More unmarked graves found at Terrebonne plantation site

By The Associated Press

HOUMA — A plantation cemetery near the site of a proposed public library is larger than archaeologists thought, raising the prospect of construction delays.

Archaeologists joined Terrebonne Parish officials in using thermal imaging techniques to get a better underground picture of the site, then placed blue markers to indicate the newly discovered perimeter of what is known as the Southdown Cemetery.

Red markers show ground disturbances that are mostly unmarked graves, some believed to be 150 years old, parish engineer Bob Jones said.

The new boundary line protrudes onto land set aside for the $12.7 million library. Construction is expected to begin early next year, and the 70,000-square-foot main branch is scheduled to open in July 2002.

“I don’t know what happens now,” said Peter Bourgeois Jr., a library board member. “Our concern would be delay in the project.”

Earth Search Inc. of Baton Rouge conducted the thermal imaging survey.

Company President Jill-Karen Wakubik and Vice President Butch Lee told Jones there appear to be two distinct means of burial that distinguished free black people from slaves.

The free black people were buried facing Jerusalem to the east and slaves were buried facing south, Jones said.

About 110 marked graves are in Southdown Cemetery, and the oldest headstone is dated 1894.

Officials did not attempt to count the unmarked graves, which could have been misleading anyway, Jones said.

“We may be seeing some shallow graves because some people were buried on top of each other,” he said.

Church leaders and parish officials have been discussing since March how to mitigate the effect of construction on the cemetery.

The new survey is expected to prevent unpleasant surprises when excavation begins, Jones said.

“There are probably cemeteries all over this parish that are undocumented,” Jones said. “There was probably a cemetery with every plantation in Terrebonne Parish.”