



After the Fire: Advice for Salvaging Damaged Family Treasures

Cherished family heirlooms that survive a fire are often covered with soot and ash, requiring prompt and gentle attention to prevent further damage. The Heritage Emergency National Task Force, co-sponsored by FEMA and the Smithsonian Institution, offers these basic guidelines from professional conservators. Note that fire professionals only recommend salvaging cherished items that can be removed safely without sifting through ashes.

General Handling Advice

- Even though you will be sorely tempted, it is important to reduce the amount you handle or touch damaged items. Soot's very fine particles stick to everything, and every touch will grind it further into the item.
- 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; 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 insert smaller plastic tubes 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.



Debris and damage after a fire. Photo by FEMA in 2012.

After a Fire

- Call your insurance agent as soon as possible to file a claim.
- Personal safety is always the highest priority when entering buildings damaged by fire.
- Check for structural damage before re-entering your home to avoid being trapped in a building collapse.
- Never attempt to salvage belongings at the expense of your own safety.
- 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.
- Wear protective clothing – disposable nitrile or latex gloves, safety goggles, protective clothing (long-sleeve shirt, long pants, sturdy shoes or boots), and an N95 mask or face covering.
- Take photographs of your damaged items for insurance purposes.



- If you want to remove additional residue, use soot sponges carefully 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 album pages may be stuck together; do not try to open them by force. Take them to a conservator for advice.
- Heat can make glass, ceramic, and metal items very brittle; remember to handle them carefully.
- Fabrics might look intact but may fall apart without very careful handling.
- Slide supports (sheets, boards, plastic) beneath your belongings so you can safely carry fragile items.

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 peer-reviewed conservator, click on the "Find a Professional" tab on the home page of the American Institute for Conservation, www.culturalheritage.org. You could contact the conservation/preservation department of a major museum, library, or archives for advice or contact the National Heritage Responders (see below).

Beware of Increased Flood and Mudslide Risks

One of the lesser known but critical considerations following a wildfire is the increased risk of floods and mudslides, even in areas far away from the fire. Properties directly affected by fires, as well as those located below or downstream of impacted areas, are most at risk, including many properties not previously considered as having a moderate or high flood risk. Residents in areas of extensive wildfires, or in areas susceptible to flash or winter flooding, need to prepare in advance for possible flooding.

Advice by Phone

Several organizations offer free telephone advice following an emergency or disaster:

- The [National Heritage Responders](#) are a volunteer cadre of preservation and conservation experts trained in collections salvage. Individuals who want to save damaged personal items can email NHRpublichelpline@culturalheritage.org. Cultural institutions can call the NHR emergency help line.
- The Preservation Directorate of the Library of Congress provides a list of emergency web pages of institutions that can assist individuals and institutions with damaged art and artifacts at loc.gov/preservation/emergprep/emerother. Some of the institutions listed offer 24/7 emergency help lines.

For more information, visit fema.gov/disaster/recover/save-family-treasures or email fema-hentf@fema.dhs.gov

Additional Resources

- [After the Fire! Returning to Normal](#). U.S. Fire Administration. FA-46/January 2019.
- [Soot and Ash Segment](#) from the *Field Guide to Emergency Response* video, Foundation for Advancement in Conservation. A short video walks you through salvaging items damaged by soot and water.
- [Fire](#). Chicora Foundation.
- [Wildfires | Ready.gov](#) U.S. Department of Homeland Security.
- [Home - Ready for Wildfire "Soot, Char Damage and Odors on Books & Paper"](#) from the California Preservation Clearinghouse.
- [Worker Safety and Health in Wildfire Regions](#). California Division of Occupational Safety and Health (Cal/OSHA).



FEMA and the Smithsonian Institution co-sponsor the Heritage Emergency National Task Force, a partnership of more than 60 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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