Archaeological dig fascinates students

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PORT HUDSON — Area students this week are getting a first-hand view of the painstaking detective work that goes into attempts to fill in missing details of the 1863 siege at the Civil War battlefield here.

Armed with notebooks, pens and pencils, pocket cameras and an occasional camcorder, the army of youngsters is assaulting the earthworks to learn more about the 48-day clash between Union and Confederate forces over control of the Mississippi River.

The charge began Monday morning and will continue through Wednesday, according to Greg Potts, Port Hudson State Commemorative Area manager. About 1,000 schoolchildren will visit during the three days.

The students conclude their field trip by watching archaeologists at work, trying to find clues about the significance of a home that once stood on the battlefield.

Led by LSU anthropologist Mary Manhein, a team of scientists is trying to determine if the home served as the headquarters of Col. I.G.W. Steedman (pronounced, and sometimes written as, Steadman).

Steedman commanded the left wing of the Confederate defenses.

"We know the house was here before the war," Manhein said between lectures to the first two groups Monday.

The townspeople of Port Hudson left the area when the siege began shaping up, she said, and the home is believed to have been the headquarters of Gen. W.N.R. Beall before he moved over to command the center of the Confederate lines.

"It was far enough behind the lines not to have been destroyed early on," Manhein said of the house.

"It's almost a fact that this was Beall's headquarters," added Potts, "but we're not sure if it was Steedman's."

A large bricked cistern was the only visible reminder that a home once stood on the site until Manhein's team uncovered part of a brick wall during a "dig" last year.

Dense woods now cover the area, and a deep ravine is encroaching on the site.

"Much of the house may have sloughed off into the ravine," Manhein said.

Digging in 1-meter-square plots, at 10-centimeter depth intervals, she and assistants Ann Whitmer, Laurie Farnsworth, Shane Fowler, Julie Bryant and Claudia Golden had uncovered a peculiar brick-and-mortar formation for the students' viewing Monday.

"We really don't know what it is yet," said Manhein, listing some possibilities — doorsteps, part of a fireplace or some other foundation.

Students watched as the LSU experts used trowels, whisk brooms and paint brushes to carefully move thin layers of dirt from around tree roots and broken bricks. Each pile of dirt was taken to a sifting screen, where small artifacts were recovered.

In addition to the brickwork, the archaeologists have found various kinds of nails, animal bones, charcoal, pieces of glass bottles and dishes, uniform buttons, bullets and other artifacts.

Union troops occupied the site after the siege was lifted, a fact that complicates the research. By carefully documenting the location of the discoveries, the archaeologists hope to find evidence pointing to the house's use while Confederate troops held the area.

"We're not sure if it was Steedman's," Potts said.

"They've found more bottleware here than at other sites. Maybe it was a kitchen, but the (Union) occupation messed it up," Potts said.

If the excavations prove that the home played a major part in the battle, the Office of State Parks, which is funding the dig, may decide to extend a park trail to the site, Potts said.

While many of the visiting students were puffing and puffing after the hike between the dig and the park's museum, Bellingrath Hills Elementary fifth-grader Jenny Teed wasn't tired at all.

"I liked it," she said. "I could have gone a lot farther."

Classmate Trent LeBaron was fascinated by the dig, but he's not ready to become an archaeologist.

"Not really ... You have to dig up a lot of dirt," he said.