
One Library's Response to Disaster

Willie Nelms

We often hear of disasters striking libraries and maybe even wonder what we would do if a catastrophe hit our operation. In most cases, however, we assume that calamities happen to other people and we do not really worry about such matters.

The occurrences of the night of March 28, 1984, convinced everyone affiliated with the Sheppard Memorial Library in Greenville, North Carolina, that bad things do happen to nice libraries. The situation, circumstances, and decisions that were made to deal with a disaster that hit this eastern North Carolina library are described below.

The afternoon of Wednesday, March 28, was partly cloudy in Greenville, but the weatherman was calling for rain and high winds. At the Sheppard Memorial Library, the public library serving Pitt County, the roofing company which was installing a membrane-type roof on the wings of the main library worked rapidly to complete their job. They had already finished the roof over the reading room of the library, and they expected to complete the side over the stacks before the predicted rains began.

The Greenville City Engineering Department, which was overseeing the work, called the roofing contractor to make certain the roof would be secure if rains came. The contractor assured the engineering department that the roof would be watertight when they left the library that evening.

The staff of the library went home after work with no idea of the damage that was to occur throughout Pitt County. On the night of March 28, tornadoes ripped through eastern North Carolina, destroying millions of dollars worth of property, killing dozens, and leaving hundreds homeless. In Pitt County alone, twelve people were killed by the vicious storms.

Because of the scattered nature of the tornadoes, the library staff came to work the next day with little knowledge of the widespread damage. The full extent of the natural disaster would not be known for several days to come.

When the library director arrived at work at 8:45 A.M. on Thursday morning, he was met by the business manager and other members of the clerical staff, who reported extensive damage to the building. Water leaks extended from the ceiling of the upper stack area into the basement two floors below.

As the director approached the stack area to switch on the lights, the sickening sound of dripping water could be heard throughout the twenty-eight hundred square feet wing. Switching on the lights revealed numerous drips in the wing roof with water seeping down onto the book collection and the carpet below.

It was clear that the roof had not been adequately secured when the roofers left the scene the night before. Water had seeped under the edges of the membrane and flowed over the original tar and gravel roof, which had been stripped of its protective coating. Since the membrane roof was fastened to the building by screws, each penetration of the roof had produced a leak.

Ironically, no tornadoes had hit the area around the library, and the rainfall levels were not even particularly high during the previous night. High winds, however, had forced water under the roof, causing the damage.

Fortunately, the library had a suspended ceiling, which absorbed most of the water penetrating the roof. In numerous places, however, the ceiling tiles had become saturated and crumbled under the weight of the water. In these areas, water poured down upon the collection. Various other tiles were nearly saturated, and the situation was worsening.

Further review of the area showed the wool carpet to be saturated throughout the stack area. Fortunately, the rain had stopped, so no new water was falling on the roof.

As the staff assembled for the day's work, the first order of business was to remove books which were in danger from the dripping water. It was apparent that the adult section of the library could not be open for business that day. However, since the children's room of the library had not been damaged by the leaks and since this area has

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a separate entrance, some library service could be provided from the building during the day.

Bucket Brigade

Since the full extent of the book damage could not be ascertained until the books were actually handled, all available staff was assigned to move books. An efficient equivalent to a "bucket brigade" was soon operating. Books which were at all wet were taken to a central location for further inspection. Other books which might be in harm's way but were as yet undamaged were taken to a lower stack level for temporary storage.

During these early stages, the roofing company representative and the city engineer arrived. The roofing company assured the library director and the engineer that every effort would be made to make certain that the roof was watertight before nightfall. The reading room wing, where the roof had been finished, allowed no water in the building, so it was clear that the roof would protect the building if it could be totally finished before the next rains came. However, since the weather forecasts called for possible showers, the situation was uncertain at best.

Once books had been moved out of the line of the dripping water, the extent of the damage to the collection became more apparent. Over three hundred items were damaged to the point that they would probably have to be discarded. About one hundred others were slightly damaged and could be dried out on the site.

At this point, the situation caused by the water damage could be divided into several projects:

1. Securing the roof to avoid further water damage.
2. Making sure that if water entered the building, it would not damage the collection further.
3. Ascertaining the extent of damage to the collection more precisely.
4. Arranging the library collections which had been moved for resumption of normal services as soon as possible.
5. Areas not affected by the water (branches, children's room) were expected to carry on operations as normally as possible.

