

Disaster Recovery and Asbestos Decontamination of Oversize Collections

Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History,
Museum Support Center, Collections Support Staff

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The Disaster

In the early hours of the morning of November 23, 1992 a tornado struck the National Museum of Natural History's storage building 26 at the Garber Facility in Suitland Maryland.



Damage to Building 26 immediately after the tornado.



Roof damage at Building 26.

Serious structural damage was sustained by the buildings. Numerous collections as well as the area surrounding the building were contaminated by the spread of asbestos from the building's insulation.



Asbestos contamination of collections and facility.



Interior view of Building 26 with contaminated collections and part of the roof missing.

The Response

Immediate Response: November and December 1992 Containment and Safety Precautions



Area surrounding Building 26 draped with plastic to contain debris from further spreading until abatement could begin.



Workers covering collections with plastic for temporary protection until a temporary roof is built.



Smithsonian employees wearing protective clothing and Powered Air Purifying Respirators (PAPR).



Containment areas and decontamination zones were created inside the building using polyethylene sheeting.



A wood and plastic super-structure is built around the damaged areas of the building to contain asbestos contamination.

Collection Recovery and Cleanup Building 26 Recovery: 1994

Collections in Building 26 included: Archeology, plaster and stone statues, rocks and minerals Paleobiology specimens, skin, bark, and wooden boats.



Trailers were set up on site with office spaces and changing areas for staff. Heavy equipment was brought in for the moving of large boats and sculptures.



Smithsonian staff work with asbestos abatement contractors to handle and sort collections for cleaning.



Because many items were fragile Smithsonian staff were always on hand to advise and assist asbestos contractors with the handling of objects.



Labeling and tracking procedures were developed to keep collections together and track clearances.



Objects were cleaned using a High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filtered vacuum and compressed air.

Unexpected Benefits of the disaster Building 25: 1996-1997

Building 25 at Garber also had contamination of collections due to the falling of debris from asbestos insulation on the ceiling. Since a crew had already been trained and fitted for respirators and the equipment was on hand this building was abated in a secondary project a few years later.

Collections in Building 25 included a large number of whale skulls on trailers, whale skeletons, cases of marine mammals specimens, barrels of baleen, crated periodicals and Paleobiology specimens.

During the secondary phase of the recovery and cleanup of the disaster, the specimens were inventoried and reorganized. Anthropology collections were rehoused on aluminum pallets in the Museum Support Center. And a new building 26 with improved facilities was built to house the marine mammals collections.



Whale skull and vertebrae stored in Building 25.



Whale vertebra and racking sections are cleaned.



Whale bones are sorted onto carts for clearance testing.



Not every item could be successfully cleaned. Some were bagged and labeled for future attention.



Improved storage for Marine Mammals collections in the new Building 26



Collections on new aluminum pallets in storage in Museum Support Center their new home, Pod 4 of the Smithsonian's.

The Teams Building 26



Back Row: Leslie Sabo, Kelly Mellon, Deb Chory, Richard Front Row: James Oakley, Kerry Button, Richard Sloyer, Lori Schlenker, Mike Doyle, Cathy Hawkes

Building 25



Back Row: Janie Burkett, Lori Schlenker, Charley Potter, Kerry Button, Leslie Sabo Front Row: Cris Geer, Matt Shepherd, Geoff Keel



Smithsonian Institution

For more information
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