

Summer 2017

## Preservation Perspectives: Disaster Planning

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### Repository Citation

Stolz, B. (2017). Preservation Perspectives: Disaster Planning. *Kentucky Libraries*, 81 (3), 5-6.  
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PRESERVATION PERSPECTIVES

# DISASTER PLANNING

BY BILL STOLZ • ARCHIVIST, WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY

Summer is here, bringing the potential for storms, heavy rain, flooding, high winds, and more. However, it is not only summer storms we must be concerned with, as disaster can strike at any time, caused by Mother Nature or by humans – think plumbing or electrical problems. In any event, we as archivists, librarians, and home historians should be ready for any type of disaster by being prepared and having a plan. Today we will focus on preparing for a disaster at home or in the office. Next time we will explore the disaster plan itself.

No one likes to think about a disaster of any type at home or at the workplace, but disasters do happen, and all of us are likely to experience at least one, whether big or small. (I have dealt with water on several occasions from heavy rain and a leaky roof.) As the Boy Scout motto (which still sticks with me all these years later) says, it is better to “be prepared” than to experience a crisis without a plan and supplies on hand.

## SOME PRACTICAL TIPS FOR THE HOME AND ARCHIVES:

- Consider your current storage space. Do you have material in an attic, basement, garage?
- Think about what is in, next to, and above your storage area. Make sure your archival and family collections are not stored next to or below the water heater, washing machine, bathroom, or major plumbing. This is an excellent time to walk the house and/or workplace and think about the placement of pipes and what they hold/carry.
- Know your building. It is very helpful, especially if you may be the first one on the scene, to know where the water shut-off valve, circuit box, drains, and so on are located.
- Always make sure all material is stored at least 4-6 inches off the ground in case of flooding.
- Have an updated contact list in case of disaster and have one or two people designated as the main contacts. Every second counts, so if it is after hours, you want to get help as quickly as possible.
- Create a priority list. Prioritize those items or collections that you consider most valuable (historical content, monetary, personal connection).
- Have a checklist ready. This list of “things to do” will be invaluable when you are handling a situation. We will explore the list in greater detail next time.
- If you have photograph negatives, think about storing them somewhere else. A safety deposit box is a great place.
- Do you have back-ups of your electronic files? Cloud storage, external hard drives, or, if you are lucky, off-site server space are options.
- Get to know your local firefighters by inviting them for a tour of your library or archives, and educate them on the value of your collection. Several years ago the repository where I worked gave tours to the entire city fire department, over 100 men and women, and they were delighted to see the highlights from our collections, offered great suggestions for disaster recovery, and, most importantly, went away knowing the value of our material stored in the library.
- Create a disaster kit. Most of us have kits ready to deal with the human side of disaster (first aid, flashlights, batteries), but it is a good idea to put together a small kit with tarps, garbage bags, sponges, gloves, absorbent paper, clipboards, pencils, and other items crucial for recovery and protection. Store the items in a waterproof container, mark it clearly, and make sure everyone knows where it is located.
- Educate yourself. Look for local and state workshops or webinars that offer training on disaster preparedness and recovery.

State organizations like the Kentucky Council on Archives, Kentucky Library Association, and Kentucky Historical Society often sponsor workshops or have conference sessions on this topic.

- Network. Talk to colleagues that have detailed disaster plans, and/or contact the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives Document Preservation Lab for assistance with disaster planning and recovery.

## RESOURCES:

Many resources, state and national, provide detailed information on disaster preparedness and recovery, including numerous books, articles, and web sites. A very good print source is *Disaster Response and Planning for Libraries* by Miriam B. Kahn (3rd Edition, Chicago: ALA, 2012). (<https://kdla.ky.gov/archivists/preservation/Pages/default.aspx>).

The Northeast Document Conservation Center, an independent conservation lab, actually offers free 24/7 Emergency Telephone Assistance ([www.nedcc.org/free-resources/disaster-assistance/emergency-phone-assistance](http://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/disaster-assistance/emergency-phone-assistance)) to individuals and/or organizations. In addition, NEDCC provides free leaflets and other resources on a variety of preservation topics.

The Smithsonian Institution Archives has a page devoted to emergency preparedness and it includes an extensive list of resources covering everything from planning to recovery assistance. (<https://siarchives.si.edu/what-we-do/preservation/emergency-preparedness>)

The Library of Congress Emergency Management page lists information and links on risk management, preparedness, and more. ([www.loc.gov/preservation/emergprep/](http://www.loc.gov/preservation/emergprep/))

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works offers a publication and resources page with guides and links to additional information. ([www.conservation-us.org/](http://www.conservation-us.org/))

The National Archives and Records Administration has compiled information sheets, bibliographies, and other resources on its Records Emergency Information page. ([www.archives.gov/preservation/records-emergency](http://www.archives.gov/preservation/records-emergency))

While many of us may never experience a disaster that threatens our collections, it is crucial to have a plan in place just in case. Better to be prepared with a plan and never need it, than to be scrambling to locate resources, phone numbers, and supplies as water is pouring in through the roof. Next column we will look closely at checklists and disaster plans.

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