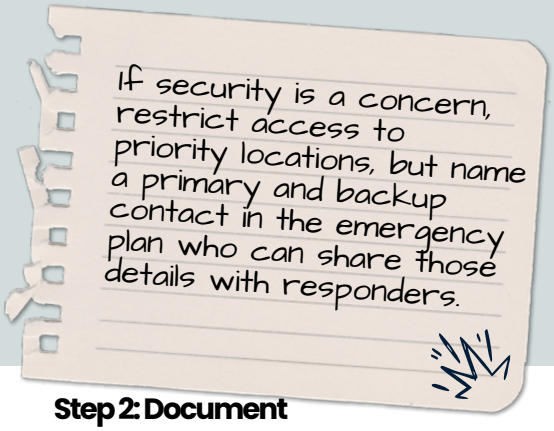
Preservation Brief

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Collection Salvage Priorities

Collection storage has flooded, and leadership is asking which objects to address first. Making those decisions under stress can feel overwhelming, but identifying salvage priorities ahead of time gives you a place to start.



Introduction

Salvage priorities identify the objects, collections, and institutional records you will focus on protecting before or recovering after an emergency. Deciding what matters most takes time and discussion. Making those decisions in advance means you can draw on your colleagues' knowledge, consider the options, and explain your choices without the pressure of an unfolding emergency.

Once you have a list, how do you make sure it will help when you need it? The salvage priority cycle has four phases:

- **Identify**
- **Document**
- **Communicate**
- **Evaluate.**

Together, they help you decide what to prioritize, give people the information they need to act, and keep that preparation current as your collections and circumstances change. Human health and safety always come first, and any collection response must follow directions from emergency responders.

Step 1: Identify

What would you focus on first if you had limited time and help? Work through these questions with colleagues who know your collections and how your organization operates.

- **What can we not operate without?** Consider vital records, collection inventories, and information needed for recovery. Are current backups available elsewhere?
- **What do we own, and what is on loan?** Check loan agreements for emergency requirements.
- **What most supports our mission?** Think about historical, artistic, research, and community significance.
- **What would be hardest to replace?** Consider unique materials and collections whose loss would leave a lasting gap.
- **What is most vulnerable to damage?** Consider likely emergencies, material sensitivities and existing condition.

Use your answers to develop a manageable list of priorities, and record why you selected them.



Step 2: Document

Could someone find your priority collections without you there to point them out? Document priorities with that person in mind. A colleague may know the building but not the collection, while an emergency responder may be unfamiliar with both.

In your emergency plan, identify what the priorities are, where to find them, and what someone needs to know to protect or move them. Include photographs and marked floor plans. Be specific: "Cabinet 3, bottom shelf, Room 102" is more helpful than "photograph storage." Note locked cases, special handling needs, and where relocated materials should go. Keep a current copy accessible outside the building.

For emergency responders, prepare a short guide they can scan quickly. Show priority locations alongside building access, known hazards, and contact information for your nstitutional liaison. Ask local responders what information and format would help them most.

At the collection location, markers on boxes, shelves, or cases can help people connect the documentation to what they see. Use a consistent system, explain its meaning, and consider whether visible markers could create security concerns. Choose placement and materials that will not damage collections.

IAcross all three formats, use matching names and identifiers so people can follow the information from the plan to the right place.

Step 3: Communicate

Your priorities will be most useful when the people responding know about them. Include salvage priorities in staff orientation and emergency training so colleagues know what the markers mean, where to find the emergency plan, and whom to contact.

Set aside time each May 1—MayDay—to revisit salvage priorities with staff. Use this annual reminder to show people where emergency plans are kept, review how to access them, and discuss anything that has changed. Include volunteers and others who may have a role in the response.

Invite your local fire department for a building walkthrough. Show them priority collection locations, explain access challenges and known hazards, and ask about their **pre-fire planning process**. Can they keep floor plans and responder guides for reference during an emergency? What format would be most useful, and how should you provide updates? This conversation can also help establish realistic expectations about collection protection and identify ways to improve emergency access.

Step 4: Evaluate

Would your priorities still make sense if an emergency happened tomorrow? Review them at least once a year alongside your emergency plan. Your MayDay check-in is a good opportunity to ask:

- **Are these still our priorities?** Consider new acquisitions, changing loans, and shifts in how collections support your mission.
- **Is the information current?** Check locations, photographs, floor plans, markers, and contact details.
- **Can we put the plan into action?** Think about access, available staff, equipment, and where materials would go.

Update priorities whenever collections move or circumstances change, rather than waiting for the annual review. Assign someone responsibility for making updates and sharing them with staff and responders who keep copies.

During an emergency, use your priorities as a starting point. Some priority collections may be unaffected, while other materials need immediate attention. Safe access, actual damage, and available resources will help determine what to address first.

M.C. CONSERVATION

Need emergency planning help? Reach out!

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Product Spotlight

KnoxBox

What if an emergency happens when no one is there to unlock the building? A KnoxBox is a secure box mounted outside, typically near an entrance, that holds keys and access devices for emergency responders. It is keyed to your local fire department or responding agency, which controls access. Larger models can also hold essential documents, such as floor plans and responder guides.

Talk with your local fire department before ordering. Confirm which products they support, where to install the box, and what to keep inside. Choose a model with enough room for the agreed contents, and arrange updates whenever keys or emergency information change.

