



# SAVING YOUR Treasures

*A Website about what you can do to protect and preserve the things of importance in your life*



## Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center Nebraska State Historical Society

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### THE CLEANING OF PHOTOGRAPHIC MATERIALS IN COLLECTIONS

The cleaning of photographic images of any kind in a collection is not to be undertaken lightly. There are many serious factors to consider. A conservator and curator should be consulted in order to assess all the issues relating to the care of the object in question. These procedures should not be used on any objects that have:

- pastel or charcoal media (like crayon portraits),
- loose or flaking gelatin or baryta layers,
- mold (even if dry and not active),
- extensive repairs, or
- been rolled and will not stay flat without assistance.

Objects exhibiting these conditions should only be cleaned by a conservator. **If you are unable to positively identify the photographic process by which the object was made, do not attempt to clean it.** Even light surface brushing can remove silver image particles from a degraded salted paper print.

If the following cleaning methods have been determined to be appropriate for your specific object, they should be followed using the utmost care and sensitivity. Extreme care is needed to avoid doing more harm than good. The materials and techniques listed below have been tested and found to be safe and effective when used in a careful and sensitive manner.

A clean, well-ventilated work area should be provided for the cleaning process, including a large, smooth-surfaced, hard worktable with adequate light. It is recommended that clean gloves be worn when handling photographic prints and negatives to avoid transferring fingerprints to the objects.

#### Materials:

- clean, acid-free blotter
- clean, small, **very soft**, natural bristle brushes (such as a Japanese Haké brush)
- vinyl eraser
- small, clean kitchen grater

**Procedure:**

1. Prepare an extremely clean, dry work area and cover the work surface with a clean piece of acid-free blotter.
2. Place the photographic object on the work surface. If the object is a "cased object", such as a daguerreotype, Ambrotype, or tintype, leave it **closed** and clean the exterior surfaces with a soft brush. **Do not dismantle these items or touch the photographic surface.** If the object is framed or otherwise behind glass, the frame and glass can be dusted with a soft brush, but neither should be cleaned with any liquids. Liquids will seep beneath the glass and cause serious staining of the object possibly contributing to mold growth inside the object's housing.
3. To clean the **border** of a photographic **mount**, the space around the perimeter of the backing board, vinyl eraser crumbs may be used. Grate your own vinyl eraser crumbs with a small, clean kitchen grater and a vinyl eraser, such as Staedtler Mars Plastic®. Do not use Scum-X® or other eraser crumbs as they may contain sulfur and other materials, which may cause deterioration of your photographic images.

Rub the vinyl eraser crumbs lightly on the surface of the mount with the fingertips of a gloved hand or with the larger piece of vinyl eraser. Remove the crumbs by brushing away from the photograph with a soft brush. **Do not rub directly with an eraser** as it may cause a great deal of damage and uneven cleaning.

4. To clean the surface of a photographic **print**, hold the print face up against the blotter with one gloved hand and brush from the center towards the edges of the object with a soft brush. A very light touch is most effective. If there are any signs of loose media or support stop the cleaning immediately and contact a conservator for further instructions. **Do not clean the surface of the print with eraser crumbs.**

National Film Preservation Foundation's *The Film Preservation Guide*:  
<http://www.filmpreservation.org/preservation/fpg.pdf>

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