

11 Lessons That Katrina Taught Me

by David W. Carmicheal

Director, Georgia Archives, Office of the Secretary of State
President, Council of State Archivists

On September 21, 2005, representatives of the Council of State Archivists (CoSA), the Society of American Archivists (SAA), and Heritage Preservation, toured the Gulf Coast area of Mississippi to assess the impact of Hurricane Katrina on record-keeping facilities in the region. The group traveled from Waveland in the west to Biloxi in the east and viewed the impact of the disaster on public buildings (city halls, county courthouses, local historical societies, historic sites, and public libraries) and private facilities (church and college buildings). In November, Carmicheal met with representatives of Georgia municipal and court associations to discuss lessons learned.

1. Disasters aren't always localized

Emergency response plans are often built on a hidden assumption: that any disaster will be localized, striking a single building or, at most, a small geographic area. On that assumption, available resources will be marshaled and concentrated in the affected area. Hurricane Katrina demonstrated conclusively that disasters may occur over a very wide geographic area. When the storm reached Jackson, Mississippi—150 miles from the Gulf Coast—it was a Category 3 storm, powerful enough to severely damage buildings and record repositories. Even those who live far from hurricane centers cannot be complacent; other disasters can affect large geographic areas: wild fires, tornadoes, earthquakes, and terrorist attacks. Our disaster planning must eliminate the hidden assumption that disasters will be localized.

2. Government buildings are not immune

On the face of it, no one believes that government buildings are immune from disasters, but citizens often assume that their most vital records are safe from destruction because they are in the care of the government. The loss of government buildings means the loss of identity for citizens. Government records prove when and where people were born, when and whom they married, what property they own, what crimes they have committed. Government buildings in particular must be protected from catastrophic disaster in order to protect the public trust.



*Remains of Waveland, MS City Hall.
(David Carmicheal, Georgia Archives)*

3. Vaults may not be enough

At Pass Christian, Mississippi, historians carefully placed the town's most historic records—maps, early photographs, Civil War records—in a bank vault as Hurricane Katrina approached. When the storm passed, the vault appeared to be intact, but its contents were ruined. The vault had been unable to withstand the water that surge through the building. At Waveland, Mississippi, I inspected a bank vault that had survived the storm, but its door was sprung and the contents of the vault had vanished. Several times I heard stories from record keepers who had imagined “the worst case scenario” and moved their records to “safe storage,” only to find that the disaster exceeded their imagination. Vaults that appear safe may not protect critical records.

4. Destruction may come in the immediate wake of the disaster...

The destruction from Hurricane Katrina was obvious and overwhelming. By far the most dramatic damage occurred as the storm passed over courthouses and city halls. This was the damage that most people, if they had prepared at all, had tried to prevent. But the initial damage was only part of the picture...

5. ...or it may come long after the disaster

Forty-eight hours. That's the time professionals say the records can wait after a



*Mold on County Supervisors' records.
(Christine Wiseman, Georgia Archives)*

disaster before being recovered. After two days mold begins to develop, deterioration accelerates, and recovery becomes increasingly difficult. In the wake of a widespread disaster, such as Katrina, access to the records may be restricted or severely limited. Emergency response officials declared the Biloxi Public Library off limits because of structural damage. While librarians waited to gain access, mold spread over large portions of the local history collection, destroying or damaging priceless maps, photographs, and

historical documents. Disaster planning must take such extended damage into account.

6. Staff may not be available to help with recovery

Most disaster plans assume that staff—who know the building, know the records, and have been trained in disaster recovery—will oversee and assist in disaster recovery. But Hurricane Katrina displaced large numbers of people, and those who remained were often too overwhelmed by personal loss to respond to disaster recovery needs at work. Even in areas where staff were available, emergency management officials closed areas and prevented staff from entering. At one courthouse I met National Guard troops who were willing and eager to begin protecting vital records, but they were confused by conflicting orders and advice. Disaster response plans need to take

this scenario into account. The people who respond may have no familiarity with the facility or the collection.

7. Prevention is cheaper than recovery

Jackson County, Mississippi, estimated that they would spend at least \$2 million to recover court records and meeting minutes damaged by Hurricane Katrina. A systematic program of producing microfilm or some other form of backup would have eliminated the need for such recovery and probably would have proved far less expensive. In addition to the actual costs of recovery (if such recovery is possible), governments need to consider the 'lost opportunity' costs to their citizens while they wait for records to be recovered. Lengthy restoration projects can delay court dates and property sales, and otherwise interrupt the lives of citizens who depend on vital records.



*Damaged legal agreements, Beauvoir, MS.
(David Carmicheal, Georgia Archives)*

8. FEMA's responsibility extends to historic buildings, not records

The legislation that authorizes the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) specifically charges them with securing and protecting historic sites, but not historic or vital records. While FEMA often assisted with the recovery of government records in the aftermath of Katrina, records were not their first priority. Until the federal legislation can be amended, state and local governments should expect little assistance with records issues during major disasters.

9. Vital records must be identified before a disaster occurs

At one site I visited after Katrina, staff were trying to deal with the loss of their accession records. Most of the site's historic artifacts had vanished in the storm, and the accession records were needed to determine what the collection had once held. The staff had carefully removed rare books and other documents before the hurricane, but in the frantic days leading up to the storm the accession records were overlooked. Disaster plans must identify key records before a disaster strikes. When staff have only days—or even hours—to locate and remove records, it is essential that they have a clear guide to the agency's most important records and their priority for rescue.

10. Vital records must be systematically and comprehensively duplicated.

Perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned from Katrina is this: the only guarantee against catastrophic loss is duplication. Government agencies must review their records systematically, identify the ones that are vital to protect their citizens, and then duplicate them. Anything less is a violation of the public trust.

11. Duplicated records must be sent to remote, secure storage

Duplicate records maintained in the vicinity of their originals are worthless. Such records should be sent far away from the original records and stored securely, safe from unauthorized access or exposure to hazards. Before Hurricane Katrina, conventional wisdom measured "a safe distance" in tens of miles; now, the wisdom must change. States need reciprocal agreements with other states to ensure that duplicate records are stored far from the geographic location (and local hazards) of the originals; communities need reciprocal agreements with other communities that separate originals from their duplicates by hundreds of miles, not dozens.

Hurricane Katrina changed the way we look at disasters and the potential for recovery. Time will tell whether we apply the lessons learned.

For more information on disaster prevention, visit the Georgia Archives website at www.GeorgiaArchives.org.