Future golf course development reveals remnants of past homes

By MIKE DUNNE
Advocate staff writer

Carl Kuttruff carefully sliced away small slivers of different colored soils from around 150-year-old bricks.

Not far away, Tom Wells used a trowel to carefully remove dark brown mud from what appeared to be a sheet of metal and perhaps a cypress shingle.

Between them, bricks that once were part of the north hearth of a home were uncovered. Placed by the find was a “menu board” ready for photographing. The board read:

16-EBR-35
Overseer House
30 CMBS
9-22-98

The board will tell future researchers that the hearth in the photo was found 30 centimeters below the surface (CMBS) on Sept. 22, 1998.

The 16 signifies Louisiana and EBR-35 identifies the site.

Kuttruff, Wells and others are cataloging

See REMNANTS, Page 2B

Archaeologists excavate the foundation and site of the overseer’s house on the Woodstock Plantation, part of which will become the University Club development off Nicholson Drive at Bayou Manchac. The house was built before the Civil War and burned to the ground in the 1970s.
Archaeologist Carl Kuttruff excavates dirt bit by bit while working an archaeological site on the former Woodstock Plantation, which is being developed into a golf and residential development called University Club. In the background, Dennis Jones, left, and Tom Wells, right, also dig. The plantation's overseer house was located on the site. Built in the 1840s or 1850s, the house burned down in the 1970s. The site must be investigated and catalogued before University Club finishes developing it.

Remnants

Remnants of the overseer's house on the old Woodstock Plantation, the most productive sugar plantation in the area before the Civil War, according to Dennis Jones. Jones is an archaeologist and partner in Surveys Unlimited Research Associates. The dig is being done on the site of the University Club, a golf and residential development on Nicholson Drive at Bayou Manchac.

The site of the overseer's house soon will become part of the front yards of some lots at the golf development. The archaeological work is required by the development's wetlands permit.

Law requires that archaeological reviews be done for work planned in wetland areas or for state and federally funded projects. Jones, his partner Malcolm Shuman and LSU architecture Professor Michael Pitts believe the dig's most important finds are architectural details about French Creole homes.

"We are finding a lot about how these types of buildings were constructed," Pitts said. "Jones picked up a piece of brick and it crumbled in his hands. The bricks were handmade, probably at the river's edge about a half-mile away, he said. Pitts said many of the bricks are different sizes, showing yesterday's builders "were not so neat as we are today," when uniformity is expected.

The foundations for the home, which sat on columns anywhere from about 4 feet to 6 feet high, were dug and bricks were layered in wide rectangles then smaller and smaller rectangles to help spread the weight the columns would hold. Clay walls, or walls of brick, helped connect and reinforce many of the columns.

"There are still a few like this still standing and you can't go digging up the foundations on them," Jones said.

The house, built somewhere around 1840 or 1850, burned down to the ground in the 1970s, Jones said.

"So we have found artifacts from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century."

Some of the items found include a silver-plated plate, pottery and glass, bone handles for knives and other cutlery, and ceramic marbles once used by children.

The area under the house was often used for work and some blacksmith tools have been found, Jones said.

Wells, who was uncovering the metal sheet and cypress shingle, said when the house burned down, everything landed in a heap.

"It's like we took a big layer cake and smashed it and then we are trying to recreate the layer cake," he said of the 3-inch layer of debris from the fire.

The bigger plantation house, built on the river, was claimed by the Mississippi River years ago, Jones said.

The wetlands permit required University Club Development to commission an archaeological survey.

"We knew there was a house here" because it had been identified back in 1976 when the area was being considered for a new airport, Jones said.

That's when the site picked up the "16-EBR-35" number. Also, historical maps created by the Mississippi River Commission showed the locations of several buildings on the parcel.

The next step, once a site is found, is a test excavation to determine if the site has significance.

The third step, if required, is for the site to be investigated and the information catalogued in a report that can be used years from now when the overseer's site is a sculptured front lawn.

The archaeologists are finishing that third step. They also excavated the sites of the old slave cabins — later homes for workers — that lie under one of the golf course fairways.

Eventually, their work will be compiled into a report and filed with the state archaeology office.

Pitts also will file a report for the architecture archives maintained by the Library of Congress.

The reports may help avoid "questions that might be a mystery a century from now unless there is some documentation," Pitts said.

Also, students in both architecture and archaeology have been visiting the site just a few miles south of LSU, Jones and Pitts said.

Sinclair Kouns Jr., one of the partners in the development, said the partnership was surprised to find out about the site's archaeological history.

The work will cost the partnership $80,000 to $100,000, Shuman said.

Jones and Shuman said University Club has been very supportive.