Since the issue of securing the roof was being dealt with by the roofing company and the city engineering department, the library staff was left free to concentrate on the other problems. To prevent further water damage to the collection, rolls of sheet plastic (purchased from a local lumber company) were draped over the book

stacks. In this way, any water falling from the ceiling would be diverted onto the floor. Since there were over twenty-five thousand books in the damaged stack level, this means of protection was preferable to a wholesale attempt to move all books.

Members of the technical services department were assigned the task of ascertaining more fully the extent of the water damage to the books, pricing the damaged items, and drying the books which were slightly wet. Electric fans were brought in to help in the drying process. Books which were candidates for on site restoration were saved, and the discards were boxed. Cards from the discards were pulled, and the task of determining their value was begun.

Numerous photographs documenting the damage were taken by the staff. In addition, the library business manager was assigned the job of recording all costs involved in the cleanup process. Such records would be necessary for insurance claims.

Members of the adult public service staff were assigned the task of arranging books which had been moved out of the line of danger so that normal public service could resume as soon as possible. The goal of opening for operations the next day was set. Members of the public service staff devised a method for showing where books formerly in the upper stack level were located in the temporary shelving arrangement.

A carpet-cleaning service was hired to extract water from the stack area. This work took seven hours, and over 150 gallons of water were taken out of the soaked carpet. Once carpet areas were cleared of water, rented fans were focused on them to dry out the moist rug and to prevent mildew. Saturated ceiling tiles were removed and taken to an outside dumpster.

Equally as important as dealing with disaster conditions was the continuation of existing services. Patrons were diverted to branches, and every effort was made to carry on library service in a normal manner at these facilities.

By 6 P.M. Thursday, the situation was stabilized. The area was cleared, books were protected by plastic covering, and a means of providing access to the moved collections was devised. Through the outstanding work of the staff, the library was able to open for business the following day.

The estimated cost of damage to the building was \$5200. The evening was spent determining the value of the damaged books which would be discarded. Nearly all of the lost books were non-fiction. Searches in *Books in Print* revealed that

over half of these items were no longer being published. Since many of these items had no suitable replacements, the need to make some effort at reclaiming even the most severely damaged books seemed obvious.

Disaster Preparedness

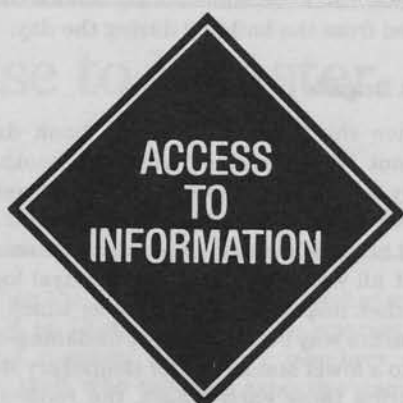
At this point, the library director referred to *Disaster Preparedness: a Guide for Developing a Plan to Cope with Disaster for the Small Public and Private Library*, prepared by John L. Sharpe, curator of rare books at Duke University, and developed by the NCLA Library Resources Committee. Appendix IV of this manual, "Salvage of Water-Soaked Books and Material," provided very useful information on how to reclaim books which are apparently damaged beyond repair.

Closely following the instruction in the manual, the library director obtained storage space in the freezer of a local grocery wholesaler. Two hundred eighty-eight books valued at \$2,538 were boxed and stored at minus fifteen degrees Fahrenheit.

Over the next month, periodic trips were made to the freezer by library staffers. Two or three boxes of books at a time were brought back and dried. The techniques recommended in *Disaster Preparedness* were used to dry the books. In essence, the freezing of the books kept the mildew and mold from starting, and the salvage problem was reduced to manageable proportions. Instead of 288 books to save at one time, the library staff could deal with 35 to 45 at a time.

As a result of these efforts, 145 of the damaged books were able to be returned to the shelves upon drying. One hundred twenty-nine others were dried and sent to the bindery for new covers, while 14 eventually had to be discarded. Drying the books was a time-consuming, often tedious, process. Considering the value of the information saved, however, the effort was worthwhile.

With the completion of the salvage of the books and the finish of the roofing, the library has returned to normal. The total cost of damage to the building, the collection, and the cost of clean up approached \$8,000. These costs could have been much higher if the library staff had not acted quickly to contain the damage. The experience was challenging, and many lessons were learned. The most important of these lessons is the knowledge that such disasters can and do happen. If such catastrophes occur, it is necessary to be prepared.



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