

Mississippi Heritage Trust

Response to Hurricane Katrina



The destruction from Hurricane Katrina has been one of the worst human and cultural disasters in our nation's history. The cities on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and other cities further north suffered extreme damage from the storm. Over a thousand historic buildings were completely destroyed and thousands more were damaged across the lower half of the state. The Mississippi Heritage Trust (MHT) responded to the Katrina damage by changing its work plan to focus on the recovery of the remaining damaged historic buildings. Below are some of the Katrina related efforts MHT has been involved in:

Damage Assessment - Assisted the SHPO (in Mississippi the Historic Preservation Division of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History or MDAH) with assessment on the coast to document damage to historic properties and identify historic areas in need of additional assistance.

Public Meetings – Held several public meetings for owners of damaged historic properties to provide information and technical assistance related to their needs.

Volunteer Coordination – Worked with MDAH, the Association for Preservation Technology (APT) and the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) to bring in volunteer experts (structural engineers, architects, and architectural historians) from all over the country to help analyze buildings and their structural integrity to prevent unnecessary demolition and assist homeowners in how to stabilize and repair properly. Volunteers came at their own expense. MDAH, NTHP, and MHT provided housing and field support.

Historic Properties Recovery Fund for Mississippi – Shortly after the storm MHT set up a recovery fund to accept donations for preservation related work on the coast. Over \$250,000 has been raised since the fund was established. Money has been used for the Pilot Stabilization Program, public meetings, volunteer support, and other items related to recovery. Donations were received from all over the country. Large contributions came from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, American Express Foundation, Johnson & Johnson, and the World Monuments Fund.

Pilot Stabilization Program - MHT and NTHP initiated a demonstration program to prove that damaged historic buildings could be stabilized and saved rather than demolished. MHT, MDAH, and NTHP selected the projects for the demonstration program and MHT coordinated the stabilization work on the different buildings. Five houses, one Masonic lodge, and a historic school were stabilized through the program. The Pilot Stabilization Program was funded by the American Express Foundation through NTHP, NTHP, Johnson & Johnson, and the World Monuments Fund.

Advocacy – Together with MDAH and NTHP, MHT lobbied for preservation funding at the national level. The director of MHT testified before a Congressional subcommittee in November of 2005 to discuss the damage on the coast to historic properties and what the government could do to help. Following the testimony, MDAH and MHT hosted a Congressional delegation visit to the coast to look at the damage to historic structures. In the spring of 2006 MDAH and MHT hosted a tour of the coast for Senate Appropriations staff members to show them the extent of the damage to historic properties and how federal grant funding could help those properties. That visit helped to solidify the \$40 million in funding for historic preservation that came through the Katrina Relief package.

Public Relations – MHT used the media to spread the word about the destruction caused by Katrina in Mississippi to try and counter the enormous coverage of New Orleans after the hurricane. MHT worked with reporters at the Sun Herald newspaper on the coast to publish articles about preservation and the projects of MHT and its partners. The MHT director gave numerous interviews to reporters from all over the country who wanted to know about the damage to historic structures and responded to requests for the use of before and after photos of damaged historic properties. In addition the MHT director traveled around the country to talk to different organizations about the damage Katrina caused and to raise money for recovery efforts. MHT, in conjunction with NTHP, hosted a reception in May of 2006 to honor the “Preservation Heroes” who worked tirelessly to preserve what was left of the historic resources after Katrina. Heroes included homeowners, local preservation leaders, city officials, non-profits, and business owners.

Field Office (Preservation House) – In partnership with NTHP, MDAH, and the Mississippi Main Street Association, MHT opened a field office in Biloxi called “Preservation House” to use as a coastal office for all of the organizations and house volunteers who came to help with the assessment of historic properties.

MHT Web Site – The MHT web site was used as a tool for the dissemination of information on Katrina damage. Photos were posted showing the damage to historic properties in different communities on the coast. The site was also used to post information about the work of MHT and other organizations on the coast to save historic properties. The visitation to the MHT web site tripled after posting this information.

Partnerships – MHT strengthened partnerships with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Mississippi Main Street Association, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation to work in coordination on recovery efforts. New partnerships were developed with the Association for Preservation Technology and the World Monuments Fund to also aid in the recovery effort.

State Tax Credit – MHT hired a lobbyist and assisted in the lobbying efforts with other preservation partners to help in the passage of a state tax credit for the rehabilitation of historic properties. In March of 2006 the statewide credit was passed at 25%. Both residential and commercial properties are eligible and there is no income producing requirement.

Please visit www.mississippiheritage.com for more information on MHT's Katrina related recovery efforts.