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Time Is Ticking: The Threat of Climate Disasters to Documentary Heritage in Barbados

Stacia Martindale, Akini Glasgow
University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, Barbados

Correspondence to Stacia Martindale, email: stacialmartindale@gmail.com

Abstract

Barbados is a small English-speaking island nation located to the east of the Caribbean. Despite its size, it is home to the largest repository of British documentary colonial records outside of Britain. This wealth of documentary heritage includes colonial office reports, wills and deeds, slave registers, and plantation ledgers. These records are key to understanding the island's cultural identity and telling the story of the island's heritage. They are also central to historical accountability by providing irrefutable evidence of British exploitation during the period of colonisation. These records are primarily housed at the Barbados Archives, but they can also be found at local churches, the Barbados Museum and Historical Society, and even homes.

Today, these reflections of the documentary heritage of Barbados are unfortunately under serious threat from climate disasters. With more persistent hurricanes and flash floods, these records are constantly at risk of damage or complete destruction. This paper adopts a case study methodology to examine the 18 June 2024 fire at the Barbados Archives, which resulted in the destruction of invaluable historical records. The case provides a sobering lens through which to explore the fragility of national heritage collections and the gaps in emergency response mechanisms. Despite evident inadequacies, there is hope. This paper argues that investment in digitisation projects, training of key personnel in record management, and the incorporation of better infrastructure can turn the tide in the fight to protect these records.

Keywords

Environmental disaster, Archives, Digitisation, Barbados

Introduction

Disaster is painful, enduring, and merciless. In the blink of an eye, generations of thoughts and voices are lost. Disaster is defined by human, material, financial, or environmental loss, induced by an interruption in societal order due to a hazardous event (UNDRR, 2015). The Caribbean, in particular, is extremely vulnerable to both climate and environmental disasters, such as hurricanes, landslides, floods, and fires. The weight of disaster has been increasingly felt across the region in light of the global climate crisis.

"My home just vanished into thin air. Nothing, nothing left to remember from it. Everything is gone" (OIM Latinoamérica y el Caribe, 2017).

These were the heart-wrenching words offered by a young mother Tusca Paul in the eastern Caribbean island of Dominica after Category 5 Hurricane Maria ripped through her home on 17 September 2017 (OIM Latinoamérica y el Caribe, 2017; Xinhua, 2017). Hurricane Maria became one of the intense disasters to devastate the region in the last decade, with others such as Irma

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(2017), Elsa (2021), and Beryl (2024) joining the list. While this Dominican mother spoke about her physical home and business, her words point to a bigger picture: disasters such as these can strip away not only human lives and property but also the very remnants by which people can remember the past.

In the aftermath of each of these events, reports highlight the decimation of homes, businesses, and public buildings. Cultural heritage spaces and institutions, and the archival records they house are considered secondary when counting losses. Yet these are the very objects and materials that represent the collective memory of our societies, and their sudden loss due to climate disasters has implications for cultural erasure. In light of this, there is the need to bring attention to the devastation caused by inevitable disasters to our archives.

Specifically, this paper explores the impact of disasters on heritage documents in Barbados, emphasising the need for preservation strategies in the face of increasing environmental risks. Documentary heritage comprises single documents or groups of documents of significant and enduring value to a community, a culture, a country, or to humanity generally, and whose deterioration or loss would be a harmful impoverishment for mankind (UNESCO, 2025, p. 1). As a result, this paper first delves into the importance of documentary heritage in preserving and reviving cultural elements, as well as providing a basis for legal work and reparatory justice. In addition to building on prior academic literature, this paper incorporates individual cultural snapshots found in archival records from Barbados to provide context for their value. To underscore the vulnerability of these documents to disasters, this study analyses the 18 June fire at the Barbados Archives, examining its impact and institutional response through comparative analysis with similar cases in Brazil and South Africa. Finally, the viability of digitisation in preserving these records, as well as the need for appropriate training of response personnel, is examined.

Why Is Documentary Heritage Important?

The invaluable nature of these records is steeped in cultural and legal purposes as well as in reparatory justice. Culture is typically defined as the way of life of a people, which can be classed as either material (tangible) or non-material (intangible). Culture is also known to be dynamic, ever-changing, and evolving. Oral histories are critical in ensuring that culture is passed on or remembered. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) asserts that safeguarding cultural heritage and making it accessible to communities is essential for fostering resilience for present and future generations (IFLA, 2019, p. 6).

