

Salvaging Water-Damaged Family Valuables and Heirlooms

The losses that are the result of disasters are usually measured in dollars, but often the losses that matter the most are the cherished items and heirlooms that are closest to the hearts of individuals and families. Although these treasured items may be damaged in floods, hurricanes, or tornadoes, it is often possible to salvage them. With a little patience, prompt action, and professional tips, saving treasured photographs, letters, and other irreplaceable objects is possible, although it may involve a follow-up consultation with a conservator.

Photographs

Carefully remove wet photographs from plastic/paper enclosures; it may be safer to slit and peel an enclosure away from the photo than pull out the photo itself. Save or copy written names, etc. Wet photographs and negatives that are stuck together should never be pulled apart. Soak them in clean water until they separate, up to 48 hours until you can air dry or freeze them. (Do not freeze glass negatives or plates.) Rinse them in fresh water. Do not touch or blot surfaces. Air dry the photographs by hanging them with clips placed at the edges, or lay them flat, face up, on absorbent paper. Keep photographs from contacting adjacent surfaces or each other. If behind glass, see Framed Art.

Framed Art

Paintings: Remove from the frame whether wet or dry, unless stuck to glass. Keep it on the stretcher bars. If still wet, rinse mud and dirt off with a clean sponge and distilled water. If the paint layer is cracking, flaking, or otherwise appears unstable, do not attempt to clean; consult a professional conservator. If stable, gently blot the back of the canvas with a clean, dry towel; avoid distorting the canvas with pressure. Air dry using good circulation instead of heat or sunlight. To increase circulation, lay the canvas face-up on a horizontal surface with airspace beneath the stretchers. **Art/photos/documents behind glass:** Remove from frame unless object appears stuck to glass. Air dry slowly, image side up with nothing touching the surface. If object is stuck to glass, leave it in the frame and air dry glass-side down for future scanning or treatment.

Basketry

Gently rinse, drain, and blot baskets to remove excess water; do not wring or twist to dry. Stuff the baskets with clean paper towels or cotton sheets to retain shape and absorb stains. Cover with clean towels and air dry them slowly, changing the blotting material regularly.



Covered in mud and silt, family photos and other family heirlooms lay on streets and lawns after the severe flash flooding in Des Plaines, Illinois, in April 2013. Photo by Bryan Adams/FEMA Corps

General Information

- If the object is still wet, gently rinse it with clear, clean water. If it is dry, clean off silt and debris with a soft brush or dab it lightly with a damp cloth.
- Air dry wet or damp objects indoors, if possible. Sunlight and heat may be too intense, causing splits, warping, and buckling. Increase airflow with fans, open windows, or air conditioners, but do not point fans directly at drying objects. Inhibit the growth of mold and mildew by reducing humidity with dehumidifiers.
- Personal safety is important when working with objects retrieved from contaminated water. Wear disposable vinyl or nitrile gloves, protective clothing, goggles, and, when possible, use an N95 face mask while working.

Because the information provided is general, the Heritage Emergency National Task Force strongly recommends that professional conservators be consulted for historic objects. Detailed information is available in the Additional Resources on the next page.

Books and Documents

If rinsing is necessary, hold books closed. If leather, cloth, or paper materials are tacky or sticky, place wax paper between them. Pack books, spine down, in a single layer in sturdy containers. Stack documents so as not to crush them. Place the containers in a freezer, preferably with a frost-free setting, and set it to the lowest possible temperature. Expect this drying process to take from several weeks to several months, depending on the freezer temperature and the extent of damage.

Textiles and Clothing

Textiles will be weaker and heavier when wet and will need extra physical support when moving. Do not attempt to unfold extremely delicate fabrics if the fragile layers are stuck together. Do not stack wet textiles. To remove mud and debris, re-wet the textiles with gently flowing clean water or with a fine hose spray. Gently press water out with the palm of your hand. Do not wring or twist dry. Remove excess water with dry towels, blotting paper, or un-inked paper, especially if the dyes are bleeding. Re-shape the textile while it is damp to approximate its original contours. Do not seal textiles in plastic bags.

Metal Objects

Rinse metal objects exposed to floodwaters, mud, or silt with clear water and blot dry immediately with a clean, soft cloth. Metal objects can be directly dried with fans and low-heat hairdryers to increase their drying rate. Allow heavy mud deposits on large metal objects, such as sculptures, to dry. Caked mud can be removed later.

Broken Pottery and Ceramics

If objects are broken or begin to fall apart, place all broken pieces and detached parts in clearly labeled open containers; ideally, use a separate container for fragments of each broken object. Do not attempt to repair objects until they are completely dry or, in the case of important materials, until you have consulted with a professional conservator. Monitor them for mold.

Wooden Furniture

Gently rinse/sponge wooden surfaces to clean, and then blot and air dry slowly. If the furniture has a painted surface, air dry slowly without removing dirt or moisture. A slow process will help ensure that the wood dries evenly and is less likely to warp, split, or crack. Improper drying may cause the furniture to shrink or the inlay to lift. Never dry wood furniture in the sun; the heat will cause uneven drying and can lighten and fade some wood stains. Consult a furniture conservator for the best method to dry your furniture.

Leather and Rawhide

If necessary, rinse/sponge with clear water to remove mud and reduce stains. Blot them dry with soft cloths or towels. Pad them with dry towels or un-inked paper to maintain shape, and air dry. To keep rawhide, semi-tanned leather, such as kidskin, and fur supple, gently, and frequently manipulate them during drying.

Additional Resources

- **Video: Water Segment from *Field Guide to Emergency Response***
youtube.com/watch?v=rXyA5Dq_iHM
- **Video: Mud Segment from *Field Guide to Emergency Response***
youtube.com/watch?v=9KSkxxydnvY
- **Video: Mold-Damaged Artwork**
youtube.com/watch?v=2zKnWUdaYyQ
- **Salvage Procedures for Wet Items**
nlm.nih.gov/hmd/preservation/pdfs/printableinstructions.pdf
- **Find a Conservator**
culturalheritage.org/about-conservation/find-a-conservator
- **Heritage Emergency National Task Force**
culturalrescue.si.edu/hentf/
- **Advice By Phone**
loc.gov/preservation/emergprep/emerother



FEMA and the Smithsonian Institution co-sponsor the Heritage Emergency National Task Force, a partnership of more than 60 national service organizations and federal agencies created to protect cultural heritage from the damaging effects of natural disasters and other emergencies.

