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RED FLAMES, SILVER LININGS

MIMI LEVEQUE AND ERIC WOLIN

On August 15, 2009, an accidental fire broke out at the Ropes Mansion, a historic property owned and operated by the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. The fire forced museum staff to confront an emergency requiring a decisive response to safeguard a unique structure and its associated collection. The fire challenged the Peabody Essex Museum's notion of disaster preparedness and subjected local first responders and, later, museum responders to a harrowing experience. Key communication infrastructures in place on the day of the fire and networks of relationships forged well before the fire helped mitigate the impact of the fire. This article will discuss the immediate response to the fire, the recovery program developed to treat the damaged art objects, and the reinterpretation and installation of conserved objects into a rehabilitated Ropes Mansion.

KEYWORDS: Disaster preparedness, Fire, Water damage, Soot, Peabody Essex Museum, Ropes Mansion, COSTEP MA

1. INTRODUCTION

Can an emergency that threatens the destruction of an important historic house and all of its contents ever be considered a good thing for a museum to experience? I suspect most everyone concerned with the care and preservation of objects would quickly and unequivocally say no. This article argues that a 2009 fire at the Ropes Mansion of the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) can be viewed both as a culmination of unfortunate circumstances and as a profound disaster averted thanks to an immediate, coordinated, and thoughtful response along with a carefully planned recovery (fig. 1).

The Ropes Mansion, located at 318 Essex Street in Salem, Massachusetts, is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Built in 1927, it was purchased in 1768 by Judge Nathaniel Ropes II and was occupied continuously by the family until 1907. Before cataloguing the unfortunate circumstances, it bears mentioning that the importance of the Ropes Mansion extends far beyond the building itself. An impressive collection of fine and decorative arts were amassed by the Ropes family during their occupation spanning more than a century, but so, too, were hundreds of utilitarian objects and household wares, objects rarely so well preserved. This legacy, along with an exhaustive archive of family papers, chronicles 139 years of domestic life in Salem in a way that is unparalleled. The Ropes Family Papers (MSS 190) are currently archived within the Phillips Library of the PEM. All of these materials were stored in the house at the time of the fire.

2. THE EVENT AND THE RESPONSE

In 2009, the PEM determined that it was necessary to repaint the entire exterior of the house. More than 280 years of paint buildup and degradation compelled the PEM to remove existing paint layers before applying new ones. The PEM's Director of Security and Facilities, Bob Monk, following regulations and recommendations issued by the local historical commission and federal agencies, determined that the use of heat was the best option to soften the accumulated paint to the extent that it could be scraped away by hand. Understanding the inherent risk involved in using heat, Bob mandated three safeguards that the crew of contracted painters must follow at all times: (1) a specific electric paint stripper was to be used by the painting contractor, (2) a designated fire watcher must be present, and (3) a member of the PEM security department staff would be present.



Fig. 1. The Ropes Mansion, Peabody Essex Museum (Courtesy of Mimi Leveque)

Two of these three safeguards were not in place the morning of the fire. Veering outside of their mandate, the painting contractors decided to work—unannounced—on a Saturday morning, one of the hottest days of the summer, with an unauthorized heat gun that they felt was better suited to remove paint from the woodwork near the eaves. Rather than softening the paint, the high temperature of the heat gun vaporized it, causing a small fire to form. The fire watcher did produce an extinguisher that apparently put out the fire. Soon thereafter, the painters stopped working to eat lunch, not realizing that sparks from the fire had been blown by their heat gun through the eaves into the attic of the house, igniting a slow, smoldering fire within the insulation.

Around noon, during the painters' lunch break, a member of the museum's security staff arrived at Ropes to open and inspect the house prior to a scheduled tour at 1 p.m. As the guard initiated his protocols, the fire alarm sounded. The alarm, linked to the museum's security operations center, triggered an immediate call to the Salem Fire Department. Within minutes, a dispatched unit arrived at Ropes (fig. 2). Owing to the close relationship that PEM has established with Salem first responders, fostered by the Salem chapter of the Coordinated Statewide Emergency Preparedness in Massachusetts (COSTEP MA), the fire department was aware of the property and its needs upon arrival and they were prepared to be proactive to preserve the collection.¹

Importantly, the fire department knew that no one resided at the Ropes Mansion, and hearing from the PEM security guard that no one was inside the house, fire personnel immediately began the work to extinguish the fire. The few minutes saved by this exchange likely prevented the fire from spreading beyond the attic of the house.

Long before any PEM staff had mobilized, fire department personnel were taking steps to safeguard the collection from water and smoke damage. Their efforts were chiefly focused on carefully moving furnishings from the edges of each room to the center and covering them with protective tarps (fig. 3) based on protocols established with the PEM.

