

# Old documents face new menace

## ISLE OF WIGHT

Virginia counties whose 300-year-old courthouse records beat the odds by surviving fires and war face a new menace: acetic acid that is eating away the historic documents.

Counties such as Isle of Wight and Northampton, which have some of the oldest continuous records in the country, have started restoration projects that have been hampered by a lack of money.

The State Historical Records Advisory Board has launched a two-year conservation survey project to try to save Virginia's written history. The \$100,000 study is funded by a federal grant from the National Historic Publications and Records Commission and by the General Assembly.

This year, teams from the Center for Art and Historic Artifacts in Philadelphia are visiting 20 libraries, museums, historical societies and government offices to find ways to slow deterioration and improve protection of Virginia's collections, which include the oldest documents in the United States.

Northampton County, with documents dating back to 1632, claims to have the oldest continuous records in the country.

They provide insights on the lives of early colonists such as Arthur Upshur, who described himself as "the child of misfortune and sorrow from the cradle to his death."

Upshur, who was terrified of being buried alive, specified that his coffin not be closed until the stench was so bad that it offended friends at his funeral, said Northampton Deputy Court Clerk Estelle Murphy.

Isle of Wight County, another of the eight original shires in Virginia, has records that date to the 1640s and scattered earlier documents. They were buried by a clerk's wife during the Revolutionary War and hidden by a slave, Randall Booth, during the Civil War, said Clerk of the Circuit Court William E. Laine Jr.

The records are being eaten away by acetic acid found in their "iron gall" ink and wood-based paper. County of-



Associated Press

## Clerk William E. Laine Jr. holds old records.

officials said they have enough government and private donations to restore a few volumes a year.

Kay J. Domine, archivist at the College of William and Mary, said an emphasis on acquiring materials has left little money to take care of documents already in collections.

"Not enough effort has gone into preservation and conservation and that's true everywhere," she said.