



The National Endowment for the Humanities: Saving Our Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage items, from presidential letters and great works of art to community archives, are vulnerable to a wide range of natural and man-made disasters, among them hurricanes, fires, earthquakes, and floods. Whether providing emergency grants to affected cultural institutions or supporting emergency training and conservation education, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) works to ensure these items are preserved for generations to come.

A 2004 report produced by the Institute of Library and Museum Services found that

80%
of collecting institutions in the United States **lacked a disaster plan** for their collections.

The NEH provides emergency grants to institutions in regions affected by large-scale national disasters.

- Following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, the NEH awarded more than \$2 million in emergency relief to cultural institutions in the region. NEH funding moved works of art owned by the New Orleans Museum of Art into safe storage; preserved more than 46,000 photographs documenting the history of the Gulf South; and salvaged documents and artifacts from Jefferson Davis’s home, Beauvoir, which sustained extreme damage during the storm.
- Following Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria in 2017, the NEH awarded nearly \$2 million to organizations throughout the Gulf South and Puerto Rico. Funding preserved a John Biggers mural housed by the Blue Triangle Multi-Cultural Association in Texas and salvaged water-damaged architectural features at Vizcaya, an estate and museum in Florida.





“Following Hurricane Irma, an NEH Chairman’s Emergency grant allowed us to pay for the marine salvage of architectural and sculptural elements that had been knocked off the Barge and into the waters of Biscayne Bay.

The grant was also an acknowledgment – from the NEH – of the significance of this unique architectural element at Vizcaya and of the sculptures by Alexander Stirling Calder that adorn it. That’s hugely important!”

– REMKO JANSONIUS,
Deputy Director, Collections and Curatorial Affairs, Vizcaya Museum and Gardens

“In response to Hurricane Sandy, Alliance for Response NYC members distributed resources about disaster response and salvaging collections. In partnership with national and local organizations,

we coordinated the salvage of thousands of works of art belonging to local artists, performing arts groups, and small museums.”

– ELIZABETH NUNAN,
Co-Chair, Alliance for Response NYC

The NEH supports educational programs that help staff at cultural institutions prepare for disasters.

- With regional partners like the Midwest Art Conservation Center, the Northeast Document Conservation Center, and the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts, the NEH ensures that staff from small organizations throughout the United States can undertake emergency preparedness and conservation training.
- NEH grants help organizations like the Comanche National Museum and Cultural Center in Oklahoma and the Museum of Nebraska Art create their own emergency response plans, train their staffs, and purchase supplies. They fund systems updates that help prevent damage in the face of natural disasters: the University of Montana is using an NEH grant to ensure its HVAC systems can manage smoke particulates, a direct response to the increasing threat of wildfires.
- NEH-funded resources such as the *Field Guide to Emergency Readiness and Response*, the *Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel*, and water remediation instruction videos are widely used by cultural heritage professionals throughout the world.

The NEH supports professional networks in areas prone to disaster, establishing the infrastructure necessary for effective disaster response.

- With the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation (FAIC), the NEH supports the Alliance for Response: 28 community networks, from Seattle to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, that build cooperative partnerships and ensure that vulnerable regions are prepared for disasters before they happen.
- The Texas Alliance for Response (TX-CERA) was instrumental in Houston’s recovery following Hurricane Harvey in 2017—and then traveled to Florida to support cultural institutions affected by Hurricanes Maria and Irma.

Through grants to graduate programs, the NEH has fostered the research that now makes it possible to salvage and recover both personal possessions and national treasures.

- NEH support of the Winterthur/University of Delaware Graduate Program in Art Conservation has advanced conservation research over the past three decades. As a product of this work, preservation professionals better understand how to treat mold, water, and fire damage. This knowledge has immediate, practical value for individual people in addition to cultural organizations, as students in the programs have helped salvage photographs from floods in Wimberly, Texas, and a tragic house fire in Columbus, Ohio, as part of their training.

