Historic Textiles Studio

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How to Care For and Salvage Your Textiles After a Flood

Use this information at your own risk! It is provided as a general guide which might not be appropriate for all textiles. If you have additional questions, contact a conservator or museum personnel.

Many of you have quilts, wedding gowns, baby dresses, military uniforms, etc. which are very precious to you. When you get to them they will probably be wet, mud covered, and maybe even covered in mildew. Sanitation must be your first concern. If there has been sewage spilled in the area, local health officials will advise you what to do with all of the items in your house.

If the items appear to be salvageable a variety of things can be done. The rarity of the item should be considered. A museum quality piece should be treated by a professional conservator or a similarly qualified person. An item that is purely a sentimental/utilitarian item should be viewed a bit differently. All items should be treated with steps 1-9 and then an option chosen.

Follow These Steps with All Items That Are Wet

1. Put on rubber gloves to handle the textiles, and wear a mask if contaminants are present.
2. Be aware of any health hazards in the area before proceeding.
3. Take photographs to document condition.
4. If it is a fragile textile do not unfold. Textiles which run the risk of the dye running or fading into another layer should have waxed paper, freezer paper or aluminum foil placed between the layers of fabric if it cannot be spread out flat. This will help prevent transfer of colors.
5. The wet textile will be very heavy if it is large, so have a support to lift it on to try to avoid tearing.
6. Brush off any crusty dirt and mold. Sunlight will help "cure" mildew but remember that excessive sunlight can also damage textiles.
7. Rinse with gentle flowing clean cold water.
8. Press water out by hand. Do not wring or twist item. Blot with towels or unprinted newsprint.
9. Do not stack items on top of each other when wet.

General Considerations for storage areas:

- Do not store in plastic bags.
- Circulate air using fans, air conditioning, and open windows to help alleviate mold. Use dehumidifiers when possible.
- Light deters mold, so until the item is totally dry do not store in a dark closet.
- Even after the item is cleaned, check periodically for mold because it never totally goes away.
- the sun or over tables and chairs inside. When drying inside, use fans to assist the drying process. Any item dries faster if air can flow around it.

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Cleaning the Textile:

Option A (No Time to Wash at Present)
If you have to wait on the washing process the item would do best if it could be placed in a plastic bag or container and frozen. When it is removed from the freezer follow one of the suggested methods of cleaning.

Option B (No Freezer Space & No Time to Wash)
If this is your option you should try to dry the item as thoroughly as possible. This is not the preferred method because often stains "set" when dried, however, this is an emergency situation. The biggest concern at this point is to avoid mold and mildew.

This is done best by blotting excess moisture with toweling. Place the item(s) on clean, dry towels or sheeting and cover with the same type of material. This can be laid out on the grass to dry in the sun or over tables and chairs inside. When drying inside, use fans to assist the drying process. Any item dries faster if air can flow around it.

Using an automatic dryer can be an option if the quilt is sturdy. This is the second choice, but might be necessary if it is wet outside and there is no room inside to spread it out.

Option C (Wash in Bath Tub)
This is the preferred home method to wash a quilt when a more suitable facility is not available because it puts less stress on the wet fibers of the fabric and the thread.

Line a tub with a clean white bed sheet and fill with warm water. Put in 2 or 3 tablespoons of chlorine bleach. (See Possible Problems on the last page.) Put in several tablespoons of Orvus quilt soap or Ivory Liquid. Place the quilt in the water to soak for 15 -- 30 minutes. Drain the water.

If the water was very dirty repeat the above. Also you may add a small amount of Clorox 2 if the quilt still looks extremely stained. (See Possible Problems.) Rinse in tepid water until all suds are out of the quilt. Roll in the sheet and squeeze out as much water as possible. Place a sheet on the grass, on a trampoline, or any other large flat area. Spread out the wet quilt aligning it so that it is squared on the comers. Place another sheet or towels over the top. When these are soaked with water replace with a dry sheet. On a sunny day it should be mostly dry within a few hours. If it is STURDY, put in dryer to "fluff" and to finish drying for a few minutes. Remove promptly. It might still be damp in the batting so allow it to dry laying flat on a bed for several days before putting away.

