

Session Overview

Disaster Preparedness and Response for Family Collections

Fires, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and earthquakes are scary scenarios for those who treasure and maintain their family history. Learn what you can do ahead of time to plan for emergencies and minimize risk to your family heirlooms as well as what to expect to do after a disaster to salvage damaged items.

Presenter Biographies



Sara Holmes

Sara Holmes started working in Preservation Programs at the National Archives at St. Louis in 2007. She is currently a conservator. Before coming to the National Archives, she was a conservator at Texas Tech University and the Missouri State Archives. She has a master of library and information science with a certificate of advanced study in conservation of library and archival materials from the University of Texas and a master's degree in history from the University of New Orleans. She is also a certified archivist and was selected as a member of the first cohort of the Archives Leadership Institute in 2008.

Presenter Biographies



Sara Leonowitz

Sara Leonowitz is a conservator technician at the National Archives in Washington, DC. She received her bachelor's degree in art conservation from the University of Delaware in 2020 and her master's degree in the conservation of books and library materials from West Dean College in 2023. She is passionate about emergency response and conducted her dissertation on the conservation of war-damaged materials.



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Disaster Preparedness and Response for Family Collections

Sara Holmes and Sara Leonowitz



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Introduction: What is a Disaster?

Emergency or Disaster ?

Emergency: a serious, unexpected, and often dangerous situation requiring immediate action

- A water pipe bursting in freezing weather, a house fire caused by electrical problems, etc.
- Typically affects one structure



Badlands National Park (1961). Fire damaged interior of a home.
National Archives Identifier: [404573665](https://www.archives.gov/details/404573665).

Emergency or Disaster?



Scottsbluff, NE (1955). Tornado. National Archives Identifier: [283875](#).

- Disaster: a sudden accident or natural catastrophe that causes great damage or loss of life
 - A train derailment, hurricane, or tornado impacting a wide area
 - Typically has a state and federal declaration of disaster

Impacts of Emergencies and Disasters

Both can damage family collections.

- Burn damage
- Soot
- Water damage
- Mold growth
- Contamination



Evansville, IN (2005). Donald Berry searches debris looking for family effects. National Archives Identifier: [5693047](#).



Spring City, TX (2013). Leyrn Miller inspects damage to her wedding gown after it was submerged in flood water. National Archives Identifier: [75579903](#).



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Health and Safety in Disaster Response

Hazards that May Result from a Disaster

- Structural instability
- Electrical and gas hazards
 - Turn off gas and electricity before entering a flooded building
 - If you smell gas, evacuate immediately
 - Use flashlights, never use an open flame



Weldon Spring, MO (2013). The roof was torn off this home after a tornado went through the neighborhood. National Archives Identifier: [24478585](#).



Hazards that May Result from a Disaster

- Debris may contain nails, glass, sharp metal
- Use caution running generators - never indoors or in an enclosed space
- Beware of wildlife
 - Snakes, mice, rats, and even larger animals
 - Yellowjackets, wasps, bees
- Never go to a disaster site by yourself

Waterborne Hazards

Sources of water

- Fresh water, rainwater
- Clean water pipes
- Fire suppression pipes can be stagnant, rusty
- Sewer and septic
 - Gray water to raw sewage



Memphis, TN (2011). The waterline on this home indicates the waters are receding slowly. National Archives Identifier: [7855576](#).

Waterborne Hazards

- Contaminants
 - Eroded building material (asbestos, lead, PCBs)
 - Oil in flood water
 - Chemicals (household cleaners, pesticides, gas, etc.)
 - Bacteria in gray water
 - Sewage

Potable Water Damage

- Do not assume water is safe just because it is not sewage or flood water!
- Some contaminants come from the source of water
- Others are added as water goes through mains, pipes, and spigots
- Testing must be done by a certified laboratory or public health department before drinking or cooking with water



Hoboken, NJ (2012). Hudson County has water trucks for residents affected by Hurricane Sandy and without potable water. National Archives Identifier: [24469930](#).

Soot

- Test to ensure it does not contain chemicals that require professional abatement
- Soot is a carcinogen!
 - Protect from inhalation and skin absorption



St. Louis, MO (1973). Burned and sooty records recovered from the 1973 fire at the Military Personnel Records Center. National Archives Identifier: [218517988](https://www.foia.gov/218517988).

Mold

- Mold can cause
 - Irritation of respiratory tract and eyes
 - Sensitivity ranging from eye itching to asthma attacks and pneumonia
 - Infections of the lungs and other organs
 - Toxicity



Minot, ND (2011). After high water flooding, mold grows on the walls of a local church. National Archives Identifier: [7856781](#).

- Protect from inhalation and skin absorption
- More exposure to mold makes you more likely to develop a sensitivity to mold

Mold



A Preservation Technician at the National Personnel Records Center points with a microspatula at dormant mold on a page damaged in the 1973 fire.

- All molds in quantity can be hazardous
- Lab testing can determine if most highly toxic molds are present
- Air sampling only determines if the ventilation system is contaminated

How Much Mold is Too Much?



New Orleans, LA (2005). A resident returns home looking for items to salvage from the flood water damage. National Archives Identifier: [5695359](#).

- Where the odor of mold is detectable
- Where there is water damage
- When artifacts have visible patches of mold
- If mold is in the ventilation system

How Much Mold is Too Much?

- No cleanup can remove every trace of mold
- Testing samples should be taken directly from artifacts or contaminated surfaces



Arabi, LA (2005). Klevort Bergeron Sr. has decided to leave his home of 45 years due to the damage left by 12 feet of flood water in his house from Hurricane Katrina. National Archives Identifier: [5693643](#).

