



After the Flood: Advice for Salvaging Damaged Family Treasures

When homes are flooded and lives upended, treasured possessions such as family heirlooms, photos, and other keepsakes become more cherished. These valued objects may be saved if untouched by sewage or chemicals. If cherished objects have been in contact with sewage or chemicals, see below under “Call in a Pro.” The Heritage Emergency National Task Force, a coalition of 58 national organizations and federal agencies co-sponsored by FEMA and the Smithsonian Institution, offers these basic salvage guidelines.

After the Flood

- Personal safety is always the highest priority when entering buildings damaged by floodwater.
- Check for structural damage before re-entering your home to avoid being trapped in a building collapse.
- Keep power off until an electrician has inspected your system for safety.
- Turn off the gas. Be alert for gas leaks.
- Look before you step. After a flood, the ground and floors are covered with debris, including broken bottles and nails. Floors and stairs that have been covered with mud can be very slippery.
- Take photos of any floodwater in your home and of damaged items for insurance purposes.
- Call your insurance agent to file a claim and report the damage as soon as possible. Homeowners insurance usually covers losses caused by wind, storms, or broken water pipes, but not surface flooding.
- Rescue the most valuable items, but never attempt to salvage belongings at the expense of your own safety.
- Wear long sleeves, sturdy shoes or waterproof boots, and plastic or rubber gloves during cleanup.
- Wash your hands often with soap and clean water or use a hand-cleaning gel with alcohol in it.
- Mold can form within 48 hours; you will need to work fast. The goal is to reduce the humidity and temperature around your treasures as you proceed to clean and dry them. If you do encounter extensive mold, use protective gear such as gloves, goggles, and an N100 face mask, available at most hardware stores.



Columbia, South Carolina, residents begin cleanup after historic flooding affected their state in October 2015. The orange tape around the pile lets debris removal workers know that the enclosed material should be removed. Photo by Bill Koplitz/FEMA

Some Simple Cleaning Tips

Air-Dry. Gentle air-drying is best for all your treasured belongings—indoors, if possible. Hair dryers, irons, ovens, and prolonged exposure to sunlight will do irreversible damage. Increase indoor airflow with fans, open windows, air conditioners, and dehumidifiers.

Handle with Care. Use great caution in handling your heirlooms, which can be especially fragile when wet. Separate damp materials: remove the contents from drawers; take photographs out of damp albums; remove paintings and prints from frames; place paper towels between the pages of wet books.

Clean Gently. Loosen dirt and debris on fragile objects gently with soft brushes and cloths. Avoid rubbing, which can grind in dirt.

Salvage Photos. Clean photographs by rinsing them carefully in clean water. Air-dry photos on a plastic screen or paper towel, or by hanging them by the corner with plastic clothespins. Don't let the image come into contact with other surfaces as it dries.

Prioritize. You may not be able to save everything, so focus on what's most important to you, whether for historic, monetary, or sentimental reasons.

