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## Marred by tornado and fire, African American museum hopes to reopen with community support

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Bowling Green's African American Museum sits with boarded windows suffered wind and tree damage from the tornadoes on Dec. 11 and an elec on Dec. 22. Along with evaluating the extent of the damage, the museum

conservator to assess the collection of saved artifacts and recommend a Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Priceless photographs, historical documents and objects commemorating southcentral Kentucky's African American heritage are among casualties of December's tornadoes.

African American Museum board Chairman John Hardin said work to restore and rebuild is proceeding "slowly but surely" after a tornado and resultant electrical fire heavily damaged the museum.

"It's going to be a challenge," said Hardin, a professor emeritus at Western Kentucky University.

In the wake of a tornado that swept through the area Dec. 11, Bowling Green's African American Museum emerged with some wind and tree damage, but the worst was yet to come, according to a news release.

Later, on Dec. 22, an electrical fire sparked as a result of wiring torn loose by the storm. Firefighters responded to the scene quickly and recovered many of the museum items.

In the coming days, a recovery team sprang into action to execute a response.

Along with Hardin, it included WKU Department of Environmental Health and Safety's David Oliver and his team, Kentucky Museum Director Brent Björkman and his team, Mary Lynn Claycomb, Tiffany Isselhardt and Sandy Staebell, along with WKU Department of Folk Studies' Ann Ferrell and Landyn Hatch and WKU Library Public and Technical Service's Joe Shankweiler.

The team set up drying tables indoors and boxed up other items that could be sent to a lab at the Kentucky Museum. Leah Craig, the National Corvette Museum's registrar, volunteered her expertise and offered the use of the museum walk-in freezer for storing damaged artifacts and documents critically in need of care.

As of last week, most recovered items are fully dried and are being temporarily housed at the Kentucky Museum.

The team is working with WKU's Facilities Department as well as insurance liaisons and conservation specialists to determine the next steps.

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All told, Hardin said about 30 boxes of materials have been placed in storage after drying out and another four boxes were frozen.

“I’m appreciative of everybody’s help,” Hardin said.

Still, the volunteers have their work cut out for them.

“We’re trying to see what we have left,” he said.

Perhaps the most badly damaged room was the one showcasing military history, including artifacts from local African Americans who served in the armed services.

That room, Hardin said, displayed a picture of Roland Bland, an African American World War I veteran who had a local park named after him. There were also flags from various campaigns and a number of military uniforms that Hardin said were able to be saved.

Along with evaluating the extent of the damage, the museum is raising money in hopes of hiring a Kentucky-based conservator to assess the collection and recommend a treatment plan for the damaged objects. The museum also wants to purchase a new computer to inventory the collection and secure a new space for the museum. Once those goals are complete, the museum wants to establish a permanent endowment to help resume operations and eventually hire a full-time curator.

The goal is ultimately to recover, document, preserve and present African American history in the Bowling Green area, Hardin said, describing the museum's mission. When it was open, it did not charge visitors admission, instead, it asked for voluntary donations.

"It was as a community museum," Hardin said.

– A GoFundMe account is raising money for the museum here: [gofundme.com/f/tornado-relief-aframermuseum?utm\\_campaign=p\\_cp+share-sheet&utm\\_medium=copy\\_link\\_all&utm\\_source=customer](https://gofundme.com/f/tornado-relief-aframermuseum?utm_campaign=p_cp+share-sheet&utm_medium=copy_link_all&utm_source=customer).

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