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Lessons Learned in the Ashes:  
The Recovery of Arlington's Library  
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On Sunday, September 15, 2002, fire broke out at the Natchez mansion of Arlington. By the time the flames were extinguished, the roof of the early nineteenth-century structure had been destroyed, and the second floor gutted. While the columned facade remained, there was considerable damage to the first floor as well. The one room whose contents were largely left intact was the library. On Tuesday, H. T. Holmes, director of the Archives and Library Division of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, dispatched Special Projects Officer Michael Hennen and myself to assist in the efforts to salvage the books. Spared by the flames, many still were damaged by heat, smoke, and the water from the firehoses. Over the next three days, under the direction of Ron and Mimi Miller of the Historic Natchez Foundation, we worked with Kathleen Jenkins, curator at the National Park Service property of Melrose, and Cheryl Munyer Branyan, curator of the mansion, Rosalie, to guide teams in preparing an estimated 3,000 volumes for freezing or storage. Numerous volunteers took part in this effort, as did the MDAH Head of Reference Services Anne Webster; Archival Reformatting Unit Supervisor Julie Dees; and Archivist John Gomez.

I had participated in disaster workshops, and served on the committee responsible for drafting a disaster plan for the MDAH Archives and Library. But the salvage work at Arlington provided important training in disaster recovery for me, revealing practical problems that theory and procedures do not always take into account. The first lesson I learned at Arlington was this: however fundamental the principle, it may be necessary to live with a compromise of it. Disaster recovery manuals point out that water-soaked paper materials and books must be frozen or air-dried within forty-eight hours to prevent the outbreak of mold. At Arlington, the fire took place Sunday morning. It was Monday afternoon before the library could be entered safely, and Tuesday morning, therefore, before salvage efforts could begin. So one had to accept from the start of the recovery efforts that there would be some mold to be cleaned from the books.

If time proved a problem, so did space. When Michael Hennen and I arrived at Arlington Tuesday afternoon, workmen were removing piles of rubble from the first floor, and trying to clear ash and debris from the stairway to what remained of the second floor. No conservation work could take place in the house, so all work had to be done at folding tables set up outside on the grass. There some protection from sun (it was in the mid-90s) was provided by the tents the National Park Service team from Melrose set up that afternoon. Moreover, the lack of space to air-dry thousands of volumes meant that it was vital to prepare the wet volumes for freezing. Following conservation procedures suggested by Alabama Department of Archives and History conservator Linda Overman, teams under the guidance of Rosalie curator Cheryl Munyer Branyan were wrapping volumes in waxed paper and placing them spine-down in plastic tubs and crates. These were then being taken to a local freezer storage facility.

As Michael Hennen and I climbed over the debris on the library floor, it became apparent that the library itself was no longer secure. There were gaps in the ceiling now open to the sky, and holes in the exterior walls that could easily let in the threatening rain. Therefore, the first priority became to remove the books from the cupboards and bookcases in the library to a more sheltered area, the central hall of the house, which still appeared intact, and in which plastic coverall was laid for the books. From there they could be taken outside for wrapping. And so, for the rest of the afternoon, we worked with rather heroic volunteers who were willing to climb over rubble, up on shelves, and balance on ladders and chairs, deftly avoiding hanging beams and protruding nails, to remove the volumes. While few of these had fire damage, and some were quite dry, many were so wet that they had swollen, and required the use of putty knives or screwdrivers to lever them out. By a little past 5:00 p.m. Tuesday, all the volumes had been removed from the library with the exception of a cupboard of modern ones of relatively little historical or financial value; these were removed the next morning.

As work progressed, the considerable historical value of the Arlington library as a whole was revealed. Not only was this a library built by generations of owners, but its nucleus was still the collection assembled in the mid-nineteenth century by planter and judge Samuel S. Boyd. Strong in Greek and Roman classics, religious treatises, works of early American history and the French enlightenment, Boyd's library was a prime example of that of a wealthy literate gentleman of his era. And from among these rare works and first editions emerged some thirty volumes of archival materials: plantation records, docket books, and personal notebooks. These unique materials were immediately taken to the freezer at Melrose for storage until they could be removed to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and air-dried.

