Much of Louisiana's history is being destroyed by the elements in an old lumber yard warehouse a few blocks away from the state Capitol. Land transactions, title transfers and other information from various parishes are stacked in every nook and corner of the old building, deteriorating because of heat, humidity, industrial pollution and general neglect. Only a few of the most critical historical records have a sanctuary — a small vault equipped with a humidifier.

The Louisiana Legislature didn’t adopt a law creating a state archives until 1956 and didn’t appropriate any money for an archival system until two years later. Officials agree that the state might not even have the warehouse or the vault if it wasn’t for Dr. Edwin Davis.

“I’ve spent over 40 years of my life trying to get a (state) archives,” the 73-year-old former LSU history department chairman said. “If I live a few years longer, I believe we’re going to get it.”

Davis came close in the 1960s when it appeared the legislature would appropriate $5.5 million. Dr. Art Bergeron, the state archivist, said the old records are often needed to solve current legal problems. The records are used in cases of succession, land transfers and a number of other legal proceedings, he said.

Recently a citizen urgently needed records of a 1903 state tax sale in Calcasieu Parish to assure he had a clear title to some property, Bergeron said. The man was told by parish officials that the records had been “dumped” at the state archives section.

About 100 boxes of records from various parishes had indeed been “dumped” at the building, said Bergeron, adding that he didn’t have the staff to sort them out.

“That is really embarrassing and it happens all the time,” Bergeron said.

Secretary of State Paul Hardy said he is “sadly” aware of the problems and intends to seek funding for a modern archives building.

Meanwhile, the blueprints and plans of the building Davis almost got in the ‘60s are collecting dust along with other historical documents.