Grave sites may be dug up

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Loreauville will host a public meeting on the New Acadia Project at 2 p.m. Saturday to discuss the proposed excavation of possible burials in a cemetery in Iberia Parish. The meeting will take place in the gym of Loreauville High School, 210 Railroad Ave.

The NAP is a multidisciplinary research effort designed to locate, identify and investigate the 18th-century homesteads and unmarked grave sites of Acadian exiles in present-day Iberia and St. Martin parishes.

Mark Rees, associate professor of anthropology at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, is the lead man with the NAP. The Daily Advertiser caught up with Rees and asked him a couple of questions about the NAP game plan and the purpose of the public meeting.

TDA: Where would the excavation take place — property of Amand Broussard or the Berard Cemetery?

Rees: The field school excavations will take place at two to three sites along the Bayou Teche in Iberia Parish during late December and early January. One of these will be an abandoned family cemetery on private property. The other site will be selected from several sites now known to have artifacts that date from the 18th century, including the Amand

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Broussard home site.

In looking for the 1765 colony of New Acadia, we are investigating homesteads with artifacts dating from the 18th century, as well as abandoned family graveyards in the area that may have unmarked burials dating from the eighteenth century. The history of land ownership and genealogies have been helpful in determining where to focus the archaeological fieldwork.

According to Rees, it appears the state has approved the application and will issue a permit for the excavation and analysis of human remains this winter.

TDA: What department in particular approves such things? Did you apply? What is the process?

Rees: We applied in writing for a State Unmarked Burial Permit and are waiting to receive the official permit, although we have been informed our request is likely to be approved. The permit would allow us to excavate and study human remains from the area in question for a period of one year. Excavation of human remains is illegal without a permit. Permits are issued by the Unmarked Human Burial Sites Board. The Division of Archaeology is responsible for protecting and preserving abandoned cemeteries, unmarked graves, and human remains under the Unmarked Human Burial Sites Preservation Act (R.S. 8:671-681) and the Louisiana Historic Cemetery Preservation Act (R.S. 25:931-943).

The NAP invites public comment and consultation in order to address any possible concerns of descendants and culturally-affiliated groups.

TDA: If an individual/group may oppose the excavation, how would you address it if it's personal property issues? Religious?

Rees: If an individual or group opposes excavation, we would like to find this out and know why, which is one of the reasons for a public meeting. If there are religious or other concerns, we would like to address these. If the buried disturbances turn out to be human remains, we might conduct analyses in the field ("in situ") and not remove the remains.

The disinterment of human skeletal remains may be warranted in the event that (1) the condition of skeletal elements permits successful removal with minimal damage; (2) additional data can be obtained that are not available from in situ analysis; (3) the human remains and associated artifacts are consistent with an interment possibly dating from the 18th century.

Any human remains that might be removed will be reburied in the cemetery after the analysis is complete.