Officials say bricks once part of stable at Magnolia Mound

By AMY WOLD
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It's hard to drag a stick across the ground at Magnolia Mound Plantation without running into another piece of history.

The latest historical discovery — of what was probably the foundation of a stable — came about two weeks ago during construction of a new building on the Nicholson Drive property.

"When they were digging for a retaining wall here, they came across some bricks," Dorinda Hilbon, director of BREC's Magnolia Mound Plantation, said last week.

Sid Gray, a historical building consultant who has worked with Magnolia Mound Plantation for many years, suggested officials call Rob Mann, southeastern regional archaeologist with LSU, to take a look.

After probing the ground for more bricks, Mann excavated a small, square pit to confirm that what they found appears to be a brick foundation. Mann said the foundation probably dates from sometime between 1830 and 1870, judging by artifacts of pottery and glass found in the digs.

On the most shallow part, there are 8 inches of top soil covering the bricks that are laid out four bricks tall by three bricks wide.

"We now think that this was a stable," Mann said. A 1881 map of the plantation supports that hypothesis because it shows a stable located where the bricks were recently found.

The 16-acre Magnolia Mound Plantation was once a 900-acre farm in the early 19th century.

A few artifacts have also surfaced including animal bones, bottle glass, ceramic, china and slate, Mann said.

"Probably roofing slate because you can still see the nail holes," Mann said. "No. 1, it indicates it was a substantial structure. It wasn't a shed."

The presence of slate also means the building was seen as important. "Slate was expensive, and that would imply that they had spent some money," Gray said.

Although preliminary investigation has identified a 10-by 15-foot site, the building was probably much larger, Mann said.

"The stable would have been a fairly large structure so some of it may have been lost," he said, pointing to the new construction going on a few yards away. "We may never know exactly what this building looked like."

Details such as what the walls were made of, how big the stable was, what it was used for and how long it stood are all uncertainties.

"That's part of the fun," Gray said. ""The discovery."

The new building will serve as a covered meeting space for visitors at the plantation. Construction, which started in April, uncovered the stable site.

"Right now, we're putting the construction on hold," said Hilbon, the plantation's director. The discovery means that plans for a sidewalk leading to the meeting building will change, she said.

In the meantime, Hilbon said, she will talk with the East Baton Rouge Parish Recreation and Park Commission to discuss hiring someone to excavate the area.

"The best-case scenario is we would excavate the entire site," Mann said. However, he said, archaeology is a money- and time-intensive science, both of which are usually in short supply.

Mann said he probably will do limited sampling of the site to identify areas where any future attention should be focused.