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Practical Preservation Demonstration: Caring for Family Collections

The key to good collection management is planning and stabilization. A thoughtfully considered plan of action may save dollars as well as your collection. First decide what is most important to preserve, then stabilize the storage environment. Use archival quality materials for storage and display, make copies for backup and sharing, and always use caution when handling valued materials.

Prioritization and Reduction = Divide and Conquer:

To give your family history collection better odds of long-term survival, it is MANDATORY that you reduce the overall collection footprint. Here are some ways to do this:



1. Your prioritization should begin with the most important pieces of your family collection. Mostly originals or rare copies (Disaster planning for the ages.)
2. One way to reduce is through citing your sources without keeping photocopies of the originals. (Readily available documents through Ancestry or Family Search – Original family documents are not a part of this category and should be preserved.)
3. Photos and albums are their own beast: Consider decreasing their numbers by eliminating images taken of landscapes while on vacation, blurry images, and duplicate images – “pick the best – eliminate the rest”.
4. Ephemera – Prioritize what was important to your family and document the corresponding story. Otherwise, it sits around without a story anchor, just waiting to be tossed by the next generation.
5. Always separate publications away from your genealogy collection. Someday, these can be donated to local libraries, or discarded if there are multitudes of copies already out there – but don't muddy your genealogy waters with outside, mass produced publications.

Conclusion: Do not assign equal value to your entire collection. Prioritize the important things, connecting them to your family through cited sources and stories, while purging the redundant elements. The biggest tragedy of all exists when the really important things cannot be seen due to

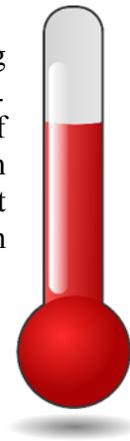


the hoarding around them. In our futile attempt to keep everything, we are at risk of losing the most important elements of our heritage.

Threats to Materials & Tips for Basic Care

A variety of conditions in the storage environment can prove hazardous to unique family papers, photographs, and heirlooms. Once damaged, it is extremely difficult, and often expensive, to restore them. It is thus useful to recognize potential problems and practice preventive maintenance.

Temperature & Humidity—Stabilization is the goal. High or wildly fluctuating temperature and relative humidity can cause severe damage to vintage materials. Adverse conditions can lead to brittleness, fading, discoloration, and flaking of surfaces. In addition to these direct effects, high humidity mixed with high temperature promotes harmful mold growth and provides a hospitable environment for insects and vermin that feast on photo emulsion. Finally, high moisture content in the air joins with pollutants to form damaging acids.



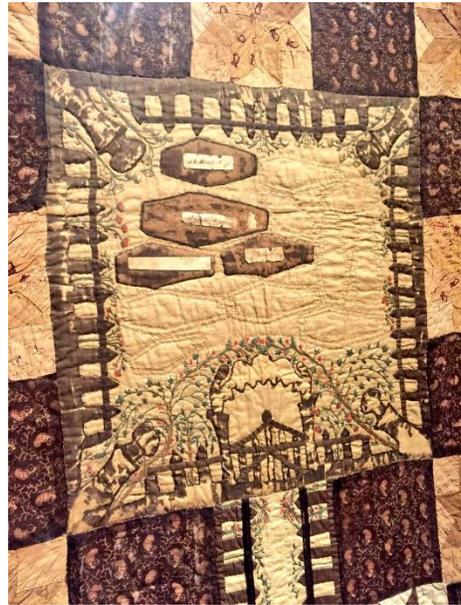
Store materials at a constant, moderate temperature and humidity: Preferably near 68-70° F. and 50% relative humidity (RH) if possible. Ideally, photos should be stored between 35 and 50% R.H. and color materials should be kept even colder if possible. Each 10°F cut in temperature will double the life expectancy of color images. Materials placed in cold storage should be sealed in packets when the humidity is relatively low. Avoid attics where temperatures soar and basements where humidity is particularly high. If humidity and temperature cannot be lowered to appropriate levels, use a fan to circulate the air and thus discourage mold growth. *Note, humidity that is too low can also create a harmful environment – so be careful.

Light—Ultra-violet light, which is concentrated in sunlight and fluorescent lamps, is particularly damaging. Direct exposure to light can cause fading, discoloration, and brittleness.

