FEMA

Fact Sheet

Federal Insurance and Mitigation Administration

# After the Flood: Advice for Salvaging Damaged Family Treasures

*When homes are flooded and lives upended, treasured possessions such as family heirlooms, photos, and other keepsakes become more cherished. These valued objects may be saved if untouched by sewage or chemicals. If cherished objects have been in contact with sewage or chemicals, see below under "Call in a Pro." The Heritage Emergency National Task Force, a coalition of 58 national organizations and federal agencies co-sponsored by FEMA and the Smithsonian Institution, offers these basic salvage guidelines.*

## After the Flood

- Personal safety is always the highest priority when entering buildings damaged by floodwater.
- Check for structural damage before re-entering your home to avoid being trapped in a building collapse.
- Keep power off until an electrician has inspected your system for safety.
- Turn off the gas. Be alert for gas leaks.
- Look before you step. After a flood, the ground and floors are covered with debris, including broken bottles and nails. Floors and stairs that have been covered with mud can be very slippery.
- Take photos of any floodwater in your home and of damaged items for insurance purposes.
- Call your insurance agent to file a claim and report the damage as soon as possible. Homeowners insurance usually covers losses caused by wind, storms, or broken water pipes, but not surface flooding.
- Rescue the most valuable items, but never attempt to salvage belongings at the expense of your own safety.
- Wear long sleeves, sturdy shoes or waterproof boots, and plastic or rubber gloves during cleanup.
- Wash your hands often with soap and clean water or use a hand-cleaning gel with alcohol in it.
- Mold can form within 48 hours; you will need to work fast. The goal is to reduce the humidity and temperature around your treasures as you proceed to clean and dry them. If you do encounter extensive mold, use protective gear such as gloves, goggles, and an N100 face mask, available at most hardware stores.

Columbia, South Carolina, residents begin cleanup after historic flooding affected their state in October 2015. The orange tape around the pile lets debris removal workers know that the enclosed material should be removed. Photo by Bill Koplitz/FEMA

## Some Simple Cleaning Tips

**Air-Dry.** Gentle air-drying is best for all your treasured belongings—indoors, if possible. Hair dryers, irons, ovens, and prolonged exposure to sunlight will do irreversible damage. Increase indoor airflow with fans, open windows, air conditioners, and dehumidifiers.

**Handle with Care.** Use great caution in handling your heirlooms, which can be especially fragile when wet. Separate damp materials: remove the contents from drawers; take photographs out of damp albums; remove paintings and prints from frames; place paper towels between the pages of wet books.

**Clean Gently.** Loosen dirt and debris on fragile objects gently with soft brushes and cloths. Avoid rubbing, which can grind in dirt.

**Salvage Photos.** Clean photographs by rinsing them carefully in clean water. Air-dry photos on a plastic screen or paper towel, or by hanging them by the corner with plastic clothespins. Don't let the image come into contact with other surfaces as it dries.

**Prioritize.** You may not be able to save everything, so focus on what's most important to you, whether for historic, monetary, or sentimental reasons.

**Can't Do It All?** Damp objects and items that cannot be dealt with immediately should be put in open, unsealed boxes or bags. Photos, papers, books, and textiles should be frozen if you can't get them dry within 48 hours.

## Call in a Pro

If a precious item is badly damaged, a conservator may be able to help. Be sure to collect broken pieces. Set your treasure aside in a well-ventilated room until you find professional help. If a precious item has been exposed to contaminated water, seek a conservator's advice on salvaging it; your health and safety, and that of your loved ones, is of utmost importance. To locate a peer-reviewed conservator, click on the "Find a Conservator" box on the home page of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), www.conservation-us.org. Also, you could contact the conservation/preservation department of a major museum, library, or archives for advice.

## Advice by Phone

A number of organizations offer free telephone advice following an emergency or disaster:

Regional Alliance for Preservation (RAP) is a national network of nonprofit organizations with expertise in the field of conservation and preservation. Individual member organizations offer free emergency advice, many on a 24/7 basis. Click on the link to locate your nearest organization.

For cultural institutions, the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation provides a 24/7 emergency hotline staffed by the National Heritage Responders, a volunteer cadre of preservation and conservation experts trained in collections salvage: 202-661-8068.

## Additional Resources

**Item-specific Salvage Steps**

A 10-minute video, "Water Segment from the *Field Guide to Emergency Response*" from the Foundation of the Amer-ican Institute for Conservation, shows how to rescue soaked photographs, books, documents, and other valued items.

A 10-minute video, "Mold-Damaged Artwork: DIY Salvage Techniques for Studio Artists" from CERF+, demonstrates simple triage and salvage procedures to stop or prevent a mold outbreak on paper, canvas, textiles, and wood.

Salvage Procedures for Wet Items. Minnesota Historical Society. Covers archaeological artifacts, photographs and transparencies, scrapbooks, textiles, wood, and more.

Disaster Recovery for Films in Flooded Areas. AMIA Hurricane Relief: What to Do About Your Home Movie Damage. Association of Moving Image Archivists. Practical and useful information on recovering film after a flood.

Studio Protector's Online Guide for artists addresses health and safety, salvage, cleanup, and obtaining disaster relief.

**Salvage a Historic Property**

Resilient Heritage: Protecting Your Historic Home from Natural Disasters. National Center for Preservation Technology and Training.

Disaster Preparation and Response for Homeowners. National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Treatment of Flood-Damaged Older and Historic Buildings. National Trust for Historic Preservation.

**General Guidance**

*Flood Recovery Booklet*. Iowa Conservation and Preservation Consortium.

*Repairing Your Flooded Home*. American Red Cross and FEMA.

DisasterAssistance.gov. Access to disaster help and resources.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides a number of helpful resources, including After a Hurricane; Evacuee Education Materials: Free Resources; Floods; and Returning Home After a Disaster: Be Healthy and Safe.

FloodSmart.gov is the official site of the National Flood Insurance Program. Resources include such topics as: Flooding and Flood Risks; Residential Coverage; Policyholder Resources; and Preparation and Recovery: After a Flood. Explore the site before the next flood. Toll-free calls are accepted at 888-379-9531.

For more information, visit the HENTF website or email HENTF@si.edu.

Heritage Emergency National Task Force

*FEMA and the Smithsonian Institution co-sponsor the Heritage Emergency National Task Force, a partnership of 58 national service organizations and federal agencies created to protect cultural heritage from the damaging effects of natural disasters and other emergencies.*