BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) - The state's archives, long neglected and abused while being shuffled from a university campus to a dank Capitol basement and an industrial-area warehouse, have landed in a showcase described as a "new chapter in the history of Louisiana."

The $10.4 million state archives building, located on a 5.8 acre site in south Baton Rouge far from the hub of government agencies, will be dedicated Monday, culminating a lengthy drive for an adequate center to house Louisiana's vital records and historic documents.

"I don't think the state can give a better gift to the people in this 175th anniversary of Louisiana than this building," said Dr. Donald J. Lemieux, state archivist. "I would say this has to be the finest in the nation."

The four-story building features modern areas for the public to study documents, internal climate controls to preserve aging paper and several warehouse-size storage areas. It replaces a former warehouse where, among other problems, air pollution posed a threat to preservation of important records.

"We never had a proper building for the archives," Lemieux said.

Until Louisiana State University established a quasi-official archives center in 1935, the state had no real system of keeping up with documents of potential historical value.

"Our records were mistreated and ignored for many years," Lemieux said.

After an archives agency was established in 1956, the documents stayed a short time in the sub-basement of the Capitol before being moved to Peabody Hall, a dilapidated 19th century relic that was finally condemned. In 1966, the archives moved to the warehouse district.

In the meantime, many records documenting Louisiana's history vanished, Lemieux said.

"Some have been lost, some have deteriorated and when you don't have a good management plan, some simply disappear," he said.

Lemieux said that too often, the public looks upon archives as a collection of musty papers.

"Most of the documents in a democracy are created to safeguard the rights and interests of citizens and for the citizens to avail themselves to the records to check on what their public officials are doing," he said.

The archives also document a major part of the state's heritage, he said.

"When your spirit is drenched with the strength of your past and it is documented, you stand up tall," he said. "How can you have any future without a clear understanding of your past?"

Unlike the previous structure, a large portion of the new building is dedicated to public study.

A 99-seat auditorium is available for meetings and school classes, along with an exhibit room and the pride of the public area - the "Louisiana Room," a display area constructed of baldcypress wood where documents from the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 will be displayed Monday beneath thick security glass.

For the first time, a comfortable research library also will be open to the public.

The historic significance of what's inside greets a visitor even before entering the building. Above the front entrance are five murals by artist Al LaVergne that portray Louisiana from the time of its settlement by France through the Civil War to the era of Huey P. Long and the construction of the Superdome.

A tinted-glass version of the state seal - protected by a layer of bulletproof glass - hangs over the entrance.

The rest of the building contains voluminous space for a conservation laboratory, a microfilm section and a records management office. Most of the top two floors consist of cavernous storage areas. Three large vaults are guarded by a system that sprays an extinguishing gas in case of fire.

The building was constructed during a time that Louisiana has faced economic hard times and tight state budgets. For that, Lemieux credits the public's interest in preserving the state's heritage through its archives.

"If it comes up in good times, that's fine," he said. "When it comes up in bad times, it shows its strength."

Monday's formal dedication will be more than the opening of another state office building, Lemieux said.

"All in all, the christening of the new state archives building can best be viewed as the writing of a new chapter in the history of Louisiana," he said.