

Selected portions of interview with John Ketchum, FEMA's Preservation Officer, in Washington D.C. Dorothy Fue Wong conducted the interview on April 26, 2012. (To be updated.)

Summary: John Ketchum and FEMA's involvement with cultural and historic resources from 1996 to 2012. The need for the historic preservation community to be involved with local responders and state emergency agency. The importance of mitigation planning for historic preservation community (planning before a disaster to reduce damages). FEMA's involvement with National Historic Landmarks. The United States' approach to protection of cultural and historic resources during disasters in comparison to other nations.

Wong: What is your background in disaster planning and recovery?

Joh Ketchum: I've been with FEMA since 1996. I've served the agency's Preservation Officer for over a decade, was appointed to the position in late 2001. In my time with FEMA I have certainly seen an enormous amount of change as well as a significant contribution to our Federal historic preservation compliance responsibilities. When I began with FEMA in 1996 we were in the midst of responding still at that time to the Northridge earthquake in 1994 and a number of historic preservation issues associated with that earthquake in southern California.

Later in the late 1990s we faced the response and recovery from the floods along the east coast from Hurricane Floyd, particularly in North Carolina. Then, of course, we had the events of September 11, 2001, and the damage to the Pentagon as well as what occurred as a result of the collapse of the World Trade Center buildings in New York City.

Later, in the last decade we had a number of flooding incidents that caused damage to historic properties around the country. Then, of course, in 2005 we had Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast in both Mississippi, Louisiana as well as Texas followed by Hurricane Rita roughly a month later in September 2005 that caused additional damage to the western portion of Louisiana.

I would say briefly that it was certainly Hurricane Katrina that put historic preservation issues on the map for FEMA, and I had the privilege of working for FEMA in Louisiana for a six-month period immediately after Hurricane Katrina. I led our historic preservation team there and set in place a long-term presence to deal with the historic preservation issues. A FEMA office in New Orleans that con-

tinues to this day to do some remarkable work in collaboration with the State Emergency Management Office and the state historic preservation officer in Louisiana as well as the city of New Orleans and other localities.

Obviously, none of us expected Hurricane Katrina. We were not prepared for Hurricane Katrina, and I say that at the Federal and State and local levels. But from that disaster I think a number of important lessons were learned regarding the need to more adequately prepare ourselves for the type of event that occurred, and include historic and cultural resources in that planning effort. I think we are seeing some successful collaborative efforts in Louisiana as well as in Mississippi as a result of the terrible damage and destruction from that hurricane. There's much more to be done, and our office here in Washington is certainly lending every effort it can to support those efforts.

Wong: What is the most important step a privately-owned National Historic Landmark should take in preparation for a possible disaster?

John Ketchum: All disaster planning as well as all preservation is local. And there really needs to be a local impetus and enthusiasm for these efforts. FEMA can certainly help create that environment, but there has to be initiative taken at the local level. So I think for the discussion we're going to have today, that would be perhaps the theme I would want to emphasize most—how to ensure that there is that galvanization at the local level so that these efforts move forward in a collaborative fashion with the emergency management community, both local and state.

Obviously we are in an environment where resources are limited and there is competition for those resources in many particular ways. Thus, it is important to be strategic about how you're going to devote your time and effort in order to ensure that you are doing it in a way that recognizes the expertise and the experience of your counterparts in emergency management, but also demonstrates a self-sufficiency.

But I think it's important that there be a recognition on the part of the local community decision makers, and I include emergency managers and first responders in that community, that these particular historic elements of the community however discrete or however expansive, will need particular expertise and assistance in time of disaster. There are economic consequences if in fact those National Historic Landmarks and other historic sites are left to their own devices without having a close relationship with the emergency management community

An example is Hurricane Katrina where historic sites, including National Historic Landmarks in New Orleans and elsewhere, were essentially for very understandable reasons abandoned by their staff. The staff had to evacuate for long periods of time. There were basic access issues that occurred where sites and facilities sat unattended for several weeks or even in some rare case a period of months.

And so in a situation like that when the staff of an institution for a historic site may not necessarily be in a position to return quickly, these are the questions that need to be addressed—What would be the plan of action for city officials if they were the first to arrive on scene? What would be perhaps the three things that you would want to make sure happen or didn't happen at that site or facility to ensure that basic buildings and basic protection of character defining features be protected. Those are the source of conversation that need to occur not in the aftermath of an event but long before in what would be described as sort of that peace-time environment.

