Louisiana Takes Steps To Rescue Records

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) - Louisiana, after a three-year struggle, is taking steps to rescue precious records and historical documents from the ravages of time.

Gov. Dave Treen and the Legislature have OK'd an appropriation for final plans and construction of a new state archives building to replace the warehouse where the documents are slowly crumbling into dust.

The money - $500,000 for planning and $10.4 million for construction - was part of the $1.3 billion capital construction bill signed into law by the governor.

"We have already begun our meetings with the architect to speed construction of the new Archives and Records Service building," said Secretary of State Jim Brown.

The building has been in the works since 1978, when the Legislature approved money for preliminary design and to buy a five-acre plot in south Baton Rouge. The plans were sidetracked in 1980 and 1981.

"While we are not building a monument, and will have no expensive frills, we want something which will be useful well into the next century," Brown said, "and a facility which will enable us to safely preserve and house documents, some of which date back to the 1600s."

For chief Archivist Donald J. Lemieux, the new archives can't come soon enough. "It's been a nightmare for four years," he said.

The current archives is a concrete block warehouse located in a grimy factory district a few miles from the Capitol. "We're out of room right now," Lemieux said.

"It's the worst location in town," Lemieux said. "Structurally the building is not that sound. But it is no place to locate historic documents.

"We need vault space, temperature and humidity control, and we need, frankly, additional people."

The plans call for a four-story main building with a connected one-story structure to house the records service. Total floor space will be more than 123,000 square feet.

Brown said the records center will contain more than 102,000 cubic feet for state and local government records.

The main building will include fireproof vaults on each floor, fire detection and prevention systems, climate control, and areas for document restoration, preservation, and microfiling.

"Without the proper facilities and additional space, we cannot go after the records which we neglected to collect (in the past)," Lemieux said.

Lemieux said Louisiana lost money because of its poor record-keeping during the 25-year battle with the federal government over mineral rights in the state's offshore tidelands.

Parish clerks of court have enough trouble accommodating their current records, and the documents which are the most neglected are often the most significant to historians, Lemieux said.

"These are the records of the most intimate interactions of the citizens: marriages, sales, mortgages, land transfers - and those are the records which are used to construct the history of the parish."

It was the historians who rescued the Cajun culture from second-class status in Louisiana, Lemieux said.

"Do you remember not too long ago that the Cajun was ostracized, a nobody?" Lemieux asked. "All of a sudden he is somebody. He can speak his language. He is clean, attractive. We love his food, his music."

It was historians, using ancient deeds, certificates of marriage, birth, and death, who re-discovered the Acadian's ties to Nova Scotia and recognized legitimacy of the Cajun culture.

"You cannot do it with myth. You've got to do it with records," Lemieux said.