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The Edward Douglass White Historic Site

Submitted by Paul Farnsworth, Louisiana State University

From late April through the month of May, student volunteers from Louisiana State University spent each Saturday carrying out preliminary survey and testing at The Edward Douglass White Historic Site near Thibodaux, Louisiana, under the direction of Laurie Wilkie and Paul Farnsworth. The site is preserved as it was the home of Edward Douglass White who was governor of Louisiana from 1835 to 1839 and subsequently to his son, also Edward Douglass White, who was a justice on The Supreme Court of the United States from 1894 to 1910, and Chief Justice from 1910 until his death in 1921. Justice White is best known for the ruling which established the legality of the "separatebut equal" philosophy that dominated race relations in the South into the 1960s.

The site is located on a parcel that was claimed by Guillaume Arceman in 1803, based on his having occupied the land for ten or more years previously. The land was purchased by E.D. White in 1831 and was developed into a thriving sugar plantation. The White home sits on a parcel owned and preserved by the State of Louisiana, while the plantation's outbuildings, cabins, etc. are believed to have been located on a privately owned, wooded parcel located immediately behind the State's land. The preliminary research included both the State and privately owned property. The research was made possible by a grant from the Friends of the Edward Douglass White State Historic Site. The goals were simply to locate any buildings or archaeological deposits associated with the plantation, and assess their chronology and function.

An area of 16,800 square meters was divided into 20 meter squares and all historic artifacts from the surface were collected. Sixty-four shovel test pits were then excavated at each corner of the twenty meter squares. Based on the results of the surface collection and the twenty meter shovel testing, twenty-one additional shovel tests spaced at five meter intervals were dug in two areas of artifact concentration and structural indications. In addition to a general scatter of materials across the area studied, and the abovementioned concentrations, several other areas were defined for additional testing. The two areas tested so far correspond with the locations of two houses noted in oral historical information gathered since the conclusion of the current field research.

The artifacts were washed and cataloged at the LSU Archaeology laboratory, and will be curated by the State of Louisiana. Detailed analysis of the artifacts and their distributions is currently in progress, and a report is in preparation. The artifacts reflect the intensive use of the property throughout period of the White's occupation from 1830 to 1921. The presence of a fewer sherds of creamware and significant quantities of pearlware in the area adjacent to the main house suggest that it was first built and occupied during Arceman's ownership. However, as with most Louisiana plantations, eighteenth-century deposits remain elusive. Additional research is planned for 1996 which will explore the deposits located this year in more detail.
