

# Disaster Relief, Recovery, and Historic Preservation

## Arkansas and its 38 Tornadoes

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**T**he fact that 38 confirmed tornadoes in one evening killed only three people is widely considered to be a miracle (not to mention a ringing endorsement of the hazardous weather warning system and the public/private partnership that has made it so effective). Yet there remains disagreement on the coordination of relief and recovery resources for owners of affected historic properties, of which there were almost 500 statewide, and in spite of important successes. Largely through efforts that included damage assessment, dissemination of useful public information, and coordination between public and private partners—all of whom were operating with the best of intentions—valuable lessons were learned about what we did well, what we did not, and how to react more effectively next time.

Though the tornadoes—and accompanying high winds—struck various parts of the state on January 21, 1999, the damage to historic structures was concentrated in three communities: Little Rock in central Arkansas, and the communities of Beebe and McRae, located approximately 35 miles northeast of the capital city. The response of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program (the State Historic Preservation Office) was immediate. Two National Register-listed districts—the MacArthur Park Historic District and the Governor’s Mansion Historic District—were impacted, in addition to several other individually listed properties. The morning after the tornadoes struck, several teams of historians traveled through the hardest-hit areas of Little Rock, photo-documenting the damage and filling out assessment forms; ultimately, nearly 500 historic properties were visited over a three-day period. The State Historic Preservation Officer initiated contact with city, state, and federal officials, including the governor’s office, to which daily progress reports were provided. The SHPO

served as the statewide point of contact for all federal assistance for historic property owners, and as such developed a particularly close relationship with both the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) and the Small Business Administration (SBA).

The primary goal of the damage assessment documentation—and the speed with which it was executed—was to provide the earliest and most accurate damage assessments to those federal agencies to whom homeowners would apply for assistance and from whom funds would be available for repair/rehabilitation/restoration work. This information would give these agencies the most accurate background on what was damaged and how badly so that their representatives could be most helpful to property owners while at the same time recognizing their responsibilities under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. Yet the long-term goal was to prevent the type of wholesale demolition that frequently occurs after such a disaster, often without any understanding of the true extent of the damage or the structural condition of the property in question. Toward this end—and though it was under no legal mandate to do so—it was also the SHPO’s intent to share this same information with local fire, safety, and code enforcement officials, primarily to make them cognizant of the alternatives to demolition and hopefully to encourage them to seek those options first.

With these goals in mind, the SHPO’s damage assessment efforts were largely successful. In fact, the information provided to the federal agencies prompted a FEMA representative to compliment the SHPO on its response, to inquire as to how we were able to react as swiftly as we did, and to comment that Arkansas could serve as an example to other states in this regard (interestingly, it was also discovered through this process that the SBA had not been submitting routine Section 106 documentation to the

SHPO, and this discovery resulted in the correction of the situation). The sharing of this information with local officials also bore fruit, as city agencies in particular became aware of the SHPO's concerns about unnecessary demolitions and this caused its officials to recognize the legal responsibilities it had in regarding the MacArthur Park Historic District, which is protected by a local preservation ordinance. However, this continuous contact also served to remind the city of how unpopular any such rash action would be, regardless of how well intentioned.

Less successful, however, was the coordination and communication between public officials and certain non-government entities that nevertheless had a substantial interest in the historic fabric of downtown Little Rock. One local private non-profit group that promotes historic preservation in central Arkansas found itself attempting to assist historic property owners regarding concerns that fell both inside and outside the formal, regulatory purview of the SHPO or city agencies; in particular, the issues of damaged historic properties that have simply been abandoned by an owner after reaching an acceptable insurance settlement, the establishment of a supervised salvage center, and provision of technical advice to property owners. Furthermore, it fell to this organization to field a number of questions regarding private insurance issues and to make the contact on behalf of property owners with state insurance officials. Representatives of this organization felt that the efforts of the public historic preservation agencies at all levels were not addressing the day-to-day, pressing concerns of these property owners and that this private non-profit entity was not sufficiently included in the design of these efforts. Though the non-profit was included in all planning meetings, there is no question that a communication problem existed,

and that it resulted in hard feelings between the regulatory organizations and the non-profit group.

Several meetings ensued after the initial disaster response, and the one solution on which all could agree was the need for a disaster response plan that would be drafted with the participation of public and private partners. It was even suggested by the SHPO that Certified Local Government funds could be earmarked to hire a consultant to draft such a plan; furthermore, it was noted that it could well be advantageous to hire an independent party not affiliated with any interested organization in order to produce the most comprehensive and most useful document. Such a disaster plan would specify such things as distinct organizational responsibilities, chain of command, lines of communication, recovery priorities, and recommended response techniques for historic properties, including sites. Ideally, it would also be endorsed by the governor and the state legislature, and distributed to preservation partners at all levels, public and private, with the understanding that this is the SHPO's official disaster recovery plan for historic properties.

Every region of the country has its natural disaster concerns, whether they be flooding, fire, earthquakes, hurricanes, or tornadoes, and thus every state, territory and possession would be well-advised to develop and adopt such a plan for the treatment of damaged historic properties, if this has not already been done. In Arkansas, with two tornado strikes within two years (on March 1, 1997, tornadoes struck the city of Arkadelphia and several small communities near Little Rock), frequent flooding problems with the state's many rivers, and the constant (if low level) threat of an earthquake from the New Madrid fault in the northeastern part of the state, it is long overdue.

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## ***For Further Reading. . .***

*Disaster Management Programs for Historic Sites* presents the proceedings of the National Park Service symposium at the University of California, Berkeley, funded by the fiscal year 1995 Cultural Resources Training Initiative. Copies may be obtained from David W. Look, AIA, Team Leader, Cultural Resources Team, Pacific Great Basin Support Office, at 415-427-1401 or email <david\_w\_look@nps.gov>.

Also, watch for the future theme issue of *CRM* on cultural resources and disasters.