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Advice for Saving Damaged Family Treasures

Follow these steps to halt further damage

As the threat of more large and devastating storms looms over the country's midsection, the survivors of the recent tornadoes begin the long journey of recovery. With homes demolished and lives upended, treasured possessions such as family heirlooms, photos, and other keepsakes become more cherished. Even if these items are torn, tattered, and damp, they may still be saved. The Heritage Emergency National Task Force, a coalition of 42 national organizations and federal agencies co-sponsored by FEMA and Heritage Preservation, offers these basic guidelines from professional conservators for individuals who are searching for, and finding, family treasures in the ruins:

- **Safety First!** With any disaster there may be health risks. Wear long sleeves, sturdy shoes, and plastic or rubber gloves during cleanup. Protective gear such as goggles and a fitted face mask is recommended if there is mold.
- **Prevent Mold.** Mold can form within 48 hours; you will need to work fast. The goal is to reduce the humidity and temperature around your treasures as you proceed to clean and dry them. If you do encounter extensive mold, use protective gear such as gloves, goggles, and an N100 face mask, available at most hardware stores.
- **Air-Dry.** Gentle air-drying is best for all your treasured belongings—indoors, if possible. Hair dryers, irons, ovens, and prolonged exposure to sunlight will do irreversible damage. Increase indoor airflow with fans, open windows, air conditioners, and dehumidifiers.
- **Handle with Care.** Use great caution in handling your heirlooms, which can be especially fragile when wet. Separate damp materials: remove the contents from drawers; take photographs out of damp albums; remove paintings and prints from frames; place paper towels between the pages of wet books.
- **Clean Gently.** Loosen dirt and debris on fragile objects gently with soft brushes and cloths. Avoid rubbing, which can grind in dirt.
- **Salvage Photos.** Clean photographs by rinsing them carefully in clean water. Air-dry photos on a plastic screen or paper towel, or by hanging them by the corner with plastic clothespins. Don't let the image come into contact with other surfaces as it dries.
- **Prioritize.** You may not be able to save everything, so focus on what's most important to you, whether for historic, monetary, or sentimental reasons.

- **Can't Do It All?** Damp objects and items that cannot be dealt with immediately should be put in open, unsealed boxes or bags. Photos, papers, books, and textiles should be frozen if you can't get them dry within 48 hours.
- **Call in a Pro.** If a precious item is badly damaged, a conservator may be able to help. Be sure to collect broken pieces. Set your treasure aside in a well-ventilated room until you find professional help. If a precious item has been exposed to contaminated water, seek a conservator's advice on salvaging it; your health and safety, and that of your loved ones, is of utmost importance. To locate a conservator, click on the "Find a Conservator" box on the home page of the American Institute for Conservation, www.conservation-us.org.

A free, online video guide demonstrating how to rescue soaked photographs, books, documents, and other valued items is available from Heritage Preservation. This 10-minute streaming video provides professional advice that benefits families as well as museum and library staff. View and link to the video at:

<http://www.heritagepreservation.org/PROGRAMS/WaterSegmentFG.HTM>

Additional resources for salvaging damaged treasures can be found at:

<http://www.heritagepreservation.org/PROGRAMS/TFcurrent.html>

These recommendations are intended as guidance only. Neither the Heritage Emergency National Task Force nor its sponsors, Heritage Preservation and FEMA, assumes responsibility or liability for treatment of damaged objects.

Heritage Preservation (www.heritagepreservation.org) is a national non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the cultural heritage of the United States. By identifying risks, developing innovative programs, and providing broad public access to expert advice, Heritage Preservation assists museums, libraries, archives, organizations, and individuals in caring for our endangered heritage.

Heritage Preservation is co-sponsor with the Federal Emergency Management Agency of the Heritage Emergency National Task Force, a partnership of 42 national service organizations and federal agencies created to protect cultural heritage from the damaging effects of natural disasters and other emergencies.

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