

Disaster Preparedness

How Ready Are You?

The Huntington Historical Society, like many similar organizations, lacks a formal, written disaster plan, although there have been good intentions to do so over the years. Among the author's early responsibilities as Director of Curatorial Services at the Society was assessment of its disaster preparedness. The author began by learning as much as possible about Huntington, its background, topography, and the current condition of its buildings, related collections, and disaster preparedness.

The Society has a rich and colorful history as well as impressive and versatile collections. Land on Long Island, which was to become the Town of Huntington, was purchased from the Indians on April 2, 1653. Four years later the first school was established which began a long history of cultural tradition in Huntington. The Huntington Historical Society is mandated to continue the development of this cultural tradition through its Mission Statement:

Huntington Historical Society preserves the heritage of the Town of Huntington by maintaining museums, collections and a research center by educating the public about our regional history and by promoting the preservation of historic sites.

The Society owns three buildings listed in the National Register, two of which are historic house museums. The diverse Decorative Arts Collection relates to the history of the Town of Huntington and is composed of many sub-collections. Among these are numerous examples of ceramics made locally. During the 17th century, the soil in the Huntington area was composed of a large amount of clay. This surplus was responsible for a successful export business delivering clay to Connecticut and New York City. Various potters often traveled and worked between Long Island, New York City, and Connecticut manufacturing and selling their products. Subsequently, production of various forms of utilitarian objects such as pots, jars, pitchers, bowls, and plates occurred here. Huntington

became known as a center for the production of stoneware.¹ The fragility of these pieces of pottery requires a safe environment for everyday care as well as extra protection during a major storm. The Society has a Fine Arts Collection, which represents the works of several important Huntington and Long Island artists. The collections also include a very fine Reference Library specializing in the genealogy and history of Long Island as well as a Textile Collection dating from 1700 that has documented connections to Huntington.

Second in importance to the cultural development of Huntington is its location, close to the middle of Long Island's North Shore facing Long Island Sound. Just as the accessibility to water was beneficial to the Indians and the earliest settlers, the water can present a challenge to the preservation of that culture. Huntington, like most of Long Island, is vulnerable to nor'easters, flash flooding, hurricanes, and related power outages. Weather forecasts are continually monitored but more so during hurricane season. However, nor'easters can be just as destructive as hurricanes and come at any time of the year. Along with any of these storms, even the milder ones, comes a chance of power outages that can obviously upset security and climate control programs. Long-range weather experts have determined that these storms seem to come in 10-year cycles making Long Island overdue for a major hurricane. These conditions demand a well-designed, complete disaster plan.

A well-written and rehearsed plan engenders confidence and security in the event that implementation becomes necessary. The primary goal of all disaster planning is to produce a document under one cover that clearly states what needs to be done in any type of emergency. Also included are locations of supplies and where to obtain assistance necessary in order to reduce the loss of life and property.

Priorities to be considered are safety of staff and visitors, then the security of buildings, and finally the stabilization of the collections.

A disaster plan is composed of four major elements:

Survey. Includes the initial survey as well as frequent reviews

Before a disaster. Correction of problems revealed in the survey as well as details of preparation

During the disaster. Last minute preparation details and evacuation

Recovery. Utilizes details outlined in the rest of the plan

The foundation of a disaster plan is a detailed survey. It is important to review any plans and emergency supplies already in place. Then you can systematically determine what needs to be changed or added in order to assure the best possible preparations are made. If you are not experienced in disaster planning, it may prove more beneficial to hire a consultant for the survey than any other part of the plan. A qualified consultant experienced in disaster planning would save time by being readily able to identify shortcomings or pitfalls and help provide the proper information required by granting agencies.

Before beginning a formal plan for handling emergencies, it is necessary to spend some time thinking of your location, assessing the weaknesses in your physical plant, determining which structures you need to protect and what are your local hazards and climatic vulnerabilities. It is also important to rank objects in your collections based on relevance to the mission statement. (This ranking needs to be included in the final document and comes into play during the recovery phase.)

Since all emergencies are not natural disasters, warning systems need to be reviewed. Equipment that needs to be checked should include smoke and fire detectors, fire extinguishers, and intrusion and anti-theft devices. Be sure that all fire suppression systems are routinely monitored by a professional company to guarantee working order when needed.

Of course, we all know that back-up of data is crucial, but it bears repeating that there should be hard copies, as well as backups of computer data kept off site. Be sure this list is updated regularly with objects on temporary loan or other materials that may be on the premises for research. Computers need to be equipped with adequate surge protection and an uninterruptable power supply (UPS) to prevent loss of data during a power outage.

Have formal security response teams, headed by a captain, been created? Are they composed of qualified staff members? Are they equipped with the necessary phone numbers, security codes, and maps of the facilities which indicate the location of water and electrical shut-offs? Are the calling lists for each team current?

