Lessons from Katrina: Recovery of Cultural Collections
by Gary Frost

After crossing from the Atlantic Ocean, Gulf of Mexico, and South Florida, hurricane Katrina, made landfall in Plaquemines Parish, as a strong Category 4 hurricane. Four hours later, the hurricane, downgraded to a Category 3, touched land again near the Louisiana-Mississippi border. A storm surge, exceeding 25 feet, was forced ashore as it met the shallow slope of Mississippi’s continental shelf and swept inland up to six miles.

Televised images depicted communities in ruin, refugees homeless and a stunned population wading waist-deep in flood waters in sodden New Orleans. The communications concerning the state of heritage collections was fragmentary in the wake of the storm. With little factual information, the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) initiated a plan to organize two mobile units to assess conditions in Louisiana’s and Mississippi’s collecting institutions. The Heritage Emergency Assistance Recovery Team’s (HEART) assessment program was funded by the generous support of the Watson-Brown Foundation of Thomson of Georgia and the History Channel. Each team was led by a museum professional and staffed with conservator volunteers from the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), with four one-week rotations planned per state.

HEART MS#1
The first Mississippi HEART assessment team was comprised of Joy Barnett (Administrative Assistant, Texas Association of Museums), the team dispatcher and manager; her son Ashley Barnett (Fire and Rescue, Burnet, TX), our ever ready driver,
Our home for a week was a small, rented recreational vehicle (RV) stocked with food, water and bedding. A car was also rented to increase the team’s mobility. The Mississippi gulf coast highways and city streets were devastated and all signage had been swept away. Without the skills of Joy and Ashley the MS#1 assessment project would have been a disaster as well.

Our team included two conservators, Randy and Gary, whose job was to assess the collections’ damage and to specify needs for salvage and recovery. We assessed 13 library and archive collecting institutions, (8 survived damaged, 3 survived with major damage and loss and 2 no longer exist). We could not find the library’s remains at Pass Christian. At another location we found the remains of the library, but could find no evidence of surviving collections. The Maritime and Seafood Industry Museum’s artifact collections at Biloxi were spread across acres of debris. In many situations, we were scouting for collections in the ruins of entire cities.

The memorable experience was not that of devastation, but of the Mississippians resilience and tenacity. Dedicated librarians, archivists and museum workers continued a daily struggle to secure and revive their institutions. The Mississipians at the devastated Jefferson Davis Library were living in tents and cars and eating army rations. Three weeks after the storm they continued to live and work without electricity, water, or any municipal utilities and many were faced with months, even years, of continuing salvage work.

It became obvious that our concern with the survival of cultural collections must be integrated with much larger regional needs— our first realization that this was a wide regional disaster covering four states, an area larger than the United Kingdom. Surviving collections would need preservation in heat and humidity or would need evacuation inland. Emergency funding would be needed to sustain institutions in the face of collapse of the local economies.

The Army provided diesel generated electricity to ventilate surviving collections. Commercial salvage operations were at work evacuating collections to drying facilities around the country. Rare and important materials were relocated to surviving inland institutions and library services were migrated to inland branches. Our team appraised the situation at each visited institution and advised on next steps and corrective actions. We also submitted four National Endowment for the Humanities “Emergency Response” grants ($30,000 each) and walked these through by cell phone. These crucial, open budget funds were made available within five working days in an admirable demonstration of agility in the large NEH agency. (See the full activity report published by the IFLA International Preservation News at http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/ipn.html, issue #37, December, 2005.)

Four Lessons
The disaster is not over. Recovery from Katrina and Rita will take decades and the potential for future natural disaster continues.

Region wide disasters dislocate populations and destroy the local capacity to recover. Institutional disaster plans become inoperative and the salvage of cultural collections is forestalled. Resources that can be brought to bear for rescue of cultural collections may be those beyond the region and these must be mobile and mobilized before the disaster strikes.

There are at least four lessons apparent from experience of the response to Katrina.

1. Improved Response—quick action saves collections. We should continue to
update best practices, first responder training and rehearsed menu of field services, especially mold suppression methods. Field responders must be mobilized or pre-selected from practitioner volunteers and training program students. They must also be mobile with access to appropriate vehicles such as job site trailers and travel homes.

