

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

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Mayday! Emergency and Disaster Preparedness

By Tamara Hemmerlein, Director, Local History Services

“Mayday!” is an international signal for distress that is used by emergency response personnel, pilots, boat captains and others. It began to be used after World War I in response to a need for a universal distress signal. It’s derived from a French phrase meaning “Help me!”



[Sandbags Outside of a Factory, March 24, 1913](#) (Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

Historical organizations, preservation groups, libraries, and archives have informally adopted the phrase and, on May 1 or May Day, are encouraged to set aside time for emergency and

disaster preparedness work.

As organizations plan for emergencies and disasters, it's important to understand the difference between the two.

- An **emergency** is an unanticipated or threatening event that requires immediate action.
- A **disaster** is an emergency that gets out of control or a large-scale calamity that may cause significant loss, damage, or destruction.
- An **emergency can become a disaster** unless immediate action is taken to protect staff, visitors, or collections.

To lessen the likelihood that emergencies will become disasters, organizations should take the following steps.

- **Prevention:** Identify risks and potential problems.
- **Mitigation:** Research and learn how to decrease the risks and solve the problems.
- **Preparation:** Put processes and materials in place to be used in case of emergencies.
- **Training:** Train staff and volunteers in what to do in case of emergencies and practice before an emergency happens.

Here are helpful preparedness tips:

- Laminate your "Object/Artwork Below" signs. If these get wet, they could destroy or damage whatever objects they are in contact with.
- Pre-open any plastic packaging to save time during a real emergency event (flashlights, batteries, PPE, etc.)
- Remember that some objects can be hazardous. Know potential hazards ahead of time so you can ensure your staff are protected. Human life comes first, always!
- Many tools for salvaging collections can be purchased at home improvement stores: plastic drop cloths, large plastic bags, fans, dehumidifiers, mesh chicken wire and plastic paint rollers (both can be used for recovering wet textiles), pool noodles, PPE, bubble wrap (temp. use only), etc.

Rebekah Furey, Collections Manager, Conner Prairie Museum

- Reach out to a local business that has a walk-in freezer and ask if you can use it in the event of water damaged objects. Freezing wet materials will buy you time to treat them as you're able without mold becoming an issue. Make sure you have after-hours contact information for the business and ask them to let their staff members know about the arrangement to avoid confusion if help is needed.
- Keep an "emergencies only" supply cache on hand. A large garbage can is a great place to store supplies. Put in plastic sheeting, personal protective gear, and some basic salvage supplies. Keep it in an easily accessible location, and make sure it's labeled as only for emergency use. That way you always know you've got supplies available when you need them.

Meghan Smith, Conservation Lab Manager, Indiana State Museum and Historical Sites

[Mayday Meaning: Exploring the International Distress Call](#)

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Timely Tips](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Disaster Planning, Preparedness, and Recovery: A Resource Guide](#) (American Association for State and Local History)
- [Emergency Management](#) (Northeast Document Conservation Center)
- [Mayday: Do One Thing for Emergency Preparedness](#) (American Institute for Conservation)
- [National Preparedness Month: Helpful Tips from CCAHA](#) (Conservation Center for Art and Historical Artifacts)
- [Resource Guide for Disaster Preparedness](#) (Conservation Center for Art and Historical Artifacts)

Collection Trainings

[Legal Issues in Collections Care: Abandoned Property](#)

May 16 (Conservation Center for Art and Historical Artifacts)

[Digitization: Planning for Success](#)

May 23 (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

[Earthquake Preparedness](#)

May 30 (Connecting to Collections Care)

[Webinars](#)

Recorded – (Indiana Historical Society)

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