

SAVING PHOTOGRAPHS AFTER THE FLOOD

The following tips are offered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) and the National Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Property (NIC), to assist victims when they return to their homes and begin the difficult task of cleaning up after a flood.

“Photographs and photo albums are often the only record of momentous occasions like weddings, birthdays and graduations,” Sarah Wagner, senior photograph conservator at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) said. “If the flood has damaged them, saving them may be possible. Remember that if flood waters did not damage the negatives, you can make new prints anytime.”

Damaged photographs for which there are no negatives should receive attention first. Once photographs have stuck together or become moldy, saving them may not be possible. Handle wet photos carefully; the surface may be fragile. Wet photos may be rinsed in clean water (if needed) and sealed in a plastic garbage bag with a tie or a Zip-Lock type plastic bag. If possible, put wax paper between each photo. If a freezer is available, freeze the photos immediately. Later, photos may be defrosted, separated and air-dried.

If no freezer or refrigerator is available, rinse wet photos in clean water and dry them, face up, in a single layer, on a clean surface (a table, window screen or clean plastic laid out on the ground). Avoid drying the photos in direct sunlight. Don’t worry if the photos curl as they dry. A photo expert can be contacted later about flattening them.

Conservators can help with severely damaged and valuable materials. The American Institute for Conservation has a free referral service to help people find experts in their area. People can call the American Institute for Conservation for more information at (202) 452-9545.