Housing photos and documents in archival safe enclosures reduces their exposure to harmful light. If original materials are displayed, use only incandescent lighting or fluorescent lamps treated specifically to filter ultraviolet rays. Do not place opposite/near windows.

Avoid use of non-glare glass that may actually absorb more light than standard reflective glass. Ultraviolet-filtering Plexiglas is recommended although its use should not preclude other precautions. Always display copies rather than originals when possible.

Storage Containers—Materials can be damaged by airborne acidic pollutants as mentioned earlier, but they are also susceptible to injurious acid migration from storage and display materials. You may have noticed a striped brown stain on the backs of prints when removing them from old frames. The stain is due to acid migration from the cardboard backing. Use of manila file folders, thick plastics such as polyvinyl chloride (PVC), and common cardboard boxes should be avoided when storing valued materials. If you do opt for plastic containers, be sure wrap the items in archival safe tissue paper to prevent the items touching the plastic, and drill holes into the container to allow for air circulation.

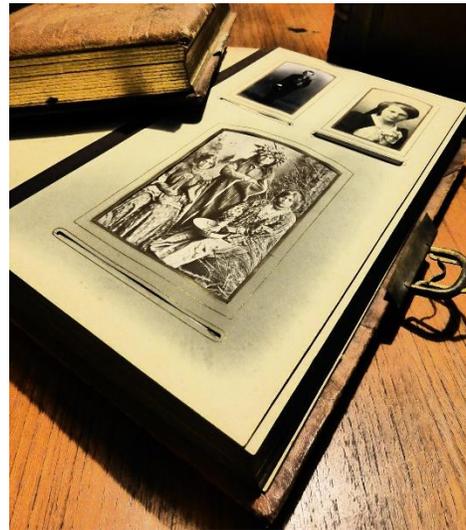


Use acid-free and lignin-free papers, museum board, folders, and boxes, or inert polyester, polypropylene, triacetate, or polyethylene enclosures for storage and framing. Acid-free buffered materials are appropriate for storage of valued papers, photos with acidic boards, and some early negatives (nitrate or diacetate). Acid-free, unbuffered enclosures may be more appropriate for some 19th-century photographic formats (cyanotype prints), color images, and especially blueprint papers. It's important to research the type of photographs you have and rehouse or separate with the appropriate buffered OR non-buffered paper. All papers used to store photographs should pass the Photographic Activity Test. Materials with the "P.A.T." designation should be safe for storing photos.

Metal cabinets with a baked enamel finish are preferable to wooden containers, which may generate harmful gases. Magnetic media, such as audio and videotapes, and computer diskettes, may be damaged by magnetic fields. As such, it may be safer to seek an alternative to metal shelving for these materials. It is recommended to store tapes vertically in boxes. Do not store magnetic media near electrical outlets, electronic equipment, or appliances that may emit magnetic fields.

Storage systems that minimize contact between your heirlooms, papers or photos, reduce crowding, and provide support, are preferred. If storage boxes contain too few materials, curling of valued items may occur. To prevent this damage, use boxes that can be adjusted for the thickness of contents, or store materials flat. Acid-free tissue paper can also be utilized as padding and support for textiles – especially in areas where folding or seams are present.

Photo Albums and Scrapbooks—Since many family archival collections are destined for display in albums and scrapbooks, they deserve discussion apart from other storage methods. Here are some important points to remember:



- Never use self-adhesive “magnetic” albums. Use of these tacky, ribbed sheets is at the top of the list of photo preservation “don'ts.” Within a few short years your photos may show damage from the adhesive. Attempts to remove the images from such albums by that time will likely result in further serious damage. If you do only one thing for your family photos, remove them from “magnetic” albums. Before attempting to remove the photos, place the album in a plastic bag and refrigerate to reduce the tackiness of the pages. Then try to gently pry the images off the pages using a small spatula or fishing line.
- Use acid-free album pages or polypropylene sleeves. Albums and scrapbooks manufactured from acid-free and lignin-free materials are available. Write identifying information directly on the page or enclosure, not the photograph.
- Interleave album pages with acid-free tissue paper, or place pages in inert sleeves to minimize image transfer between facing images (using buffered or non-buffered paper depending on type of photograph).
- Do not glue or paste photos into albums. Rubber cement and animal glues are particularly damaging. Use of acid-neutral or polyester mounting corners is recommended. You may also use pages with slots cut to accommodate the photo corners.
- Prior to removing photos from an album, photograph each page to remember the order in which the album was put together – the order may yield clues as to relationships, location, or chronology. Better yet, photograph or scan each page prior to disassembling to keep a record of the original order on file. Even if you do not see any order in the apparent chaos – it may become apparent as you process the images.

