‘Pieces of the past’ unearthed

UL Lafayette team explores cluster of six Indian mounds

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LAFAYETTE — If clues from the past are any indication, Louisiana has been the “Sportsman’s Paradise” for years, like 1,000 of them.

Fourteen UL anthropology students have unearthed artifacts from a cluster of six Indian mounds at the Bayou Portage site in rural St. Martin Parish. The archeological dig demonstrates Acadiana has always been a haven for hunting and fishing, according to their teacher.

UL professor Mark Rees said Monday that “pieces of the past” collected at the site — which has been associated with the early Plaquemine culture of the Mississippian period from 1000 AD to 1700 AD — include deer and fish bones, an arrowhead and shards of pottery.

Rees said from the evidence gathered at the site, an ancestral tribe to the Chitimacha Indians who once populated the area found so much natural bounty they didn’t need to farm.

“We don’t know for sure yet, but they likely lived as hunters and gatherers,” Rees said.

Charles McGimsey, regional archaeologist with the UL Department of Sociology and Anthropology, said the lack of agricultural evidence at the site, coupled with findings of other sites in this area specific to the period, bolster the hunting and gathering theory.

“This is such a rich environment, you didn’t have to become a farmer to survive,” McGimsey said.

“There may have been no incentive to farm here.”

Rees said the site, which rests on private land, has been scarred from erosion, looting and four-wheeler riding. The area, Rees said, will be restored and partially enclosed in barbed wire as part of the undertaking.

The current project, Rees said, will build on the excavation work done at the site since it was discovered in 1974, while giving UL students practical experience in the field.

“We’re discovering the whole past of a people,” said student Renee Thomas. “Where they lived, how they lived and their technology. What we’re basically doing is digging through their trash.”

Rees said the main mound, which measures 13 feet high, could have been built in about 30 years or less by the Indians. Tools used would have likely been sharp sticks for shovels and baskets woven from area vegetation for carting soil from “borrow” areas.

With names like Squirrel Trap, Broken Arrow and Black Crow, Rees said the mounds could have served a number of purposes, including mortuary temples or residences for the elite. Rees said they almost certainly weren’t burial sites, however, based on data consistent with the period and lack of human bones found.