The need for further training was illustrated by well intended, but problematic activities of local first responders. Although, industrial materials such as Tyvek®, polyethylene and plywood are more readily accessible following a regional disaster, they are problematic as applied to collection salvage. Drying areas prepared with plastic sheets and poly bags used as item protectors, nurture mold growth. Plastic film or Tyvek® archival enclosures can also nurture mold. Plywood screwed to windows is frequently left in place long after the hurricane, inhibiting ventilation and illumination (without electrical service) of interiors. Historical storm shutters are superior to plywood board-ups since they can be quickly opened again.

Another illustration of misdirected activity occurs when the “germ theory” is inappropriately applied to mold propagation. There is an inclination to segregate, disregard and discard molded materials in an attempt to keep them from “contaminating” material without mold. The result is particularly adverse when materials with mold are quarantined under polyethylene. Ventilation and out-door air exchange applied to whole collections, regardless of ambient relative humidity, is better advised.

2. **Coordinated Dispatching**—live advisory directs activities. Disasters should activate directorates or agency emergency groups for compiled assessment and report by cell phone communications providing real time movements and schedules. In-field dispatchers must also move into action to guide on-site visits, navigation and manage distributed rest and work sessions. Assessment teams can be followed by on-site teams with job-site capacity. Overall coordination with commercial salvage services is needed.

Assessment and follow-up teams should not be composed solely of preservation workers. Although the objective is collections recovery, the teams must have members responsible for logistics, communication and navigation. Such divisions also better distribute rest and work periods, increasing the team’s overall endurance.

3. **Distributed Recovery**—most help maybe outside the region. The disaster can activate out-of-region treatment projects and provide coordination with local volunteers at work sites beyond the devastated region. Distributed preservation activities should encourage long-term response planning including institution-to-institution connection with open exposition of lessons learned.

Commercial freeze drying and sterilization processes are applied to collections salvage. Needed document cleaning and mending processes are not commercialized and are much less available. A solution is distribution of some document cleaning and mending to preservation departments outside the region.

An out-of-region response example is the Project CALM (Conservation Assistance for Libraries of Mississippi) sponsored by the University of Iowa Libraries, that assists restoration of historical documents damaged by hurricane Katrina, by volunteers from the Iowa City and Cedar Rapids areas. The three-year effort will provide cost-free conservation treatment and archival enclosures.

4. **Accessible Funding**—cash first, before recovery. The disaster should activate emergency funding programs. The admirable example of quick relief funding by the NEH should be considered by other funding agencies. Application and
corroboration of need can be provided by objective, visiting assessors. The four NEH Emergency Response grants implemented by the HEART MS#1 team provided a huge encouragement and crucial early support to the besieged institutions.

The rejuvenation of cultural life is important in regions like the Gulf Coast with their economic dependence on tourism. Salvaging cultural collections launches rejuvenation of cultural life. This step can be taken early at a lower cost than municipal infrastructure and utilities reconstruction. Project funding supporting exhibitions interpreting the impact of the disaster are well directed to the local cultural institutions.

In the longer term, cultural institutions must position themselves for municipal recovery investment. Disaster presents opportunity, but advocates for cultural institutions will find themselves between developers’ intent on the most profitable tourist and hospitality economics and residents longing for restoration without change.

Continuing Effort

Momentum for collections recovery was well appreciated by the 30 funding agencies and preservation programs officers who met at the Library of Congress in April, where the “Future Directions in Safe Guarding Documents Collections,” was sponsored by the Preservation Directorate of the Library of Congress, the Federal Library and Information Center Committee and the American Folklife Center.

Randy Silverman composed a working white paper for this symposium; “Towards a National Disaster Response Protocol,” which will be published in Libraries and the Cultural Record, University of Texas.

Katrina’s aftermath underscores the national need for a robust emergency response plan to deal with the salvage of cultural materials. Reviewing our experiences, we envisioned mobile job-site trailers outfitted with collection stabilizing gear already on board. Such units could operate for days at a given location providing local outreach and assistance to private and institutional collections.

We recognized the need for standing agreements with funding agencies to support emergency recovery efforts. Cooperative relations between relevant national organizations (e.g., AASLH, AIC) could standardize the training and selection criteria for potential volunteers—conservators, museum professionals, life-safety personnel and conservation training program students—to ensure teams are ready with the first responders. Relevant national associations (e.g., American Association of Museums, American Library Association and Society of American Archivists) could support efforts by maintaining lists of members and non-members within each state to expedite determining which institutions need condition assessment. Several appropriate contacts per institution should be listed, including home and cell phone numbers. Such organizations could coordinate onsite mobile conservation unit hosting, providing clearance to use vacant institutional parking lots.