So I would emphasize the relationship building that will provide the ability for a historic site to put together a disaster plan and practice it with as many participants as possible. It's certainly will create an opportunity to get to know people and spending a day doing what we would call a tabletop exercise where you take the particular disaster event as your scenario and walk it through it together.

Wong: Who are the members of the local emergency management community? Are they the local firemen and policemen?

John Ketchum: Those would be your first responder community, and are an intrinsic ingredient in this conversation. But in addition to them, typically even if it's a shared responsibility, the locality should have an emergency management point of contact. It may be within their police departments, but it also could be a separate department.

Wong: Would the local emergency personnel have time for this?

John Ketchum: You put your finger on an issue that we all recognize— emergency managers are pulled in many, many different directions. So what I think, from a tactical perspective, it's important to size up your emergency management audience and determine how best to present your case to them. I would say, generally speaking, the more that you can demonstrate that you don't necessarily want to occupy their time over an extended period, but that you're looking for them to help

you develop preservation preparedness strategies. I think they will be impressed that you're looking to collaborate with them.

It is important to demonstrate to the emergency management community that you're serious about this, that you're not looking for someone to essentially bail you out, but you want to do this in the right way, you want to be methodical. You want to be thoughtful about it. And again, look at this as an opportunity to help enhance their awareness of the historic resources and the unique building types that you may be working with. And they may not have thought about those issues before.

And keep in mind that I think for many emergency managers, historic preservation can be somewhat of an intimidating subject and topic. And so they will appreciate the more that you de-mystify your responsibilities and that of your community in preserving your historic resources. At the same time it's an opportunity for them to them to de-mystify what they do on a daily basis.

It would help if a historic site has an outline of a disaster plan to bring to the discussion to demonstrate the intent of their seriousness and purposefulness. In summary, the more that the historic preservation community can demonstrate that they are organized as a force, the more impressive and the more willing the emergency management community will be to work with them.

Wong: Could the eight Stein Landmark Garden cities (located in New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, and California) come together with our common concerns and then receive guidance from you and FEMA?

John Ketchum: It's really at that local and state level that I think there needs to be an alliance. I don't serve in an official reviewer capacity for disaster plans. That's not a role that I think FEMA necessarily is well equipped for. We do have ten regional offices around the country. I have counterparts in each of those offices. Certainly informally there would be a willingness to work with those who have an interest in this particular effort. But I would encourage the alliance to be built up at the state level.

I say that particularly because there is a state mitigation plan that each state has to have in order to gain substantial amount of funding from the federal government. What to me would be key is that each state explicitly acknowledges as part of that mitigation plan the need to consider historic and cultural resources. And to date,

and I will be happy to double check on this, but to date I don't believe there is a state out there that has done that.

Wong: They haven't done that even though FEMA has published a manual to deal with this situation? (The manual is Integrating Historic Property and Cultural Resource Considerations Into Hazard Mitigation Planning (FEMA 386-6/May 2005.)

John Ketchum: Yes, they have not called out what is espoused in this FEMA's manual in their state plan.

Wong: Doesn't that make your job very difficult?

John Ketchum: It does make it difficult, absolutely. And so you have an ever present tension there that is unfortunately exacerbated by a lack of awareness or a lack of commitment at the state level. I'm not to suggest that it reflects a state's disinterest in mitigation planning, but it's a missing piece.

So for us at the Federal level we, I think, are frustrated at times because it seems as if we're always in a reactive environment. And as I think you well know, the emergency management continuum is not just a responsive recovery. It's preparedness and it's mitigation. And without that preparedness and mitigation piece, you find yourself in just an endless cycle of repeating the same things over and over again when it comes time to response and recovery.

Thus, it is important for each community to develop a disaster plan that put together a holistic hazard mitigation plan that incorporates historic and cultural resources into its larger aims and goals.

Wong: How important is the state emergency management agency to each of the Stein Landmark Garden cities?

