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Report of Hurricane Katrina Damage Assessment

by

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Background

On September 19, 2005, representatives of the Council of State Archivists (CoSA), the Society of American Archivists (SAA), 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 sought to demonstrate the profession's solidarity with those affected by the storm and to learn how best the archival profession could help them

Staff of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), including Department Director Hank Holmes and State Archivist Julia Young, helped with logistics. MDAH staff members Grady Howell and Jeff Rogers served as guides for the team. The team is deeply grateful for their assistance.

The group traveled from Waveland in the west to Biloxi in the east and viewed two city halls, a county courthouse, a local historical society, a historic site, and a public library. The repositories were representative of facilities in the region that house public and private records, vital records, and historical collections. The tour also gave the group a chance to see the impact of Katrina on businesses, private homes, churches, a college, schools, and other private and public facilities.

This report is specific to conditions observed along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, which suffered significant damage from a storm surge. Conditions may be significantly different in New Orleans, where water from a broken levee rose more slowly and records will doubtless remain immersed for longer periods of time.

Preparations for the storm

Although many record keepers were proactive in their attempts to protect records, almost no one foresaw the scale of Katrina's devastation, and most attempts fell far short of the necessary measures. However, even modest efforts for disaster preparation helped records survive.

Record keepers consistently reported that in preparing for Katrina they referred to Hurricane Camille (1969) as the 'benchmark.' At one site, for instance, artifacts and records were housed in a building that had withstood Camille, and staff moved items from lower shelves onto tables, assuming a worst-case scenario of two or three feet

of water finding its way into the facility. In fact, the facility was totally destroyed and its contents swept away in the 30- to 35-foot storm surge that accompanied Katrina.

The storm surge was responsible for much of the damage and loss, particularly close to the Gulf. In many instances records were moved from first-floor locations to second- or third-floor locations in anticipation of the storm. Often this resulted in the records being saved because, in some instances, the buildings were constructed in a manner that allowed the first floor to wash away without significant damage to higher floors. In some cases, though, roofs were blown away by the force of the wind and records on higher floors suffered severe water damage from rain.

The team was unable to assess the extent to which record keepers had prepared for catastrophic loss by microfilming or securing copies of records, but such information is likely to be available at a future time. Cities and counties might be expected to have such procedures in place. In one case, city council minutes were moved to a bank vault just before the storm hit; the city hall and bank building were demolished, but the bank vault survived and the records were recovered.

Response to the storm

Response to Katrina is less dependent on traditional disaster plans than on improvised actions as conditions permit.

Record keepers along the Gulf Coast are making heroic attempts to rescue damaged records. At many sites the team found staff hard at work laying records out to dry or boxing them for eventual shipment to freezers. In nearly every case, the staff said that their own homes were either severely damaged or completely destroyed. The team found that the emotional toll of the storm was severe and the personal loss often catastrophic. Workers expressed the sense that recovering records gave them something to focus on and a feeling of accomplishment in light of the overwhelming difficulties they faced.

Institutions, both large and small, were improvising their response because major resources are being concentrated—appropriately—on health and safety concerns. Large populations are in need of basic housing, food, water, clothing, and medical attention, and it may be many months before the loss of property and identity records begins to be felt.

The team observed that collections typically were either destroyed entirely or survived the storm but were damaged subsequently by high humidity and mold. Recovery of damp or damaged collections was often exacerbated by unhealthy residue in the buildings.

There was little evidence of paper in the debris surrounding homes and businesses. Shreds of fabric and plastic were caught in trees, but it appears that the power of the

storm surge completely destroyed paper. A few plastic data disks and videotapes were scattered around, although caked in grime, and an occasional photograph was seen among the debris. In a few instances, a file cabinet could be seen standing (although often missing drawers), and in every case observed the records were already heavy with mold.

Devastation in the area was so total that traditional response plans were not equal to the event. Such plans usually envision removal of wet records from affected areas within 48 hours, for instance. Access to buildings and areas damaged by Hurricane Katrina, though, is controlled by law enforcement or military personnel, and hazardous conditions largely prevented any response during the 48-hour window. In many cases record keepers are still being prevented from accessing their collections more than four weeks after the storm.

Traditional disaster plans also assume that staff who are familiar with the records—and, perhaps, skilled in the care of records—will be available to respond to the disaster. In the aftermath of Katrina, however, staff of many repositories have been displaced or are preoccupied with their own overwhelming physical needs. In the absence of the record keepers themselves, response is sometimes left to others who have little experience with records. At a county courthouse the team spoke to members of the National Guard who had been sent to begin ‘rescuing’ the land records damaged by water. Their confused commander said that, during the course of that day, he had been instructed in how to save the records by three different people who had described three different techniques (ranging from fanning the pages open to cutting the bindings off). Two of the ‘instructors’ turned out to be vendors from paper restoration companies. As a result, the Guard members had stopped work and were waiting for further instructions.

Finally, the team quickly scanned a packet of widely used disaster recovery publications (which were being distributed in the regions struck by Katrina) and found that much of the information was irrelevant in the face of Katrina’s scale. Repositories given such publications were unlikely to find them useful.

Action Required: Immediate

The team identified several action items that were immediately initiated to respond to the situation in Mississippi.

