

# LIBRARIES IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM HURRICANE KATRINA

**Are we better prepared for future emergencies?**  
by Tom Claeson and Jane S. Long

**H**urricane Katrina was one of the deadliest storms in the last 100 years, and the costliest natural disaster ever to strike the United States. Katrina and the other storms of 2005 caused widespread damage along the Gulf Coast. Libraries and cultural heritage institutions were not spared.

Of the 188 public libraries in Louisiana, 23 were destroyed, 33 suffered severe damage, and 37 more had moderate damage. Damage to the New Orleans Public Library system alone is estimated at \$26 to \$30 million. In Mississippi, eight public and 43 school libraries were destroyed, and many more need major repairs.

But lessons learned from this huge regional tragedy, as well as new services and information resources to combat disasters, may help us better prepare for future emergencies.

### WHAT ARE WE LEARNING?

Has Katrina changed the way we look at disaster planning? Yes and no. In some ways it only reinforced what we already know about emergencies large and small: Even a little preparedness makes a difference. One of the most important things is to be aware of what you have and what you want to save first.

In Harrison County, Mississippi, the storm's 34-foot tidal surge destroyed four libraries—the Biloxi and Gulfport branches, as well as the Division Street Study Center in Biloxi and the Isiah Fredericks Study Center in Gulfport—and caused flooding at the D'Iberville branch where the building was destroyed but the collections spared. All five locations remain closed nearly a year later.

Robert Lipscomb, director of the Harrison County Library System, stressed that without a disaster plan and good inventory list, all contents might have been lost as well. "The best plan in the world wouldn't have saved this situation; this was completely out of control," Lipscomb explained. "It was just horrendous. But we had prioritized what we were going to salvage afterwards, which things were most important. That's something you need to think about."

Lipscomb was among the library and museum experts invited to share their insights on the Gulf Coast response and recovery efforts during a national forum held in March at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. The Heritage Emergency National Task Force ([www.heritageemergency.org](http://www.heritageemergency.org)), an initiative of the nonprofit organization Heritage Preservation and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), convened the meeting. The task force, a partnership of 40 federal agencies and national service organizations, including the American Library Association, was formed in 1995 to help libraries, archives, museums, and historic sites better protect their collections and buildings from natural disasters and other emergencies.

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma, the task force served as an information clearinghouse and communications coordinator about the impact of the storms on cultural heritage, helping to focus resources where they were most needed. Later this year, Heritage Preservation will produce a report on the effectiveness of response and recovery efforts

after Katrina and recommend strategies to better protect cultural and historic resources in the future.

Carma Fauntleroy became interim director of the Louisiana State Museum four days before Katrina struck. One lesson she pointed to was the need for more formal partnerships with municipal and state agencies and first responders.

"We had a good rapport with the local police department and state troopers, so we were able to call on them informally," Fauntleroy said. "But museums really need to be integrated into local emergency management plans. Then we're not educating them on the importance of our collections at the last minute."

The sheer magnitude of Katrina's impact has led task force members to examine new issues, such as clarifying policies and procedures regarding communications after disasters. No one anticipated that library staff would be so widely scattered, separated from each other and their institutions for so long.

Julia Young, director of the Archives and Library Division of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, believes traditional disaster training should be reevaluated in light of Katrina. She recommends that it be more realistic and more frequent.

"Training needs to teach people critical thinking and flexibility, not just how to deal with artifacts and collections," Young explained. "You never know what the next day is going to bring."

### DISASTERS REMAIN A THREAT

The 2005 hurricane season was the most active on record and severe weather is likely to continue for at least a decade,

according to the National Weather Service. The agency reports that we are in a cycle of increased hurricane activity in the North Atlantic that could last another 10 to 20 years.

Even if you don't live along the Atlantic or Gulf Coasts, the risk of emergencies large and small persists. At the Heritage Emergency National Task Force meeting, Archivist of the United States Allen Weinstein said, "The terrible events of last fall created a surge of interest in disaster issues. But let's not forget that day-by-day records, collections, and historic sites are at greater risk for localized and even mundane events."

In 2004, the Arkansas State Library conducted a survey on behalf of the Arkansas Disaster Assistance Task Force for Libraries, Archives, and Museums. Thirty-three institutions, or nearly 40% of those surveyed, had experienced one or more disasters in the last decade. The causes of damage and loss constituted a familiar litany: strong storms, tornadoes, floods, and fires; construction accidents and improper renovations; broken pipes, leaking roofs, and faulty equipment; and mold, perhaps the most common and severe consequence of emergencies. When it comes to disasters, the question usually is not if, but when.

In fact, most institutions remain susceptible to emergencies. Heritage Preservation, in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services, conducted the Heritage Health Index, a survey of preservation needs and conditions at libraries, archives, and museums nationwide. The results, published in December 2005 in *A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America's Collections* (AL, Jan., p. 22) presented the first comprehensive overview of the condition of collections ([www.heritagehealthindex.org](http://www.heritagehealthindex.org)). ■



A member of the local Common Ground Collective adds to the pile of damaged materials during cleanup of the New Orleans Public Library's Martin Luther King Jr. branch.



