Magnolia Mound is renovating slave homes

By CHRISTOPHER BAUGHMAN
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"We just had to point into the distance," to a place where the plantation's 15 original slave cabins once stood but have long since vanished.

All that has changed.

Now Edwards can point to a weathered white cabin located just a few hundred yards from the mansion. It is one of four slave homes dating to 1830 that came from the River Lake Plantation near New Roads and were donated to BREC.

Movers removed the roof and porch from one of the cabins, trucked it across the Interstate 10-Mississippi River Bridge last week and placed it in the southeast corner of the Magnolia Mound grounds. Workers also have taken apart the three other cabins to move them. Edwards said she hopes to have enough material from them to reassemble two of the cabins.

The workers measured and photographed the buildings so they can be reassembled as accurately as possible, Edwards said.

"They're very rare," Edwards said. "In Magnolia Mound's development, it's one of the most exciting things we've had to work with."

Sid Gray, a historic building consultant, came across the buildings while working at River Lake Plantation, Edwards said.

Nobody had noticed them for years because trees and brush grew over them, even though they stood only 30 feet from a nearby lane.

Much of the wood has rotted, and the cabins will require extensive renovations. But despite the neglect, the slave quarters have lasted for 160 years because of how they were built, Edwards said.

"They're put together with peg construction like Magnolia Mound," Edwards said. "And they're made from heart of cypress (wood), which you can't even find now."

Edwards said she needs about $120,000 to renovate the cabins. She's applied for a federal grant and will learn in August if the government will award the money for the project.

In the meantime, a racially integrated board will decide how best to portray slave life on the plantation for an exhibit at Magnolia Mound, Edwards said.

That is not an easy assignment. Some people would just as soon forget slavery ever existed, Edwards said, while others hunger for knowledge about their ancestors' lives.

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