

[The New York Times Insider](#)

# Flooding Threatens The Times's Picture Archive

By [DAVID W. DUNLAP](#) OCT. 12, 2015



*Jeff Roth, the morgue manager, stretched drop cloths to protect the files after a flood on Saturday. Terrell Ramos, the weekend clerical supervisor, helped. Credit Niko Koppel/The New York Times*

A broken pipe on Saturday morning sent water cascading into [the morgue](#) — the storage area where The Times keeps its [immense collection of historical photos](#), along with newspaper clippings, microfilm records, books and other archival material — causing minor damage and raising significant alarm.

And it raised the question of how in the digital age — and in the prohibitive Midtown Manhattan real estate market — can some of the company's most precious physical assets and intellectual property be safely and reasonably stored?

Jeff Roth, the morgue manager, said it appeared that about 90 percent of the affected photos would be salvageable, but it is too early to say with any certainty how many were lost.

Though he stood undaunted among rubber drums and wastebaskets catching the residual water dripping from the ceiling, Mr. Roth made it clear that this was the stuff of nightmares.

“It’s always been a worry,” he said.

That’s because The Times’s morgue occupies the sub-subbasement of the former New York Herald Tribune building on 41st Street, which abuts The Times’ headquarters at 620 Eighth Avenue. (Fittingly, the Herald-Tribune building now houses City University of New York’s [Graduate School of Journalism](#).)



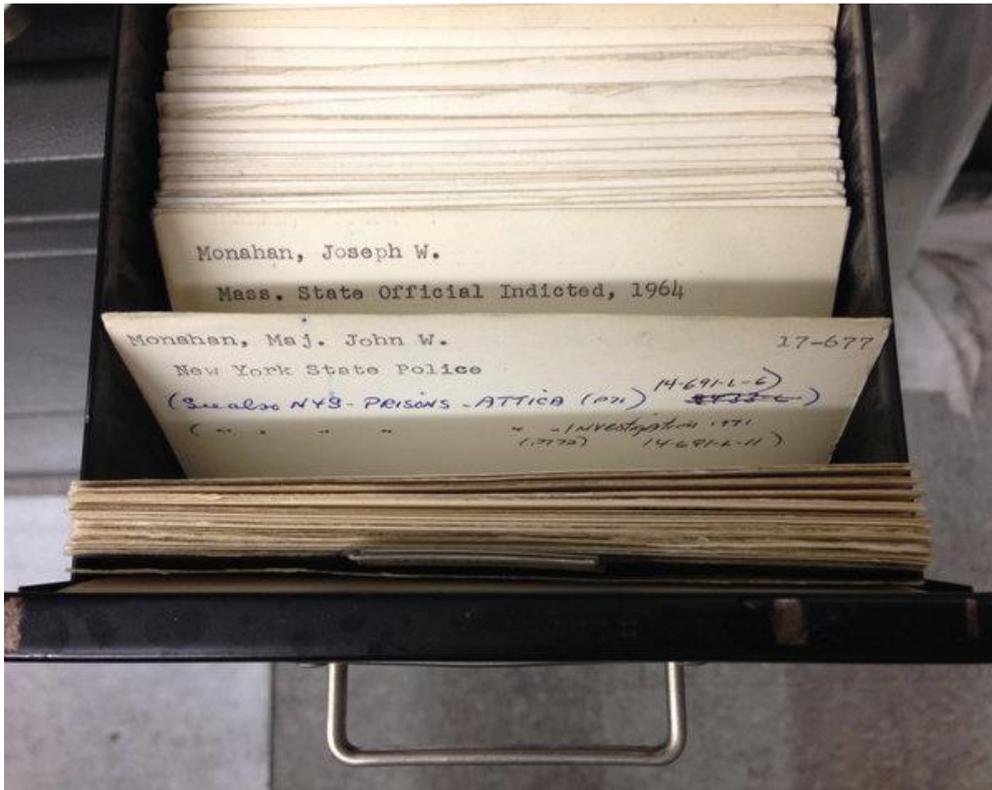
*Week in Review photos protected the card catalog. Credit Benjamin Havrilak/The New York Times*

At that deep level, where you can clearly hear the No. 7 subway train rumbling on its way to the new Hudson Yards-34th Street station, there is abundant evidence of past water damage. Saturday’s flood was believed to have originated in pipes under the street or sidewalk.

The Times’ picture archive is celebrated enough to have its own Tumblr page, the [Lively Morgue](#). For those who depend on the files for illustrations and historical research, it’s almost too frightening to imagine what would have happened had the flooding gone undiscovered and been allowed to flow unchecked for an entire weekend. At the very least, the card catalog to the picture collection would have been inundated by the deluge.

But then news came that [Lord Geoffrey Howe had died](#), prompting Niko Koppel, a picture editor, to ask Benjamin Havrilak, a news assistant, to go next door pull the photo files on Mr. Howe.

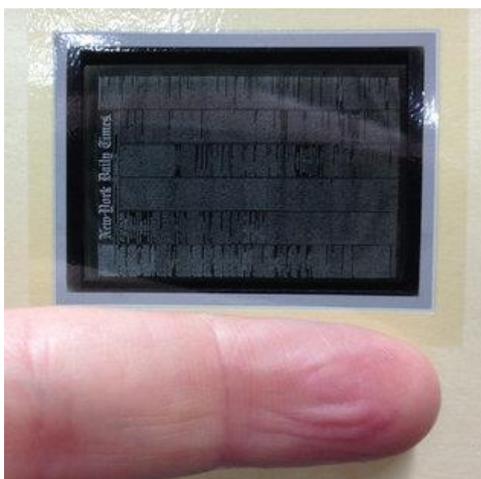
“I walked in, and there was a river of water,” Mr. Havrilak said. He ran over to the rear wall of the morgue, where most of the card catalog sits, and saw what he said looked like a waterfall.



*Without the index number 17-677, it would be impossible to track down the portrait file of Maj. John W. Monahan of the New York State Police. Credit David W. Dunlap/The New York Times*

After grabbing the needed files — news always comes first — Mr. Havrilak returned and alerted Mr. Koppel. From there, the distress signal went up the chain of command, through John Garafalo, a security guard, to Patrick Whelan, the director of facilities.

The flood damaged or came harrowingly close to boxes full of high-resolution microfilms of every New York Times front page and also to a collection of photos of plays, movies, television programs artworks used by the culture desk.



*Microfilms of every front page sat under the cascade, evidently undamaged. Credit David W. Dunlap/The New York Times*

What makes the card catalog irreplaceable is that it has never been digitized. Hundreds of thousands of people and subjects are keyed by index numbers to the photo files, which contain an estimated six million prints and contact sheets.

“Those getting even a little wet would have left them smudged, smeared and stuck together,” Mr. Koppel said. “They are our blueprints to the morgue. Without them, the material is lost.”

For want of space, Mr. Roth had employed the card catalog drawers as a pedestal on which to store boxes of photos used by the Week in Review in the 1990s. They seem to have absorbed much of the water before it could reach the cards.

Like so much else in the morgue, this demonstrates that if you keep something around long enough, it will always prove useful again.



*Submitted by Alison Edwards - Cardinia Shire Council*