



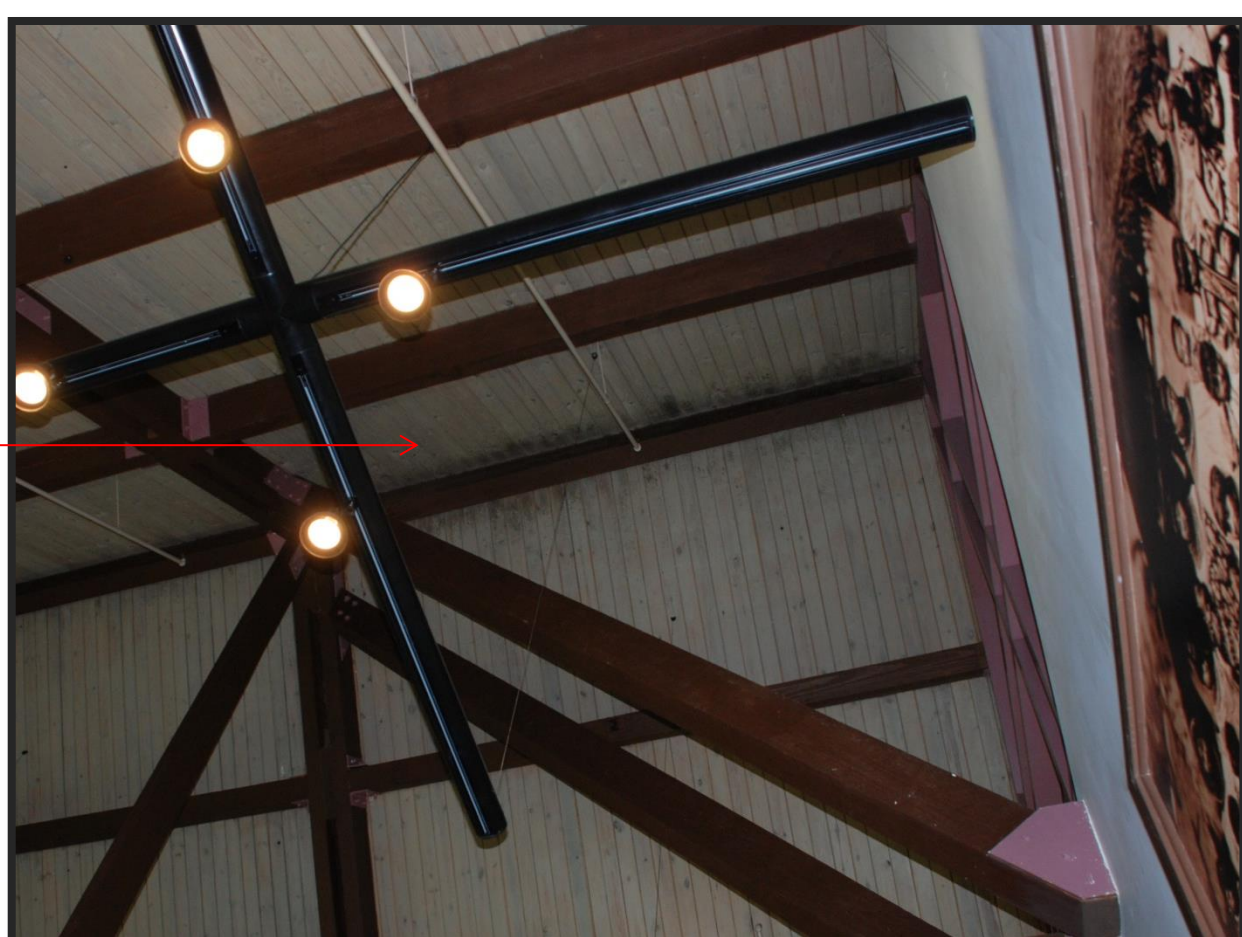
Weathering the Unexpected: Lessons Learned in Keeping Seminole Cultural Property Safe



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Dirt accumulation and possibly mold in crevices of Museum roof beams.