1. Contact US Archivist to solicit FEMA help for the Biloxi Public Library and to provide support to cover increasing immediate and essential response costs. **(Completed)**

2. Contact NHPRC for assistance in funding temporary warehouse site for recovery operations. **(Completed)**

3. Identify warehouse site within easy reach of coastal Mississippi where records may be taken and stored during recovery operations. Ensure proper health and safety precautions due to mold growth. (**In progress.** SAA and CoSA working with MDAH.)
4. Identify individual who could relocate to Mississippi and be employed for 6-month period to act as Volunteer and Resources Coordinator to assign resources to repositories and share information with the profession at large. (**In progress.** Input needed from profession at large. Initial funding offered by CoSA. Further funding sources may be needed.)
5. Deploy volunteer conservators and archivists to Jackson for one-week periods to assist with recovery work and training. Determine if funding is available from FEMA or elsewhere. (**In progress.** AIC and SAA. Deployment of volunteers must wait until Volunteer and Resources Coordinator is in place.)
6. Contact AIC to advise where conservators may be most helpful in Gulf Coast Mississippi and to ensure that their visit is carefully coordinated with the state. (**Completed**)
7. Develop press release aimed at increasing media awareness about the cultural records at risk and urgent need to ensure their long-term preservation (**In progress.** SAA lead)
8. Contact all local press and distribute information on salvaging personal belongings as families are returning to their homes and trying to save anything possible. (**In progress.** Heritage Preservation and AIC with MDAH.)
9. Organize no-cost recovery effort for artifacts damaged at Beauvoir through the University of Delaware and other graduate programs. Secure shipping support via ANAGPIC. (**In progress.** AIC and the University of Delaware.)
10. Establish a toll-free number for preservation assistance, especially for members of the public. (**In progress.** AIC and Heritage Preservation; Heritage Preservation lead. Temporary number: contact AIC at 202-452-9545 or Beverly Perkins at 951-698-1520.)

Action Required: Short Term

The team identified several action items that might be undertaken by the archival profession in the short term to enhance response to future disasters of this magnitude.

1. Institute a once-a-year, emergency preparation day (possibly called May Day) on which the entire profession would focus attention on a few simple but critical aspects of emergency planning. Specifically,
 - a) Essential information required in the event of an emergency (large or small) would be updated, verified, and disseminated on that day by every record repository in the country.
 - b) Conduct a disaster drill to ensure that everyone knows how to respond.
 - c) Make sure that there are sufficient supplies on hand for an emergency response. (SAA lead)
2. Request that Congress allocate block grants to the states to assist with emergency planning and training in the preservation of archival records during the next 12 to 24 months. (CoSA lead)
3. Amend FEMA legislation to include vital and historical records among their legislated responsibilities. (CoSA lead)
4. Develop a placard to be used by state archives and other assessment authorities during initial assessment of damaged sites. The placard—which could be nailed to the wall of the repository—would announce that an assessment team had visited the site, detail any recovery recommendations, and provide contact information (for the State Archives, for instance). This information could be referenced by those later sent to the site to assist in the recovery. This may avoid mass confusion and contradictory recommendations. (CoSA lead)
5. Create and update a directory and/or database of vendors and maintain online for use by the profession. (SAA lead)
6. Review widely used disaster publications to ensure that their information is relevant and not boilerplate. (AIC lead)

Action Required: Long Term

The team identified several action items that might be undertaken by the archival profession in the long term to enhance response to future disasters of this magnitude.

1. Archives must recognize—and place greater emphasis on—duplication and off-site storage as the *only* preservation tool adequate to a catastrophic disaster. Systematic imaging programs should be developed and implemented to protect essential records. States with coastal areas or those threatened by natural disasters may focus on these areas first.

2. State archives, local governments, and private record repositories could institute 'buddy systems' with comparable repositories in other states far removed (geographically) from their own. 'Buddy' repositories might store copies of vital records for each other or provide a single point of contact for staff displaced by major disasters.
3. The profession must make practical, current disaster preparedness a high priority. Surveys consistently show that most disaster plans are out of date or that information that is essential for response is out of date. Disaster plans that list home phone numbers are useless when homes have been destroyed. (Personal cell phones and e-mail addresses may be more appropriate in such cases.) Plans must include priorities for salvage, and such priorities must be determined in advance. The inability to recognize which records are essential creates confusion and time may be wasted on salvaging materials that are replaceable or that do not merit the cost.
4. State archival agencies need to ensure that their states have been surveyed and their historical records repositories identified. It is essential that state agencies know *where* records—public and private—are held *before* a disaster strikes. Wherever possible, historical repositories should be plotted on maps (or within a Geographic Information System) and contact information of key personnel should be kept current. More detailed systems might include a general description of the records held by each repository and whether these records relate to individual identity, rights, or entitlements.
5. The profession should develop a simple brochure and website for the public that identify and describe essential records that must be retained and guidelines for their long-term preservation.
6. NARA should develop a mobile response and recovery laboratory, which could be dispatched immediately to the site of a disaster to give NARA a highly visible presence and allow them to work with local and state agencies to ensure a rapid response to records issues. When not involved in immediate disaster recovery, such a vehicle might travel widely to provide training and raise awareness to archivists and the general public.
7. NARA should develop rapid response contracts with private companies to provide freezer trucks to disaster sites within days of the event.