

## **Philadelphia Alliance for Response – May 20, 2010**

Thirty cultural heritage professionals from Philadelphia and Southeastern Pennsylvania attended the May 20 Alliance for Response meeting at the First Troop Philadelphia City Cavalry (FTPCC) Armory. The site, a landmark in Philadelphia since 1900, suffered severe fire damage over the Martin Luther King holiday weekend in January, 2010. Although it is once again open for meetings and other activities, the Armory still bears the smoke stains and odor from the fire and serves as a stark reminder of what can happen when fire strikes library, archives, and museum collections.

The FTPCC Armory actually contains all of the collection types mentioned above, with important ledgers and business records from the work of the Armory, a library of historical books, and artwork and textiles related to the history of the institution. No part of the collection was spared by the fire, which started in a trash can and quickly spread to a number of floors of the multi-story building.

Dennis Boylan, a former Troop Captain, served as host of the meeting and presented information about both the fire itself, and the history of the Troop, which has been in existence since 1774 and is the oldest Cavalry unit in continuous service in the United States Army. Boylan recalled some positive and lucky scenarios in the immediate response to the fire. Both he and the Armory's Facilities Manager were able to reach the building soon after the fire started. While the locked doors of the Armory might have slowed Fire Department access or been a cause for windows to be broken out, Facilities representatives reported to the scene quickly enough that they were able to unlock the doors for Fire Department entry. Quick access prevented greater loss.

The Armory did not have a formal disaster plan, but were quickly aided in assessment of damage by representatives of the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts (CCAHA), located near the Amory, and by staff of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The event also highlighted the importance of a plan for the cultural community in responding effectively to a disaster among its members. In this case, after being alerted to the situation, Laura Blanchard of the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries (an Alliance member) contacted Boylan to determine their needs and then put out a call to determine what supplies and volunteers could be mustered. Although the assistance turned out not to be necessary, the community would have been able to make a significant amount of supplies and expertise, but a more streamlined procedure would have eliminated some obstacles.

Boylan also strongly suggested that institutions be very familiar with their insurance policies, carriers, and representatives, so that they have both someone who "speaks insurance" to advocate on their behalf and a baseline idea of collection value before a disaster strikes. Boylan and other members of the Armory are planning to write up an "after-action report" of the disaster in the future, and invited the Philadelphia Alliance for Response members to return for a full tour of the restored facility in 2011 once recovery and renovation are complete.

Because the response by Alliance members to this disaster was informal, rather than a formalized procedure, some institutions asked that the AFR group discuss how we would react to another such situation if it was to happen in the future. As part of this discussion, titled "Anatomy of a Disaster," Philadelphia institutions made it clear that they want a "central entity" to contact in the case of a disaster. Many thought that CCAHA, which

already has a 24-hour disaster line, would be the best group to fit this role. Groups talked about further preparation by using tools such as the Council of State Archivists (COA) Pocket Response Plan (PRP), text alerts from the Philadelphia Office of Emergency Management, walk-throughs with Fire Department representatives, and the Heritage Preservation Field Guide to Emergency Response to build better institutional plans.

*Summary provided by Tom Clareson.*