The deep-down findings aren’t glamorous — a few chicken bones and bits of bottles. But after a few days of digging through the rubble of the old Kornmeyer’s Furniture Co. store on the corner of St. Ferdinand and America streets, archaeologists still expect to be able to piece together a tiny mosaic of middle-class life in the last century.

Late last week, LSU’s southeast regional archaeologist, Susan Wurtzburg — and volunteers Laurie Wilkie Farnsworth and Thurston Hahn — began digging through the accumulated ages of trash and debris beneath the 1923 furniture showroom. Wurtzburg and the others were given through Sunday to do their work, because earthmovers were scheduled to come in Monday and begin clearing the debris to make room for an Allright Parking lot.

Unfortunately, trespassers arrived before the archaeologists and dug up what they could of salvageable bottles and artifacts, Wurtzburg said.

Beneath the 1923 building — which is built on a foundation of coal cinders — are the scattered remains of older structures. Buildings of one form or another have been on the corner at least since the mid-1800s. The original Kornmeyer’s store was built on the site in 1880, an addition was added in 1892, then the entire store was torn down and replaced in 1923. Finally, an annex was constructed in 1941.
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And each time something “has added about the middle class and even the lower classes.”

A few years ago, Wurtzburg and others dug into the history of the very lowest class of society, the site of the old state penitentiary downtown.

“If archaeologists are told before the buildings are torn down, they can do a lot of research and preparation first,” she said. In this case, she said she would have “interviewed family members before coming to the site. We would have gone through old photographs, census information, documents and archival information, everything I could find.”

Wurtzburg said part of her job as regional archaeologist is “going out in the community and talking to private landowners” and persuading them to let professional archaeologists investigate historic sites, to document and preserve remains of the past before bottle hunters and scavengers destroy them.

The Kornmeyer’s site “had been totally untouched,” she said. “Then some people came and dug holes and stole bottles and took away, basically, a lot of information.”

One of the problems inherent in urban archaeology “is that everybody can see what you’re doing,” Wurtzburg said. “Most are really good and just interested in what you’re doing, but others are a problem.”

Once everything that can be found is dug up and sifted, it will all go back to LSU, where it will be cleaned and numbered, she said. Later, a report will be written.

LSU archaeology student Mike Mahady examines a ceramic fragment beneath the old Kornmeyer’s Furniture Co. store on the corner of St. Ferdinand and America streets.