



SAVING YOUR Treasures

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



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FAMILY PAPERS AND PHOTOGRAPHS **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

Families accumulate a wealth of important and meaningful papers that denote the milestones in their lives. A ticket stub that brings back memories and emotions of a special date, paintings by our grade school “Rembrandts,” wedding certificates, family photographs all shuffled together in an old cardboard box on the top shelf of the laundry room represent the archive of each of our families. How can we save these treasures for the future?

What should I do first?

Organize and document! Before any preservation activities can begin the papers, photographs, and mementos must be organized and documented. A curator or archivist might recommend organizing the papers by family member or date, for example. After the papers are organized, it might be a good idea to separate out those items that should be duplicated for other family members or for display. See “Documenting Your Heirlooms”.

How should I store my family papers and photographs?

Dust, light, and extremes of temperature and relative humidity are very detrimental to the preservation of paper-based materials. Acid-free, lignin-free paper storage boxes and folders can provide the protection your family papers need from light and dust. They can also serve to buffer your papers from swings in temperature and relative humidity.

Family photographs can be stored in clear polyester, polypropylene or polyethylene plastic sleeves for ease in handling and to protect them from dust, dirt, and fingerprints. Only these plastics should be used, as they are inert, stable plastics that will not become sticky, discolor over time, or deteriorate your documents and photos. Acid-free, lignin-free paper boxes will protect them from light and other environmental factors.

- Use acid-free *and* lignin-free folders, boxes and interleaving tissue.
- For brittle, delicate papers (newspaper clippings, carbon papers, typing paper) use Mylar D® or Melinex® (polyester) clear plastic sleeves. The sleeves facilitate handling while protecting your document. Food grade polypropylene and

polyethylene are other plastics that may be used for storage. Avoid other plastics as they contain additives that cause the plastic to discolor and become sticky over time.

- Mylar® and Melinex® sleeves are also recommended for housing photographic materials. The sleeves prevent fingerprints and damage to the photograph's surface, while allowing the viewer to see the item.
- Buffered housing materials add an extra amount of protection for your paper documents, but do NOT use them on photographic materials or blueprints/ diazo prints. The buffering agent can cause discoloration in these particular materials.
- A piece of buffered tissue or paper or Microchamber® zeolite-impregnated paper (Conservation Resources International, LLC, Springfield, VA) can be placed behind a document in the sleeve as a simple way to reduce acids in the item without the use of chemicals. This technique is great for newspaper clippings.
- Use plastic paper clips rather than metal if items need to be kept together (e.g. letter and corresponding envelope). Never use rubber bands, as they deteriorate over time and can stick to your papers.
- Do not overstuff folders; several paper items of similar size per folder. Avoid packing folders in manuscript boxes too tightly.
- Be certain that the folder or sleeve completely covers the object; do not allow the item to stick out on the top or sides of the folder or sleeve.
- Keep materials out of the light as often as possible – once ink fades, it **CANNOT** be restored.
- Store paper-based materials in a living part of your home; avoid the basement and attic as extremes in temperature and relative humidity can hasten the deterioration of paper and photographs.

What is lignin and why is it problematic in paper-based products?

Lignin is the part of wood fiber that gives it strength. As lignin ages, it becomes quite acidic. It can be left in fibers used to make paper pulp (as with newspaper) or separated out (as in better quality papers). Acid-free papers are made both with and without lignin. Papers containing lignin, which are acid-free at the time of purchase, will become acidic in a relatively short time as the lignin breaks down.

How and where should I keep my papers and photographs?

The most important aspect of storage for special items is to provide a stable environment that doesn't include wide swings in temperature and relative humidity. Basements and attics are not good places to keep anything for the future. It is better to store these items in living spaces, like under the bed or in a closet.

Can I copy my family papers/ family photographs?

