Elmwood paints picture of past

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The scientist who led a study of Elmwood Plantation last year says the site is so important it should become an archaeological park.

"I think Elmwood is to Jefferson Parish what Williamsburg is to Virginia," Dr. R. Christopher Goodwin said.

"What we have learned there the last six months has changed history," he said.

He said the study of the five-acre site, all that remains of a plantation once stretching from the Mississippi River to Lake Pontchartrain, shows that much of Elmwood's history is myth.

Goodwin, a former research fellow with the Smithsonian Institution, said Elmwood has archaeological qualities the Smithsonian would consider nationally important.

Goodwin's research, including the investigation of 19 excavations, was commissioned by the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism.

The work was financed by a $10,000 federal grant matched by contributions from the Jefferson Historical Society and the Elmwood owners.

A 268-page report of the work by Goodwin, Jill-Karen Yakubik and Cyd Heymann Goodwin was completed in January.

Goodwin said the state will publish a 40-page monograph on the study later this year. It will be available to residents at no cost.

In January, the plantation's owners said they wanted to demolish the plantation house and build twin condominium towers.

But preservationists launched a campaign to buy the site and restore the house.

The owners have put off redevelopment indefinitely.

Goodwin said the most significant finds include:

- A residence existed on the plantation since the 1760s and was destroyed in a 1784 hurricane. The residence, or great house, associated with colonial New Orleans businessman Vicente Lafreniere and gutted by fire in 1784, was built in 1762 and was not among the oldest structures in the Mississippi Valley.

- The owners have put off redevelopment indefinitely.

- The kitchen has remained intact and almost unchanged from domestic meat, "Goodwin said. The kitchen yielded evidence about the Fortier family diet, the plantation livestock and the use of earthen flooring similar to that found in adobe homes of the Southwest.

"We know the plantation had a good study of the New Orleans area plantation in transition from French colonialism to territorial America and Louisiana statehood," Goodwin said.

Goodwin said Elmwood meets all the criteria for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. He said it is an important archaeological and historical site because of its setting in the cultural and economic development of the Louisiana Territory.

He said the site has remained intact and almost unchanged from its original development and the research potential for investigating the plantation's part in the history of the area appears boundless.

"We could do archaeological digs there the next 10 years and not run out of work," he said.

Last year's digs began with a magnetometer study of the western edge of the site, where 19th-century maps showed several buildings were located, he said.

A trench was dug along a north-south line across points where the kitchen yielded evidence about the Fortier family diet, the plantation livestock and the use of earthen flooring similar to that found in adobe homes of the Southwest.

"We know the plantation had many more sheep than most Southern plantations where pigs and cattle provided the main source of meat," Goodwin said.

Goodwin said Elmwood provides a good study of the New Orleans area plantation in transition from French colonialism to territorial America and Louisiana statehood.