Visitors can look into the drawing rooms and dining room from the central hallway. The wood from the floors was reportedly used to make repairs elsewhere in the house many years ago. It has not been inhabited since the 1930s. The second floor is in better condition. Architectural details are the primary focal points since most of the original furnishings were removed to the home of one of the owners.

"It must have been an astonishingly fine home when Duncan Kenner owned it." Babson observed, "may one of the finest in the country. He was the J. Paul Getty or Donald Trump of his time. His income would have been $100,000 to $200,000 a year, the equivalent of $30 million to $40 million today."