Survey begins to decide placement of slave cabins

By JAMES MINTON
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ST. FRANCISVILLE — Archaeologist George Castille glanced down at the dial on the magnetometer strapped to his chest.

"A 20-gamma hit," he noted. "There's a pretty big piece of metal down there."

Castille and several others have been surveying the area behind Oakley House, the 189-year-old plantation home where naturalist John James Audubon briefly lived, to be sure no cultural remains will be disturbed when two donated slave cabins are moved there in April. The Oakley House is located at the Audubon State Commemorative Area.

The cabins, donated by retired Gen. Robert H. Barrow, a former U.S. Marine Corps commandant, are now on Barrow's Rosalee Plantation and will be featured as part of a project to interpret the life of a working plantation.

David Floyd, commemorative area director, said extensive research on Oakley's slave graveyard will be used to mark the graves and list on a commemorative plaque the names of the slaves and former slaves known to be buried there.

The buildings "won't be just a couple of cutesy cabins" in a display that attempts to whitewash the era of slavery or perpetuate an Uncle Remus-type myth, Floyd said. The project, which has the support of Southern University's history department, "will commemorate the slaves' accomplishments and help visitors understand their toils and tribulations," he said.

LSU's Rural Life Museum was in the forefront of efforts to interpret slavery in a museum setting, Floyd said, but its displays cover a broad range of plantations. The state commemorative area's exhibits will focus specifically on the conditions of slaves and, later, sharecroppers at Oakley.

"The treatment of slaves varied from plantation to plantation," Floyd noted. A large volume of documentation on Oakley from 1804 to 1850 is available to give the Office of State Parks an accurate picture of slavery as it existed on one plantation.

"But the story won't be told just in cut-and-dried fashion," Floyd said. "There will be a commemorative aspect to it."

One of the 15-foot by 15-foot cabins, built in the single-pen Upland South style, will be furnished according to a typical inventory reconstructed from the plantation's records. The other will house displays of documents relating to the treatment of slaves, which Floyd said was above the norm at Oakley.

State workers clearing a portion of the 100-acre tract the state purchased in...
1947 found the graveyard, but it was only documented and then left alone, Floyd said. Lucy Matthel's, a descendant of the Pirrie family that hired Audubon as a tutor and the last person to use the home as a residence, told state parks officials that the last burial in the cemetery was that of William Gardner, "who was literally a gardener on the plantation," Floyd said.

Oral histories obtained since the state bought the property and research in the archives of Grace Episcopal Church are being used to prepare the plaque for the cemetery. The graves will be marked, although not by specific names, and the fence will be rebuilt.

Most of the plantation’s outbuildings were torn down years ago, a fact that Floyd and other historians regret. But the donated cabins have a link to Oakley, Floyd said, because Barrow is a direct descendant of Eliza Pirrie, Audubon’s pupil at Oakley in 1821.

Barrow also is donating two more cabins that will be moved to Oakley when state funds are available. One will detail the architectural features of the simple structure, and the other will be furnished to depict a typical Oakley post-Civil War sharecropper’s residence.

When the survey was conducted two weeks ago, the area behind the house was divided into 3-meter square grids, and Castille took magnetometer readings at each measured interval. LSU anthropology major Laura McMurray recorded the data. The magnetometer, "a fancy metal detector" as Castille described it, allows the archaeologists to map magnetic variations which could indicate the outbuildings’ locations.

Pieces of metal, burned areas, bricks and areas where the soil was disturbed — such as graves or privies — can be detected as much as 2 feet underground, Castille said. When the map is finished, Oakley will have pinpoint locations of magnetic sources for later investigation.

Castille and his crew already had a good idea of what the magnetometer would reveal because LSU researchers probed the same area and did some surface examinations in 1984, “mapping everything they saw.”

While Castille and McMurray worked with the magnetometer, LSU anthropology major Laura McMurray and archaeologist Bryan Guevin dug small holes at regular intervals on the proposed locations for the two cabins, painstakingly troweling the excavated dirt to see if he could find evidence of cultural features, such as a chimney or house pillar.

Guevin said a lane leading from the house to the area where the exhibit is planned indicates there probably were slave cabins and other outbuildings in the area, although their precise locations are unknown.

Had the shovel work turned up artifacts, the cabins would have been placed at other locations.

"We were kind of hoping they’d find something so we could have an archaeological interpretation to go with the cabins," Floyd said.