Magnolia Mound roof really ‘hip’

By ED CULLEN

Magnolia Mound Plantation house is getting what is probably only its fifth roof in 200 years, says the Baton Rouge restoration expert overseeing the current reroofing job.

The original French Creole structure built in 1791 has averaged a new roof every eight years, says Ted Gray, a historic buildings consultant.

The Baton Rouge Recreation and Park Commission bought 14,000 cedar shingles for the job. Gray estimates the new roof will require at least 80 percent of the supply.

The roof has a swirled ridge, Gray says. The technique is common among handmade houses built before 1820. Four feet from the hip (the ridge where the roof’s planes meet), the shingles start to turn toward the ridge, eventually paralleling the ridge. A conventional, modern roof would have a ridge cap. On the Magnolia Mound roof, the shingles are woven together at the ridge.

“This is a more secure roof than the quick and dirty way we do roofs today,” Gray says. “The way it’s usually done is with little triangles that get smaller and smaller as you get close to the corner. They actually blow off in bad weather. This is a better roof.”

When it rains, gravity channels the water down the shingles’ natural grooves.

The old house, dilapidated and overgrown, was purchased by BREC in 1969. It was last refloored in 1972. The house opened to the public in 1975. The house and outbuildings are situated on 18 acres off Nicholson Drive. Magnolia Mound was a 1,054-acre (900 acres) indigo plantation.

The roofing job has been a busman’s holiday for BREC carpenters.

“I’ve never worked on a hip roof like this,” carpenter Paul Lott says. “I’ve never flared a hip like this. Just run it up, cut it off, and put a cap on it. On a roof like this, you have to cut the shingles different widths.”

Magnolia Mound looks much the way it did when it was home to owners of an indigo plantation. This drawing is from an exhibit in the visitor’s center.

Exploded view of Magnolia Mound as house looked around 1810

1. Mediterranean style, hip roof
2. French style internal chimney
3. Blades of Norman roof truss. By this time, most of the other elements of the Norman truss have been eliminated.
4. Knee-wall of old porch posts (in roof), probably from the original gallery of Magnolia Mound
5. Cove ceiling (Renaissance high-style)
6. Walls of half-timber filled with bousillage (mud and moss)
7. A Norman style core of rooms
Magnolia Mound

CONTINUED FROM 1C

“I’ve never worked on a roof this steep,” Mike Bordelon laughs. BREC carpenters and laborers have worked around the daily rain showers.

“When it starts to rain, we cover up and try to do some of the inside work,” says Gary Sides, BREC trades foreman.

The work started in early May. Workmen refelted the roof and put down 1-by-4-inch lathing strips. The lathing permits air to circulate beneath the shingles.

“If we were being strictly accurate, we’d use cypress shingles” instead of western red cedar, says Gwen Edwards, director of Magnolia Mound.

“You just can’t find cypress,” says Gray, a veteran of 40 restorations in Louisiana.

Magnolia Mound’s new roof will cost under $10,000, including Gray’s fee, says Lamar Logan, BREC’s maintenance superintendent.

A structural analysis two years ago found the house in “remarkably good condition” for its bicentennial year, Edwards says.

“I like working with carpenters instead of roofers,” Gray says. “A feeling for wood is essential on a roof like this. It’s the most satisfying thing I’ve ever done.

“It’s an irregular material. You don’t have strict straight edges. It calls for more concentration.”

“Historically, the shingles were no more than six inches wide,” Edwards says.

“These are 7½ inches maximum,” Logan says.

Carpenters are using hatchets and saws to tailor shingles to the roofline.

“This roof will last 25 years if you do nothing to it,” Gray says.

Treating the roof with a fungicide and keeping the roof clear of limbs and leaves should add another 25 years.

Edwards says the house is open despite the work. Tour hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday. Magnolia Mound is closed Monday.