Some of the report's most striking findings were in the area of emergency preparedness. The Heritage Health Index found that 80% of all U.S. collecting institutions and 78% of libraries do not have a written emergency/disaster plan that includes collections with staff trained to carry it out.

## EMERGENCY RESPONSE RESOURCES

What can your library do to prepare for the next emergency or disaster that threatens your collections?

There are a number of new services and tools—many of them in development since before Katrina and Rita wreaked havoc—that can assist you in disaster preparedness and recovery.

**SOLINET (Southeastern Library Network)** ([www.solinet.net](http://www.solinet.net)) has long been a leader in preservation education. The network has recently developed a web-based disaster information clearinghouse and low-cost disaster response workshops for Gulf Coast institutions.

## HINDSIGHT: THE LAST DAY OF SMITH

by Katherine Wilkins

I was in charge on the last day that the lovely Robert E. Smith Regional Branch of New Orleans Public Library was open: Saturday, August 27, 2005.

We were wrapping up the "Board Up, Pack Up, and Boogie" hurricane safety program for kids. For grownups, we had evacuation maps showing how I-10 would turn one-way (north) in case of a mandatory evacuation, plus hurricane safety pamphlets. I wasn't convinced "Boogie" would help, but I'd been pressing the adult materials on patrons for weeks.

"I never evacuate" was the all-too-common response. "Take one for your neighbor," I'd reply, stuffing a map into their checked-out books.

That morning, my husband had warned me that the steadily enlarging storm had turned toward the Gulf Coast, too big and too close to ignore. He would find a hotel room and pack while I went to work, stopping on the way to gas up. After lunch, I would try four banks before finding an ATM that still had cash.

The staff arrived and we opened. My coworkers that Saturday did not include Dan "The Man" Couget, who lived with his aged mother near Bayou St. John, or branch head Ed Real. Neither Dan nor Ed owned cars, and I wasn't sure if Dan could drive—or if his mother could see. Assistant branch head Anita Fiasconaro planned to stay in her home, confident she could evacuate to the second floor of her father's condo if the worst happened. Amanda Riley, who'd worked for Smith since high school, owned a car but lived with her mother and a severely disabled younger sister.

Mike Madary, a part-time associate, was planning to take his wife and two small daughters to stay with friends in Houston. Library associate Juliann Helms, had been offered shelter in Alabama. Her husband was due to leave for a job in Seattle, but he wanted to see a hurricane

(he did). Library associate Michelle Gre-million's 80-year-old father was against evacuating; we hoped that one of her seven siblings could convince him. William Vanderwall, NOPL associate for 17 years, had several elderly relatives.

New Orleans had been lucky ever since 1965, when Hurricane Betsy had flooded the Ninth Ward, killing dozens. But over the past years, local meteorologists spent their summers discussing the inevitable "Big One," which would march up the Mississippi, past long-gone barrier islands, and bring the river—as well as adjacent Lake Pontchartrain—into the city.

### Was this it?

We waited for Mayor Nagin's press conference, listening to a very faint broadcast from Ed's radio. Nothing. We were all convinced that the library would have to close Monday, but wanted to know about Sunday hours. I checked my library e-mail hourly and updated my hurricane printouts from the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration. I'd plastered the interior windows with "Board Up, Pack Up, and Boogie" posters.

In the meantime, I showed my colleagues the latest public advisory from NOAA, which indicated a 22% probability that Katrina would make landfall within 60 miles of us. I solemnly explained that the number would reach 100% only after the fact. Another NOAA map had several wavering lines on it, indicating possible storm tracks, all of them too near our city.

At 1:30, Assistant City Librarian Geri Harris called: Prepare for the storm, she said, and close at 3:30. We'd reopen August 30.

By now we were all thrusting hurricane maps on patrons and pointing to the ugly NOAA printouts. The staff kept shelving books; it was too awful to act as though it wouldn't matter if we didn't.

I started notifying the off-duty staff. Ed told me to put garbage bags over the computers in case of leaks. Technical Services advised us to unplug and elevate the workstations. Juliann made signs for the book-drops, which we duct-taped closed. After Hurricane Cindy a month earlier, they'd overflowed.

We all looked at our desk mementos, contemplating what to take just in case. I left behind my unfinished kitten quilt squares for luck.

We said good-bye a little more solemnly, wishing each other luck, worried a too-emotional display might jinx us all. The Smith staff members survived, but are now spread across the country, in varying states of loss and dislocation.

On my way home, I passed many people boarding up windows.

Tuesday morning in a Houston hotel, I read in an online *Times-Picayune* article that flooding a block from Smith reached store ceilings. Smith was only three feet over street level. Katrina had won.

