To Gulf Coast conservators, life's simple mementos are treasures, collections that define our culture and document regional communities. Now they fear much has been lost to the hurricane.

IT may have been just a stack of old vinyl albums, travel brochures, ticket stubs or even restaurant menus that were stashed away, forgotten, in a cabinet. Though their importance pales in comparison to lost lives and homes, the destruction of such relatively trivial items in the Katrina disaster means key artifacts of identity, history and culture of the region are gone forever.

Flooded New Orleans has conservationists and collectors in despair about what history might have washed away or been irreparably damaged in museums and in homes.

New Orleans was a treasure trove of regionally specific culture where surreal Mardi Gras memorabilia coexisted with sober Victorian furniture, where stately mansions and shotgun shacks shared a history defined by jazz, Cajun cooking, slavery and even voodoo.

The largest and best collections of regional significance are, of course, stored and collected by the region's museums, colleges, antiques dealers and collectors — institutions squarely in Katrina's path.

Though many institutions moved or protected their collections, according to reports from the American Assn. of Museums, flooding damaged a storage area at Tulane University's Newcomb Art Gallery and may be causing mildew at its Museum of Natural History. The New Orleans African American Museum is assumed to have major flood damage and several collections at a new Mardi Gras museum in Biloxi, Miss., also are assumed damaged.

But it's not just fine art or museum collections that have conservators worried. It's the ephemera that gets passed down through generations, the documents of everyday life that suddenly have become quite poignant and valuable.

In areas of the region that are being called unreclaimable, even a previously insignificant piece could become a meaningful artifact of pre-storm life.

"There is probably all kinds of material culture that has been wrecked," said Victoria Steele, head of special collections at the UCLA Charles E. Young Research Library. "We all keep things, little mementos, that were meaningful to us." According to U.S. Census data, nearly 80% of New Orleans residents are Louisiana natives, and as such, the keepers of its history.

 Aside from recognized heirlooms such as family Bibles and wedding albums, there are the postcards, playbills and posters that librarians, historians, collectors and everyday people value as a document of New Orleans and the also-damaged Gulf states. Experts such as Steele have a name for these bits of paper: ephemera.

"Sometimes ephemera doesn't survive because it is ephemera and people don't see it as collectible," Steele said. "In a way, that stuff becomes even more precious because it's so interesting." Today's trash — packaging, posters, shopping bags — can become a window into an era's distinctive graphic style or a record of overlooked populations.

"Libraries don't buy it, particularly, but someone has to collect it," she said. After Katrina, "There will be a whole swath of that kind of thing that may disappear."

Because many of Katrina's hardest-hit victims were poor, the impact of their losses is perhaps the most far-reaching. "They're not the people who typically get studied and recorded for history," said Steele. The same populations are an important source for music history, said William Novotny, an Arcadia antiques appraiser and former rare records dealer.
"Nothing is more valuable in rare records than the roots of black music," he said. That includes jazz from the 1920s, R&B from the '50s, and cool jazz from the '50s and '60s.

"You've got to remember that there are collectibles in every material from every country in the world for every use you can think of — paper, samplers, quilts, rugs — all kinds of handwork done in textiles," he said. Fine examples of it are now underwater or under debris all across the Gulf.

Loss can be an indicator of human behavior. Fear and vulnerability can translate into a hesitancy to acquire. The Northridge earthquake, for example, dampened the collecting fervor for fine breakables, thus depressing their value and price, said Novotny.

Yet, disasters also create scarcity, which boosts demand and value.

Uncertainty, however, is the likely short-term outcome of Katrina, said Novotny. Salvaged items that come onto the market in damaged or restored condition may create problems for collectors if restorations are not disclosed, he said.

When vast categories become scarce or damaged, reproductions often appear, an outcome that creates further uncertainty and may depress values, Novotny said.

A few days after the disaster, a measure of the sentiment toward New Orleans appeared on EBay. "We often find that what happens on EBay is reflected in society, and vice versa," said spokesman Hani Durzy.

Collectors offered up their memorabilia of the city for auction on the site's "Giving Works" page, a program where sales support nonprofit charities.

Though few bidders offered extra-generous prices for items, the sellers generally donated most, if not all, of the proceeds to Katrina disaster relief. If there has been an overall increase in the number of New Orleans items for sale or their prices, the site doesn't officially track it, said Durzy.

Durzy said the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the death of Pope John Paul II created a noticeable uptick in related items.

It may be too early to know if "pre-Katrina" will become part of the collectors' lexicon in the same way as "prewar" or "pre9/11." Some preservationists, however, are hopeful that even mud-covered documents can be saved.

The Heritage Emergency National Task Force was formed 10 years ago to help institutions such as libraries and museums prepare for and recover from natural disasters and other emergencies.

Sponsored by the nonprofit Heritage Preservation and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the task force includes 36 federal agencies and national service organizations that combined their resources.

The website at http://www.heritagepreservation.org offers the public information on protecting, restoring and salvaging documents and other artifacts from damage and disasters.

The site also offers extensive links to other sources of preservation, disaster response networks and the kind of information that's good to know now, before it's too late.