

From: Bruce  
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Subject: Bit by Bit, Federal Team Recoups Gulf's History (mentions NPS SWAT team)

<http://tinyurl.com/7utcx>

Bit by Bit, Federal Team Recoups Gulf's History

By Petula Dvorak  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
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National Park Service preservationists, escorted by the equivalent of the agency's SWAT team, spent the past two weeks rolling through checkpoints and wading into moldy and still-wet museums to preserve rapidly disintegrating artifacts that record some of the Gulf Coast's colorful history.

They returned this week to the Washington area and will begin sifting through condition reports on thousands of artifacts recovered after Hurricane Katrina. They saved flintlock muskets and Civil War pistols from rust. They rescued a Confederate colonel's diary and heirloom plant samples from mold. They helped save precious family photographs from the ever-growing trash piles in New Orleans neighborhoods.

It wasn't an easy mission, to work frantically amid human suffering to save things, rather than people, said Pam West, director of the Park Service's Museum Resource Center.

"There were times when we talked to people who lost everything, and we'd tell them we were sorry that we couldn't help them," West said. "But they would tell us: 'Oh, yes, you're doing something. You're saving our culture. You're saving our heritage.' "

The team of 10 curators -- preservationists and historians who are trained in outdoor survival skills and run drills by soaking items in swimming pools and then salvaging them -- split up between Mississippi and Louisiana, where they were escorted by the Park Service security force.

At the Gulf Islands National Seashore in Mississippi, the historians saved ceramics, glass and a 5,000-specimen historical plant exhibit that had been floating for days in rancid water, West said.

In New Orleans, team members were relieved to find priceless items such as Louis Armstrong's original music scores unharmed. But at the Chalmette Battlefield and National Cemetery, the site of the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812, the entire collection was assaulted by invasive, relentless rust and mold, she said.

"They were working with flashlights, and everything was dark and smelly and gross," West said. "It was just a couple of days underwater, and everything was rusty: flintlock muskets, pistols, swords and scabbards. The military uniforms were all reproductions, so

we left those behind."

The weaponry was taken through checkpoints, packed and shipped to the Springfield Armory in Massachusetts, where the Park Service's only gun conservator works.

At the cemetery, things looked much worse. The team had to bring in an archaeologist because the giant historic cypress and oak trees at the battlefield toppled in Katrina's winds, shooting the trees' ancient, sprawling root systems skyward. Embedded in the roots were pieces of historic coffins and old human remains, West said.

The archaeologist extracted, identified and prepared the pieces for burial, she said.

The team set up a triage room in Natchez, Miss., where they brought everything from farm implements to documents to historic photographs salvaged from the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park on Decatur Street in the French Quarter.

"Nothing was 100 percent lost. We were very lucky," West said.

The group also worked with the tiny museums that are the homes of old New Orleans families. Members took calls from grandmothers who didn't know how to preserve the antique collections that filled their Garden District homes and families who didn't know what to do with waterlogged books or family photos floating in their frames. If residents had Internet access, Park Service preservationists directed them to their Web site, which has salvage tips:  
<http://www.ncptt.nps.gov> .

Their best advice? "Do not throw stuff out. Just because it's wet and dirty doesn't mean it's lost," West said.