



PRESERVATION IN PRACTICE, DISASTER

SAVING WET TEXTILES AFTER A FLOOD

Topics covered in this brief:

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- HANDLING WET TEXTILES**
- MATERIALS NEEDED**
- CLEANING WET TEXTILES**
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National Center for Preservation
Technology and Training
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Flood waters damage the contents of a home, including special garments and essential items made of fabric. While everyday clothes can be laundered or dry cleaned, heirloom textiles require special handling. Heirloom textiles, such as wedding dresses, quilts, special garments, rugs, or draperies, may contain different types of fibers. Dry-cleaning can be used to clean some fibers (rayon, wool, and silks), while other threads (cottons or linens) can be gently hand-washed with a laundry detergent such as Woolite.

When dealing with flood damaged textiles, recognize that different materials will react differently when wet. Wet textiles may be more fragile or shrink or distort as they dry. Dyes can transfer from one fabric to another. In this document, preservation professionals offer general advice on how to salvage textiles after a flood event.

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ASSESSING

Assess wet textiles to determine the course of action for salvage.

- Are the dyes stable? Will they run? Test the dyes using a cotton swab wetted with a soapy-water mixture. Run the wet cotton swab over the fabric and see if the dye transfers to the cotton swab. We recommend a preservation professional treat bleeding dyes.
- Do you know the fibers of the textile? Are they cotton, silk, wool, etc.? Minimize handling of fragile textiles such as silk.
- Are there any structural damage such as tears, splits, fabric losses, etc.? Carefully support any such areas when moving these textiles.
- Is the item worth salvaging? Throw away pillows, stuffed animals, and other non-heirloom clothing that has been in flood waters for an extended period.
- Can you clean and dry your textiles within 48 hours? Take immediate action when possible.



Test dyes for bleeding using a cotton swab wetted with a soapy-water mixture. Run the wet cotton swab over the fabric and see if the dye transfers to the cotton swab.



HANDLING

Carefully handle wet textiles to protect the textile and yourself.

- Put on rubber gloves to handle the textiles, and wear a mask if contaminants or molds are present.
- Do not fold a textile that has bleeding dyes because colors will transfer from one side to the other.
- Fibers in heirloom quilts and garments can become fragile when wet. Special handling is necessary to prevent holes or tears.
- Textiles soak up water and become about 50% heavier than when they are dry. DO NOT pick up a wet textile by the corner without support.
- Support the textile from the underneath. Use your cupped hands to lift a small textile from the contaminated water. For larger items, a clean nylon window screen, a towel, a sheet, or a stretcher made from wood and canvas can be used to lift a quilt, rug, or drapery from the water.



Support wet textiles when lifting. For larger items, you can use a clean, color-safe sheet or towel as demonstrated here.



MATERIALS

Gather materials needed before beginning.

- Plastic drop cloths or sheets of plastic
- LOTS of clean towels or paper towels
- Support stretcher for larger items
- Large bin or basin



CLEANING

Carefully remove the textile from flood water using safe handling techniques and begin cleaning the fabric.

- Rinse dye fast textiles with clean water to remove dirt and debris.
- Rinse small items using a container of clean water.
- Often a bath tub is used to rinse large items. Alternately items can be rinsed using gently flowing clean water or with a fine hose spray.



Rinse contaminated textiles in clean water to remove dirt and debris by submersing in a plastic bin or bath tub.



DRYING

Begin the drying process after all dirt and debris are removed from the fabric.

- Remove the textile from the clean rinse water using safe handling procedures.
- Gently press the excess water from the textile with the palm of your hand.
- Place the textile flat onto a clean cloth or polypropylene sheet.
- Blot the textile with another clean cloth or paper towel.
- Cover the textile with clean towels or sheets. The cover sheet will wick water and soiling away from the surface of the textile. Do not remove the cover cloth until the textile is dry.
- Allow the textile to air dry, preferably in a room with a dehumidifier or fan for air circulation to prevent mold.



Blot the textile with a clean cloth or paper towels, then cover the textile with additional towels or sheets to wick water and soiling away from the surface.



CASE STUDY



A small heirloom textile is rinsed using gently flowing clean water from a fine hose spray. Photos courtesy of Karin von Lerber.



REFERENCES

- American Institute for Conservation, “Salvaging Water Damaged Textiles,” <https://www.culturalheritage.org/docs/default-source/resources/emergency-resources/guides/salvaging-water-damaged-textiles.pdf>.
- Museum Textile Services, “Emergency Salvage of Textiles and Clothing” http://www.museumtextiles.com/uploads/7/8/9/0/7890082/flood_recovery_book_-_emergency_salvage_of_textiles.pdf.
- American Institute for Conservation, Find a Conservator, <https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-conservation/find-a-conservator>.



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