

# Two Years and Counting: New Orleans Libraries After Katrina

The spray-painted symbols on the front door of the Robert E. Smith library look like graffiti. Anywhere else, it would be evidence of vandalism, but because this is New Orleans the symbols are recognizable as one of the tens of thousands of Urban Search and Rescue markings still visible on buildings around the city. These are the letters and numbers that were painted on houses and businesses two years ago in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (*AL*, Oct. 2005, p. 14) to indicate that the structure had been searched for casualties.

The USAR markings consist of a large “X” with abbreviations and figures in three or four of the spaces around the arms of the X—depending on what was found inside the building. On the front door of the Smith branch, the spray-painted numbers “9-25” at the top stands for the date when the building was searched. In the left quadrant, “FL 2” is the unit that searched it, an element of the Florida National Guard. The right quadrant is blank because no hazards were found on site, and at the bottom quadrant of the X, a zero indicates that no bodies were found inside. For many houses throughout this part of the city, that number was something other than zero.

Located in the middle to upper-middle class Lakeview neighborhood, the Smith branch is about a mile from the 17th Street Canal breach, one of the major breaches in the flood control system surrounding

New Orleans that occurred after Katrina. Smith was a complete loss after having 10 feet of water in it for several weeks, and it is one of eight of the city’s 13 branches in similar straits. Pre-Katrina, the Smith branch was one of the biggest and busiest in the city, averaging 12,000 items circulated each month. Two years later, it is a gutted shell. The surrounding neighborhood has an encouraging number of houses that have been cleaned and fixed, and which are occupied, but many are still abandoned and empty. A bookmobile donated by the Friends of the Medina County (Ohio) District Library is parked night and day near the Smith branch entrance, but is only open 14 hours a week. A shortage of staff prevents it from being open longer or actually being driven. This June, patrons visiting the Smith bookmobile checked out 568 items.

Before Katrina, New Orleans Public Library had total holdings of 800,000 and 216 employees who served a city with a population of 454,000. Two years later, five branches and the main library have reopened, one is served by a bookmobile, two are in temporary facilities, and there are 90 employees. A total of 320,000 items in the system’s collections were lost, and the city’s population is now estimated to be between 280,000 and 300,000. But the view of the future is optimistic: The goal of the NOPL staff, administrators, and board of directors is to “build back better”—not to only replace what was lost but to make New Orleans an exemplar of what a

large urban public library system should be in the 21st century.

## Challenges and choices

City Librarian William Johnson resigned in the summer of 2006, and acting city librarian Geraldine Harris left that November. A search committee geared up and since then the system has been run by senior administrators. Also in November 2006, Tulane University Dean of Libraries Lance Query began serving pro bono



Two years after Katrina, the Robert E. Smith branch of New Orleans PL is a gutted shell. Visible on its locked front doors is the reflection of a donated bookmobile.



Several thousand pounds of unusable donated books sent to NOPL from around the country are loaded up for recycling. Many of the donations weren't worth keeping or selling, but the fraction that was sold raised over four times as much money for the Friends book sale as was raised in a typical pre-Katrina year.

as “special consultant for administration” to the NOPL Board.

Query notes that because the NOPL system is funded primarily from a dedicated property tax, with fewer residents and fewer properties being taxed, long-range planning is difficult.

“We’re faced with a chicken-and-egg problem,” Query says. “We want to serve the population of the city, but if we don’t know where they’ll be, we don’t know where to rebuild.” Query believes that a better library system for New Orleans is doable, but just as the city is unlikely to return to its pre-Katrina size, it will be a library system on a smaller scale.

Many citizens think that the city administration has not made the hard decisions that may be necessary post-Katrina. The parts of the city that flooded the most are former swamps that were drained and developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Instead of even seriously considering buying out these devastated neighborhoods and not rebuilding the parts of the city most prone to catastrophic flooding, the decision—or, more accurately, the nondecision—was made to let anyone rebuild anywhere they wanted to.

Many urban planners warn that this will result in a “jack-o’-lantern effect”: Neighborhoods will be largely abandoned and blighted but have

small pockets of renovated houses occupied by the intrepid and determined (and, some would say, the foolhardy). But because the city’s footprint will remain the same, services such as fire and

police protection, garbage collection, and utilities will still have to cover the same geographic area but with two-thirds of the pre-Katrina population and tax base. If the library system is to be only two-thirds as big, what two-thirds of the destroyed branches get rebuilt? How much time do you allow for additional citizens to return before you make those decisions? It is a challenge unique in the history of librarianship: Rebuild *and* downsize a large urban public library system in a city whose future is uncertain.

NOPL damage and losses from Katrina total over \$20 million. But the target dollar amount to remake it into a leading urban library system is \$35 million. FEMA has committed to paying for roughly two-thirds of the rebuilding and remediation costs, but the agency doesn’t just hand out big checks; FEMA primarily works on a reimbursement basis, so repairs and new construction typically must first be funded before FEMA steps into the picture and, as you’d expect, the rate at which the federal government doles out such large amounts can seem glacial. Damaged libraries at the University of Houston were still dealing with FEMA five years after a tropical storm flooded out much of its campus in 2001.

