Archaeologists focus on Oak Alley

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Archaeology buffs can search for some history at Oak Alley Plantation near Vacherie during the next week in a hands-on excavation planned in observance of Louisiana Archaeology Week.

Archaeologist Elizabeth Boggess of Archaeologists Unlimited of Natchez, Miss., will lead the excavation beginning with a lecture at 2 p.m. Sunday on recent archaeological discoveries at the plantation.

Boggess has been directing sporadic research at the plantation for the past two years under the sponsorship of the Oak Alley Foundation, the National Parks Service, Louisiana Preservation Alliance and the non-profit Archaeologists Unlimited.

“We just barely scratched the surface,” Boggess said. “We are having to rethink plantation economy, plantation organization, plantation lifestyle.”

Oak Alley Plantation was built between 1837 and 1839 by Jacques Telesphore Roman for his new bride, said Shelby Mayhew, marketing director for the plantation.

Located on La. 18 about 3½ miles west of Vacherie, the magnificent Greek Revival structure is graced by an alley of 28 live oaks believed planted by a French settler in the early 1700s, Mayhew said.

In 1925, the home was purchased by the Stewart family, whose descendants serve on the board of trustees of Oak Alley Foundation or work at the National Historic landmark.

Historians and archaeologists recently learned that “many of the great houses of the River Road functioned almost as summer houses” and that the owners and their families usually spent the winters at city residences, she said.

Archaeologists also have been trying to learn how all the people on the plantation functioned “almost as independent communities,” Boggess said.

“We can definitely take some lessons on how they lived and interacted with the environment . . . Hopefully, we learn some of the mistakes our ancestors made and we won’t make the same ones.”

Boggess has been trying to determine the exact location of three outbuildings at the plantation believed to be garconnieres, or bachelor homes, or offices.

Photographs taken before the turn of the century indicate that the outbuildings were located between the great house and the Mississippi River, she said.

“The past is a non-renewable resource. Once you tear it up, it’s gone,” Boggess said, adding that her organization is trying to get children involved because “it does seem to help people understand where they came from.”

School groups are invited to take part in the archaeological dig from Monday to Wednesday, according to an Oak Alley Plantation press release. Reservations are required.

The general public is invited, with no reservation requirements, from Sept. 27 to Sept. 29.

The entrance fee is $1.50 for children ages 6 to 12, $3 for children ages 13 to 18, and $6 for adults. Group rates are available for groups of 25 or more.

For more information or to make reservations, call 265-2151.