Chapter 11

Prepared for Anything and Everything: Libraries, Archives, and Unexpected Small Scale Disasters

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ABSTRACT

There are ample resources to help with large scale disasters in libraries and archives, but what about those small, unknown events that happen rapidly and cause as much damage and destruction as larger disasters? This chapter will examine several seemingly small-scale disasters that, if left alone, will become big problems. Solutions to these may sometimes be less obvious than with large-scale issues. This chapter will also provide useful techniques and procedures that will aid both libraries and archives to be prepared for almost any small-scale disaster.

INTRODUCTION: I DID NOT KNOW THAT COULD HAPPEN

“Be Prepared,” the motto for the Boy Scouts of America, is simple and succinct. It carries the connotation of possibility amidst the unknown. Within libraries and archives, the possibilities for mold, mildew, and UV damage can be quite high. Preparations can be as simple as temperature adjustments and well placed blinds. Unfortunately, they can also be as complex as new HVAC systems complete with multiple dehumidification/filtering processes. There are plenty of resources to help with large scale complications. What about those small, unknown events that happen rapidly and cause as much damage and destruction as larger disasters? This chapter will examine several seemingly small scale disasters that, if left alone, will become big problems. Solutions to these may sometimes be less obvious than with large scale issues. This chapter will also provide useful techniques and procedures that will aid both libraries and archives to be prepared for any small scale disaster.
BACKGROUND

Archivists and librarians are indoctrinated early in “disaster planning” (UNESCO, 1999). “Prevention, preparedness, response and recovery” are the code words used when preparing a disaster plan (1999). But disasters come in all shapes and sizes and it is not easy to prepare for every type (National Archives, 1993). While preparations may be made for damages caused by large-scale natural disasters, they may be neglected for those less obvious (e.g., flooding caused by a pigeon building a nest in a downspout). Just as someone said, “I did not know that could happen,” disasters can take us off guard when we cannot predict them.

There are some that make a distinction between a crisis, emergency and a disaster (Lighthouse Readiness Group, 2012). They contend that an “emergency is a situation that requires immediate attention” and “is usually small in scale.” A disaster is similar to an emergency “only much bigger” and a crisis is an emergency or disaster “that is expected to lead to a dangerous situation.” A disaster is further defined as “an event that causes serious misfortune for a company, a city, or even a large region, and its people.” Then, based on this final definition, any event that affects an archive causing “serious misfortune” is a disaster (2012). Distinctions between large and small scale disasters is based on quantity, not necessarily on the quality of the materials affected.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

From its inception until 1999, the Tuskegee University archives were originally held within the existing main library. However, due to renovations, it was moved to an existing dormitory where it languished for approximately three years. The archives occupied two floors within the dormitory that were neither environmentally controlled, nor adequately sealed from birds, insects, or rodents. There was limited access to most of the collections since they were boxed and sealed.

Finally, the archives collections were moved to their current location where they remained in moving boxes for approximately two years. Fortunately, the archives were placed in a building that had been renovated in 2003 with special emphasis given to design, environmental controls and security. Even though the building had been recently renovated, problems arose that were not anticipated either by the architect or the contractor.

The facility had dodged damage from wind and rain during the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons. Hurricane Ivan hit the Alabama coast in September of 2004 with 130 mph winds and copious amounts of rain. This storm was followed in July of 2005 by Hurricane Dennis with 120 mph rains and equally large downpours (Hurricane City, 2014). These came and went without adversely affecting the archives. Curiously, there were no large, rain making events during the summer of 2008, yet two different areas within the archives were inundated with water.

At the time, the archives staff was working on processing a collection when the ceiling tiles fell and water started to pour onto the floor. There had been some thunderstorms a couple of days prior, but on this day, the skies in the area were clear. After the immediate needs of relocation and cleanup had been achieved, an intense search was undertaken in order to locate the leak. There were two leaks, one in the archives library and one toward the back of the main archives storage. The two areas were located on opposite sides of the building. Why there and no other places in the building?

After a thorough search, it was noticed that local pigeons were flying in and out of openings close to the roof of the buildings. Cool and dry (most of the time), these spaces were the perfect locations for a bird to build its nest (Gibbs and Barnes, 2001). Upon closer inspection, it was confirmed that the pigeons were indeed the culprits. The nests had acted as small dams, causing the water to back