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## California Fires Destroy HP Archives November 2017

An archive of historic documents created by Hewlett-Packard founders William Hewlett and David Packard were destroyed by a devastating fire in Sonoma County, California in early October, 2017. The documents included over 100 boxes of correspondence, speeches, and other documents. They represented the heart of HP historical activities.



The collection had been valued at USD \$2 million in 2005. They were part of a total archive worth USD \$3.3 million at the time.

### Hewlett-Packard

Hewlett-Packard was founded in 1939 in a one-car garage in Palo Alto by Bill Hewlett and David Packard. The garage is now an historical landmark noted as the birthplace of Silicon Valley. It serves as a private museum.



HP initially produced a line of electronic test equipment. In fact, all the test equipment in my electronics lab when I was a teenager bore the HP label.

In the early 2000s, HP started producing PC systems. From 2007 to 2013, HP was the world's leading PC manufacturer until Lenovo passed them.

HP went on to develop and manufacture computing, data storage, and networking hardware and software. Major product lines included personal computers, enterprise and industry standard servers, storage devices, networking products, and a diverse range of printers and scanners.

HP marketed its products to households, businesses, retailers, vendors, and online. It also provided consulting services around its products.

### How Were The Archives Stored?

In 1999, HP shed its test and measurement division into a newly created company, Agilent Technologies. In 2014, Agilent spun off its electronics group as Keysight Technologies. For some reason, Keysight ended up with the archives that were eventually lost to the fire.

HP and Agilent had stored the archives in controlled vaults with foam fire retardant and other protections. When Keysight inherited the archives, it moved the archives to a modular building in its Santa Rosa campus in Sonoma County, protected only by a water sprinkling system.

## Keysight Technologies

When Keysight was created, it took ownership of the archives and held the archives on its campus in Santa Rosa, where they were consumed by the fire.

In a statement made by Keysight, it stated that a portion of the historical archives, including items from the company's time as part of Agilent and HP, were destroyed in the fire. These included documents from Hewlett and Packard.

Keysight maintains that it met all standards for archival protection and that they were stored in the same manner as they had been at HP and Agilent. It noted that many parts of the archives were not damaged as they were situated in other parts of its Santa Rosa facility that sustained only minor damage, or they were stored at other Keysight locations.

## What Was In the Archives?

The papers in the archives dated from 1937 to 1995. They revealed the company's strategy and its evolution from the beginning of the electronics industry.

HP had not made the existence of this cache of documents widely known, and it restricted access to the archives. Many of the documents lost in the fire were never made available to researchers.

Consequently, the fire consumed a significant piece of the test industry in which HP made its start, along with a bit of American history.

## The Sonoma Valley Fires

The Sonoma Valley fires began on the night of October 9<sup>th</sup>. The fires reached Keysight's Santa Rosa campus and damaged several company buildings. Two buildings were totally destroyed. Unfortunately, one of these buildings contained the HP archives that were lost.

Some have said that it was irresponsible for Keysight to put the archives in a building without proper protection. But Keysight maintains that it took appropriate and responsible steps to protect HP's archives. It claims that it met the standards for archival protection as set forth by the United Nations and the U.S. Library of Congress. It packed the material in damage-resistant archival boxes and stored them on steel shelving in modular buildings with sprinkler systems.

It took the most damaging fire in state history to thwart these steps. The fire was so fierce that it even melted some fire-resistant safes. The modular buildings were destroyed by the fire, though Keysight's permanent offices survived the fire. If Keysight had stored the archives in its permanent offices, we would still have the archives.



## The Good News

However, amidst all of this destruction, there was some good news. A large chunk of HP archives are stored elsewhere. Many archives remained intact or were stored in both physical and digital format. Archives held by HP were not affected. The company uses a facility in Atlanta, Georgia, for its corporate archives.

Some company archival materials such as historic product catalogs and correspondence were secure because they were housed at other Keysight locations. Nevertheless, a significant amount of irreplaceable personal material was lost.

## Where Were the Backups?

One shortcoming stands out in this story. Where were the backups? One requirement for high availability of which we continually speak is the need for backup copies of all critical data. One never knows when the primary copy of such data can become corrupted for some reason. In that case, it can be replaced with the backup copy (and another backup copy made).

The HP archives certainly qualified as critical data. Backup copies of all documents should have been made. True, there were 100 boxes of documents, and this might have discouraged thoughts of backup. Still, the lost archives were valued at USD \$2 million. It would have taken just a fraction of that cost to provide backup copies. The backups could have been paper copies of all documents, they could have been photographs of each page, or they could have been a digitized copy stored on a secure server.

It could have been HP, Agilent, or Keysight that made the backup copies. They all had the documents in their possession at one time or another. As one who specializes in high availability, I fault each of these companies for not doing their job. They all depended on 'hope' that the archives would be safe. "Hope" is not a viable backup.

## Acknowledgements

Material for this article was taken from the following sources:

[HP lost key historical archives in California's wildfires](#), *EE Times*; October 29, 2017.

[Loss of Hewlett-Packard Archives Wake-Up Call for Computer Historians](#), *IEEE Spectrum*; October 30, 2017.

[HP lost key historical archives in California's wildfires](#), *Bangladesh 24*; October 30, 2017.

[Calif. Fires Destroy HP Archive Documents](#), *EE Times*; October 31, 2017.

[California Fires Destroy HP Archive Documents](#), *One River*; undated.

[Silicon Valley history lost: Archive of documents that belonged to HP founders destroyed by wildfire](#), *HP*; undated.

[Wikipedia](#)