John Ketchum: I would really emphasize that the state emergency management agency is key, and within their state emergency agency there is a state hazard mitigation officer – that's HFMO and sometimes is referred a SHIMO. So the HFMO would really be the encyclopedia of sorts for those Federal mitigation assistance programs that would be able to provide financial resources to help support and encourage efforts such as these. And keep in mind that any of these mitigation programs at the Federal level will have consistent criteria for eligibility across the country. So the question becomes your constituency – how would they be able to

apply for a mitigation planning grant. And that would be a question best put to the state hazard mitigation officer in each state.

Wong: Would a Stein Landmark community go directly to the state hazard mitigation officer to obtain funding for its mitigation projects?

John Ketchum: I think it's going to come down to every state has mitigation priorities that they set for typically, some on an annual basis others on a longer term basis. So it's understanding what those mitigation priorities of the state are. In having that conversation I think you would be well served in determining if there is a local emergency manager within your locality, your political jurisdiction that can be part of that conversation too.

Essentially, those mitigation priorities at the state level, they're going to feed up from the various localities within the state. And then the state plan will feed up to FEMA. So it's developing an appreciation of who those players are at the local level for hazard mitigation planning and then at the state level. So there's a building process that needs to take place. But, yes, you were right. Ultimately, it really is your state hazard mitigation officer that I think is most crucial, and they would be in the best position to tell you what financial assistance is available to help a local community, or a portion of a local community, develop their hazard mitigation plans.

Wong: Are there organized efforts to involve both communities and local/state emergency management in disaster planning?

John Ketchum: Yes. I would just say that there are some efforts that are well underway at the national level. One involving an effort entitled Alliance for Response. It brings together the emergency management and first responder community in a particular urban area, with their counterparts in the historic and cultural communities. Usually it's at a cultural institution where the forum is held and they just spend a day getting to know one another talking about what they actually do in their various responsibilities.

From this situation, a networking process begins. We've seen in a number of cities across the country that this process has blossomed into a very, very strong and vibrant alliance where on a very regular basis the participants are testing their disaster plans for a particular cultural institution. So there's an opportunity for the cultural community to get to know one another better as well. I think there are

some wonderful success stories in the library community, in the archival community that the historic preservation community can learn from.

It really has reflected well on both the emergency management and the cultural communities in how they can learn one another's language, and learn one another's unique features and understand how in time of disaster when everyone is challenged by competing demands. The participants can take advantage of their respective counterparts and in the end be able to respond more effectively to meet the needs of historic properties and cultural resources as well as be better prepared the next time something actually happens.

We often times are so consumed by the disaster itself that we don't take time to do that postmortem to really reflect on how well we did in responding. How well did we do in recovering? What are the lessons learned that need to influence how we approach this the next time?

Wong: What is the role of GIS in disaster planning in recovery?

John Ketchum: GIS is a terrific tool. We all recognize that. The challenge is how the community is set up in such a way that they have the opportunity to develop that digital data and to adequately maintain it. So I think that's just a basic question that needs to be asked. Obviously, as we're talking about including historic and cultural considerations within hazard mitigation, so too should we include these considerations in any geospatial documentation efforts. That's not necessarily been the case oftentimes. That's a missed area.

There are certain states that I think are more progressive than others. Certainly Deidre McCarthy and her office (the Cultural Research GIS office at the National Park Service) are there to help encourage these efforts for the cultural community. But, as she probably explained to you they don't have grant assistance that they can provide directly to a local community. That's unfortunately not something that they have the ability to do.

The level of familiarity and experience with GIS is going to fluctuate on a state-by-state basis. There are some states, for example California being one, that I would describe as much more advanced and sophisticated regarding the use of GIS. Certainly, I think your state emergency management agency is where you want to focus your efforts. But keep in mind that you just need to be prepared that they may not necessarily be equipped to receive that information and adequately maintain it because of their own limitations. So I think it's also important to develop relation-

ships with the state historic preservation officer, the SHPO. My experience is that more and more state historic preservation offices are enhancing their GIS capabilities.

The State of Maryland that we mentioned earlier would be one such example. So the SHPO is the official repository and representative for preservation issues in the state. I think it's important to include them in this conversation. Regrettably, oftentimes the state historic preservation officer and their state emergency management counterparts don't have much of a relationship. So this actually might be an opportunity as in the work of your group to actually bring those state agencies together for a just getting to know you conversation before actually another disaster occurs.

