Chapter 17
After the Flood: Lessons Learned from Small-Scale Disasters

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ABSTRACT
This chapter uses two case studies of small disasters caused by water to examine the impact of such small-scale events on the libraries concerned, how those libraries managed the emergencies, and what lessons were learned which will inform their planning for future incidents. The case studies show that while both incidents are water-related, they are quite different in terms of source, size, impact, recovery time, and frequency. Many books and articles on disaster planning focus on the larger disasters, such as hurricanes and floods, which may be the reason the much more common smaller emergencies do not get the attention they deserve. Libraries should be planning for the small disasters first, and then scaling up their preparation to account for the larger, less frequent events, rather than the reverse. More libraries may be persuaded to do such planning if they are preparing for a probable scenario rather than one which may only be a possibility.

INTRODUCTION
The Chinese philosopher Laozi wrote 2,500 years ago that “nothing is softer or more flexible than water, yet nothing can resist it.” It is that very flexibility which makes water the most significant threat to libraries (International Records Management Trust, 1999, p. 8), whether it is in the form of a 100-year flood or a leaky roof, torrential rain from a hurricane or an overflowing bathroom sink. Libraries must be prepared for all types of water emergencies but few librarians, fortunately, have to deal with catastrophic events during their careers. It is the small-scale water emergencies, the “routine” kind such as roof leaks and malfunctioning plumbing, which are a constant threat and most libraries will sustain damage from them (Dawson, 2009, p. 4, 10). Because such damage can be quite extensive, these events are still disastrous in their effects on the collections, infrastructure, staff and finances of the institution involved. While the number of

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books, manuscripts or other materials affected during a small water disaster may not be great, it is just as likely the most valuable items will be impacted as those on the discard list. Buildings old and new require running water, fire prevention systems and waste water disposal and all this water makes our buildings vulnerable to incursions, and the larger the building, the greater the vulnerability. Compounding the problem is human fallibility which leads to design faults, delayed or incomplete repairs, and accidental or deliberate damage which creates flaws in the tightness of the building envelope. Once released into a space, water will run wherever it can to find its lowest level, and that could be under floors, through ceilings and down walls, and into any cavity. Assuming the source of the water can be found, discovering where it went and then drying the space out can be a lengthy and possibly expensive exercise even if the incursion seems minor. The demands on staff during the actual disaster can be great, causing stress and throwing everyone off-balance but the recovery can be worse as the adrenalin subsides and the reality of cleaning up and assessing and repairing the damage is faced. Finally, there is the financial impact of the disaster. Funds designated for other purposes are redirected and budgets are strained, which is especially difficult for many institutions living with tight or diminishing incomes and rising expenditure.

This chapter will examine small-scale water disasters and, using case studies, show how easily such emergencies occur, what might have been done to mitigate or even prevent them, and how the disaster was handled when the water started to flow. But the disaster is not over when the water stops, for it is then that the real work of recovery begins and, in the days and weeks that follow, the affected institution must have a plan in place to make that recovery efficient, fast, and as complete as possible, so that the needs of all the stakeholders are addressed.

BACKGROUND

Libraries, along with archives and museums, like to think of themselves as safe repositories for our cultural heritage, with the larger institutions proudly touting their security systems and climate–controlled spaces. The reality is, however, that most American collecting institutions have struggled to provide even the basic care their collections require according to the Heritage Health Index survey taken in 2005. This survey (a follow-up of which is expected in 2015) revealed that around 50 percent of responding institutions had damage to their collections from sources such as light, airborne pollutants, and improper storage, 40 percent had no funds for preservation, and 80 percent had no capability to implement an emergency plan should a disaster strike (2005, p. 2). Unfortunately, disasters occur more frequently than we would like to think. The Association of College and Research Libraries reports that 75 percent of small to mid-sized college libraries had experienced an emergency, some multiple times (Wilkinson, Lewis, & Dennis, 2010, p.7).

While light, temperature and pollution take their inexorable toll on our collections, water poses the most immediate threat because of its unpredictability and potential to inflict significant damage. The Heritage Health Index survey noted that 53 percent of institutions had materials harmed by water in one form or another (Heritage Health Index, 2005, p.2). It is clear libraries must try to do more to prevent incursions of water and recognize that it will most likely be an “inside job.” Broken pipes, backed-up toilets and leaking roofs are the culprits much more often than flooding rivers. Libraries are vulnerable to water because they are often housed in older buildings which have been repurposed and modernized, or newer ones where possibly function and the tightness of the building envelope have been subordinated to architectural considerations. There may be nothing we can do about the design of the building but we must become more proactive in recognizing the...