Following two decades of litigation, the Ashland-Belle Helene Plantation, located on Louisiana’s famed River Road near Baton Rouge, has been sold to the Shell Chemical Co. for $3 million, five times the 102-acre plantation’s appraised value of $650,000. Shell purchased the property to expand a chemical plant that is located on an adjacent site.

Although Shell has not decided how to use the plantation, Noel Wheeler, the company’s community-relations manager, stresses that the Ashland-Belle Helene is at least one quarter of a mile from Shell’s proposed plant expansion and that Shell is aware of the “cultural and historical significance of the property.” According to Susan Kidd, the director of the National Trust’s southern regional office, preservationists are encouraging Shell to turn the plantation into a house museum.

Although it has fallen into serious disrepair, Ashland-Belle Helene is among the grandest and largest plantation houses in Louisiana. The house is also a singularly pure example of the peripteral style, a regional version of Greek Revival architecture. The style is thought to have evolved from galleried Creole plantation houses of the 18th and early 19th centuries. While most peripteral-style houses incorporate galleries only on their principal elevation, Ashland is exceptional for being girdled by a gallery on all four of its facades.

The main house, which is surrounded by 28 stuccoed pillars boasting molded capitals formed of corbeled brick, is characterized by the extreme simplicity, massive scale, and dignity associated with the best Classical Revival design. Ashland-Belle Helene’s interiors have suffered not only from neglect and vandalism, but also from use by film companies.

The plantation was the home of Duncan F. Kenner (1813-1887), a sugar planter and politician. After his election to the Louisiana House of Representatives, Kenner became the president of the state constitutional convention of 1851. Kenner, the eighth largest slaveholder in his state, also served as one of Louisiana’s seven delegates to the provisional Congress of the Confederacy at Montgomery, Ala., and as a member of the new government’s House of Representatives. Returning to a plantation in ruins following the Civil War, the 52-year-old sugar planter rebuilt his estate as even larger than it had been before the war.

According to Wheeler, Shell has secured the property. Electricians from the company’s neighboring plant have checked the plantation’s wiring, set up a water supply for fire fighting in the back of the house, cut down underbrush, and documented the property. Shell representatives have also met with the state historic preservation officer, his deputy, the state archaeologist, and the director of the Foundation for Historical Louisiana. Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer Jonathan Fricker reports that Shell “is taking positive steps.” Kidd adds that “with the River Road being on the Trust’s 11 most endangered list, there’s a spotlight on what anybody does there that didn’t used to exist. That pressure alone makes me feel less fearful about the plantation’s future.”