

Preserving Family Photos and Papers Arizona State Archives

"Of all the national assets, Archives are the most precious: They are the gift of one generation to another and the extent of our care of them marks the extent of our civilization."

Arthur G. Doughty, Dominion Archivist, 1904-1935

The first rule in preserving photos and papers is to never do anything that you cannot undo such as displaying original photographs in a room where the photograph is exposed to light, mending a photo or document with tape, writing on the back of a photograph with ink or laminating original documents.

Events that can damage or destroy family records:

- Flooding, flash floods, extreme rainfall
- Wildfires, lightning and extreme heat, including our summer temperatures
- Biological agents (mold, insects, vermin infestation)
- Exposure to light
- Fingerprints and dirt on photographs and documents
- Mending with tape
- Laminating documents
- Failure to properly store or migrate electronic/digital records

Step 1: Getting the "lay of the land."

What do I have and what do I need to do with it?

- Do I have letters, diaries, telegrams, land deeds?
- What kind of paper is it?
- What types of photographs do I have?
- Does the collection contain negatives?
- Do I have digital images? Are they scanned or born digital?
- Look for preservation issues

Preservation Strategies

- Examine the condition of materials
- Remove containers and materials that are unsafe for the storage of historic materials
- Promote storage conditions for the collection that will help preserve and keep it safe and in good condition
- NEVER do anything you can't undo!

Step 2: Create a plan for preservation issues.

- Can I deal with the issue?
 - *Can I unfold the letter without tearing it?*
 - *Can I clean the document without damaging it?*
 - *Can I remove the image from the frame without harming it?*
 - *Will I be able to read that CD in a few years?*

Are damaged photographs or documents valuable enough to justify a professional conservator?

Preservation Supplies for photos and documents

- Alkaline*/lignin free file folders
- Alkaline*/lignin free paper for interleaving
- Archival storage boxes (ideally)
- Mylar enclosures for photographic prints (view-ability)
- Mylar enclosures for fragile or damaged paper
- Number two pencils and a good soft vinyl eraser
- A dust brush with soft bristles
- Microspatula
- Flattening weights

* Except with photographs

Do you have photographs that are:

- Torn?
- Beginning to adhere to the enclosure?
- In frame and needs to be removed?
- The color is starting to fade?

Preserving Photographs

- Pick up photographs with two hands; wear gloves
- Purchase photographic enclosures from a recognized supplier of archival quality materials
- Prints and negatives: “fold lock” enclosures
- Glass plate negatives: glass plate folders
- If you have photographs in a scrapbook, the pages can be acidic so interleave the pages with acid-free paper
- Newspaper clippings are also highly acidic, if possible remove them from close association with photographs
- Remove photographs from photo albums if you can do so without damaging the photograph
- Remove photographs from inappropriate enclosures such as glassine enclosures or magnetic photo albums

Placing photographs in folders and boxes

- Once you have moved photographs from improper enclosures, place them in acid-free folders and acid-free boxes.
- If photographs cannot be removed from “cardboard” frames and won’t fit in an enclosure, “interleave” them with acid-free paper before placing them in a folder with other photographs

Storing Photographs

- Store at:
64° -68° F (black and white prints and polyester negatives).
- 60° F or less (color prints, cellulose nitrate, cellulose acetate and chromogenic dye). Freezing is best for nitrates.
- 30% -40% RH (glass plate negatives) 20% -40% RH (others – colder temperatures can minimize damage rate of high humidity)
- Photographs are susceptible to damage from high, low and changes in relative humidity.
- Store film based negatives in buffered enclosures, other material use unbuffered enclosures.
- Do not use magnetic or self-adhesive albums to store photographs, as this will damage the photographs.

Scanning

- Why scan photographs or documents?
- Is scanning a preservation technique?
 - In what way?
- What do I need to think about before I embark upon a scanning project?
- The smaller the image, the higher the dpi for a clearer scan

File Stability

- CD manufacturers insist that CDs last 99+ years.
 - That is just the plastic. There is no reliable data that states that the information will still be on the CD in 99 years let alone that we will have the technology to read the CD in 99 years
- Scanned images are only considered a “preservation” tool in that they reduce the number of times that you must handle the actual photograph.
- Remember that scanned photographs are just a series of 1s and 0s in an electronic file and are susceptible to corruption.

Do you have documents that are:

- Torn
- Acidic
- Stapled
- Paper clipped
- Folded
- Dirty
- Mended with pressure sensitive tape (scotch tape, etc.)

Preserving Documents

- Torn or acidic documents can be housed in a mylar enclosure to prevent further damage
- Remove staples and paper clips with a microspatula
- Folded documents need to be relaxed (humidified) in a humidification chamber
- Once relaxed the paper needs to be flattened

- Place documents on a flat, stable surface
- Weight the document down
- Cleaning Documents
 - Put the document on a flat, clean surface
 - Use a soft, flexible eraser such as an art gum eraser or a drycleaning eraser bag
 - Start at the outside edge and gently rub
- Brushing dirt from a document
 - Use natural bristle brush
 - Brush in the same direction from the center of the document out
- Do not attempt to remove pressure sensitive tape from documents. This requires highly specialized treatment and should be done by a reputable conservator

Storing documents

- Letters, deeds, diaries, journals and other paper documents should be stored in acid-free folders and acid-free boxes
- Folders should be no more than an inch thick when filled with papers
- Boxes should not “bulge” (a result of too many folders per box)
- Small diaries or journals can be stored in boxes that allow the item to be stored flat
- Store in a dark, dry area with humidity no higher than 35%
- Ideal temperature is 70 degrees
- Most important thing is to prevent large fluctuations in both temperature and humidity
- When the humidity reaches 50% or above, mold will bloom

Digitized and Born Digital Records

- Born digital records are inherently fragile
- The ability to read the digital record is dependent on software and hardware
- Data decays over time
- Physical and chemical deterioration to the medium (CD, DVD) can make the data unreadable

Optical Disks – CDs, DVDs, and MOs:

- Store at 40° -68° F, 20% and no more than 50% Relative Humidity
- Handle disks by the edge and center. Do not touch the surface
- Do not write or apply label to surface of the disk. Chemicals in the ink and adhesive can leach into the disk and cause damage. Apply label or writing to the clear center portion of the disk
- Store disks in cases in which the surface of the disk does not touch the surface of the case
- Store disks vertically
- The life expectancy of CDs and DVDs varies greatly from 2 years and up
- Magnetic Optical and Ultra Density Optical disks have greater life expectancy, but not forever

Migration and Digitization

- Nothing keeps forever
- Have a migration plan
- Keep original if possible

If you go to YouTube to view preservation videos, make sure you are watching someone who is from a reputable institution such as the Smithsonian Museum, the National Archives or one of the State Archives

You tube videos from the Smithsonian on caring for a preserving photographs

Removing photos from a sticky album. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcDlbNi-9D0>

How to store your photographs <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=geqVsJJK5rs>

You Tube video on Basic Paper Conservation

Illinois State Archives: Basic Paper Conservation
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcb3JwPjDjA>

Additional Questions about preserving photos and documents?

Contact the State Archives

- archives@azlibrary.gov
- 602-926-3720
- <http://www.azlibrary.gov/arm>
- Conservator: Siegfried Rempel
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