What emergency supplies are on hand? Are they containerized and reserved only for emergency use? Is there a schedule for regular inventories of the containers? Do they include large and small rolls of plastic sheeting, plastic "milk" crates, blotter paper, absorbent toweling, flashlights, rubber gloves, dust masks, a cutting tool, sponges, mops, buckets, and pencil and paper?

A thorough, written survey simplifies writing of the final plan. It is indicative of the strengths, weaknesses, and omissions of existing procedures as well as areas needing immediate attention.

The survey, however, is just the beginning. The actual writing of the plan and assembly of equipment is the next step. Since this can be time-consuming and costly the various granting agencies frequently have project support funds available to assist particularly small institutions in this endeavor. After the survey is completed and the funds are secured, writing of the disaster plan can begin.

Safety of the staff and visitors requires inclusion of a plan for evacuation. This part of the plan needs to take into consideration the scenarios possible at various locations. The plan should direct people to the nearest exits without interfering with the arrival of emergency vehicles. In case time does not allow for an evacuation, such as a tornado, places must be identified within the building that would provide the greatest amount of shelter. Small maps detailing exit routes should be placed at the main emergency exit doors. These maps should also indicate alternate routes out of the building in the case of blockage. Of course, docents, educators, and other staff should be well trained in the execution of these plans in order to assist visitors safely out of the area.

A detailed floor plan of all buildings must be included in a final plan. These plans should highlight gas, water, and electrical shutoffs as well as location of fire alarms and fire extinguishers. Location of objects listed as "priorities for rescue" should be noted on these floor plans.

During a natural disaster, fire, flood, snow-storm, power outage, etc., total evacuation of the

premises is the best policy. Collections are best cared for when the environment is stable. If compensating climatic systems are inoperative, due to a lack of electricity, opening and closing of doors by concerned staff could upset that stability and cause more harm than good.

Recovery is the final and most important aspect of disaster planning. The success of the recovery depends on how well plans have been made. During the recovery phase, phone calls soliciting help from various agencies listed in the plan will be made. These contacts should include conservators, commercial freezer companies (for freeze drying wet papers and books), fine arts movers, emergency storage areas off site, and local fine arts organizations that might be able to lend various forms of assistance.

A major disaster is something we hope never to experience. It is helpful, however, to learn from the experiences of others. There are many sources available with information on disaster planning. Do not overlook the Internet as a major source of help. The National Endowment for the Humanities has designed and produced a wheel² that contains information on various disasters and how to handle them. This is very user friendly and extremely helpful both in planning and recovery. Insurance companies that handle fine arts insurance are also an excellent source of information. Most archival supply catalogs now have

sections devoted to various emergency supplies needed.

Writing a disaster plan is a long-term commitment. It not only involves the items mentioned here but a follow-up plan must also be included. There should be a periodic review of the plan from cover to cover to make sure that revisions are made as necessary and supply inventories are still current. The better the preparation, the greater chance for a successful recovery that means the survival of priceless collections.

Despite the fact that the Huntington Historical Society buildings are historic and vulnerable, they are in good condition and well maintained. Plans for enlargement are being considered that will take advantage of modern technology providing an even safer environment for people and objects.

Notes

- ¹ Corbett, Cynthia Arps, *USEFUL ART: Long Island Pottery*, The Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities, Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, New York
- ² National Endowment for the Humanities and The St. Paul Companies, *Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel*, National Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Property, Inc., Washington, DC.

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International Conference on the Seismic Performance of Traditional Buildings, Istanbul, Turkey, November 16-18, 2000

While many have seen the heartrending images of the collapsed concrete apartment houses in Turkey last year, few have seen the many brick and timber houses constructed in a traditional method still standing among the destroyed buildings. The fact that so many of these houses remained standing mocked the conventional wisdom about the safety of such construction. Since reinforced concrete has largely replaced masonry and timber construction throughout the world, rarely have present-day researchers addressed the inherent seismic resistance of particular forms of these traditional structures and the influence that earthquakes may have had on their evolution.

An international conference, entitled Earthquake-Safe: Lessons To Be Learned From Traditional Construction, will provide a forum to bring people from many parts of the globe to focus on these issues. It will also explore what can be learned from these historic

structures that could lead to improvements in contemporary building practice. The purpose of this conference is to help bring attention to the kinds of buildings that are often accorded little value in developing countries by encouraging a more balanced view of the relative seismic performance of these traditional buildings when compared to more recent construction.

The conference is sponsored by ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites), and is supported by UNESCO, Government of Turkey, Ministry of Culture, the Kress Foundation and other donors.

All inquiries and applications for conference registration should be made to: conference@ahsap.com.

The conference web page can be accessed at the ICOMOS International Wood Committee home page at www.icomos.org/iawc/.