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Saving Damaged Family Treasures after a Fire

Cherished family heirlooms that survive a fire are often covered with soot and ash, requiring prompt and gentle attention to avoid further damage. The Heritage Emergency National Task Force, a coalition of 42 national organizations and federal agencies co-sponsored by FEMA and the Smithsonian Institution, offers these basic guidelines from professional conservators for those who are searching for, and finding, family treasures in the ruins:

After a Fire

- Personal safety is always the highest priority when entering buildings damaged by fire.
- Never attempt to salvage belongings at the expense of your own safety.
- Wear protective clothing—especially gloves (nitrile or latex are preferred over cotton), face masks, and eye protection.
- Avoid breathing in or touching hazardous materials. Risks in fire-damaged areas can include particulates, exposed asbestos, lead-containing building materials (such as glass and lead paint), and chemical residues.
- If water has been used to put out the fire, mold may also be an issue and should not be inhaled.

General Handling Advice

- Even though you will be sorely tempted, it is important to reduce the amount you handle or touch damaged items. The very fine particles in soot stick to everything and every touch will grind it further into the item you are trying to save.
- Take photographs of your damaged items and contact your insurance agency as soon as possible to start any claims.
- Soot and ash are very abrasive and will further damage items through scratching.
- If your items were exposed to both heat and water, they will be even more fragile.
- Lift your objects carefully and avoid weakened areas; for example, support ceramics from the base rather than lifting by handles.
- Wear nitrile or latex gloves when handling objects as the greasy residue in soot can be permanently fixed to absorbent surfaces by skin oils.
- Avoid placing pressure on blistered or lifting surfaces, such as on paintings or photographs.
- Place items in supportive boxes or plastic containers until you can obtain further advice or are ready to begin cleaning.

- Keep in mind that the longer the soot remains on the item, the harder it is to remove.

Some Simple Cleaning Tips

- Do not use water—or any other cleaning solution! Water will drive soot and ash further into the surface of your item and they will become impossible to remove.
- As soon as possible, vacuum the soot and ash off your item.
- Do not vacuum wet or damp items—wait until they are dry.
- It is preferable to use a HEPA filter in your vacuum cleaner.
- Use the vacuum on the lowest setting, or have smaller plastic tubes inserted into the main tube to reduce suction.
- Do not use a brush and do not allow the nozzle to touch the surface.
- Vacuum all exposed surfaces *before* opening out folded items such as textiles or books.
- If you want to remove further residue, soot sponges can be carefully used if the item is robust enough. Cut small pieces of the dry sponge for more accurate application and economic use. The dirty surface of the sponge can be cut off to expose a new cleaning surface. These sponges (often called dry cleaning sponges) are available at local home improvement stores.

Some Important Considerations

- Shelved books may be charred on the outside but intact inside. Vacuum the edges before you open the books—don't worry if some of the charred bits come off.
- Photograph albums may be stuck together—do not try to open them by force. You will need to take them to a conservator for advice.
- Heat can make glass, ceramic, and metal items very brittle—remember to handle carefully.
- Fabrics in particular might look intact but may fall apart without very careful handling.
- Supports that you can slide underneath your belongings (sheets, boards, plastic) will enable you to safely carry more fragile items.
- You have now essentially done all you can to stabilize your items. It is likely that they will need further attention from a qualified conservator as they may be in a fragile state. Please keep in mind that, while things might look irretrievably damaged, there may well be treatments that will salvage these items. Do not despair, but please seek conservation advice.

Contact a Conservator

Recovering items damaged by a fire is challenging. If a precious item is badly damaged, a conservator may be able to help. To locate a conservator, click on the “Find a Conservator” box on the home page of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), www.conservation-us.org. Also, you could contact the conservation/preservation department of a major museum, library, or archives for advice or contact the American Institute for Conservation Collections Emergency Response Team (AIC-CERT; see below).

(more)

**Resources for Recovery—Books, Photographs, Art,
Artifacts, Papers, etc.—Damaged by Water, Smoke, or Fire**

ADVICE BY PHONE

American Institute for Conservation Collections Emergency Response Team (AIC-CERT)
24/7 Emergency Hotline: 202-661-8068

Western States and Territories Preservation Assistance Service (WESTPAS)
24/7 Emergency Hotline: 888-905-7737

Balboa Art Conservation Center
619-236-9702

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

“After the Fire! Returning to Normal.” FEMA FA-46/August 2012.
http://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/pdf/publications/fa_46.pdf

“Dealing with Soot” in the *Field Guide to Emergency Response* video. Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation. A short video walks you through salvaging items damaged by soot and water. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9i9BfofVFo>

“Fire.” Chicora Foundation. <http://chicora.org/fire.html>

“Worker Safety During Fire Cleanup.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/wildfires/cleanupworkers.asp>

The Heritage Emergency National Task Force thanks the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material, which responded to the devastating 2009 bushfires in Victoria in 2009, for sharing its fire-recovery steps.

These recommendations are intended as guidance only. The Heritage Emergency National Task Force and its sponsors, FEMA and the Smithsonian Institution, and the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material assume no responsibility or liability for treatment of damaged objects.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Smithsonian Institution co-sponsor 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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