Letters written by Helen Keller. Forty-thousand photographic negatives of John F. Kennedy taken by the president's personal cameraman. Sculptures by Alexander Calder and Auguste Rodin. The 1921 agreement that created the agency that built the World Trade Center.

Besides ending nearly 3,000 lives, destroying planes and reducing buildings to tons of rubble and ash, the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks destroyed tens of thousands of records, irreplaceable historical documents and art.

In some cases, the inventories were destroyed along with the records. And the loss of human life at the time overshadowed the search for lost paper. A decade later, dozens of agencies and archivists say they're still not completely sure what they lost or found, leaving them without much of a guide to piece together missing history.

"You can't get the picture back, because critical pieces are missing," said Kathleen D. Roe, operations director at the New York State Archives and co-chairwoman of the World Trade Center Documentation Project. "And so you can't know what the whole picture looks like."

The picture starts in the seven-building trade center complex. Hijackers flew jetliners into the twin towers on Sept. 11, 2001, which collapsed onto the rest of the complex, which included three smaller office buildings, a Marriott hotel and U.S. Customs. 7 World Trade Center, a skyscraper just north of the twin towers, collapsed that afternoon.

The trade center was home to more than 430 companies, including law firms, manufacturers and financial institutions. Twenty-one libraries were destroyed, including that of The Journal of Commerce. Dozens of federal, state and local government agencies were at the site, including the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Securities and Exchange Commission.

More...