Documentary heritage (e.g., letters, newspapers, and even wills and inventories) makes up our cultural heritage and is instrumental in providing concrete evidence of cultural practices that have survived and those that have been lost along the way. Language and names are some of the most prominent examples. An advertisement in the 25 January 1825 issue of the Barbadian newspaper noted the following:

"FOR SALE, 17 Barbadian Negroes & a House in Maiden-lane, of the Estate of the late Mrs.

Elizabeth Henery" (Dummett, 1825).

This simple statement brings to light the culture of the colonial slave society of Barbados, in which black individuals were referred to in official documents as "negroes" but, even more importantly, were identified as property. Today, this term is deemed derogatory and inappropriate not just for publication but in everyday language and conversation.

Historical issues of the local newspaper, the *Barbados Advocate*, also reflect cultural shifts in highlighting the everyday Barbadian of the past. For instance, a feature was published in September 1950 about a mauby man and woman in the capital of Bridgetown. These vendors sold the popular local beverage to the thirsty passers-by on the warm day in question (Fight The Heat With Mauby, 1950, p. 5). Why is this feature valuable? Today, mauby is still a staple and local delicacy, but unlike the 1950s, mauby men and women are no more. Rather, it is customary to purchase mauby syrup by the bottle from the supermarket and make the drink at home. While showcasing the connections between present-day Barbadians and those of the past, it also hints at the undermining of local vendors by larger commercial establishments (mostly foreign-owned). These archival documents are therefore integral in remembering the legacy of these vendors and their historical place in our culture, which would be lost to present and future generations without such features.

In both cases, these records reflected their importance in understanding the cultural change of our societies. These stories, whether painful or light-spirited, help us, as Barbadians, to understand where our society has evolved from and how it shapes our cultural identity.

Documentary heritage is also paramount for the execution of scholarly work on Barbados (and, by extension, the Caribbean). The tendency to categorise the Caribbean alongside Latin America in academic research neglects the critical distinctions between these regions, each possessing unique historical and cultural experiences that deserve discrete study. Moreover, it is essential to build on and expand research focused on individual states within the region in order to ensure more accurate and representative scholarship. As previously mentioned, the Barbados Archives houses many primary source documents covering a range of topics and issues. These include the Diocesan records, many of which are handwritten on well-weathered paper, outlining details related to the most influential religious institution of the colonial period: the Anglican Church. A proposed report from 1841 for the Saint Mary's Asylum for the relief of sick and destitute individuals indicates that this charitable institution was established in Bridgetown to serve meals and provide housing for such individuals (*Proposed report St. Mary's Asylum*, 1841). These records provide critical evidence not only for research into the church but also for the evolution of social care in Barbados. Certainly, academics across all fields (including, but not limited to, heritage, education, law, medicine, engineering, technology, and science) can benefit from the wide repository (UNESCO, 2016, p. 3).

The value of these records extends to family research and legal matters. Familial documents such as wills, land records, and personal letters can provide much-needed closure. These contain information needed to settle disputes over property, which is one of the primary motives

for those seeking assistance with family history research. On the other hand, these documents open individuals to a whole new world, helping them connect with their ancestors by tracing their family line and affording Barbadians the opportunity to feel a true sense of identity.

Further to this, ancestral tourism, or genealogy tourism, is a growing industry, which Barbados can certainly capitalise on through its documentary heritage (Ashraniyan, 2019). This form of tourism involves travellers visiting the homelands of their ancestors and is often a deeply emotional journey as persons reconcile with the lives and experiences of those who came before them (Stephenson, 2002). Throughout its colonial past, Barbados served as both a destination for migratory groups (Europeans, enslaved Africans, and indentured workers) and a place from which groups migrated in great numbers. Relative to the latter, many in the 19th and 20th centuries emigrated to regions such as Panama, Cuba, and North America for employment opportunities, resulting in a vast Barbadian diaspora spanning continents (Conniff, 1987; Marshall, 2016, pp. 7–17). The opportunity exists for these descendants to travel to Barbados to engage with sacred spaces (local communities and burial sites) but this cannot be realised in its entirety without first-hand or personal accounts documented in archival records. These records are therefore fundamental for the potential diversification of the island's tourism industry.

