

7-1-2014

The Importance of Connecting to First Responders: Fire at the Zona Gale House

Kathleen D. Mullen

Wisconsin Historical Society, kathleen.mullen@wisconsinhistory.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/macnewsletter>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mullen, Kathleen D. (2014) "The Importance of Connecting to First Responders: Fire at the Zona Gale House," *MAC Newsletter*: Vol. 42 : No. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/macnewsletter/vol42/iss1/7>

This Preservation Essentials is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in MAC Newsletter by an authorized editor of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

Contact Sara Holmes at sara.holmes@nara.gov if you would like to guest author a Preservation Essentials column or share a good idea.

The Importance of Connecting to First Responders: Fire at the Zona Gale House

By Kathleen D. Mullen, Wisconsin Historical Society

A recent fire in Portage, Wisconsin, at the Zona Gale House (also known as the Museum at the Portage) perfectly underscores the tremendous benefits of connecting with first responders before a disaster. The local fire department received reports of the fire around 1:30 on a Sunday morning in early April 2014. Firefighters at the scene found themselves unable to reach any of the all-volunteer museum staff, affecting decisions about how to proceed in extinguishing the fire. But the savvy responders, many of whom had grown up visiting the museum (which also served as the Portage Public Library for many years), understood how precious the contents of the Gale House are to the small Portage community and its history. Gale was the first woman to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize in drama. The city of Portage, which was the focus of her writing, remains dedicated to preserving the study room she used while composing her work.

Due to this local attachment and knowledge of the space, firefighters tailored a remarkable response that minimized damage and maximized the preservation of the museum's collections. First, they contained their spray to the area of the fire, rather than proactively wetting adjacent portions of the building. Then, with some responders working outside, others entered the ground floor of the building (which was not actively on fire) and covered the collections with plastic to reduce water and soot damage. Finally, to minimize water damage to the ceiling and walls in the first floor study (distinguished on the National Register of Historic Places for its beautiful architectural elements), the firefighters drilled drainage holes in the center of the plaster ceiling. This allowed a controlled drain of water from the floors above and kept the plaster ceiling and carved wood paneling on the walls dry and clean. Ultimately, local knowledge, forethought, and careful actions by these first responders combined to keep damage to these historic collections at a minimum.

How You Can Connect with First Responders before a Disaster

To safeguard your institution from disaster before it happens, there are many things to discuss with your local first responders, especially members of the local fire depart-



The first floor study was used as a staging area where collections were covered in plastic or up on blocks until they could be removed.

ment. Your initial task should be a very easy one: simply reach out and ask if the fire department will review or test your emergency response plan. The Library, Archives, and Museum have just done this at the Wisconsin Historical Society. All it took initially was looking up the general contact e-mail on the website of the Madison Fire Department and sending a brief e-mail to ask if someone might be able to review our collections emergency response plan. Second, anticipate that the responders might vitally need certain information from you, such as the location of a key box, the nature of particularly flammable materials in your collections, and where they could get floor plans in the event of an emergency. They might also want to do a walk through, which is great for you, because you can familiarize them with where collections are stored or exhibited versus where common areas are.

Finally, make the same type of connections with first responders as you do with donors, patrons, and volunteers. These connections greatly advantaged the Museum at the Portage. The first responders cared about the museum structure, its collections, and its central role in the community. How can your institution replicate and foster a similar relationship? Offer special behind-the-scenes tours for first responders and their families. This would entail contacting your local emergency responders and asking for assistance to arrange an invitation to your site.



Fire damage on the upper floors of the Museum at the Portage. Photo by Sara Andrews.

Set it up on a day or days most suitable to their schedule and give them free admission if you have an admission charge. Or you might arrange tours ahead of time and ask those scheduled to come what their particular interests are so that you can tailor your tours to particular heritage artifacts with which they will connect.

Some useful resources are available now that contain strategies for making this connection and include talking points to ensure a smooth exchange of information. For example, the Midwest Art Conservation Center maintains a checklist that details how to prepare for a meeting with your first responders.¹ This checklist stems from the center's participation in a symposium held by the Alliance for Response (Twin Cities Chapter) in 2012 that brought first responders and local heritage institutions together. Heritage Preservation has published a wonderful poster on "Working with Emergency Responders: Tips for Cultural Institutions."² You can purchase it directly from Heritage Preservation or download a booklet version on its website.³ Finally, the Connecting to Collections Online Community provides some great resources for learning more about this topic. In particular, the first two webinars in the Risk Evaluation: First Step in Disaster Planning series cover the importance of building a relationship with

your local first responders and the steps to take in building that relationship.⁴ The recordings are freely available on the Connecting to Collections Online Community website.⁴

Notes

1. Midwest Art Conservation Center (MACC) and Alliance for Response, e-mail message to author, "Prepare before Meeting with Your Local Responders," May 1, 2014. Contact MACC at info@preserveart.org for more information.
2. "Lessons Applied: Katrina and Cultural Heritage, Heritage Preservation," Heritage Preservation, accessed May 1, 2014, www.heritagepreservation.org/lessons.
3. "Working with Emergency Responders: Tips for Cultural Institutions," Heritage Preservation, accessed May 1, 2014, www.heritagepreservation.org/lessons/hpr_emergency_poster8.5x11.pdf.
4. Alexandra Allardt, "Webinar 1: Overview: What Disaster Planning Entails" and "Webinar 2: Earth, Wind, and Fire: Identifying External Hazards to Your Collections," Connecting to Collections, "Risk Evaluation: First Step in Disaster Planning," accessed May 1, 2014, www.connectingtocollections.org/courses/risk-evaluation.