### The long haul

Weeks later, I saw the damage thanks to Amanda Riley, who had stayed behind and posted photos online. Heavy armchairs balanced on the tops of bookshelves; the circulation desk stood five feet from its base; books lay a foot deep on the floor in a soggy mass; brown and yellow lines bisected the glass doors; and a wooden log from God knows where had floated in.

A year later, a bookmobile serves Smith's still-decimated Lakeview neighborhood three afternoons a week. Half of New Orleans public libraries have reopened and a number of ongoing donations and fundraising campaigns will resurrect the others.

We're coming back.

KATHERINE WILKINS returned to New Orleans Public Library in mid-June as children's librarian at the Main Library.

Dedicated to the memory of Anita Fiasconaro, who died in July.

SOLINET is a member of the **Regional Alliance for Preservation (RAP)** ([www.preservcollections.org](http://www.preservcollections.org)), a national network of 13 preservation and conservation organizations that offer coordinated outreach, education, and publications, as well as a wealth of information on disaster recovery for a wide spectrum of cultural heritage materials.

The **Northeast Document Conservation Center** ([www.nedcc.org](http://www.nedcc.org)), another RAP center and respected publisher of preservation information, has recently released the online disaster planning tool called **dPlan** ([www.dplan.org](http://www.dplan.org)). Originally developed with the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners for the libraries in that state, the project has been fast-tracked so that all U.S. libraries can use its detailed disaster plan template and tools.

NEDCC is one of the lead organizations in the national **Alliance for Response** initiative ([www.heritagepreservation.org/programs/AFRmain.htm](http://www.heritagepreservation.org/programs/AFRmain.htm)), developed by Heritage Preservation. An effort to bring together cultural heritage professionals, emergency management officials, and first responders, the alliance has led to community partnerships in Boston, Dallas, New York, and Ohio. New Alliance for Response forums will be held this year in Seattle, Atlanta, Illinois, and California. Heritage Preservation will also publish a team-building kit on working with first responders.

An essential disaster information tool is the **Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel** ([www.heritagepreservation.org/catalog/Wheel1.htm](http://www.heritagepreservation.org/catalog/Wheel1.htm)), a hands-on tool that explains how to save collections for libraries, archives, and museums nationwide. Published by Heritage Preservation, the wheel is a popular training tool that has been translated into six languages. The latest edition features a water-resistant coating, magnets on the handle for easy display, and an updated section on salvaging electronic records.

Heritage Preservation has also developed the new **Field Guide to Emergency Response** ([www.heritagepreservation.org/NEWS/FieldGuideann.htm](http://www.heritagepreservation.org/NEWS/FieldGuideann.htm)), a multimedia publication that gives step-by-step advice on how to respond to emergencies large and small. The publication features an easy-reference notebook with instructions on how react safely and quickly. A companion DVD and easy checklists are designed to help staff rescue books and documents from mud, mold, and other emergencies.

The **California Preservation Program** ([www.cal-preservation.org](http://www.cal-preservation.org)) has helped cultural heritage organizations in its home state prepare for and deal with many types of emergencies. A long-time leader in state-based preservation efforts, the CPP is also an umbrella organization for many local and regional library disaster networks looking at issues such as mutual disaster-aid agreements and centralized caches of disaster supplies.

Funding to deal with sudden emergencies and disasters is always a concern. In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the **National Endowment for the Humanities** ([www.neh.gov](http://www.neh.gov)) awarded more than \$1 million to help salvage damaged collections and is offering an additional

\$750,000 in stabilization grants. The **Institute of Museum and Library Services** ([www.imls.gov](http://www.imls.gov)) is reserving \$1.5 million of the grant money it will award over the next year for regions affected by major disasters. Sources of funding—for both preparedness and recovery—are detailed in a new publication, *Before and After Disasters*, published by Heritage Preservation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and FEMA ([www.arts.gov/pub/disasterrecovery.pdf](http://www.arts.gov/pub/disasterrecovery.pdf)).

To raise awareness for disaster planning, the **Society of American Archivists** developed the grassroots



**MayDay** effort ([www.archivists.org/mayday](http://www.archivists.org/mayday)) to mark each May 1 by urging archivists and other cultural heritage professionals to update their disaster plans, practice disaster drills, or conduct other disaster preparedness activities.

Libraries are invited to assist in a national effort to raise the public's awareness of disaster preparedness. **Ready.gov** ([www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov)), an initiative of the Department of Homeland Security, provides general information to the citizenry on recognizing and preparing for emergencies ranging from terrorist attacks to natural disasters. DHS is asking libraries to distribute information about this effort.

The full story of the 2005 hurricanes is just beginning to unfold. Recovery will take years, and the need for resources and volunteers will continue. The library community has generously committed time and talents to help cultural and educational institutions on the Gulf Coast. We can also learn valuable lessons on disaster planning and response from these tragedies.

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