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Option D (Wash in Washing Machine)
Wash only cotton or polyester bat quilts in a washing machine.
DO NOT LET YOUR MACHINE AGITATE YOUR QUILT. STAY BY THE MACHINE THE ENTIRE TIME YOU ARE WASHING TO AVOID DAMAGE!!!!!!! Wet cotton batting is very heavy and can act as a wet baseball inside a quilt if allowed to agitate.

Set the machine for an extra large load using the "soak cycle". Read your manufacturers instruction booklet on soaking. The water temperature should be warm or cold. (If mold is present you may have to consider rinsing first with cold and then washing with hot. Remember that hot is more harsh on the fabric so give the condition of the item careful consideration before doing.)

Fill the machine with water and then pour in one or two tablespoons of Clorox and liquid soap. (See Possible Problems.) Use Orvus or Ivory Liquid. If the machine begins to agitate, turn it off while soaking the quilt. Place the quilt in the water and push it below the water level. Soak for 10 minutes and manually push up and down in the water to create gentle agitation.

Drain water from machine. (This will be explained in your washing machine instruction booklet.) Turn knob to spin. DO NOT PUT YOUR HANDS IN THE WASHER AT THIS POINT! Fill tank again with water only and agitate with your HANDS to remove soap. Drain and spin again. Continue in this manner until all soap suds are removed.

NEVER LIFT THE QUILT WITH WATER IN IT. IT WILL TEAR!!!! Only lift after the spin cycle.
Dry as per the instructions in the section on bath tub washing.

Option E (Contact Your Dry Cleaners)
Do this if the item would normally be dry cleaned (wool, rayon, silk). This applies to, wedding dresses, suits, etc.

Option F (Contact a Professional)
You may contact us at our textile conservation facility, Historic Textiles Studio/Battleground Antiques. We have an 8 foot X 10 foot stainless steel wet cleaning tank and a de-ionized water system. All conservation/restoration services are available. We specialize in treatment of military uniforms, antique quilts, flags, and vintage clothing.

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Possible Problems with All Types of Washing

The quilt might have dyes that run. A conservator would test each dye to try to determine if the dyes are stable before washing. If you want to test the dyes, rub over each fabric a Q-tip which has been dipped in a soapy water mixture to determine if the dye transfers. With a flood damaged quilt, one must make a quick judgment call and decide what is best for the item. If a dye begins to run, pour a cup of salt into the water and soak. Rinse and proceed with washing in soap mixture.

The quilt might have an odor. Put 1/2 cup of baking soda in the water and soak the quilt. Proceed with washing in soap mixture.

Once washed the thread in the seams might break and fabrics might ravel or fray. Re-stitch the areas and if possible consult with a person who does quilt restoration.

Using Chlorine bleach in the wash water might remove some of the color from the fabric. Using this is a personal choice. It is suggested on this sheet due to the mildew/mold and bacterial problems associated with floods. Otherwise it is not advised.

Resources:

Library of Congress Emergency Drying Procedures for Water Damaged Collections
Salvaging Water Damaged Textiles National Park Service
Emergency Salvage of Flood Damaged Family Papers FEMA
I would like to also add that the members of the Quilt History List shared a great deal of information regarding the washing of quilts. Many thanks to them for their concern regarding the disaster that is facing Eastern NC. (1999)

Information Regarding Documentation:

If the item is of special value your insurance adjuster will need to be made aware of this and he will give you forms to accompany it. An appraisal will also be necessary.

This information is provided by Lynn Lancaster Gorges, Textile Consultant and Quilt Restoration Specialist. Ms. Gorges is a member of the Costume Society of America (Board Member Region IV), American Quilt Study Group, Twin Rivers Piecemakers Quilt Guild, and the Crystal Coast Quilters Guild. Historic Textiles Studio is located 5 miles east of New Bern on Highway 70. Hours for consultation are by appointment only.