Sixth-graders look on as members of the LSU Department of Archaeology search for relics during a dig at Port Hudson Commemorative Area Wednesday.

Dig may verify site of civil war house

By STEVE CULPEPPER
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PORT HUDSON — For 48 days, ragged, hungry, desperate men here on Commissary Hill fended off hordes of invading Yankees, dodged bullets and shells, and died.

That was 127 years ago and the moans of the wounded and prayers of the dying could be heard throughout this left flank of the battlefield, site of the 48-day siege of Port Hudson.

Last week there were different sounds coming from Commissary Hill.

"That's neat," Sarah Moreland said.

"That's awesome," Erika Waguespack said.

"That's cool," Sarah said.

"It's awesome," Erika said.

"I know," Sarah said.

Sarah and Erika were part of a group of elementary students from Chapel Trafton School, one of many schools which sent children on a field trip out into these woods to see the workings of real archeologists.

LSU Geography and Anthropology Department's Mary Manhein, Ann Whitmer and John Mitchem, along with student helpers, are conducting a preliminary investigation of a suspected house site on Commissary Hill, believed to be the headquarters of Col. I.G.W. Steadman, commander of the 1st Alabama Infantry, which manned this left flank of the Confederate stronghold. The work is done under a contract with the Office of State Parks, which runs the Port Hudson Commemorative Area that encompasses this steep hill.

Manhein, who is supervising the work, said the state hopes to prove for sure that it is a house site, although she said there is strong proof that it is, and to determine the extent of the site.

"The park would like to be able to demonstrate to visitors that this was a house and that this is what it looked like and that it might well have been one of the ones used during the Civil War."

What's left of the house site is scattered piles of brick and a large cistern. Workers on Wednesday had carefully dug into two small areas of the site and had uncovered more brick. At one of the "one-by-ones," a one-meter by one-meter square excavation, workers uncovered only random bits of brick, a shard of glass and a fragment of china. At another one, mortared brick was uncovered, indicating to Manhein that the area had perhaps been the site of a brick chimney or kitchen foundation.

The house belonged to William Rist, who was dispossessed of it by the Confederate troops who needed to control the area to prepare for the Union assault.

"The house was part of what we think of as the town," Manhein said.

"It was just a typical little port town. There was a sawmill and a railroad running through it. And saloons. It was a bawdy little town, that's how it's described. It was a wonderful..."
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little town. I would love to have lived there.”

“The battle itself destroyed nearly all of the buildings. The cause of destruction of the Rist-Steadman house is not clear.

“This is a major area that had to be defended,” Whitmer said. “Commissary Hill was almost like a complex. That’s where they had their grain stores. The houses behind Commissary Hill, but not far behind, are part of the Commissary Hill complex. It was an area of field hospitals.”

Whitmer said the small excavations may be enlarged. “If it looks like we’ve found something of interest, we’ll open a larger unit next to that. Our motive is not to find out everything we can about this house, but to see if it warrants further archaelogical work and to see if this could be worked into the tour” of the commemorative area.

Deborah Woodiel, chief of interpretive services for the Office of State Parks, said a special event at the commemorative area is arranged for school children every year.

“This year we combined the special event and the archaeology we’d planned for this outlying area,” she said.

The kids didn’t mind a bit. After all, they weren’t in a classroom.

“Right now in social studies we’re studying the Middle Ages, so this really doesn’t have anything to do with it,” 11-year-old Rachel Smitherman said. “But it’s cool.”

Peggy Haynes, 11, said she likes “watching them dig up stuff.”

“It’d be fun to find things but not to dig for them,” Rachel said.

Gaggles of sixth-graders crowded up against the excavation sites, oozing superlatives.

“Look how neat, y’all,” one would say. “Neat,” said another. “Wierd,” another. The field trip inspired one word more than any other, though, and that word was “awesome.”

“This is awesome.” “Totally awesome.” “It’s really awesome.”

Awesome.”