Old cemetery discovered, may halt work

By The Associated Press

HOUMA — Perhaps the oldest black cemetery in Terrebonne Parish, long hidden by fields of sugar cane, has put a snag in local government development plans.

New construction in the area made visible again the cemetery of more than 100 graves, occupied mostly by slaves who worked at Southdown Plantation about 150 years ago.

"Before this development, nobody knew it was there," said the Rev. Leroy Banks Jr., pastor of the New Zion Baptist Church. "Now everyone can see it."

Some were aware of the cemetery's existence. While many of the headstones are unmarked or date back to the early 1900s, more than a dozen date from just the past 20 years.

"My grandfather is buried there," said Southern Bibbins, deacon and treasurer of the Greater New Salem Baptist Church.

The church hired lawyer Darryl Christen in an effort to ensure the graveyard is at least protected and perhaps beautified.

"We want them to treat the situation with dignity, the grounds be maintained in a respectable manner," Christen told Parish President Bobby Bergeron during a meeting this week.

Wildflowers grow around broken headstones Tuesday at Southdown Cemetery in Houma. The cemetery is near the site for the new Terrebonne Parish Library.

Surrounding the graveyard are the new Houma-Terrebonne Civic Center and the Allied Health and Continuing Education complex, which is under construction.

Within the next year, construction of the new main Terrebonne Parish Library and a new Houma Fire Department building is expected to begin nearby as well.

"It's really in a bad place," Banks said. "What are they going to do? You can't move them. That's a sacred place."