Plantation history emerges as Angola digs yield clues

By JAMES MINTON

Engineers will cover the two sites under tons of earth to strengthen the prison's levee system, which was nearly swamped by the Mississippi River's spring flood of 1997. Most of the 18,000-acre prison farm lies in the river's flood plain, and its levees were built in fits and starts from before the Civil War until the 1990s. Federal funds were not allocated for the prison's levees until after the 1997 flood emergency, however.

"The Corps of Engineers is building up the levee to where it subsided. We're bringing it up to the standards of other Corps of Engineers levees," said Kenneth Ashworth, an archaeologist for the corps' New Orleans district office.

The corps hired Coastal Environments Inc. of Baton Rouge for the archaeological study required...
on any federally funded construction project, and the company investigated 31 archaeological sites, most of them inside the levee system.

Coastal Environments also was given the contract to recover artifacts from the two sites eventually chosen because of their eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

CEI Project Manager Stephanie Perrault said the sites, which run parallel to the levee near the area of the prison known as Monkey Island, are separated by a road perpendicular to the levee that shows up on historic maps and is still in use today.

Maps from before the Civil War show the plantation house and two rows of slave quarters on one side of the road. After the war, the big house shows up on the same side on the road, but the rows of small houses — presumably for tenant farmers — have moved down the levee and across the intersecting road.

Last week, Perrault showed a group of visitors, including state Culture, Tourism and Recreation Department Secretary Phillip Jones, the remains of pillars, chimneys, cisterns, floors and a spring house, all made of brick.

"A raised house was here in the 1850s," Perrault said.

She said Maj. Samuel L. James bought the house, Angola plantation and several nearby plantations in 1880.

James was an entrepreneur who turned brutal punishment into handsome profits for himself between 1869 and his death in 1894 by leasing convicts from the state for farm work and levee construction.

Louisiana was like some other Southern states that turned to a convict leasing system as an economy measure after the Civil War.

James' son continued leasing convicts until the state bought Angola and other plantations in 1901.

The plantation home stood until some time in the 1920s or perhaps 1930s.

Perrault said the sites are considered significant because they reflect the evolution of the Louisiana penal system and represent more than 100 years of continuous plantation occupation from the 1820s to the early 20th century.

In addition to the outline of the plantation house, the excavations revealed the brick floor of a detached structure, a total of 10 cisterns, a blacksmith's shop that yielded many artifacts, a spring house and other structures.

Between the rows of slave cabins, archaeologists found two dark soil stains.

"This evidently was some sort of pathway," Perrault said, showing where a cross-section of the path is being excavated in search of artifacts.

Using trowels and other small tools, the CEI employees lift small scoops of dirt into buckets, which are logged and taken to a sifting screen to search for small artifacts.

"We'll look for plant particles and small bones to see what the people ate and for comparisons between what was eaten at the big house and the slave quarters," Perrault said.

Ashworth said CEI will analyze all of the artifacts found in the digs and write a draft report on its findings. After reviews by the Corps of Engineers and the state Division of Archaeology, the company will write a final report.

The Division of Archaeology, which comes under the Department of Culture, Tourism and Recreation, annually reviews 2,000 to 3,000 plans for archaeological studies in connection with highway, levee and other construction projects, State Archaeologist Tom Eubanks said.

The artifacts eventually will be housed in a climate-controlled warehouse that is open to researchers, Eubanks said.

The state office also will work with the Louisiana State Penitentiary Museum to develop a display related to the excavations, he said.

Sarah Terlouw scrapes away dirt in the yard area between the remains of two slave cabins at the Angola Plantation site, exposing small artifacts and what she said appeared to be cow bones.