

Colonial Papers Show French-Louisiana Heritage

December 08, 2010 3:00 AM Fran Simon

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The Old U.S. Mint, a part of the Louisiana State Museum, has a “vault” room that contains about 300 boxes full of documents in French, dating back to the 1720s. A Tulane University service-learning class took on the project of beginning to decipher these historical documents.



Teri Chalmers (from left), surveys the work of Annette Sojic, professor of practice of French, and students Roman Griffith and Renee Kimble. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

The class of 22 students in the “French Theory and Practice” course received five CD-ROMs that contained scans of handwritten documents. Some of the Louisiana colonial documents had illegible handwriting, and many had misspelled or archaic words. Scans of the delicate originals show signs of deterioration from acid in the ink and damage from cellophane tape that was applied decades ago in efforts to preserve them.

Most of the documents involve legal matters. They include a breach of contract between a man who agreed to travel to Illinois on a hunting/trapping trip but instead sent a monk and 200 pounds of flour. Another involved a case in which a woman

assaulted a man without provocation, according to a witness' testimony.

“The students had to do their own cultural research using the *Louisiana Quarterly* and other historical documents to provide context for their translating,” says Annette Sojic, the course instructor and a professor of practice in the [Department of French and Italian](#).

Their hard work paid off. “Even if these documents were in English, I think they would be confusing,” says Polly Rolman, with the Louisiana State Museum digitizing project. “The students' work will increase the public accessibility to these historical documents.”

At a showcase of the class project on Dec. 1, visitors included Oliver Brochenin, the consul general of France in New Orleans. “I congratulate you and the Tulane University Department of French and Italian,” Brochenin said. “What you have been doing is beautiful and not an easy job ? translating documents from the 18th century. This helps us understand how deeply rooted French culture is in Louisiana.”