Wong: I have the impression that after a disaster, FEMA would quickly come on site to support National Historic Landmarks because of these sites' significance. Is that correct?

John Ketchum: I can't say it necessarily works that way. Keep in mind that the National Historic Preservation Act was enacted in 1966. Section 106 is that Act. It sets out procedural framework for review of historic properties. So typically for FEMA, that review occurs in the aftermath of a disaster. Not always. Section 110 of the Act speaks to the special significance of National Historic Landmarks. What Section 110 stipulates is that a Federal agency should do everything it can when involved with a National Historic Landmark to avoid any adverse effects. So we take that responsibility extremely seriously.

But I would not want to tell you that we have the people power and the instantaneous ability to go out and assist the owners of a National Historic Landmark. That I think would be overly optimistic. One of the reasons is how disasters get declared. There can be a period of days, weeks, and months before the governor of a particular state petitions the Federal government for disaster assistance. So in the meantime you would have an National Historic Landmark that has suffered great damage and the Federal role has not yet been determined. So that's a complication, and so again I think it's important to recognize and to develop that statewide and those local relationships because the Federal relationship may not coalesce for quite a number of days.

Wong: I know that National landmarks do have first priority on the funding, but it may take years depending on the funding from Congress.

John Ketchum: It could, and you've put your finger on something that I think is important to mention and that is FEMA does not have any discretionary funding set aside for historic properties in time of disaster. That's not how our assistance programs operate. We are set up in such a way that if a facility is eligible for FEMA assistance and they petition for FEMA assistance, then we determine the amount of FEMA assistance based on the degree of damage as well as what the applicant proposes to do to repair that damage or perhaps they may actually in some cases, believe it or not, not want to repair a damaged facility, but abandon it and build a new facility in its place or perhaps export the assistance that they would be eligible for to another use.

As so you have some very interesting decisions that are made at the local level in terms of responding and recovering from disasters. Those are decisions that really FEMA typically does not dictate outcomes. It is the local decision makers as well as their state counterparts that are really driving that process. And so we tend to really take a back seat to local government and state government in that process. And that would include the future state of historic properties, including even National Historic Landmarks.

But what you put your finger on I think is a gap, and that is at the Federal level, how to ensure that there is dedicated financial assistance, an incentive that is provided to damaged historic properties in an aftermath of a disaster. So what you see is sort of an ad hoc situation developing. After Hurricane Katrina, after the Northridge earthquake, after the mid-west floods in 1993, Congress did step up but there's not a long-term strategy.

So as in Japan or in the Netherlands in Europe, there's much more of a national strategy for recognizing the needs of historic properties in the aftermath of a disaster. We have not reached that point yet here unfortunately. I would perhaps think that after Katrina that maybe that conversation would take place. I think there, maybe the conversation got started, but as with many things in this country where our attention span is extremely limited, we sort of moved on to the next thing.

Wong: Will FEMA provide specifications for preparation of major documents that would be used in reconstructing historic buildings and landscapes, such as the historic structure report and a cultural landscape report? These are the major documents used in preservation and are important because they contain the inventory and professional treatments of the historic fabric.

John Ketchum: We would not.. Actually, these are specifications that we would be very differential to either any requirements that exist at the local level or the state level. There perhaps could be specifications that the State Historic Preservation Officer has, and it would be advisable to probably to talk to an SHPO about, and get their feedback on this question. But we would not set a bar in regards to how those particular documents or reports would be prepared.

Wong: There is a need for the Stein Landmark Garden cities (located in six states) on how to create these preservation reports so that they as a group would gain full benefit in disaster planning and also meeting the funding requirements for recovery. These eight historic planned communities have common characteristics, but different types of environmental hazards. Also, I think that FEMA has produced an outstanding manual on mitigation planning that can be used by the various Stein Landmark Garden cities in their disaster/preservation planning.

John Ketchum: I would just say, with all due respect, I think the conceptualization – yes, it is there and it's quite explicit, but that in some ways is the easy part. Breaking it down into sort of digestible pieces and figuring out exactly how you're going to focus – that to me is where the challenge lies.

Start small in increments and look for individuals out there in the emergency management community who you really can work closely with. We're going to support these efforts over a sustained period of time because you do need some time and attention there from the emergency management community.

It would be fascinating to see if there are some templates or prototypes that could be created that other communities could learn from.