With 2005 on record as the most active hurricane season in recorded history, NOAA predicts we are now entering a 20-30 year cycle of increased tropical storm activity. In combination with other types of natural and manmade disasters, this warning should provide ample incentive to begin formulating national and international response plans to harness the good will of knowledgeable practitioners to ensure irreplaceable cultural collections are not needlessly lost.

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In Medias Res: How to Protect Media and Mixed Media in an Age of Transition

by Oliver Cutshaw

The article title comes from the Latin term meaning to start a story in the midst of things—a favored tradition for Homeric epics and more recently for the Star Wars saga. Being in the midst of things is not always easy, especially for preservation librarians who are trying to make practical decisions in a changing era while maintaining professional standards grounded in historic precedent and best practice. It has, however, always been our job to deal with existing technologies and maintain older formats while anticipating future innovations.

Today’s librarians are confronted by a wide array of evolving challenges: online catalogs with rapidly expanding links to commercial databases, larger digital collections, the increasing use of off-site storage facilities, and ever changing media formats and technologies. How much time and expense should we devote to protecting media that might be obsolete by the end of the decade? As Thomas Mann described in a recent issue of American Libraries, there is considerable debate in our field even regarding the most fundamental issue: the future structure of academic libraries. Will they maintain a somewhat traditional model, open stacks and browsing collections, or become an internet café social center served by off-site storage?

At my desk in the basement of Widener Library at Harvard University, I am not in a position to predict where these massive changes will take us. While more information is accessible on the web, our libraries continue to purchase videos, DVDs, CDs, and books with accompanying media which our users want now. As Uwe Joachim summarized in his excellent article “The Gnosis of Media:”

This brings us back to the corporeal library and its necessity. Whoever opts for the real life in this world, and not for a utopian transformation of our world into a noncorporeal and electronically shining and translucent cosmic spirit, has to opt for real books and libraries.

Although we are in an age of transition, we still must find practical ways to preserve the media we have collected and will continue to collect and make it accessible.

**Practical Steps for Preservation and Access**

A number of articles discuss the wide range of concerns that we face on a day-to-day basis when working with media and mixed media: How to house? What type of security strips or targets to use? To label or not to label? Ultimately these decisions are driven by the nature of an institution’s policies and practices for housing media and mixed media. Answers to the following questions should guide your decisions:

- Does your library house CDs with their accompanying books and bound periodicals?
- Does your library store media and mixed media in the general stacks or are they housed in a media resource center or special collections area?
- Is your media housed at an off-site storage facility?
- And lastly, is your circulating media collection viewed as an integral part of the core collection or merely a convenient tool for the patrons to use and then be discarded when the next format revolution comes along?
Housing
A practical concern is how to protect the media that are part of a library’s circulating collection. The housing protocols and choices outlined below are the ones we make at Widener Library and may be applicable to other institutions.

The original condition of media enclosures is often poor. A CD or DVD that costs the University $30 will be housed in a fragile plastic case that costs only pennies. It is my experience that many of these containers break at the corners and have cracked or damaged hinges. Instead consider house or re-housing media in polypropylene containers. These are tough, dependable and cost efficient.

Mixed media are more complex. Each library has to find its own solutions depending on how and where the media is stored. The first decision is whether the media is to be separated from the text material and stored in a media center, or will it be somehow stored together. At Widener Library, most media is housed at our off-site storage facility, the Harvard Depository, so we want it to remain with its accompanying text. Our goal is to keep the media component protected, and readily usable. One option is to insert safe, easy-to-use pockets or to house it in polypropylene containers.