INTRODUCTION

Deep in the Florida Everglades is the Big Cypress Seminole Indian Reservation, home to the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum. The campus also includes a curatorial building with a conservation lab and collections storage vaults, a Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO), and a natural "museum" of the Everglades flora and fauna on a mile-long boardwalk. Each year, the southeastern United States endures hurricanes, wildfires, tornadoes, and severe thunderstorms that can be quite destructive. Over the years, Museum and THPO staff have realized the importance of emergency preparation in the face of possible impending disaster in order to protect the cultural property safeguarded on the reservation.

METHODOLOGY

Challenge 1: 2005's Hurricane Wilma caused severe roof damage

Procedures: In the southeastern US, June 1st through November 30th is hurricane season. The Seminole Tribe of Florida's (STOF) Office of Public Safety includes the Department of Emergency Management, which conducted a comprehensive program to inform Seminole Tribe Departments and Tribal Members on preparedness strategies and available resources during emergencies, especially tropical weather. Disaster can still strike even with diligent preparation and early warning. Hurricane Wilma damaged a large section of the Museum's roof and needed replacement. Built in 1997, the roof is a hand-framed large timber wood structure with a standing seam system. The original HVAC system was designed for conditioned air not to flow to the high ceiling area since it is an unoccupied space. However, this permits warmer air and moisture to rise, allowing for dust accumulation and corrosion to form over time on the steeply sloped ceiling.

Challenge 2: Mold contamination on Museum's upper support beams

Procedures: In June 2008, the STOF's Environmental Health Department tested a discolored area on the Museum's ceiling and found that it was low levels of dormant inactive mold, probably a result of the damage caused during Hurricane Wilma three years prior. In August 2008, the Museum shut it's doors for three weeks to remedy the mold situation. The mold mitigation process involved chemicals (Microban QGC, SurfaceShield, and FB® Sodium Percarbonate) that could be harmful to the objects and display cases. All objects, mannequins, and props in Museum were removed and placed in secure areas the first week – either by cart or vehicle. Remaining cases, signs and text panels were protected by Visqueen. Gallery checklists were created to account for all objects. Systematic documentation and drawn maps of gallery displays were beneficial aids for orientation and location of objects and props during reinstallation of the galleries in the third week, after mold remediation.



Museum staff member Pedro Zepeda covering exhibit cases with Visqueen

RESULTS FROM PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A Museum Emergency Plan and a Collection Preparedness/Salvage/Recovery program for Museum and THPO collections were developed in the event of various emergency situations. Some guidelines are highlighted below:

- ✓ While most resources are many miles from the reservation, the local fire station is across the street from Museum.
- ✓ Protect objects by covering or moving to a temporary environmentally controlled storage location. The Museum has two 30-kilowatt diesel generators that start in the event of a power failure, and can power the HVAC systems for 3 days. Designating where objects are stored ahead of time allows them to be accessible to researchers and Tribal Members when requested. Most objects were securely stored in the collection vaults.
- ✓ Retrieve collection salvage/recovery carts from designated areas on the property once safe. Disasters supply list with name and location of companies to make purchases or provide assistance is attached.
- ✓ Set up work areas for objects that require treatment. Prioritize collections based on importance, level of damage, etc.
- ✓ Document, document, document! Assemble photo documentation of objects, gallery displays, and damage. This ensures no object is lost during the process. Record all salvage activities and conversations with recovery personnel.
- ✓ A significant lesson learned was to periodically check for signs of leaks that lead to high humidity and mold growth. In 2012, engineer Greg Batista inspected the Museum's roof and recommended washing the roof periodically of dirt and dust containing high levels of abrasive grit that can wear down the protective covering on the roof panels, as well as consisting of salts and chlorides that can cause corrosion.

LESSONS LEARNED FOR THE FUTURE

In summer 2015, the Museum closed for a month to clean and apply a sealant to the ceiling in order to prevent the buildup of dirt in crevices, which had previously led to mold growth. Even though this was not an emergency situation, the same basic procedures as mentioned above were employed to keep collection objects safe during cleaning and accessible to Tribal Members. Many of the staff were not with the Tribe during these previous situations, so this was also a sort of test run in deinstalling the Museum in the event of an emergency. This project was a good time to arrange for a textile rotation of the permanent collection since the objects had to be removed from display anyway. Most important lesson – preparedness and documentation is the key to a successful recovery from disaster!



Deinstallation - from left: 40 mannequins line the aisles of the archival vault and Museum/THPO staff taking down the large Noah Billie painting for safekeeping in the Library.



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