As Salem's first responders were doing their job, PEM initiated a mobilization effort. Following our disaster plan, a series of communications were issued to key museum personnel. One of the first calls



Fig. 2. Fire department responding to the fire (Courtesy of Frank Cutietta)



Fig. 3. Dining room furnishings moved and tarped by the Salem Fire Department (Courtesy of PEM staff)

placed was to the “Collection Emergency” cell phone, which is in Head of Collection Management Eric Wolin’s possession 24/7. Living well outside of Salem, he was not the first to arrive on scene, but the names and numbers of the response team were programmed into the cell phone and he notified them immediately about the nature and scope of the fire.

PEM staff converged on Ropes from near and far to assess the situation and formulate an action plan. The security perimeter established by the Salem Fire Department was relaxed the moment human safety was not at risk—another example of coordination between first responders and PEM staff that allowed response and recovery efforts to initiate. This would not have been permitted if that relationship had not existed. When the assembled PEM personnel were allowed to enter, the imperative to completely evacuate the house of objects quickly became apparent.

The volume of water required to extinguish the fire had permeated most areas and floors of the house. It poured down from the attic behind walls and through gaps in floors and ceilings, soaking carpeting, upholstery, wallpaper, and objects along its path. Not everything had been protected by the tarps—objects in pantries and cupboards were soaked, and mirrors and other framed pieces on the walls had been too large or cumbersome to be moved, so there was extensive wetting of those objects (figs. 4a, 4b).

The initial assessment revealed that PEM personnel were not sufficiently equipped or staffed to address the urgency and scale of this task alone. A call was quickly placed to a Salem-based moving company, T.E. Andresen, with whom PEM has strong ties. By amazing luck, they had the capacity to immediately provide packing materials, trucks, and brawn to assist in the evacuation of objects from Ropes. As additional resources were en route, PEM staff began to triage especially vulnerable or precious objects (fig. 5).

Not every object required an immediate or exhaustive intervention. For example, simply drying an important Queen Anne chest-on-chest in situ, then draping it with polyethylene sheeting provided sufficient protection to allow staff to address higher priorities elsewhere. The chest-on-chest was safely moved as soon as there was adequate clearance (figs. 6a, 6b).

The majority of the objects large and small were dried, packed, and delivered to the Cotting-Smith Assembly House, another 18th century property owned by PEM just a few blocks away from Ropes.² Of the many silver linings, the fact that this popular venue for summer weddings had not been rented the day of the fire is particularly striking. Teams formed at Ropes to efficiently containerize and load out objects; while at Cotting-Smith, teams received objects, recycled certain transit containers, and populated the largely empty first and second floors of the house with furniture (fig. 7a) and packed boxes (fig. 7b).

Late into the night of August 15, PEM staff worked to complete the evacuation of threatened objects from Ropes. A small selection of photographs, books, textiles, and other objects requiring immediate intervention by conservators were transported to the PEM conservation lab so that emergency treatments could be initiated. Textiles and works on paper were rinsed and blotted to remove discolored water and prevent permanent staining. Precious small objects, such as jewelry, were moved to secure storage at the museum.

Beyond first responders, PEM staff, and local movers, additional resources were called in to address critical needs. Again, with great good fortune, every resource—electricians, structural engineers, steeplejacks, and water damage mitigation professionals—prioritized PEM’s needs and provided immediate support to the response and recovery effort. On the day of the fire, once the building was completely checked (fig. 8), the structural recovery of Ropes commenced. The roof was stabilized and patched to ensure that it was structurally stable and water tight. Additionally, fans, dehumidifiers, and blowers circulating hot, dry air through networks of flexible plastic tubes placed in strategically cut holes in ceilings removed moisture and prevented the growth of mold (fig. 9).



Fig. 4a. Glassware in wall cabinets filled with contaminated water in the ground floor's china room; 4b. Water cascading into the ground floor's butler's pantry (Courtesy of PEM staff)



Fig. 5. Triage in the kitchen (Courtesy of PEM staff)

3. RECOVERY

The next step was the recovery phase. While renovations began on the mansion—including redoing all wiring, adding fire suppression and climate control systems, and reconstruction of all the interior spaces—the conservation team began to assess the scope of the project with the objects moved to the Cotting-Smith Assembly House. We were faced with a daunting task. Not only did we have hundreds of packed boxes and pieces of furniture, but every drawer, trunk, and chest was also full of items. The collection comprises more than 3000 objects, and we were about to have to deal with them all.

Rather than attempting to move objects back to the conservation lab at the museum, we decided to create conservation treatment spaces in Cotting-Smith for the initial recovery work. We divided the available personnel into two groups. Contract Furniture Conservator Chris Thomson oversaw the treatment of furniture with her assistant Gregg Porter and Conservation Technician Joanna Sese (fig. 10). Mimi Leveque supervised the remainder of the treatments and coordinated the project with Assistant Registrar Katie White to manage the data.³

As it was intended for catering large functions and therefore was fitted with sinks, countertops, and storage cabinets, Cotting-Smith's service kitchen was ideal for object conservation, while the furniture could be tackled all over the house. As the work proceeded, we expanded into other areas of the house to have dry, flat places to examine paintings, works on paper, and photographs. Work even moved outside when we needed better ventilation and light.

