Mable Daniels’ great-grandmother was a patient in the State Insane Asylum about a century ago when she was laid to rest on the asylum grounds – before her family knew she had died.

“Things were done different back then,” said Daniels, of Forest.

Apparently so; Daniels wonders if her ancestor’s remains could lie in one of the five dozen wooden coffins uncovered over the past few months beneath the former site of the vanished asylum – the campus of the University of Mississippi Medical Center.

As has happened before at UMMC, a construction crew scraped away a decades-old layer of dirt and desertion near a stand of pine trees to reveal 66 unmarked graves, making it virtually impossible to name the people buried there.
But if Epsie (Seals) Devine is among them, Daniels can be sure the remains of her great-grandmother are being treated with respect.

In spite of an extensive campus road construction project delayed in part by the discovery, UMMC is working with several institutions to document, and then rebury, the people lost to their loved ones.

“It’s the right thing to do,” said Jim Woodrick, director of the Historic Preservation Division of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. “Things expand, but memory doesn’t expand with them.”

Archaeologists help us recover it, he said.

“This doesn’t stop progress, but we are also able to accommodate those who died. We learn things about our past. We honor the dead.”

Already, investigators have made an educated guess about the general identity of the deceased, said Nicholas Herrmann, assistant professor of anthropology at Mississippi State University, whose department is removing the remains for testing at MSU.

“I believe the coffins are tied to the asylum,” he said.

That was probably the suspicion from the moment in November when construction workers struck wood buried in the messy gunk of Yazoo clay.

“That’s when the whole thing started,” said Nicole Reese, senior project manager in the Office of Planning and Design.

It started because of a project designed to add a new north-south road and campus intersection with Lakeland Drive to improve traffic flow, providing a beltway that bypasses the campus’ heart and eases future development. The roadway cuts through a wooded area and intersects an existing road running parallel to Lakeland.

The remains were found just off the north side of that existing road.

From November and through early March, as crews dug out subsoil to see if it was fit to support a new road, construction equipment exposed a total of 66 coffins. In size, they are fairly uniform – about six feet long but alarmingly narrow, as if each held a pair of stilts instead of a human skeleton.

Many were at least four or five feet deep in the ground.

“A lot of clay and junk was in the soil,” said Ron Horne, director of construction projects, “and has to be replaced.

“We might have built the roadbed on top of the graves if the subsoil had been solid.”
Because of the land’s former occupant, the discovery wasn’t surprising; neither was it particularly expected. Known as the Mississippi State Lunatic Asylum and then the Mississippi State Insane Hospital, the institution operated from 1855 to about 1935, its main building rising four stories alongside North State Street near the current Ronald McDonald House site.

Later, it was destroyed to make way for UMMC, which opened in 1955.

The asylum moved and became the Mississippi State Hospital in Whitfield, but during its 80-year history in Jackson, it treated thousands of patients, many of whom died there. They were buried on a site hundreds of yards to the east, where 21st century workers discovered 66 graves.

Over the years, relatives abandoned some patients, even after death. Or, as in Epsie Devine’s case, kinfolk couldn’t get to them in time.

“Her family had to come by train from Vaiden to the asylum,” said Daniels, Epsie Devine’s descendant. “She was in the ground before they got there.”

The family’s own genealogical research shows that Epsie Devine, or Divine, died on Feb. 14, 1916, Daniels said.

“We’re having a hard time finding out much about them. I would like to know more about her if I could.”

If Devine’s grave is among the 66, her marker and the other 65 have disappeared. Patient registries and other historical documents from the asylum are stored at the state archives, but many are sketchy.

Fires that broke out early in the asylum’s history may have destroyed some records. Complicating matters: Other cemeteries sat on or near the same site, including one with paupers’ graves.

Naturally, construction workers have uncovered human remains at UMMC long before now. In the early 1990s, 44 unmarked graves emerged during work on a steam line for a new laundry.

Another 29 or 30 graves found a few years earlier in another area did retain mostly intact markers and inscriptions, including names and death dates ranging from the late 1800s to the early 20th century. Although they are linked to the asylum, which was for adults, they included the names of two children.

Combined, those 70-plus marked and unmarked remains now lie in the UMMC Cemetery in the northeast corner of the campus, where the Medical Center has also placed a memorial to medical donors. That cemetery also will be the eventual resting place of the 66 latest remains unearthed so far.

They could have been found even before the road crew started digging.

An archaeological review is required before any work begins on public property, Woodrick said. The investigation was especially important in this case, since the land also embraces a Civil War battle site – in July 1863, Union artillery placed on a ridge bombarded the Confederate city of Jackson. Preserved artillery earthworks on Asylum Ridge mark the spot to this day, and relics from the war may be buried nearby.

Using metal detectors, ground-penetrating radar and other methods, staff from the Center for Archaeological Research at
the University of Mississippi surveyed the area between September 2011 and January 2012. The investigation uncovered “nothing of significance,” the center’s report states.

But construction barriers for the School of Pharmacy building (under construction then) prevented researchers from investigating a stretch along the north side of the existing road, University Drive, where the first group of more than two dozen remains would surface.

As for the existing road, under which about three dozen graves later emerged, “it was never surveyed because it was developed land,” Reese said. As with other surveys, this one was aimed only at undeveloped land.

Crews who built the old road decades ago did no undercutting; that’s why they found no graves then, Reese said.

Reporting the survey’s findings, the Department of Archives said the road site area was not eligible for historic preservation. Archives officials also reported that it’s unlikely we’ll find out if “the burials located on the ridge to the east of the project area include inmates from the asylum or paupers or some other group of people.” But investigators will do their best.

“Bone chemistry” can help determine residential history, Herrmann said. By examining tooth enamel, for instance, archaeologists can learn much about a deceased person’s diet – in this case, if it was typical for Mississippi. Traces of certain elements – say, lead and carbon – reveal details about a person’s environment and approximate age.

Unexamined, the contents of the coffins haven’t disclosed much, Herrmann said.

“We have found no grave goods. There have been no traces of clothing so far. We did find one button and two shroud pins.

“All the remains are adults, male and female.”

As for the mystery of the coffins’ narrow size, Herrmann explained it easily. “The weight of the soil compressed them,” he said. “The coffin lids collapsed, the sides pushed in and the bottoms pushed up.”

Still, some of the wood is in pretty good shape, he said. Determining its makeup and approximate age is the work of a dendrochronologist at the University of Southern Mississippi.

The MSU anthropology team is asking for two years to analyze all the remains, at a cost of approximately $2,100 per grave. UMMC is planning to schedule the opening of the new road within the next couple of months.

Meanwhile, archaeologists will be transporting the skeletons to Starkville, adhering to guidelines laid out by the Department of Archives and Ole Miss’ Center for Archaeological Research. Once their work is done, the remains will be sent back to Jackson for reburial, with Department of Archives’ approval.

But the scope of this investigation may only grow larger. Beyond the road project, more construction is in the offing, including plans for a nearby parking garage, Horne said.

“We could identify graves that may be in that spot.”

Rain has delayed the excavation of some of the coffins. Many at the bottom of a hill have been covered in wet silt and clay, Herrmann said. Throughout much of March, the MSU team had not been able to work in the lower part of the pit.

“We might find more graves there,” Herrmann said.