Widener Library is fortunate to have a large in-house conservation laboratory with facilities to make custom enclosures. The foundation enclosure is a standard phase box adapted to accommodate a wide array of media materials. These different types of media provide opportunities for various levels of decision making. Kate Rich, Senior Conservation Technician at Widener Library, emphasized the following points:

• Decision making is dictated by the piece. Size, weight, and ease of use will determine appropriate housing choices.
• Always use “archival quality” (chemically stable) materials.
• Pockets in publishers materials are often weak, damaged, or impractical and will therefore need to be replaced.
• Often when a publisher’s media pocket has to be removed, the book will require repair. Great care should be exercised when removing paper pockets from the text in order to minimize damage to the media and the book.
• With more publishing of mixed media and a wide array of mixed media combinations, it is necessary to come up...
Introduction of Archival Products
New Account Manager

I would like to introduce myself as the newest member of the Archival Products team. My name is Molly McIlhon and I am your new Account Manager, eager to serve your conservation and preservation needs. I am new to the industry and bring over 9 years of customer relations and quality control experience with me. I am excited about my new position and passionate about the quality of our products and service. People usually say that I am a naturally optimistic and energetic person and I hope to continue that trend at Archival Products. Our customers are very important to me and I will strive to make your job easier in any way I can by listening and fulfilling your archival needs. Whether it’s a family photo kit to preserve your family’s heirlooms or pamphlet binders for your university, I am committed to serving you. So, feel free to contact me to introduce yourself or if I can be of assistance in processing an order. I look forward to working with you soon on your archival needs.

with standard solutions and an inventory of materials to expedite processing and ensure quality.

**Sample Solutions**

Ms. Rich described some options that she routinely employs while working on a wide variety of Harvard College Library materials.

- Sometimes the simplest solution is the best: put a fragile box of CDs in a phase box of 60 pt. blue/gray board, a stable and easy solution in a lab equipped to do boxmaking.
- Four flap enclosures work well for smaller or thin mixed media items. Often these smaller items present unique challenges and this enclosure is a versatile solution.
- Another useful solution is to build a sink mat into the standard foundation enclosure. The sink mat is made of archival corrugated cardboard and is used to house the accompanying video, cassette or CD. This solution is illustrated below.

These solutions meet Widener’s criteria for mixed media: (1) that the media be kept with the book; (2) that the book and media be easy for the patron to use; and (3) that the housing of the media be dependable and sturdy to withstand transporting to and from the Depository.

These solutions have been developed in coordination with our Technical Services and Access Services staff. In all aspects of media preservation, whether it be access, security, or storage, it is vital to have a good working relationship and ongoing communication with your library partners. Procedures and storage solutions must be appropriate to the institution and meet the needs of its patrons. Good policy is not made in isolation.

**Security and Access**

Let me point out a few things that seem to work well in Harvard College Library.

A. Security strips are built into the containers or applied to the containers of all non-magnetic media. However, if your media or mixed media are housed in open stacks collections you may wish to use the security strip overlays for your stand-alone CDs and CDs in pockets that accompany other materials.

B. Specific notes concerning accompanying media are built into the item level records of our Integrated Library System (ILS). These records alert the Circulation Services staff to the presence and the nature of accompanying media making it easier to verify that the media is intact.

C. Cataloging teams add notes to the bibliographic records of our ILS, indicating the type of media, its number and...
These serve the dual purpose of alerting the patron to the accompanying materials and helping the Circulation team track media and verify that returned items are complete.

D. Our emphasis on durable cases and housings means that the media or accompanying media is likely to survive a bit longer.

E. Easy-to-use enclosures are essential for access. If the patron cannot readily use and re-house the media they are less likely to request it in the future.

Conclusion

While technological obsolescence is the fate of all contemporary formats in our digital age, content of many accompanying media items have long-term value. We cannot assume that just because ongoing massive digital initiatives are underway that everything “new” or born digital will be readily available to future generations. Existing media collections and new acquisitions must be processed and stored properly even if we suspect that they will be considered antiques in a few decades.

For example, even though a floppy disk may appear in the back of a recent commercially published book, is it always reasonable to conclude that the files on that disc have been safely preserved by any entity. Whose responsibility is it to preserve them? The author? The publisher? The academic community?

The nearly overwhelming tasks of making our print collections available online and reformatting our older materials on tapes and disks is a concern for the whole library profession. Ultimately the needs and tastes of our patrons and the advances of technology will remain the crucial forces that both form and inform our decisions.

As for those in collections care, our task is a bit simpler. It is our job, in this age of transition, to make sure that the media and mixed media objects in our care are safely housed, properly handled, and readily accessible to our patrons.

SOURCES


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Photographs in this article are courtesy of Shannon Phillips, Conservation Services Intern.