Like the captain of the ill-fated Titanic, conservator Doug Harrison said it is his job to determine which historic state documents will be saved and which will go down with the ship. As chief conservator for the Louisiana State Archives, Harrison said he sometimes feels the weight of responsibility when he realizes that what will be left to future historians is in his hands. With a degree in history and training in conservation, it's a responsibility he is willing to shoulder.

"I kind of backed into conservation work and this job," he said. "I was in graduate school at LSU getting a Ph.D. in American history in 1984 when the chairman told me about a grant to work here. When the grant ran out, I found out that the conservator was retiring and, so, I apprenticed under her for on-the-job training."

While many who work in conservation now come into the field through library science, Harrison said he believes his background in history is critical because it helps him place the material he handles in context.

"The vast majority of our collections (at the archives) are paper documents. When records come into our office, we evaluate them for their historical significance and interest. For example, we look for documents that illustrate operations of past history, such as the sale of slaves, or histories of governmental bodies that are now extinct."

Such records are often used by individuals and organizations with a variety of interests, such as genealogy research.

Located in a state-of-the-art building on Essen Lane, 11,e State Archives is part of the secretary of state's office and is headed by state archivist Florent Hardy Jr. Most of the documents come to the State Archives from state and local governmental agencies, such as clerk of court offices, who discover old records they are no longer required by law to keep but don't want to discard. Occasionally, private individuals and organizations also donate documents to the State Archives (such as the Fulwar Skipwith collection of records related to the West Florida Republic, which was recently profiled in the People section).
Some of the archives’ documents date back as far as the early 1700s. Colonial records were written mostly in French, and many are in surprisingly good shape, Harrison said.

Currently, Harrison is working on some colonial records from St. John the Baptist Parish that date to the late 1700s. Most are mundane records of the day, including sales of land, cattle and slaves. The records are written in French and Spanish. Louisiana was a colony of Spain at the time. Among them are several documents that bear the signature of Bernardo de Galvez, then governor-general of Louisiana.

“When a new collection comes in, an archivist processes it and refers it to us if they have concerns about preservation,” Harrison said. As a conservator, Harrison has three options — preservation, conservation and restoration. Preserving a document may mean simply providing proper, long-term storage in the friendly environment of the archives building.

All that’s needed for some of the documents is a simple cleaning and storage in acid-free folders and boxes placed on steel shelves with optimal temperature and humidity controls and light filters to deter further disintegration.

Conservation techniques for documents needing further treatment can involve treating the paper in an acid-free bath, backing it with nylon netting and placing it between sheets of plastic. Restoration is a more tedious job that requires mending tears and holes and fixing torn pages to put the missing pieces back into place, a little like putting together a jigsaw puzzle.

“If I can put it back together so that you can’t tell I’ve done anything, then I’ve done a good job, but perfection is a goal rarely attained,” Harrison said. “It’s tedious, time-consuming work. Searching for the upstroke of an ‘H’ is like searching for a needle in a haystack.”

“One of our primary goals of conservation is not to do anything that can’t be undone. We learned a lesson about that from lamination. Once a document is laminated, you can’t get back to the original paper, and if it continues to deteriorate, there’s nothing you can do. Now we encapsulate instead of laminate.”

Paper quality is another important factor to consider in conservation work, he said. Documents from the 1700s are often in better shape than those from the 1950s because of the chemical instability of cheap, modern paper. Old documents were crafted on 100 percent cotton rag paper, which lasts well over time. Modern wood-pulp paper is full of natural and added chemicals that react volatily to heat, humidity and time.

Conservators first starting to work may be intimidated by the idea of handling valuable old documents, he said. For that reason, many practice initially on old papers that have no particular value, such as old oyster fishing licenses.

“That first mistake you make is always a memorable one. I remember binding a document to a table once, but it was reversible, and I was able to return it to its normal state.

“Conservation is kind of like carpentry,” he said. “It’s both an art and a craft, and you acquire a certain touch over time.”

Some of the archives’ documents are also microfilmed to make the information accessible and to store it in another format and to decrease handling of the original papers. That brings up another point, Harrison said. What is the age of computers and electronic data going to mean for archives in the future?

“We generate data much faster than we can ever hope to manage or preserve it,” he said. “It will be confusing when we have so many different formats. In fact, there are some conservators today who specialize in electronic records which have become outdated, such as the IBM 10-inch tapes, for which there are no longer readers available.”

It’s kind of like having a storehouse of 8-track tapes or Beta videocassettes.

Harrison, who often gives talks about conservation techniques to interested groups, offered the following tips to individuals concerned about preserving their family records for future generations:

• Heat, humidity and light prematurely age paper. Store your documents and photographs in a cool, dry location in your home — not your attic or basement. Keep exposure to light to a minimum.
• Store documents in a flat position, rather than rolled or folded.
• Don’t store papers or photographs near food, which attracts insects that eat paper.
• Hands should be clean and dry before handling documents or photographs. Oils from fingers can damage materials. Conservators wear white cotton gloves to handle items.
• Don’t frame photographs by pressing them directly against glass. The photograph easily sticks to the glass and often cannot be removed. Use a mat to separate the photo from the glass.
• If you must write on a document or photograph, never use ink. Only use a No. 2 soft lead pencil.