



Protecting America's Cultural Heritage

To learn how cultural heritage is protected in your state, visit statehumanities.org

America's creative and intellectual legacy is at risk.

Lifetimes of writings, images, films, recordings, artworks, artifacts and more are held in museums, libraries, archives, and a host of other venues across the country. These items make up our nation's creative and intellectual legacy, and they form the foundation of America's cultural identity. They help tell our story, they inspire new creative work and research, they connect us to our past, and they suggest our future. But many of these objects are also old, fragile, and in dire need of professional conservation. Some exist on antiquated formats that make access practically impossible, and others do not have reliable or safe storage facilities.



"The need for preservation is overwhelming and state humanities councils have rallied to the defense of the nation's cultural heritage."

Still others are threatened by repeated flooding, storm damage, wildfires, and other natural disasters—catastrophes that can cripple the small museums and cultural centers that safeguard these objects. The need for preservation is overwhelming, and state humanities councils across the country have rallied to the defense of the nation's cultural heritage with support for object conservation, preservation education and awareness campaigns, increased access to collections, and rapid assistance when disasters strike.



Case in Point

On August 29, 2005, the copper roof of Mississippi's Old Capitol Museum was wrenched from its moorings, exposing exhibit and storage areas to torrential rain and wind from Hurricane Katrina. The damage was severe and widespread, and the **Mississippi Humanities Council** raced to provide a grant, helping the museum install emergency equipment, assess and treat damaged objects, and eventually transport their entire collection to safety.



The case for cultural preservation is complex and conservation requires broad public support to be effective. The **Rhode Island Council for the Humanities** and others have addressed this need head-on by supporting robust community outreach and education efforts, such as the Providence Preservation Society's *Why Preserve?* symposium and a year of related community discussions across the state. State councils have also played a leading role in the preservation of some of the most historically valuable, but ephemeral, histories. **New Mexico Humanities**, for instance, supported the *New Mexico Rural Heritage Oral History Project*, which captured firsthand accounts of rural and ranch life and then used those records to create an archive with more than 500 hours of transcribed interviews.



“ Humanities New York co-founded CultureAID, a network of more than 5,000 New York state nonprofits that can spring into action following an emergency. ”

Increasingly, the stewards of America's cultural heritage have turned to digitization as a method of ensuring broad access and long-term stability, but such efforts require sizable investments and a prolonged commitment. Nevertheless, councils like **Virginia Humanities** have taken up the challenge by offering multiple levels of support for digital initiatives, including producing new digital content (for *Encyclopedia Virginia*), creating a yearly conference for web

professionals working at institutes of learning (edUi), and embarking on their own large-scale digital preservation project (*Discovery Virginia*).

Disaster Response

When natural disasters strike, America's cultural institutions can be particularly disadvantaged. They often hold large collections of vulnerable objects, operate on modest budgets, and must address significant structural and material damages all at once. Here again the state councils have demonstrated their commitment to protecting the nation's cultural heritage. For example, after large portions of northern and central Louisiana were flooded in August 2016, the **Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities** used its knowledge of local cultural institutions to efficiently and responsibly get emergency funds to those who direly needed them. Likewise, when Hurricane Sandy swamped thousands of organizations in New York, **Humanities New York** understood the necessity of fast action, streamlined their grant process, and issued their first disaster relief grant within 13 days of the storm. The council has continued to support disaster preparedness for cultural organizations by co-founding CultureAID—a network of more than 5,000 New York state nonprofits that can spring into action following an emergency—and by offering community conversation programs, such as *After Sandy*, which encourages communities to think about their response to the storm and consider what it means to make a full recovery.