Reparatory justice is perhaps the most pertinent example of the need to safeguard the documentary heritage of Barbados. The Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice (n.d.) purports that European governments have "refused to acknowledge" the crimes committed against the enslaved in the region and "perpetuated suffering upon the emancipated" (CARICOM, n.d.). Refusal to acknowledge cannot and should not continue in light of the evidence contained in the archival records of former colonies such as Barbados. These records tell a story of the horrific reality of African enslavement and European colonisation. Handwritten slave registers, 1813–1834, clearly display names, ages, and occupations of just a few thousand of those who were held in bondage in Barbados (Ancestry.com).

Meanwhile, colonial newspapers provide glaring examples of the treatment afforded to the black population. For example, a runaway notice written by Mr. J. Welch and published in the *Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette* in 1808 revealed the following:

"Taken up...living in the Parish of St. Joseph, an African NEGRO MAN, about five feet high, with his two fore teeth filed; appears to have lately had a severe flogging; can give no account of himself…Any person proving the property and paying expenses, may have him by applying to JOHN WELCH" (Welch, 1808, p. 4).

This harrowing account of an enslaved man, and the matter-of-fact tone in which his assault and bondage are recorded, provides compelling evidence of the brutal conditions endured by the enslaved. For the pursuit of justice to be meaningful and to yield tangible redress, the preservation of our documentary heritage must be treated as a critical priority.

What Are the Threats?

Having discussed the significance of Barbados' documentary heritage, it is important to understand the looming threats. Climate disasters, in particular, refer to extreme weather events (heatwaves, floods, hurricanes, or droughts) that incur a breakdown in the functioning of a society (BiologyInsights Team, 2025). For the purpose of this article, this classification is extended to include fires triggered by climate-related factors, such as drought or lightning storms. The global climate crisis has intensified and increased the frequency of these events, making them threats to our archival legacy.

Fire has always been a constant enemy of historical preservation. History is fraught with examples of these tragedies, such as the burning of the Mayan codices during the 1500s, or the fire that engulfed the Library of Alexandria (Christenson, 2007). Even in much more recent history, in 2018 and 2021 respectively, the Museu Nacional do Brasil and the Jagger Library in South Africa both suffered unfortunate fires that decimated their historical records, artefacts, and cultural paraphernalia (Motomura & Rebello, 2018).

The Jagger Library is of special interest, as the Reading Room, which housed over 70,000 African study items, including rare books, films, and other audio-visual records, government publications, and much more, was in the process of digitisation by the University of Cape Town Special Collection Team before being engulfed by a runaway wildfire (Kirkwood et al., 2023). This in itself could be attributed to climate change. South Africa is identified as a climate change hotspot by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, as the nation is exhibiting a drier climate and delayed precipitation. This change in climate has significantly increased the chances and frequency of wildfires (Engelbrecht et al., 2024). With this example, it is plain to see the risk climate change has (and will continue to have) on South Africa and its surrounding countries in their battle for cultural preservation and advancements.

Case Study - Fire at the Barbados Archives (2024)

While it may be true that the Barbados Archives did suffer a fire, the circumstances differ from those of the Jagger Library. It was an atypical lightning strike during a storm, not a wildfire, that caused the tragedy at the Barbados Archives. On 17 June 2024, a nightmare became reality when a fire broke out at the Barbados Archives located in Black Rock, St. James. The overnight blaze was triggered by a lightning strike just before midnight, heavily impacting one of the two-storey buildings holding the island's most precious resources. An early assessment of the situation was provided by Chief Archivist Ingrid Thompson, who painted the sombre story. She explained that Block D, the affected building, contained irreplaceable documents from the colonial period, such as vestry, city council, and hospital records (Parris, 2024). Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Dr Shantal Munro-Knight echoed regret regarding the loss. She revealed that digitisation of the records in the general repository had begun, but unfortunately, not those destroyed in the blaze (Caribbean Media Corporation, 2024). The fire resulted in the immediate

closure of the Archives to public researchers for nearly a year. Consequently, such disasters significantly disrupt the functioning of cultural heritage institutions, thereby impeding both academic and personal research conducted by stakeholders who rely on access to these records.