Disinfection vs. Abatement

- Disinfection: Cleaning and sanitizing to remove mold
 - Full disinfection requires removing mold-contaminated items
- Abatement: Reducing mold contamination to address health concerns
 - Allows for keeping contaminated items
 - Must be sure these are kept in low relative humidity and temperature to prevent dormant mold from growing again

Safety and Hazard Resources

- Your local fire marshal
 - Contact your fire department and ask if they can assess your home
- State emergency response
 - Look for your state's Emergency Management Agency
- Local emergency response
 - Counties and cities will also have designated Emergency Management officials
- [Community Emergency Response Team \(CERT\)](#)
 - Trains volunteers in basic disaster response skills



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Saving Cultural Resources, Including Your Family's Collections

Salvaging Family Collections



Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (2005). Aerial shot of a small building on the roofs of homes in a flooded area. National Archives Identifier: [70191461](#).

Salvaging Family Collections



The photos were removed from the album as best as possible and allowed to air dry. Note that there is still some mud, and some photos are stuck to parts of the paper from the photo album.



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Response and Recovery

Salvage vs. Stabilization

Salvage: physical recovery of objects from floodwater, debris, fire, or other deleterious conditions

Stabilization: getting objects to a state where they will not continue to deteriorate



Moore, OK (2013). Moore resident, Kristian Parrish finds one of her favorite scarves in the debris that was once her home. The area of Moore, OK, was struck by a F5 tornado on May 20, 2013. National Archives Identifier: [24477703](#).



Personal Health, Safety, and Well-being

Physical well-being:

- Make sure the proper authorities have deemed your home safe to enter
- Keep power and gas off in your home
- Watch where you step
- Photograph damage to your home for insurance purposes
- Call your insurance agency as soon as possible

Personal Health, Safety, and Well-being

Emotional well-being:

- Decide what is most important to you:
 - Focus on saving irreplaceable objects
 - Handwritten letters, handmade quilts, other one-of-a-kind objects
 - Consider discarding items that can be replaced
 - Mass-produced books, photographs that can be scanned and reprinted

Personal Health, Safety, and Well-being

Salvaging personal items:

ALWAYS use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)



Gloves



Rubber boots



N95 mask

Personal Health, Safety, and Well-being

Coming into contact with floodwater:

- Wash affected area with soap and clean water
 - Or alcohol wipes/sanitizer if needed
- Clean wounds and seek medical attention if necessary
- Wash clothes in detergent and hot water

Recovering Personal Belongings

Handling objects:



Images from the Canadian Conservation Institute.

Recovering Personal Belongings

Handling objects:

- If you have any objects that are stuck together, **DO NOT** attempt to separate them before rinsing
- If you have photographs or paintings that are framed or in an album, and can safely remove them, do so before rinsing



Stabilizing Personal Belongings

Materials needed for stabilization:



Flat work space



Multiple containers



Clean water



Paint roller and brushes,
paper towels



Fan



Window screen mesh

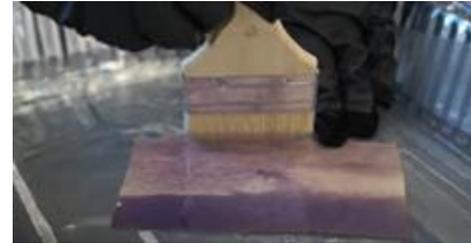


Undyed cotton towels

Stabilizing Personal Belongings

Rinsing objects:

- 1) Carefully submerge object in water
- 2) Gently brush off mud/debris with paintbrush if necessary
 - a) Attempt to safely separate stuck objects
- 3) Lift object out of water
- 4) Repeat steps one to three in other two baths



Stabilizing Personal Belongings

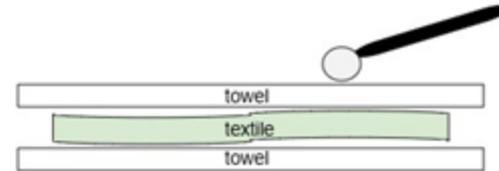
Handling objects while cleaning:

- Paper documents, photographs, textiles → use window screen mesh to handle while in the bath
- Books → hold firmly shut while you dip in and out of the bath
- Paintings, ceramics, metal/wooden/leather objects → can submerge or sponge clean

Stabilizing Personal Belongings

Drying objects:

- Dry thoroughly to prevent mold growth
- Different objects need different amounts of time and set-ups to dry



Stabilizing Personal Belongings

Freezing objects:

- Mold growth starts within 48 hours
- Wrap objects with:
 - Freezer paper (NOT wax or parchment paper)
 - OUTDOOR painters tape
 - Freezer bags
- Can leave up to one year if necessary



Freezer paper



OUTDOOR tape



Freezer bags

Some Things to Consider...

This guidance gives you your best chance of saving your family heirlooms but does not guarantee success.

Stabilization will not return your objects to their original state, but it can help halt the deterioration processes brought on by the disaster.

Resources

National Heritage Responders helpline: NHRpublichelpline@culturalheritage.org

[FEMA Save Your Family Treasures \(SYFT\)](#)

[Heritage Emergency National Task Force \(HENTF\)](#)

American Institute of Conservation (AIC) [Find A Conservator](#)

AIC Disaster Response and Recovery [Guides](#)



Thank you!

Please reach out to

preservation@nara.gov

if you have any further questions about the material presented today.



After the Broadcast

Email questions to inquire@nara.gov

Video recordings of lectures and downloadable handouts
will remain online at

www.archives.gov/calendar/genealogy-series/2025



KNOW YOUR RECORDS

National Archives and Records Administration

Educational resources on how to access and conduct research using U.S. federal government records at the National Archives and Records Administration.

www.archives.gov/calendar/know-your-records