

## Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford

### Record Hurricanes

Hurakan was the Mayan god of thunderstorms and whirlwinds, as well as the creator of earth and the life upon it. Hurakan has been in all our thoughts of late. The scale of destruction and human tragedy suffered this hurricane season is almost beyond our comprehension.

Though our attention has rightfully been focused on the disruption and loss of life, widespread destruction has also been visited upon records. Pictures of the destruction to archives and libraries are disheartening (see: <http://www.coshrc.org/arc/hurricane-MSvisit-photos.htm>).

One of the early reports out of Louisiana indicated that the New Orleans Notarial Archives had been damaged and its records, including early land records and current title records, flooded. Other early reports noted the extensive damage to court records throughout the region, as well as to local manuscript repositories and archives.

Steve Bruno, custodian of the Notarial Archives, was quoted in the New Orleans Times-Picayune as saying "there won't be any [real estate] transactions until this problem is solved. Sure, a lot of people are going to want to sell and a lot of speculators are going to want to buy," but without the records "it isn't going to happen."

The loss of court records also had an immediate impact. Inmates were evacuated from New Orleans flooded jails, but without court records (or a court system for that matter) there was no way to tell what charges each inmate faced. Accused murderers were mixed in with those facing drunk charges. But without court records it was, in the words of one official, like "taking a jail and shaking it up in a fruit-basket turn-over, so no one has any idea who these people are or why they're here."

Court records in general took a heavy hit and a September 9th New York Times article noted that "a vast universe" of court records had been lost. "Court proceedings from divorce to murder trials, to corporate litigation, to custody cases will be indefinitely halted and when proceedings resume lawyers will face prodigious—if not insurmountable—obstacles in finding witnesses and principals and in recovering evidence." Beyond court records, it was reported that a third of Louisiana's lawyers lost their offices

The scale of destruction and the lack of coordination delayed attempts to salvage records, creating additional problems. Mold, for example, begins to form fairly quickly after water damage, particularly in a hot and humid climate. The Notarial Archives, had a disaster recovery plan calling for the use of refrigerated trucks to freeze-dry water-soaked documents to allow for later recovery. The trucks, however, were turned back by troops trying to keep people away from the flooded area. The records were eventually retrieved and are now housed in refrigerator trucks or at a freeze-dry facility in Chicago.

In truth the degree of destruction over such a wide area undid most plans. As H.T. Holmes, the Mississippi state archivist reported, "None of our reactions are following the textbook recovery lessons, but this 'melt-down' situation over such a huge area is not a situation previously thought probable by most folks down here." A recovery team of archivists visiting Mississippi three weeks after Katrina reported that "collections typically were either lost entirely or survived the storm but were damaged subsequently by high humidity and mold...Much of the damage to records came from a storm surge that swept through buildings, destroying their contents, and then retreated. This suggests that

conditions may be different in New Orleans, where the water resulted from a broken levee rather than a storm surge and where damage has probably resulted from standing water rather than surging water."

The archivists visiting Mississippi reported that "there was little evidence of paper in the debris surrounding homes and business. Shreds of fabric and plastic were caught in trees, but it appears that the power of the storm surge completely destroyed paper." Interestingly, the news story on court records reported that law offices with computers (and off-site back-up) are better positioned to recover than those offices totally reliant on paper records.

Archivists have launched a variety of efforts to assist in document recovery and restoration. The Society of American Archivists has established a grant fund to support stricken repositories and is accepting contributions at:

<https://www.archivists.org/katrina/contribute.asp>

The Council of State Archivists (nee the Council of State Historical Records Coordinators) provides a variety of flood-related information on its web site at:

<http://www.coshrc.org/>.

Being in Vermont allows for some distant musings on the impact of hurricanes on records. We have, for years, tried to alert state and municipal officials, as well as citizens, about the value of archival records. The loss of records relating to titles to land, to the court system and to local history provides a real life, and tragic, example of that argument.

How current are our own disaster plans and do they envision a broad scale catastrophe or only one localized to our building? What if the land-based phone system has been destroyed, or the roads are impassable or the area sealed off for emergency response reasons? Have we built mutual support plans when more than one repository is damaged (the Rutland County Clerks' Association was working on a county-wide response team a few years ago; it would be interesting to hear how their plan has progressed).

The survival of computer records, at least those which were backed-up outside the immediate region, suggests that properly managed electronic records may have some advantages in the event of a disaster. I hasten to add, however, that the key phrase is "properly managed." We have already experienced a wide range of "quiet disasters" as improperly managed electronic records are lost with the implementation of each new "generation" of hardware and software. Widespread loss of electricity or phone lines may also complicate the restoration of computer systems (does your disaster plan address how you would respond to the loss of computer hardware even if the software survived off-site?).

The events of the last few weeks should make all of us revisit our disaster mitigation and response plans. We should also give pause to celebrate the dedicated archivists and recordkeepers of the Gulf coast who are struggling to save their records even when confronting the loss of their own homes and communities.