Everything needed to be unpacked, identified with the Ropes Mansion inventory, condition reported, and recorded. Each object was photographed and numbered when needed (fig. 11). Mimi kept a separate daily log of all objects treated and at what point in the treatment they were in. This proved to be very helpful for tracking complex objects whose treatments might span many weeks. We worked closely with the Curator of American Decorative Arts Dean Lahikainen and reviewed all treatment plans



Fig. 6a. Chest on stand in bedroom after the fire; 6b. Draped chest on stand (Courtesy of PEM staff)



Fig. 7a. Furniture placed in the Cotting-Smith parlor; 7b. Packed boxes stored in an upstairs room at Cotting-Smith (Courtesy of Katie White)



Fig. 8. Bob Monk, PEM's Director of Facilities, inspects attic spaces with the fire department (Courtesy of PEM staff)



Fig. 9. Dehumidifiers and blowers in place to reduce humidity (Courtesy of Kathy Tarantola)

with him in advance. Packed books were sorted out and delivered to the PEM's Phillips Library staff for cataloguing.

As the work progressed, we were happy to see that the packing had been excellent—no objects were broken during the move out of the Ropes Mansion. Most of the condition issues were due to



Fig. 10. Furniture conservation team Joanna Sese, Gregg Porter, and Chris Thomson determining treatment protocols (Courtesy of Mimi Leveque)



Fig. 11. Conservation intern Rebecca Barber numbering glassware (Courtesy of Mimi Leveque)

exposure to soot or water combined with pre-existing issues. Each object was initially vacuumed to remove soot and dust (fig. 12). Soot combined with dust was most problematic on organic objects such as baskets; for some, vacuuming was inadequate and they required more thorough cleaning. Many inorganic objects could be washed, especially the enormous amounts of ceramics and glass; there were 300 pieces of Irish crystal, and one set of china alone had 345 pieces, which together comprised the largest surviving early 19th century set of tableware. The water from fire suppression had caused the failure of many old glued repairs, so those had to be treated.



Fig. 12. Vacuuming baskets to remove soot and dust by Rebecca Barber and Katie White (Courtesy of Mimi Leveque)

Metal objects had become corroded from exposure to the contaminated water. Corrosion was primarily removed mechanically. Some utility items, such as fireplace equipment, had been inadvertently left behind at the Ropes Mansion, where they corroded further, requiring far more time to clean. The polishing of bright metals was deferred until just prior to the reopening of the mansion.

The pieces of furniture had numerous problems, such as water stains and soot from the fire that had settled on old wax and dust. The conditions were complicated by the variable state of each object prior to the fire, where some had light-damaged finishes that had become water soluble or old polish residue on and around metal hardware. As a result, no one set of treatments could be used on all of the objects. Each piece of furniture was reviewed by the furniture conservators, and the curator and given a 3 x 5 card with the treatments required; white cards indicated those to be done only by the furniture conservators, and purple cards signified objects safe to be treated by interns or collections staff.

We had a few surprises. For example, the packing and handling of old mirrors had released spatters of mercury over the objects and into the packing materials. We had the liquid mercury professionally removed and all packing materials properly disposed of, and then we sealed gaps on the backs of all mirrors with strips of thick Japanese *kozo* tissue to avoid as much further leakage as possible.

The treatment of the works on paper, photographs, and books was overseen by PEM Paper Conservator Kathryn (Casey) Carey. All objects were treated, but some of the more fragile works, such as the silhouettes, were reproduced for display in the Ropes Mansion to prevent further damage due to light exposure.

4. REINSTALLATION

Once the objects had been treated and the house renovations completed, the task of reinstalling the Ropes Mansion was taken on by the special projects team, headed by Angela Segalla, and the collection



Fig. 13. Snow piles in front of the Ropes Mansion on the reinstatement day (Courtesy of Angela Segalla)

management group, led by Eric Wolin, under the rubric of Exhibition Planning. As the objects were treated, they were moved to the museum's off-site storage for housing and documentation, where the collection will remain except for objects that were specifically chosen to go back into the house. This will eliminate the possibility of a catastrophic loss of the entire collection, as we could have had if the fire had been worse.

