

Water Damages Nixon's Papers

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When government custodians moved 8,000 boxes of former President Nixon's papers to a special storage facility a few months ago, they claimed the documents would be safer in the temperature—and humidity—controlled environment.

Last weekend, a drain overflowed from an air conditioner in the Washington National Records Center in Suitland and 180 of the boxes got wet.

Richard Vawter, a spokesman for the General Services Administration, said Wednesday that most of the boxes were dampened only on the outside, but the contents from 14 boxes had to be sent through a dryer.

Two boxes containing documents "with publications set aside for a possible Nixon Library," were ruined, but Vawter said they were replaceable.

None of the boxes contained any of Nixon's Watergate tapes. They are still in the Executive Office Building near the White House.

After Nixon resigned in August, 1974, Congress passed a law decreeing that the 42 million papers and 5,000 hours of tapes were government property. Nixon sued to regain possession, but a federal appeals court ruled against him last January. The issue is now before the Supreme Court.

An attorney for Nixon, R. Stan Mortensen, said Wednesday that he was told that the damaged materials were of low political sensitivity.

"It certainly isn't the files of H. R. Haldeman or John D. Ehrlichman," he said, "but that's exactly the reason why I didn't consent to having them sent to Suitland."

The GSA had to obtain court permission to move the documents. In addition to extolling the virtues of the facility's controlled environment, the custodians told the court that the files were taking up too much space in the Executive Office Building.

Mortensen has demanded a written explanation for the incident.

Vawter said a larger drain has been installed in the Nixon storage area, "and we contemplate putting in an alarm device."

He added that the GSA's safekeepers "are the most expert in the world in protecting their papers, but even they have their problems occasionally."