GRILLWELL SPRINGS — State prison inmates will attempt this month to uncover a relic of community history that’s been long buried on a piece of state property bordering the Amite River.

If the prisoners from Dixon Correctional Institute are successful, the springs that gave the community its identity as a health spa in the 19th century will be flowing again.

No one will be happier than Dr. Jesse L. Fairchild Jr., a native of the area who has written a book on the East Baton Rouge Parish community’s history.

Now treating the mentally ill in its reincarnation as the Greenwell Springs Campus of the Eastern Louisiana Mental Health System, the state hospital on Greenwell Springs Road served tuberculosis patients during much of this century.

Before then, the springs attracted visitors from around the state and served as a focal point for community activities during two different eras, Fairchild said.

“Our hope is that we can make a small park for the families of the patients here, as well as for people from the area,” Fairchild recently told a gathering of hospital employees and state officials, including DCI Warden Jimmy LeBlanc.

LeBlanc said the prison work crews are ready to tackle the first project: clearing underbrush from around the ruins of a large spring house built at the turn of the century.

The prisoners also will dig out sand and gravel dumped into the sunken concrete floor of the spring house shortly after the state took over the property from the Louisiana Antituberculosis League in the 1920s.

Fairchild said 10 mineral springs each were encased in concrete in the house when a New Orleans syndicate attempted to Dr. Jesse L. Fairchild Jr. stands in the ruins of a spring house while holding a picture of the structure that was taken before the property became the grounds of a state tuberculosis hospital. Fairchild is promoting a project to make a small park at the site.

Ten mineral springs, each enclosed by concrete boxes, flowed in the spring house of the Greenwell Springs Water Co. shortly after the turn of the century.

The spring house built by the Greenwell Springs Water Co. about 90 years ago collected water for a bottling plant.

 Spa
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 revive interest in Greenwell Springs as a health resort shortly after the turn of the century.

The state, however, wanted to use the spring house foundation as a sewage system filter bed — an idea that didn’t work — and the springs were buried under tons of sand and gravel.

Fairchild, who served as a physician at the hospital for 20 years, later attempted on his own to rehabilitate the springs, but the task proved to be too daunting.

The ruins of the spring house would be the focal point of a park “if we can get the springs cleaned out,” he said.

Warren Taylor Price, chief executive officer of the hospital and two others in East Feliciana Parish, said the park will serve to remind residents, patients and visitors of the area’s rich and varied history.

State Rep. Donald Ray Kennard, R-Baton Rouge, said the hospital has played a major role in the Greenwell Springs-Central area’s economy for decades.

Kendall recalled that a controversy involving the facility in the mid-1970s played a part in his first successful bid for a legislative seat.

When modern drugs and treatment techniques began to cut the number of TB patients needing hospitalization, a proposal was floated to make the Greenwell Springs hospital “an arm of Angola,” for hospitalized inmates, Fairchild and Kennard said, but people in the area successfully challenged the proposal.

The New Orleans syndicate that built a large hotel on the site about 1910 never could make the venture as popular as the resort was before the Civil War, Fairchild said.

Before the war intervened, a village grew up around the springs, and the resort featured the parish’s largest ballroom, a bowling alley, billiard room, post office, commissary and other amenities, he said.

The springs were covered by a shed with a dance pavilion on top. The waters flowed to a mineral-bath house, and a bathhouse was situated on the riverbank.

Fairchild said the Army garrison at Baton Rouge buoysat in the area during the summer, and the garrison’s band played for dances.

“It was a health spa in the truest sense,” Fairchild said.

During the war, Confederate forces used the facilities as their headquarters for an attack on Baton Rouge, and wounded soldiers were treated at the hotel after the battle.

Some of the soldiers died and were buried in unmarked graves, he said.