Ironically, as the fire had taken place on the hottest day of one of the hottest years, the beginning of the reinstatement turned out to be scheduled right after a major snowfall in the snowiest winter ever in



Fig. 14. Recreating the bed hangings with Elizabeth Lahikainen, Meegan Williams, Paula Richter, and Ani Geragosian (Courtesy of Walter Silver)



Fig. 15a. The reinstalled china room; 15b. A reinstalled pantry (Courtesy of Mimi Leveque)



Fig. 16. Angela Segalla and Dave O’Ryan installing featured furniture on a platform in an exhibition room (Courtesy of Annie Lundsten)

Salem, 2015. The logistics of simply keeping the space clear for the truck in front of Ropes were complex (fig. 13), let alone the coordination of safely moving and reinstalling the 1000 objects chosen for display. It is an important lesson that weather plays a huge role in how well one can recover from a disaster. If the conditions had been reversed and the fire had been in the winter, the fire department would have found it difficult to approach the house and then all of the objects would have been covered in icy spray from the fire hoses, causing far more damage.

The large pieces of furniture had to be reconstructed inside the house. Pieces had to be carefully eased back together, as pegs and dowels had swollen when wetted and not gone back to their original sizes. Conservator and historic cabinetmaker Phil Lowe was brought in for that delicate task. We decided to reproduce the hangings, which then had to be fitted to the beds following the original hanging designs (fig. 14). This proved incredibly time consuming; it took 10 days to make the tester for one bed alone. The original straw and feather mattresses were used but encased in washed Tyvek to keep out pests.



Fig. 17. Room depicting the family's travels with items in an open trunk protected by acrylic case inserts (Courtesy of Mimi Leveque)

The vast quantities of china and glass were moved back into their special room (fig. 15a), and all pantries were refitted with hundreds of kitchen items (fig. 15b).

Contrary to the typical approach for historic houses that are generally interpreted at just one particular time period, the reinterpretation team decided to open the house up to telling multiple stories of the family in a diverse way, covering many periods of time over the family's long history in the house. Some of the upstairs rooms were made into galleries with objects on platforms and in exhibition cases that can be changed periodically to tell other stories so that the house always has something fresh and new to show visitors (fig. 16). As the interpretive team wanted the public to be able to wander the house with self-guided tours, few docents, and minimal security, we had to come up with creative and aesthetic barriers, such as acrylic inserts for shelves and trunks that allow clear viewing but prevent theft (fig. 17).

In the first season after the Ropes Mansion was reopened, it was an enormous hit with the public—we had more than 7000 visitors! We were delighted that our work won a Salem Preservation Award, shared with the Salem Fire Department, and we have just received a 2016 Leadership in History Award from the American Association for State and Local History for “Re-envisioning the Ropes Mansion.”⁴

5. CONCLUSION

The circumstances leading to the outbreak of fire at Ropes were unfortunate, the weather conditions were extreme, and the environment in which responders mobilized was extraordinary. Nothing in the PEM disaster plan or training could fully prepare staff for what unfolded on August 15, 2009, but the fundamentals guided emergency responders and PEM staff through a difficult situation toward a

satisfying outcome. We learned important lessons to guide our responses to any future emergency, particularly that fostering ongoing relationships with first responders and local providers is crucial. Establishing and maintaining thorough documentation of the collection is critical to tracking each object from the beginning to the end of the crisis. Despite the initial disaster, the Ropes Mansion has emerged in better condition and the collection far better housed and documented than it might have been without the fire—a silver lining indeed!

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It takes more than a village to undertake such an enormous project; it takes a metropolis! We are indebted to the wonderful members of the Salem Fire and Police Departments for their extraordinary work to save the mansion. The T.E. Andresen Moving and Storage Company helped at every phase of the project. More than 80 staff members, interns, and volunteers from the PEM assisted in the recovery, along with numerous contracted conservation professionals. The authors wish to particularly thank Bob Monk, Director of Facilities and Security, Paula Richter, Curator for Exhibitions and Research, and Angela Segalla, Assistant Head of Collection Management, who each played key roles in the recovery and provided important recollections for this article.

NOTES

1. COSTEP MA (<http://mblc.state.ma.us/costepma/>) is the Coordinated Statewide Emergency Preparedness program in Massachusetts. “It is a collaborative of representatives of cultural and historical institutions and agencies as well as first responder and emergency management professionals from federal, state, and municipal governments. The purpose of COSTEP MA is to build and foster a statewide emergency planning process that serves the cultural and emergency management communities and addresses disaster prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation” (from the COSTEP MA website). PEM Security annually invites senior fire department staff to tour PEM buildings and historic properties on a rotating basis to learn about the properties.
2. PEM owns and operates 20 historic properties, both in the immediate “campus” of the museum and the nearby “McIntire Historic District.”
3. Over the course of the recovery phase, the conservation team added PEM paper conservator Kathryn Carey; five preprogram conservation interns; two additional furniture conservators; and textiles, upholstery, photography, and paintings conservation specialists.
4. See the blog on the reinstallation at the PEM website: <http://connected.pem.org/re-imagining-ropes/>

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