BERMUDA, La. (UPI) - The genteel aura surrounding the 1790 Beau Fort Plantation belies an embarrassing lawsuit pitting a local historic group against its treasurer and her family over control of the national landmark.

It may seem only a tempest in a graceful Southern teapot, but feelings are running high in the controversy over exactly who should run the charming 265-acre plantation 10 miles south of Natchitoches in northwest Louisiana.

Family members say Elizabeth Williams Cloutier had the best motives when she left her $400,000 plantation to the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches. Cloutier, a wealthy widow whose only child predeceased her in death, died in December 1980.

"But instead of being a beautiful gift, this situation has developed," said niece Ann Britain, who is also treasurer of the historical group.

The "situation" is the lawsuit filed last December by the association against Britain and other family members, seeking to remove the strings Cloutier attached to her bequest.

"We have been trying to clear title on it, to get a clarification of the will," said Orr B. Watson, association president.

Although association members are reluctant to discuss the matter publicly, they contend the conditions are hampering them from doing certain things - such as a full-scale promotion of the home as a tourist attraction and the renting out of the "stranger's room" to overnight guests for badly needed income.

The traditional plantation stranger's room at one end of a home originally was closed from the remainder of the house and had only an outside entrance.

The money is needed for the $1,500 monthly maintenance costs and to pay off the $10,000 mortgage.

The association receives $3 for each visitor and $10,000 annually in rent from Cloutier's favorite nephew, one of her conditions stipulated that he could rent most of the property surrounding the plantation for eight years for about half price.

Another condition was naming Britain as one of the plantation's curators. The association wants to choose its own.

"She just wanted to make sure it was maintained," said Britain. "We want what she wanted."

Britain said she believes many of the active members of the historical group are elderly women with little business sense, and her aunt feared Beau Fort might suffer under their jurisdiction if family members were not involved.

Another stipulation calls for the plantation to revert to Britain and another aunt if it is not maintained as Cloutier left it. Some association members privately charge the family wants the property.

"I'm treasurer of the historic association," Britain said. "It was at my suggestion that she give it to them as a museum. You can imagine what a terrible thing this has been."

Britain said both she and her elderly aunt are too well off and settled in their own homes to want Beau Fort.

"We don't need that," Britain said. "That's why we're here. We don't need money. We've done so much for the community and this really hurts."

The plantation, named at the suggestion of historian and novelist Francois Mignon because it is at the site of one of the area's first forts originally was built by unskilled slave labor. Cloutier and her husband had it renovated in 1949 and it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

The main house, with its Creole-style architecture, has walls made of cypress timbers and an adobe-like mixture of mud, deer hair and Spanish moss. The 1½-story cottage-type structure features an 8-foot front gallery and has an unusual interior design where no single wall goes all the way through from front to back or side to side.

Britain says the lawsuit, naming her and four others, has caused a rift in the historical group. She claims more than 100 members have resigned because of it. Watson says no one has resigned.

Guide Sadie Lawton stands in front of the Beau Fort plantation in Bermuda

"I don't want my friends to have to be involved," Britain said. "But we lost about 100 members last year and there have been three resignations off the board."

She said she intends to remain on the board and will continue to attend meetings.

"It's not easy, in fact, it has been most difficult," she said. "But I'm not going to let them run me off."

Watson said the community supports the lawsuit and said two $500-couple benefits held to raise money for Beau Fort have been well attended. Britain disagrees.

Judge R.B. Williams, executor of Cloutier's estate and Britain's father as well as one of the signers of the lawsuit, said of the community reaction: "I bet they could care less."

Williams said he was surprised by the lawsuit because, when the judgment was filed placing Beau Fort in the group's possession, it was signed and accepted.

"Everybody was happy, at least I thought they were, when that happened," about May of last year. Then on Dec. 31, 1981, they had counsel file suit."