A love of history led Eubanks to Louisiana

By GEORGE MORRIS
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Although he grew up in the Midwest, an intellectual sweet tooth helped lead archaeologist Tom Eubanks to Louisiana.

"I was able to attend the third World Plantation Conference in Lafayette in 1989, right after I finished the first major piece of my research in Tobago on sugar factories and sugar estates," said Eubanks, who became state archaeologist Aug. 1. Much of Eubanks' prior work involved archaeological research into sugar plantations on the Caribbean island of Tobago and in Georgia.

"I got to tour a little bit of south Louisiana and see some of the modern operating sugar estates and fell in love with the countryside," Eubanks said. "When the opportunity to apply for this position became available, it looked like a good place to come."

Appropriately enough, as Eubanks was settling into his office in the State Capitol Annex, archaeologists were digging across the river. There, remains of the Nina Plantation were being excavated so the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers could proceed with a riverbank revetment project that would cover some of the site in rock and concrete.

The Nina project, which began before Eubanks took over, is one example of the kind of work undertaken by the State Division of Archaeology, one of the less well-known branches of the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism. Eubanks and his office staff conduct virtually no field work themselves. That is reserved for three regional archaeologists located at LSU, Northeast Louisiana University and Northwestern State University.

Rather, the state archaeologist's roles include helping preserve archaeological sites and making the public more aware about Louisiana's rich history as uncovered by archaeologists.

The Historic Preservation Act of 1966 sets rules that federal agencies like the Corps of Engineers must follow to evaluate archaeological sites present at a project, prevent damaging or destroying the sites and mitigate any damage that can't be avoided.

When the revetment project threatened Nina, the state Division of Archaeology and the corps staff archaeologist came up with a plan to recover artifacts that could not be otherwise protected. The corps contracted archaeologists to research the plantation. Thousands of items like pieces of glass bottles and china, buttons and hardware were found and their exact location noted before being sent off for cleaning and study.

"In the case of Nina, only a small portion of what's left of the site is being destroyed by their activity," Eubanks said. "A larger section is still protected and will be better protected once the revetment works take place."

Similar state laws prevent the destruction of archaeological sites on state lands. Although other archaeologists do...
much of the actual research, Eubanks’ office receives much of the materials for curation.

“We tend to be more of a repository of the materials, and those materials are available for scholars for whatever reason to conduct their own follow-up research,” Eubanks said.

Archaeology, however, is not just for the researchers, Eubanks said. For several years, the Division of Archaeology has sponsored Archaeology Week to help educate the public about recent archaeological discoveries. The Archaeology Week program began under Eubanks’ predecessor, Kathleen Byrd, who is now at Northwestern State.

This year, Eubanks’ office has funding for an additional field archaeologist. Instead of another research plan to station the archaeologist at the Los Adaes State Commemorative Area in Natchitoches Parish to develop a research plan for the site. Los Adaes was a fort built in 1721 to protect Spanish territory from the French. The commemorative area is currently unstaffed.

Eubanks hopes eventually the same thing can be done at Poverty Point in West Carroll Parish. Poverty Point is the state’s most famous archaeological site. Its large, man-made mounds are thought to be about 3,500 years old.

“I think this office needs to see that archaeological information that is done as a part of state or federal requirements...gets back out to the public and does not disappear into the journals with that being the end of it,” Eubanks said.