inding a lost key may feel good, but imagine how retired Mailie engineer Roquey Jobes reacted when he found one that was about 200 years old and probably belonged to one of his ancestors.

Jobes, 60, found the key while volunteering in an archaeological exploration of the 18th century Ilince settlement at Bayou Des Familles in Jean Lafitte National Park, near New Orleans.

Members of the Delta Chapter of the Louisiana Archaeological Society, led by Jefferson Parish historian Betsy Swanson and archaeologists from Coastal Investments Inc. of Baton Rouge, are winding up a two-year exploration of the village.

About 57 families were brought there from the Spanish-owned Canary Islands in 1778. They were soldier-settlers, Swanson said, forming one of four villages meant to guard the way toward New Orleans, then under Spanish rule.

The $10,000,000 archaeological project was financed by the parish and private foundations and individuals.

A friend of Jobes' knew of his interest in Ilince history and of the archaeological project, and invited him to help.

Archaeologists and volunteers were working last January on the site believed to be the home of Francisco and Maria Sanchez, Jobes' great-great-great-grandparents, when they found signs of metal in the ground.

"We did some shovel testing and found a number of pieces of metal," Jobes said. "This happened to be at the root of a tree and was kind of hard to get out."

What he found was an iron key, about 3/2 inches long and orange with corrosion.

It was, in fact, in very good condition, said archaeologist Thurston Hahn of Coastal Environments. "The thing that preserved it more than anything else was that it was underground and remained wet." Conditions that kept oxygen to a minimum.

Archaeological Society member Mal Theriot of Metaire has been preserving it through electrolysis. Theriot has helped preserve other metal items found in the project as well, including square nails, hoe blades, buckles and buttons.

Finding the key was a thrill, Jobes said.

"You get a lump in your throat. To go out there and say, 'Hey, my ancestors were here . . . That's the enjoyment.'"

In the quiet of the forest, sitting through handfuls of black earth, "you feel like you were there," society vice president Maureen Downey said.

"You feel like you're in people's houses."

10 to the casual observer, it's not easy to see a village among oak trees, palmetto fronds and wild grape vines, but to professionals and archaeology enthusiasts, the gentle mounds that were once foundations of houses and narrow ditches that defined and drained the Spanish Islanders' farms are readily apparent.

The village extended well north of the levee. It clung to the bayou, once the upper end of Bayou Barataria, which runs through the John Lafitte Park, and was named for the Spanish families who tried to live there.

Those in Barataria had an extraordinary tough time, hit by hurricanes and floods annually, she said. In five years, half left the settlement; the last survivor to stay, Maria Olivasre, died in 1807.

It was from records of her life and property that Swanson was able to piece together the location of the farm of Jobes' ancestors.

Pottery and ceramic shards, glass, bricks and metal objects have been unearthed in the project and will be displayed by the park.

"It's important because it is a whole community," said archeologist Charles Pearson, the project's principal investigator. Because of the briefness of its existence, "we can (directly) equate locations and people."

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