Old sugar mill site excavated
By MIKE MULHERN

The mere mention of archaeologists roaming about causes most Felicians to shudder and think that another "Tunica Treasure" debacle is about to begin.

The "treasure," a collection of Indian artifacts, has been the subject of contested ownership and a battle in the courts for many years.

Archaeologists are now back in the Felicianas, but this time they are excavating at antebellum plantation sites rather than at abandoned Indian villages.

In December, two archaeologists dug test holes around the ruins of an 1850 sugar mill located on Gulf States Utilities Co. property at River Bend, three miles south of St. Francisville.

Involved in the project were Malcolm Shuman, a doctor of cultural anthropology who is the executive director of the Louisiana Naval Memorial Commission, and Charles E. Orser, also a doctor of anthropology, who is an assistant professor of geography and anthropology at LSU. The report on their investigation was completed recently.

"We were hired by GSU to conduct an archaeological survey at this site because the company wanted to determine if it was deserving to be included on the National Register of Historic Places," Shuman said.

"Conducting an archaeological dig is a lot like exploratory surgery," he said. "You never know what might be there until you actually go out and do an excavation.

In this instance, we found very little. We also concluded that the structure was not that much out of the ordinary to be on the National Register."

The plantation owner was not a successful sugar planter, nor is the site the best-preserved antebellum sugar mill in the area, according to the report. Despite these conclusions, GSU plans to preserve the site.

Artifacts uncovered during the shovel-testing included laid brick and evidence of subsurface brick walls, a machine-cut square nail manufactured sometime after 1830, a stopper-type bottle neck made between 1845 and 1870 and a fragment of flat glass.

The mill site itself is an L-shaped brick ruin 17½ feet long and 7½ feet wide, with two arched openings. This sugar mill made use of steam-powered cylindrical rollers to extract juice from the stalk so that it could be heated until it crystallized. It was in operation from 1850 until 1862. It was located on the grounds of Magnolia Plantation and was owned by William Johnston Fort, who resided in the Cataula Plantation Home and held more than 200 slaves.

"Part of the archaeological work would be to locate these building sites and find out what remains," Orser said. "We may find rubble, brick foundations or actual artifacts. Once this is done, a nature trail to each location could be mapped out, and display cases featuring maps, diagrams and salvaged artifacts could be installed.

"Visitors would be able to take a self-guided tour of this outdoor museum and experience the full range of what a plantation was all about," he said. "Such an exhibit would be a first for Louisiana."

"We have received a grant from the state Division of Archaeology to conduct the initial survey," Orser said. "Right now I am trying to raise funds to continue the work. To keep the project going we will need a funding base to draw upon.

"I would encourage any businesses or private individuals interested in providing funding for this worthy project to call me at my office at LSU," he said. "My phone number is 388-6132."