ake 14 tons of ceramic molding clay and a creative mind and what will you get? If the creative mind belongs to Baton Rouge sculptor Al Lavergne, you'll get a massive five-panel mural that will literally carve the history of Louisiana in stone on the new State Archives Building, now under construction on Essen Lane.

The clay is the raw material for the first stage in a complex process that will produce cast-stone slabs to form the facade of the structure. The building, scheduled to be open to the public by January 1987, will house the vital state records that are now stored in an old warehouse.

"I felt we should be able to depict the flow of Louisiana history, to have the building bring life to the history and heritage of the state," said Secretary of State Jim Brown. He and Don Lemieux, director of state archives, got the idea for a major mural after studying archives around the nation and looking at the major public buildings in Washington.

"The best public buildings have murals and sculpture as an integral part," Brown said. "This (the archives) is the grand building that Louisiana will build in the next 50 years, the best constructed and most important. I had quite a session with the Division of Administration about funding for the murals, but I convinced them we shouldn't ignore what this is all about, and they agreed to let us have the murals."

The murals will cost about $130,000, including casting in an out-of-state facility. "We're certainly getting our money's worth," said Brown.

For Lavergne, getting the contract to design and execute the massive panels meant great satisfaction and a very long, hot summer working 10 hours a day, seven days a week in a big metal warehouse without air conditioning. He thinks it's all worth it, however.

"I'm really proud, because I'm a Louisiana native and it's an opportunity to do something in my home state and feel good about it," he said as he mopped his brow in the oppressive heat of the warehouse.

Lavergne's initial designs were chosen by state officials in an invitational competition involving Louisiana artists. He has refined and altered the first plans to create a detailed, action-packed series of...
The theme of the river recurs in each design. “Water and boats are shown in all of the panels,” said Lavergne. “It’s a basic part of our history, and that’s how people came to Louisiana.”

The Louisiana Purchase and French panels were completed on a recent visit to the warehouse, stored carefully and kept damp. The Spanish panel was in progress. One of the big problems in working with clay is that it must be kept moist at all times but not permitted to be too wet, Lavergne explained.

Bowman and Lewis worked carefully with small tools, scraping away bits of clay along lines of the design.

“This line will have to disappear around here,” cautioned Lavergne to Bowman, reaching to correct a small cut in the clay. One advantage of the clay is that mistakes can be corrected with relative ease, he said.

Lewis reaches for a spray bottle and begins misting the surface of the clay design. Bowman goes to a cooler for cold drinks for everybody, but no one stops working. Now that school has started, working hours will be limited to nights and weekends.

When all the clay panels are completed, they will be taken by truck to Jackson.
Lavergne and assistants work on one of the panels

for the final casting. A special trailer has been designed to move the panels, and Lavergne is going to drive the truck himself, taking one panel at a time.

"It's a long trip, and they have to stay moist," he explains. "I couldn't trust anyone else to check them and to know when they need to be sprayed."

Lavergne's designs are full of action and detail in a true art deco style appropriate to the theme and congenial with the state's art deco Capitol.

"Lavergne seemed to capture the flow and spirit of Louisiana history," said Brown, adding that he felt the designs were right the minute he saw them.

"He is busy in his approach, and Louisiana's history is not simple. The designs are active and involved. Louisiana is complicated. It started out that way, it is complicated now and probably will be in the year 2000. The murals reflect that. I love the busyness and detail. It expresses the very complex and involved history of Louisiana."

Lemieux echoed approval of the designs. "Lavergne is a good choice. He's a product of Louisiana and he knows the people and the history."

The designs are full of people, places and action. The Louisiana Purchase panel depicts the Battle of New Orleans and a large figure of Andrew Jackson, and the French panel features Iberville, Bienville and LaSalle as well as the French and Indian War. Bernardo de Galvez is prominent in the Spanish segment.

Designs for the contemporary panel will show Huey Long in the center panel, with jazz musicians, Cajun cooking, the State Capitol and the Superdome. The state's industry, Louisiana culture and current prosperity are depicted. The Secession panel will show an antebellum home, the Old State Capitol, Zachary Taylor riding through Baton Rouge, P.B.S. Pinchback, the state's only black governor and Southern soldiers marching. A pelican and an eagle are at either side, ripping the U.S. flag apart.

Lavergne is known primarily in this area for his life-sized steel sculptures and for his warm but witty portrayal of people. Working in clay is a different medium for him.

"I find it a lot of fun and not as technically difficult as steel," the artist said, "but the size and weight were more than I imagined. It is a major project just to get a panel ready to begin and requires a lot of attention at all stages of the work."

Brown is excited about the murals and about the new building as a whole. He regards it as a major contribution to the state's heritage and says it is being built to last "several hundred years. It's more than a proper place to store valuable records. It's a building that ties into the history land aesthetics of the state. There's not a subject in the mural that is not relevant to Louisiana."

The building will face Essen Lane, but there will be no circular drive in front as originally planned, Brown says. Instead, existing trees will remain and the area will be landscaped.

"I didn't want it to be all concrete," he said. "There will be ample parking on the side and people will walk to the entrance with the landscaped area and the murals making a statement about Louisiana."

An auditorium seating 250 people will be included, and Brown envisions the archives as a center for use by the public, not simply a storage place.

"The auditorium will be available for groups to meet or to show films or have programs. We hope to have it open on weekends so the community can use it for research. Hundreds of groups all over the state worked for this building, and everywhere I go they are excited about it."

The building will also have a courtyard in the center, with glass walls surrounding it, and exhibition areas where displays from the archives can be mounted and where Louisiana artists can show their work. Brown hopes to have regular monthly art exhibitions by Louisiana artists.

At the rear of the building is a huge storage area where documents and other archival materials will be delivered and stored. Cataloging and research facilities will be in the front, almost as if the two buildings exist under one roof. Columns surround the building, and when a few of these toppled recently it caused a good deal of consternation. It turned out that they are prefabricated columns that have been put in place without being properly braced.

"It may have been a good thing that it occurred," said Lemieux. "Now it will make the contractor be very sure that everything is done just right."

Brown likes the setting of the building, its accessibility to the public and the facilities that the building will provide.

He makes no secret of the fact that he's running for governor.

"But if I thought I would be secretary of state the rest of my life, I'd want to have my office in this building and stay right here."