

Preserving Family Photos, Photo Stories, and Documents - Handout

SMCGS Meeting - 21 November 2020

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PURPOSE: Protect and preserve your family photos, letters, documents, and their stories for future generations.

MOST IMPORTANT is to move your family photos and documents into acid-free enclosures and storage boxes in a climate-controlled area away from light, heat, and moisture.

BASIC PRESERVATION STEPS:

- 1. Gather archival supplies: acid-free photo/document enclosures, binders, boxes, pencils/pens, etc.**
 - 2. Gather family photos and documents.**
 - 3. Write photo/document's story information: date, names, occasion, location, anecdote, etc.**
 - 4. Scan important photos and documents. Store files on hard drive, flash drive, DVD, and/or cloud service.**
 - 5. Transfer photos/documents to acid-free enclosures, binders, and boxes.**
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1. GATHER ARCHIVAL SUPPLIES – see RESOURCES at end for where to purchase

1.1 Use acid-free or inert enclosures to protect your photos/documents from insects, dust, and general pollution.

1.2 Terminology

Acid-free	Material with pH of 7.0 or more at time of manufacture.
Archival	No specific meaning. Intended to protect historical items.
Bond paper	Acid-free, often 25% cotton stock, used to photocopy and interleave, durable, pH 8-8.5.
Buffered	Acid-free paper, with added 2-3% calcium carbonate to raise pH level.
Interleave	Placing sheets of material between photos/documents for protection.
Lignin-free	Lignin is an acid in wood pulp which breaks down paper and causes yellowing in newsprint.
PAT	Photo Activity Test. International standard for testing archival quality of material.
Polyester	Good stiffness and density for interleaving or using a protective sleeve.
Polyethylene	Not completely transparent material, but economical. Stable for archival.
Polypropylene	Transparent sleeves and binder pages, many sizes available.
PVC	Vinyl or polyvinyl chloride. Do not use as PVC releases gas and causes damage.

1.3 Sample supplies to gather for archiving photos/documents:

- 20 lb. bond paper. General use for printing, mounting photos. 25% cotton, buffered, lignin-free, acid-free.
- Polypropylene 3-ring sleeves, assorted. 4x6 photo pages, 8x10 photo/doc pages.
- Polyester 3-ring sheet protectors with sturdy insert for fragile items (newsprint, brittle documents).
- Corner protectors (acid-free) for mounting photos on bond paper.
- Three-ring binders, and divider pages.
- Polypropylene envelopes for photos/documents (then place in file folders).
- File folders for photos/documents, acid-free.
- Document storage boxes for file folders and binders, acid-free. Flip-tops are nice options.
- Photo storage boxes for basic storage of photos not going into binders or other albums.
- Archival ink pen (e.g. Pigma) for marking clear pages, file folders, boxes.
- Pencils, No. 2, for old b/w photos. Stabilo All: black, for plastic-coated color photos; white, for black pages.
- Soft photo brush for cleaning lint from photos.

2. GATHER FAMILY PHOTOS and DOCUMENTS

2.1 Gather photos and documents from file cabinets, garage, attic, basement, etc.

Before handling photos and documents:

- Wash and dry your hands. Do not use hand lotions.
- White cotton gloves are not necessarily recommended, but nitrile or latex could help with very old photos.
- Do not have liquids or food in your workspace.
- Handle photos/documents by the edges. Avoid touching the image portion.

2.2 Organize photos/documents into broad categories.

- Group photos with photos, letters with letters, documents with documents.
 - Evaluate original order or groupings in case there was a reason or they tell a story.
 - With letters, organize by author, then by date (avoid combining two authors back and forth).
- Keep photos/documents in scrapbooks as they are. Items can be removed later for scanning, if possible.
 - EXCEPTION: Remove photos from 1970s/80s/90s “magnetic” albums as the adhesive is highly acidic. To remember the layout, photograph the album first.

2.3 Prepare batches of photos/documents for documenting, scanning, and storing.

- