

Final Report & Recommendations to the Seattle Genealogical Society Regarding Disaster Preparedness

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The society's stated purpose was adapted from the California Genealogical Society, and as posted on their site, is as follows:

To collect, preserve, disseminate information on genealogy and Washington local history; to assist its members in tracing their ancestry; to ascertain the location and condition of various public and private records which are or may become accessible to students of genealogy and American History; to aid in investigation of this nature by combining the efforts and resources of its members; to seek to direct public attention to the value of complete and exact records; and *to emphasize the necessity of unremitting care in their collection and preservation.*¹ [italics mine]

Despite the stated purpose of emphasizing “unremitting care in [records’] collection and preservation,” the Society has a minimal budget, almost fully dedicated to paying rent for the space it occupies, and has neither the time, labor nor expertise available to develop a fully functional disaster plan in the foreseeable future. As consultants, and after careful consideration of SGS’s situation and unique considerations, we have come to the following list of recommendations through which SGS may increase its effectiveness in fulfilling the Society’s purpose and mission for many years to come.

Assessment

In essence, SGS has almost no disaster preparedness plan, a situation which must be remedied as quickly as possible for its practice to align with its purpose. SGS has in its care materials that provide unique opportunities for researchers—by rarity, evidential value, and/or location and access—and precautions should be taken to ensure that everything possible is done to safeguard the physical and/or electronic existence of these resources.

Recommendations

With the balance between an ideal world and the limitations of SGS’s resources as our guide, we have made recommendations based on the Society’s particular situation and limitations. Following are our recommendations, organized into priorities by urgency and importance.

¹ <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~waseags/history.html>

High Priority:

Give the condition of the library and current recommendations for library disaster preparedness, we very strongly recommend that SGS:

- Keep a master phone list in a highly visible location, and provide each volunteer with a copy of the abbreviated phone list we have provided (Appendix A). (We also provide a brief explanation of when services such as cold storage, refrigerated trucking, or data recovery would be warranted, as simply a list of numbers for these services does little to indicate when they should be used).
- Provide volunteers with the phone list we have provided or a modified version.
- Offer a training session for volunteers in the use of extinguishers; we would prefer, and strongly advise, that the SGS make arrangements with the local fire department to receive instruction, not only in the use of extinguishers, but in the broader aspects of fire prevention and safety.
- Not store large stacks of books and papers immediately adjacent to electronic equipment, to reduce the chances of them catching fire due to an electrical spark or short.
- Not store books on the top shelves of the stacks, as the lack of clearance there increases the possibility of a catastrophic fire—we acknowledge that space limitations have necessitated the use of this space, but we believe it would be wiser to “thin” the collection somewhat, rather than continue to store the whole collection in a high-risk environment.
- Create an evacuation plan (both for fires, and for other disasters) that is clearly communicated and easy to follow. We have identified a possible check-in point across the street, created a simple step-by-step plan for evacuation, and have prepared some materials to make the implementation of that plan smooth (see Appendix B). The evacuation plan, possibly adapted for visitors, could also be displayed at the visitor log-in book and elsewhere in the stacks.
- Keep on hand and accessible the basic supplies needed to deal, for example, with flooding and damp books, including a copy of a disaster preparedness resource publication such as Fortson’s *Disaster Planning and Recovery: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians and Archivists*, which is available on Amazon used for under \$10.00. A list of those supplies is included in the materials being provided to the SGS, and can be adapted for budget/applicability (see Appendix C, and <http://www.protext.net/react-pak.html>). These materials could be stored in a plastic tub or garbage can, with their location marked on the priority preservation floor plan.

- Create a phone tree and some sort of disaster team/list of responsibilities; we recognize that the nature of the Society and its structure of support is a challenge for centralizing such a team, but putting together a list of officers, board members, and volunteers who, for example, might have vehicles or experience in moving heavy boxes and be willing to assist in case of an emergency, could be a great time-saver when such a situation does arise (see Appendix D).
- Contact the organizations they would look to for help in a collections disaster (SPL and the UW were mentioned as possibilities) to seek at least an informal, if not a formal, understanding of what help would be available. If SGS cannot reach such an agreement with those institutions, we'd advise contacting local genealogical societies and historical societies to seek an agreement—probably a cooperative agreement in which the affiliated societies agree to assist each other in the event of disaster. At the very least, we strongly recommend that they find several volunteers who would agree to make space available in their homes or garages in the event of a disaster
- As we were unable to obtain information about the building or the Society's insurance policy, we cannot offer any informed opinions about their current level and type of insurance. We are, however, including information gleaned from our research about insurance terminology (Appendix E).
- Integrate prioritizing the collection for salvage with the planned expansion of intellectual control through creating an electronic catalog. This control is crucial both for insurance and salvage purposes, and we are very glad to hear that steps are being taken to strengthen the Society's knowledge of its holdings. We also offer a list of questions to consider when prioritizing the collection (Appendix F). This could help indicate whether the color-coded section map is the most effective way to organize prioritization, or if there are materials throughout the collection that might need individual indications of high priority (for example, some sort of colored sticker or affix on the spine).
- Apprise all volunteers of the new disaster preparedness considerations, and make sure they know where to locate phone numbers, evacuation instructions, and disaster supplies.

Mid-Level Priority:

Give the condition of the library and current recommendations for library disaster preparedness, we strongly advise that SGS:

- Expand their locking-up procedure to include checking the kitchen area before departure, so that appliances are not inadvertently left on overnight.

- Assign appropriate members to a disaster team as soon as they are able.
- Move its computers and other electronic devices away from the portion of the facility that is directly beneath the building's central drainpipe, if possible.
- Consider removing the the carpet from the stacks, if possible—if, due either to budgetary constraints or the contract signed with the owner of the building, the carpet cannot be removed, we suggest that uncarpeted flooring be a priority to consider when the SGS contemplates moving to a new location.
- Weld the shelves in the stacks to the top rail to increase stability in case of an earthquake. In an ideal scenario, the shelves would be welded to that top rail, and attached firmly to the floor and walls (though the ceiling at SGS is currently made of tiles) following the advice of a seismic engineer, but we recognize that the expense of these adjustments, along with the expectations of the building's owner, may prove too great an obstacle to the SGS implementing that recommendation. In that case, we would equally strongly advise that the SGS negotiate permission to bolt shelves in place when they next select a facility to house their library collection.