Handling—Careless handling can undo all of your good preservation efforts. Fingerprints are especially damaging to photographs. Ink from felt or ballpoint pens may bleed through from the backs of photos to the image surface. Metal staples and paper clips can rust or scratch the image surface. Attempts to repair photos with pressure-sensitive tape (including “magic” tape) usually end in disaster. The adhesive will eventually stain the photo, whether applied to the back or the front of the picture. Adhesive tape applied to the image surface should be removed only by a restoration specialist, and even then damage may result. Therefore, the following procedures are recommended:



- Do not use tape to mend valued materials. Plastic paper clips may be used to attach related materials.
- Do not store newspaper clippings and engravings next to photographs or other documents as contact with the ink and paper used may cause damage.
- Use gloves (cotton or nitrile), when handling many materials. Due to the fragility and risk of snagging, gloves are not recommended for handling paper archives or textiles.
- Identify photos on reverse with a soft-lead pencil, using light pressure – or on the enclosure as mentioned earlier. You may prefer to simply number each photo and maintain a separate log with identifying information.

Scanning/Digitization—There are major benefits derived from creating digital copies of your original photographs/documents. First, the copies provide insurance that the image will be preserved. Second, copies eliminate the risk of damage inflicted through display and/or handling of the originals. Besides, sharing digital images is a great way to gather more information from other family members.

Rule of thumb: Scan photographs at 600dpi, .tif format. This is a lossless image that does not compress upon opening, preventing pixilation. For documents, 300dpi in .tif format is the standard. Keep in mind that negatives or small slides may require higher dpi settings depending on your future enlargement needs. These are your master images – sharing is easier via lower resolution copies made from your masters.

Don't forget to take high resolution images of your family heirlooms! Recommended equipment includes a 35mm single-lens reflex film or digital camera (without auto focus), a good lens no less than 50mm, close-up rings, and a tripod or copy stand. Small studio light boxes are also available to help with lighting and a professional look that highlights the details. For further information concerning the copy procedure, contact the Kentucky Historical Society.

Tips for Digital Photographers

- *Make adjustments to a copy*, preferably a “tif” file, rather than to the original file.
- *Decide on naming conventions* that distinguish versions of the file (e.g. *filename_orig.tif* and *filename_adj.tif*).
- *Use high-quality paper and inks for digital photo prints.* Pigment inks are recommended. Henry Wilhelm, of Wilhelm Imaging Research, Inc., posts his printer test results and other digital image resources on his Web site at www.wilhelm-research.com.



For all digital material:

Don't forget data migration! Keep an eye on trends in technology to avoid obsolescence. If your files are saved on a medium that requires older "viewing" hardware that is disappearing from the market, migrate your files to current formats that are more stable. Be sure to check on migration needs every year to make sure the format you are using is still stable – and of course, always maintain back-up copies!



In Conclusion:

As your family collection may include a myriad of materials, this guide is only meant to provide a starting place for your preservation needs. Do your homework about specific items or materials and purchase the appropriate enclosures for long term preservation, stabilization, and access.

Resources/Supplies:

Do not be intimidated by the cost of caring for your items. There is no need to break the bank for preservation. Stabilize what you have, and then purchase new housing materials as you go along, or as you can afford. The educational and supply sources below should help further.

Archival Methods: <https://www.archivalmethods.com/>

Gaylord Archival: <https://www.gaylord.com/>

Hollinger Metal Edge: <https://www.hollingermetaledge.com>

Light Impressions: <http://www.lightimpressionsdirect.com/>

Talas Conservation Supplies: <https://www.talasonline.com/>

University Products: <https://www.universityproducts.com/>

Society of American Archivists: <https://www2.archivists.org/>

Directory of Archival Consultants: <https://www2.archivists.org/consultants>