Loss of La.'s past causes concern

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Bulldozers have obliterated entire ancient neighborhoods throughout Louisiana, demolishing homes and turning human bones to dust — all without opposition, archaeologists say.

No one knows how many of the state's 7,000 recorded archaeological sites or countless unrecorded sites have been accidentally or intentionally destroyed.

But urban development and growth spurred by energy exploration, waterway modification, farm expansion and highway construction have crushed the remains of centuries at an alarming rate.

"People just don't realize that Louisiana has any archaeology," said Kathleen Byrd, director of the state's Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism's archaeology division.

"It's the same throughout the South and elsewhere. You say 'archaeology' and they think only of Italy or Greece."

"They just don't realize archaeology of the Indians or the early settlers."

According to Byrd, one of the most dramatic examples of destruction occurred near the town of Jonesville.

The Great Mound, one of the highest Indian burial mounds in the South, was dynamited and bulldozed in the 1930s to make way for a new subdivision.

The mound, Byrd said, was more than eight stories high. It was built about 500 A.D. and together with about a dozen smaller mounds marked the site of an Indian village that once thrived on the spot.

An embankment 10 feet high, 10 feet wide and several miles long had been built by the Indians to protect the village. But something happened, and the village was abandoned.

"We'll never know why," said Byrd.

"It could have been disease, war or drought. But urban growth, vandals and treasure hunters have taken the evidence."

One of the problems archaeologists face in trying to save what remains of the area's heritage is that many people see sites on their property as their own private digs, the archaeologist said.

"People are afraid that if they let someone know about their find, the state will come in and restrict the use of their property," said Byrd. "That rarely happens."

Others, thinking the artifacts they find are of great value, try to keep their finds a secret.

"Most people who dig for artifacts do so for the thrill of discovery," said Nancy Hawkins, a staff archaeologist.

"Even the most avid collectors often do not make a gain."

But while stone arrowheads, bits and pieces of dishes, tools and other artifacts are of questionable value to the layman, they are priceless to archaeologists who use them to tell the story of a site.

The level within the earth where an artifact is found may determine the age of the site, Hawkins said.