Assistance from various nonprofit foundations is helping to bridge this period of uncertainty that the NOPL faces. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Bush-Clinton

Katrina Fund, and other nonprofit groups have collectively issued grants of over \$5 million to assist New Orleans libraries, and more such funding is expected. These grants will both help the system rebuild long-term and help fund the operation of temporary branches before those final decisions are made.

## Second flood: donations

Charitable giving after Katrina broke philanthropic records: Several billion dollars have been donated to various relief efforts benefiting the city and region, half a billion alone in the first week after the hurricane hit. For New Orleans libraries, when word got out about the system’s losses, donating books was the first thought that many people across the country had. Though the intentions were honorable and appreciated, the donations were often less than useful.

Patrick O’Brien has been head of the Friends of the NOPL since 1999. The Friends have long run a book sale with books donated by the community to raise supplemental funds for special library projects. After Katrina’s flood passed, it was the Friends who sorted through the flood of donated books.

“We’ve processed five to five-and-a-half million books since Katrina,” O’Brien says. Unfortunately, as any book drive veteran knows, many book donors motivated by Katrina used it as an opportunity to clean out titles they, and most other people, don’t want. Some 50% of the donated books were unusable because of their physical condition, and O’Brien estimates that the Friends received 3,000 sets of encyclopedias, some in mint condition but all out-of-date.

O’Brien notes that the postage used to send most of the donated books would have been more useful. “If it cost \$25 to ship a set of encyclopedias in three boxes and we can’t use them, I would much rather have

had the money it cost to mail it.” He estimates that the postage spent to send all the donated books the Friends have received since Katrina totals at least \$1 million.

The post-Katrina book drive hasn’t been completely devoid of success. With a core group of 20 to 25 volunteers over the past year-and-a-half, O’Brien has sifted the useful nuggets out of the slurry of donations and supplied the Friends’ book sale with a constant supply of salable titles. And with so many books, an occasional gem was inevitable. A French Quarter antiquarian book dealer was consulted periodically and a fair number of rare books given by unwitting donors—a first-edition Hemingway, a 1930s-era catalog of the works of Edgar Degas, for example—went to auction.

On a rainy afternoon in late July, O’Brien and a crew of three assistants loaded up the remaining dregs from 18 months of book donations. One of the system’s gutted branches, now empty but unfortunately without power or air conditioning, has been used to receive and process the donations. The four of them spent six hours loading a 53-foot truck trailer with what was left over and couldn’t be used, some 4,000 pounds of books. A commercial recycler was buying the remainder of the donations for eight cents a pound. Despite it all, the post-Katrina book drive has been a success. Donated books that actually were sold at the book sale for a dime to a dollar apiece raised \$125,000 in 2006, over four times what the Friends’ book sales would make in a typical, pre-Katrina year.

### Call it progress

The June 2007 year-to-date circulation transaction figure for the NOPL system is 137,315, an 87% increase over the June 2006 YTD figure of 73,121. But with two-thirds of the pre-Katrina population in the city,



Recently reopened, NOPL's Martin Luther King branch shines as a beacon of hope in a slow recovery.

roughly half as many branches open or operating in temporary facilities, and 60% of its collection intact, that figure is about 45% as many transactions as during the same period in 2005.

During the last week of July, two events occurred that heralded progress in NOPL's recovery. On July 26, the Mid-City branch, the first of several planned temporary facilities, held its dedication ceremony. With money from the Gates Foundation, the city is leasing a former video rental store (the branch manager's office is in what used to be the adult video section) for three years to serve as an interim location while long-range plans for all the branches are finalized. Besides the Smith bookmobile, this is the only library branch operating in a huge swath of the city that suffered some of the worst flooding. It has 3,500 square feet of space and only a minimal collection so far, but it provides internet access using laptops also donated by the Gates Foundation.

The second event in the last week of July was the announcement that as of September 1 Donna Schremser,

formerly executive director of the Huntsville–Madison County library system in Alabama, will be New Orleans city librarian. Asked what the immediate challenges are, she said that facilities are a concern but that the library “also has a big recruitment challenge.” Schremser continued, “I hope that some of the younger professional librarians around the country will take a look at coming to work in New Orleans.”

One of Schremser's accomplishments at Huntsville–Madison County has been the creation of an endowment that now totals \$1.4 million in invested funds, the proceeds from which are used for collection development. Given the financial challenges facing New Orleans, Schremser said, “My hope is that the library system will continue to build on all the good fundraising that's going on right now.” The Huntsville Library Foundation also brings in a noted author for a fundraising dinner each year. In 2006, some 1,100 people attended the dinner and heard Garrison Keillor speak; the foundation made a profit of \$103,000. Schremser feels that with so many literary traditions and connections in New Orleans, such an event would be a perfect fit for her new home city.

Asked whether she agreed that NOPL can become a model modern urban library system, Schremser said, “I do. I think it's a possibility, I think the potential is definitely there.” She said the libraries, like the city itself, are at a turning point. “Eventually New Orleans will be up there with cities like Memphis and Atlanta and other major urban library systems across the United States.” The citizens of New Orleans hope she is right, and many are ready to actively help her and our public libraries build back better. —*Brian Huddleston, senior reference librarian, Loyola University New Orleans College of Law.*