Copies used to share information or for genealogical research can help save original documents and photographs from mechanical wear. Sometimes a photocopy or a scan will serve as a sufficient surrogate to the original. When you require a lot of detail, digital scanning and a digital print may be more appropriate.

How should I display important items, like my grandparents' marriage/birth certificate/immigration papers? Flat paper-based items can be matted and framed in acid-free, 100% rag board mats with acid-free, 100% rag board back mats and boards, but they must be properly affixed in the mat. (See Matting and Framing".) Double-sided tape or pressure-sensitive tape of any kind is damaging and should never be used on your original objects. Photo corners should be used. In many instances, a conservator can be consulted for advice on framing. A better solution might be to display a good copy of the original. A digital print or color photocopying can provide copies for display. When framed, these color facsimiles will look like the originals. Photographs can be displayed this way also. Extensive light exposure causes irreversible damage to paper items, so display of original items should be limited. Remember, direct sunlight is not the only light source that will fade inks; regular lamps can do the same and faded inks cannot be restored.

How can I duplicate my special items?

Papers and other memorabilia can be duplicated by a number of processes: photocopies, black and white negatives and prints, color transparencies and prints, and digital images and prints can be made. Black and white negatives are good archival duplicates. Photocopies can be used as facsimiles for access and reading that will reduce wear and tear on the original. Digital images can provide the maximum detail and allow for easy duplication and sharing of images. The most important thing to remember when duplicating precious original materials is that photographers or processing technicians can easily damage them, as they are usually not trained in the special handling that fragile old papers require. Photos that are curled or curved can be broken under the cover of a copy machine. Clumsy "touch-ups" by a restorer can permanently damage items. Take them to a professional that you trust.

My diploma has been rolled up for years. How can I flatten it?

My family has letters written during the Civil War that have torn along the creases. Can they be repaired?

Some problems, such as tear repairs and flattening, need the attention of a professional paper conservator. Attempting some treatments at home can cause further problems. See a paper conservator for a consultation for further information on treatment.

I have an old scrapbook that contains newspaper clippings, photographs, and theater programs. It is falling apart and the inks are transferring from item to item. What can I do to preserve it?

Order a storage box or have one made to keep all the pieces together and to provide dust and light protection. Interleave the pages with acid-free, lignin-free tissue paper to

prevent further transfer of ink and acidic transfer from the newspaper clippings. Interleaving is not recommended for tightly bound books but it is appropriate for loosely bound scrapbooks.

My family bible contains marriage and birth records. I want to display these records, but I don't want to destroy a bible that has been in my family for so many years.

Have them scanned and display colored reproductions. Color photocopies work as well, although that may be more difficult to achieve if the bible is difficult to open or bound tightly. Order a storage box or have one made to better preserve and protect the bible. (Also see "Bibles, Declarations of Independence, Newspapers, and Signed Books...")

Original family papers and photographs should be handled very carefully. Deteriorated paper is much weaker than the new paper encountered on a daily basis. Items that have been tightly rolled or folded for a long time might need the attention of a conservator. These items are often torn when well-meaning individuals attempt to pry them open. They can often be safely and successfully flattened and repaired by a professional paper conservator. This type of work is very technical and cannot be done at home. The conservator will have the proper equipment and chemicals to do the work safely.

Some Tips:

- Use clean hands when handling documents. This will prevent oils from your hands transferring to the document, which causes damage over time.
- When handling photographs, wear clean cotton gloves. This will prevent fingerprints and damage to the photograph's surface.
- When examining your documents, make sure the table and surrounding area is clean.
- Mark items only with a #2 pencil lightly on the reverse of your letters and photographs in a lower margin or corner. Avoid using "permanent" inks or stamps, or self-adhesive labels.
- If you cannot label directly on the item (e.g. tintype), you can label the folder or sleeve using a PigmaPen®. DO NOT use these pens DIRECTLY on your item. The ink over time can seep through the paper or photograph. If the item inadvertently gets wet, the inks could bleed.

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