The size and eclectic nature of the collection, and the varying degrees of damage it had sustained revealed other questions that had to be answered in our recovery procedures: how would the collection be handled after the immediate freezing of the books and where would it be housed? Ron Miller designed procedures late Tuesday to solve these problems. Having obtained the owner's consent to donate the volumes to institutions who wanted them, Miller suggested that representatives from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and Melrose review the books before they were prepared for freezing, and make determinations of both condition and destination. They would be sorted as too badly damaged to keep; as dry and ready for simple storage at the warehouse space of the Historic Natchez Foundation; or as ready for freezing. They would also be identified as appropriate for return to the family of the owner, for sale, or for housing by a particular archival/museum institution. If funds could be obtained, these volumes would be freeze-dried later.

What I had read on disaster recovery emphasized mainly the wrapping and preparation of books for immediate freezing after a disaster. Millers procedures for a sort by destination were an important addition to this process. For, as Miller pointed out, one has to do such a selection before freezing, since it would be impossible to open the books to read title pages or search for signatures once the volumes were frozen. So over the next two days, Anne Webster, Head of Reference Services at MDAH, joined Kathleen Jenkins and Michael Hennen in guiding the book sort. Some were retained by MDAH, others set aside for the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, and many, particularly of Samuel Boyd's collection, were designated for Melrose, where Kathleen Jenkins was recreating a library of the period.

Wednesday, September 18th, was a showcase in practical problems for those in the salvage effort to solve. The change in the workflow created by adding a sorting step to the recovery procedures caused some difficulties in the morning: until more tables for sorting arrived, and the procedures of the sort were established, bottlenecks were created for the teams bringing volumes from the house to the sorting tables, and for those waiting to wrap the volumes. Supply problems were also acute. Those wrapping the volumes for freezing had to wait repeatedly for more containers to arrive. At first, plastic tubs and crates were both purchased; it was then realized that basket-type crates would not stack as well for freezing, so tubs were sought instead. By the end of Wednesday afternoon it was determined that every plastic tub and crate within about thirty miles of Natchez had been purchased. These proved to be barely sufficient.

Then the afternoon brought unexpected difficulties. Around 1:00 p.m., mattresses smoldering on the second floor were discovered and the fire department called. The firemen unleashed gallons of water onto the second floor of the house with the result that the ceiling medallion in the central hall of the first floor began to fall and sheets of water cascaded onto the plastic coverall protecting the books that had been moved there the night before. I helped volunteers and workmen remove these books from the area. We employed a dolly to transport the books to the porch, conference tables to set them on there, and fire-chains of volunteers to move them to sheets of plastic coverall placed on the ground near the sorting tent. By the end of the afternoon, about half the volumes were sorted, and many packed for freezing. With no shelter available in the house, there was no option but to leave the remaining books wrapped in plastic coverall on the tables or ground overnight, and hope it would not rain (it did not).

There was another problem with available space, this time affecting the volumes being frozen. The freezer facility that had agreed to store the books normally stocked chickens; some had just arrived and there was no room, therefore, for more volumes. After an hour spent by a volunteer on the telephone, another cold-storage facility was found that had room and was willing to take the smoke-fragrant books. Because this one specialized in deer preparation, and it was not yet deer season, it had space enough for all the volumes selected for freezing.

