It’s been a decade since the storm surge receded from Jackson County, MS, in late August 2005, but the memories linger with the Chancery Clerk’s office to this day.

Barbara Trubee, supervisor of Jackson County Land Records, can’t help but think back to her personal turmoil: her daughter, trapped in her own home as the waters threateningly rose higher and higher.

She recounted her experience, saying, “We only had 30 minutes to an hour before her phone batteries would die. She went up to the attic with her dogs and asked, ‘Mom, what do I do if the water comes up to the attic?’” Trubee urged her to find something she could wield to break a hole into the roof if need be. The only tool her daughter possessed was one hammer. “She could see daylight through the roof when I lost contact with her. I did a lot of praying that day.”

The next morning, the County met for a board meeting to discuss reopening and resuming operations. Afterward, as Trubee paced around the parking lot, she heard from her daughter—who was dirty, but safe and sound.

Trubee’s daughter was not alone. Approximately 90 percent of Pascagoula’s residential neighborhoods sustained serious damage as a result of the storm surge.

Hurricane Katrina deeply impacted Jackson County, Mississippi and has led to them taking precautions in case of another disaster. In case of future hurricanes, the County has since rebuilt in a 15-foot-high facility to withstand rising waters in the future and it has digitized its records after a large effort to restore those that were damaged.

Jackson County Chancery Clerk Terry Miller serves as the recorder of land records and Chancery Clerk records (divorce, custody, adoptions, alimony, estates of descendants, etc.) and sees to their protection. The plan in place prior to Hurricane Katrina was that if an approaching hurricane was Category 3 or higher, the County would make necessary preparations: covering the shelves, unplugging the computers, covering files in plastic, and hiring a moving company to load the land record books into the back of a tractor trailer and relocate them from the danger zone. When the storm receded, they would replace the books on the shelves and resume business as usual.

Except with Katrina.
The storm waters, however, contained everything one could possibly imagine: gasoline, sewage and all sorts of debris. Miller himself was trapped in his home, in the water, for eight hours that day.

The morning after the storm receded, Miller convened with the County Board of Supervisors to discuss restoring the county properties and facilities. They contacted a restoration company to send a nearly 100-person crew to Jackson County, where they would carefully transport the compromised documents to their headquarters in Ft. Worth, Texas—a process taking two to three weeks alone. The process of document restoration would take nearly two years to complete, with Miller making nearly 10 trips to Ft. Worth to check the progress.

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

After the storm, Land Records resumed operations at the Jackson County Fairgrounds after only 12 days. However, there were limitations.

“If we had sent off a file to be restored and someone needed it, we couldn’t help that person. We had no choice but to tell them, ‘When files come back, if we can find it, we’ll give you what you want,’” Miller said. Thankfully, “90 percent of court files were able to be recovered.”

Even two years ago, Miller and his team discovered nearly 30,000 damaged court files that are still being restored to this day. While the Chancery Clerks office in particular dedicated itself to preserving the past of the county they love so much, they understand the county’s true value resides in its people.

But the most valuable assets, the people, remained safe.

“I have about twenty employees. About five of them lost their homes,” Miller said. “When we got the clear to come back, they were here in the office, doing their duties and recording records.” He told them to come whenever they could, and to first and foremost take care of themselves and their families.

Despite the personal hardships the team faced, they balanced their families and their own disaster recovery with their work responsibilities. Trubee said, “My mother always taught me the importance of your job, the responsibility you had, and the love of the land. I have tried to do my very best and give it 100 percent as I was raised to do...you just balance it out.”

She added that the county came closer together to pull through. They heard many stories in the office, counseled people who lost their important paperwork and set them in the right direction. “People care about each other in the community—people came from other states to help. It has helped us appreciate as a community more of what we have. There is camaraderie...people helping other people,” said Trubee. “People across the street from us got their water then invited everyone else to come to their house. You can see there is an appreciation and love for one another you didn’t know existed but was there all along.”

TRANSCENDING THE PAST AND SAFEGUARDING THE FUTURE

The office of the Jackson County Chancery Clerk has continued their project of back-scanning documents and transferring them into their new system. Eventually, they will enjoy the benefits of going digital and eFiling. Trubee knows this is a huge benefit to the office and attributes the bright future of the office to Mr. Miller. “If I ask, ‘Do you think we can have this, he says, ‘Find out about it, let me know,’ and he gets it done.’

Today, the office of the Chancery Clerk is located in a new county complex that sits 15 feet above sea level. The team feels more protected with digitized documents. “After coming from the ‘old school’ and doing everything by hand, with computers, this place has become wonderful. I have been taught a lot. I embrace the newness because I know it helps,” said Trubee.

As Hurricane Katrina proved, Mr. Miller is not only open to new ideas. “He’s always been thoughtful of the personal lives of people. He understands people have problems—family, financial, work related,” Trubee praised. “There’s no way to say how much I’ll miss him.”

As Terry Miller is stepping down as Chancery Clerk of Jackson County into retirement, he can reflect on quite the tenure, having led the team through massive catastrophe. His legacy will remain, having modernized the office so his constituents not only enjoy a more efficient process, but so the county’s history is preserved for the decades to come.

HURRICANE KATRINA STATS AT A GLANCE

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<th>4 million</th>
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<td>Jackson County Chancery Clerk employees lost their homes</td>
<td>court documents were damaged</td>
<td>of Jackson County residential neighborhoods were damaged</td>
<td>beachfront homes in Pascagoula were utterly destroyed</td>
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