Barbados, much like the rest of the Caribbean, also contends with hurricanes, tropical storms, and fires on a regular basis. With rising sea surface temperatures driven by global warming, the Caribbean has been experiencing increasingly intense and frequent tropical phenomena over the years (Hernández-Delgado et al., 2024). Therefore, it can be inferred that the fire at the Archives was not merely an act of negligence but the consequence of an unforeseeable climate-related disaster brought about by the unpredictable weather this region now faces.

In similar fashion, Hurricanes Irma and Maria (2017) placed many archival records in Puerto Rico at risk of water damage and mould as facilities were flooded. This was reported by the PhD candidate in History Aura Jirau, who further revealed that Puerto Rico's General Archive was forced to close for eight months post-disaster until April 2018, significantly disadvantaging students and researchers like herself (Jirau, 2018). To compound this, power was lost during and after the hurricane, leaving many documents stored in museums and heritage institutions across the territory at risk of further damage due to heat exposure (Cultural Rescue Initiative, 2017). Heat and humidity are the enemies of document preservation, as they accelerate the degradation of old papers. Most archives have climate-controlled document storage rooms with cool and dry conditions to preserve the papers, but without the consistent power needed to run the system, documents can be damaged quickly.

The vulnerability of record sets at the Barbados Archives to intense climate events will no doubt be compounded by infrastructural limitations. The buildings of the Archives are historical, having been retrofitted for their current purpose. These buildings are constructed from traditional limestone rock whose porous nature makes them susceptible to weathering and infrastructural issues, particularly heavy rainfall, which is constant in the region. Coupled with the wooden interior beams, staircases, and floors, the buildings (and, by extension, the documents) are vulnerable to complete destruction by fire or heavy rain.

What Can Be Done? Digitisation and Training

First and foremost, improved infrastructure must be put in place to mitigate the impacts of climate-related disasters. This will involve introducing fire-retardant storage spaces as well as buildings designed to withstand events such as hurricanes and earthquakes. Emergency plans should be kept up to date and made accessible to both staff and first-responders (firefighters and military personnel) to ensure that appropriate action is taken in the event of a disaster. This will require not only identifying areas of risk but also advocating for greater prioritisation of these records during and after emergencies (IFLA, 2019, p. 6).

Staff members should be trained regularly on emergency protocols and disaster responses

relative to archives. This will require knowledge exchange in the form of meetings or workshops covering issues such as “cataloguing, risk management, and identification of endangered documentary heritage” (UNESCO, 2016, p. 5).

Digitisation, however, is most critical as the intensity of disasters is becoming increasingly unprecedented. As noted by Dr Munro-Knight, digitisation efforts at the Barbados Archives are currently underway (Caribbean Media Corporation, 2024). However, given the extensive scope of the collections, this represents a significant and complex undertaking that necessitates substantial investment in both resources and specialised personnel. Digitisation in this instance refers to the processes of microfilming and transcribing documents.

In 2021, Barbados officially launched the *Reclaiming Our Atlantic Destiny (ROAD)* programme, which includes a dedicated digitisation initiative in collaboration with the Barbados Archives. This project aims to preserve the island’s documentary heritage through digitisation while simultaneously enhancing public access to these records (R.O.A.D.–Reclaiming Our Atlantic Destiny, 2025).

While the initiative marks a critical step forward in archival preservation and accessibility to meet the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) standards on digitisation, its success depends on sustained support (IFLA, 2019, p. 9). In particular, targeted investment in the training and professional development of archival personnel is essential. Furthermore, strategic efforts should be made to involve university students and recent graduates, particularly those specialising in heritage, history, and related fields, in the implementation of such projects. Ensuring meaningful participation from these individuals will not only strengthen the project’s outcomes but also contribute to capacity-building within the sector. This is especially relevant in the creation of accurate metadata for digitised records, a process that demands both meticulous examination of the materials and a robust understanding of their historical context.

Conclusion

Barbados and the Caribbean’s documentary legacy is at a turning point. The physical fragility of archives has become a pressing concern as the region experiences more severe natural disasters associated with climate change. These documents are crucial for historical accuracy and future research, as well as for cultural identity and legal justice. Important fragments of Caribbean history will continue to disappear if aggressive steps are not taken. The most effective and practical option is digitisation, which enables the protection of sensitive documents, increases public access, and guarantees their continuation despite hazards. However, institutional commitment, technical knowledge, and consistent investments to secure funds are necessary for successful implementation. Digitally preserving the past is a cultural necessity as much as a technological advancement.

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