Wednesday also produced an unexpected bonus; the stairway to the second floor was cleared and it became possible to explore the second floor. A two-drawer metal card catalogue of the library prepared by former Arlington owner Anne Gwin Vaughan was among the treasures rescued from the second floor. Some cards were charred badly, but others were intact, and the whole was transported to MDAH for cleaning and transcription. On Wednesday, Ron and Mimi Miller, the structural engineer, and the owner's brother, Jack C. Vaughan, had ventured upstairs. The next day, Archivist Gomez and I were guided upstairs by Mr. Vaughan, who showed us areas in which books had been kept. On the second floor, safety took precedence over salvage. Since we had to negotiate an ash-covered stairway and clamber over iron pieces from bedsteads, I elected to sort the volumes on site. We were able to identify and pull a few nineteenth and early twentieth-century fine editions from a bookcase of badly charred volumes, and John Gomez removed them to safety downstairs. But I determined that a bedroom, whose floor of questionable stability was buried under five to six-foot-deep piles of debris, and whose ceiling was gone but for the stray dangling jagged remnant of rafters, was too dangerous for us to explore. Returning downstairs, we rejoined the sorting and wrapping. By mid-afternoon Thursday the sort was complete, and all the volumes were removed either to the cold-storage facility, or to the workroom at Melrose. There, those books still unwrapped would be finished the next day under Kathleen Jenkins' direction. The next morning, Michael Hennen and I picked up the archival materials from the freezer at Melrose and took them back to MDAH where we air-dried them.

Time, space, supplies, the unexpected problem -- Arlington provided a training ground for dealing with all these issues. It also however revealed the greatest resource for a disaster recovery -- people. Dozens of individual volunteers helped with the effort. Curators of the Natchez mansions, historic house owners, antique dealers, genealogists, and historical researchers -- all turned out to help. Natchez restaurants catered food to the site; other volunteers provided drinks. On Wednesday, the workmen clearing debris from the house immediately pitched in to remove the books when these were threatened by the water flooding from the second floor. Of course there were problems resulting from the involvement of many people in a multi-faceted salvage effort. It is important to realize that while the salvage of the

library was underway and workers were clearing the house of rubble, other teams were removing large parts of the architectural decoration so they could be copied and restored, and transporting the nineteenth-century silk drapes from the house to dry on the grass before wrapping them in acid-free paper.

While Ron and Mimi Miller provided general direction of the whole operation, they had to delegate various parts of the operation. For example, the wrapping of volumes was overseen by a variety of people, depending on who was available at the time. As a result, occasional communication failures resulted. Directions were sometimes inconsistently given, understood, or carried out. Tubs were purchased for freezing the volumes; but several arrived without lids. Moreover, some of the volunteers wished to help sort the books as well as wrap. While their interest and enthusiasm was wonderful in keeping morale high, the volunteers did not possess the knowledge necessary to select books for institutions' collections. It was therefore sometimes a diplomatic challenge for those directing the sort to curb their enthusiasm and to channel well-intentioned helpfulness in directions that would be beneficial to the salvage operation as a whole. But without the volunteers and their determination to save books and fight for a historical landmark in heat and soot day after day, the salvage effort would have been impossible.

What the recovery work at Arlington brought home to me most was the importance of community support to such an undertaking, particularly in the form of institutional cooperation and the cooperation of local organizations. The leadership of Ron and Mimi Miller and the Historic Natchez Foundation was vital. So was that of Kathleen Jenkins who provided National Park Service resources, teams of workers, and her own expertise. She undertook to oversee the freezer storage of the volumes, wrote the grant which obtained funds for freeze-drying all the volumes selected by institutions for preservation, and some months later, directed the cleaning of the volumes after the freeze-drying was complete.

When Anne Webster, Michael Hennen, Julie Dees, John Gomez and I returned to MDAH after our days at Arlington, we met to discuss what we had learnt from that experience--indeed, this report is primarily drawn from the results of that de-briefing. From our discussion, a suggestion emerged: Might we not work on creating a statewide list of disaster resources? For this might help mitigate a number of the practical problems faced in salvaging the library at Arlington. One part of the list could concern suppliers, so that less time would be spent hunting for supplies that are impossible to store in sufficient numbers for emergencies, such as tubs and crates. Regional as well as local suppliers could be included. Freezer facilities could be contacted, to see in advance if they would be willing to store smoke or water-damaged materials, what their busy seasons were, and how much space they could spare for such materials. Finally, the list should include both individual experts and organizations such as the National Guard, the National Park Service, and regional groups who could provide manpower or supplies. To create such a list would provide an important advantage, a means to organize support quickly when disaster strikes and time is of the essence.

