



DOCUMENT DRYING  
& RESTORATION

# Case Study: New Orleans Notarial Archives



Property Damage  
Restoration



Temporary  
Humidity Control



Property Damage  
Prevention



DOCUMENT DRYING & RESTORATION

## Overview

In addition to the tragic impact on people's lives in New Orleans, the devastating Hurricane Katrina threatened to erase three centuries of city history. A tenacious response, fast rescue and state-of-the-art technology helped secure the city's precious past.

At 1340 Poydras St. in the Crescent City, the New Orleans Notarial Archives maintained a one-of-a-kind collection of older documents, some dating to the 1700's, including slave records and land grants, and a letter from Jean Lafitte to Washington, D.C., demanding payment for his expenditures in the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812. Those delicate and vital records, most on linen, were endangered by wind-driven rain that passed through windows broken by the powerful storm.

Just a few blocks away, inside the basement of the New Orleans Civil District Courthouse, originally built as a bomb shelter during the Cold War, the Notarial Archives maintained an equally large collection of documents. There, water saturated more than 20 percent of the 60,000 leather-bound volumes stored on metal shelves. These books contained the records of all property transfers occurring in New Orleans in the modern era.



Munters oversaw restoration of 23 truckloads of documents: first, removing them from the water damaged archives; second, shipping them to Munters restoration facilities; and finally, returning them in a well-organized and usable condition.

## The Problem

Most governments have digitized their real estate records, but at the courthouse basement archive, abstractors still do hand searches. Without access to the records in the Notarial Archives, no one in New Orleans can buy or sell property, and many insurance claims can't be settled.

"A typical day would include 20 to 30 people poring through the brown leather books, tracing the history of individual land parcels, confirming the validity of titles or recording land purchases," said Stephen P. Bruno, New Orleans custodian of historical records, a gubernatorial appointee.

Bruno was just about to hire a firm to transfer many of the 12 million documents stored in the Notarial Archives to the computer. But Katrina hit first. Basements were flooded with muddy, snake infested, bacteria-laden water. The city was closed off by the National Guard. An information disaster was in the making!

## The Solution

Fortunately, Bruno was prepared for natural calamities by having a disaster plan in place. As part of its disaster plan, the Notarial Archives was registered with Munters Code Blue program, which provides priority emergency services in the event of a disaster. Thus, immediately after Katrina hit, Munters document recovery experts, with equipment, stationed themselves outside the city ready to respond.

"The city was under a state of martial law, and we could not gain entry," said Eddy Pokluda, Munters national business development manager. "This was frustrating because there's a short amount of time before water damage documents can be saved."



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# New Orleans Notarial Archives Restored After Hurricane Katrina



## THE SOLUTION

*continued*

Caught in a desperate situation, Bruno, used the only means of communicating in the stricken city, and placed a call to WWL-AM radio to arrange an emergency travel authorization that gave archive officials and Munters experts security clearance into New Orleans. Munters then launched its mammoth restoration effort, dispatching equipment and personnel to both the New Orleans Civil District Courthouse and to the 1340 Poydras St. building.

Working as quickly as possible, Munters removed the bacteria-laden, snake infested standing water, by bringing in generators to operate powerful pumps. Then, crews spent 36 consecutive hours extracting thousands of gallons of water. Additionally, a reptile expert was called in to remove the snakes from the courthouse basement.

Water gone, Munters crews consisting of 60 people began removing the 60,000 volumes. Books were carried out of the basement, loaded into boxes, inventoried and then placed onto pallets. When a pallet was completed, it was lifted by forklift into a Munters freezer truck. Once inside, the documents became frozen, eliminating any further damage due to the liquid phase of water.

It took 10 days to remove all of the 60,000 volumes from the courthouse basement and two days to remove damaged volumes from 1340 Poydras St., with the materials filling 23 refrigeration trailers. All of the work took place under difficult conditions, including a city curfew, checkpoint delays, no communications infrastructure, fuel shortages, road blockages, flooding, no electricity, limited housing and lack of food and water.

As soon as a trailer was fully loaded, the truck drove to Munters suburban Chicago document processing facility. There, the Munters' accelerated vacuum freeze-dry



system, the most sophisticated method available today to restore water-damaged materials, treated the precious paper.

All of the documents were restored so they could again be used in day-to-day activities. "We are happy to report that we didn't lose one page of the 60,000 notarial volumes housed in the basement," said Bruno. "There was only minimal damage to some books due to dirt, but that was expected. It was a monumental task to save the records. Munters met the challenge and assembled a team of experts to get the job done in battle ground conditions," said Bruno.



## THE BENEFITS

When you call Munters for document restoration services, you have the nation's largest, most experienced recovery company at your disposal. Here's how Munters efforts benefitted the New Orleans Archives:

### Decades of Experience

Munters has been saving documents and books for more than 20 years. No company has better trained staff or a wider range of equipment to use in service of customers facing document losses.

### Fast Action

Deterioration of paper, blurring of ink, cockling and mold growth are all problems that become worse with time. Munters prides itself in coming to your project fast, well-organized and well prepared.

### Cleaning and Decontamination

After the water is removed, the documents are cleaned and all micro-organisms, such as bacteria, are eliminated by gamma radiation. This eliminates health hazards when the documents are returned to service.

### Organizational Services

Massive libraries of information require strict inventory and organization when undergoing recovery. Munters can handle thousands of documents and then return them in a well-organized and ready to use manner.

Photos: After carefully inventorying the damaged documents, cartons were shipped by freezer truck to Munters suburban Chicago Document Restoration Center. Once frozen, documents stop deteriorating. Munters then uses its vacuum freeze-dry chamber to remove moisture through the process of sublimation which dries the documents without letting them become "wet" again.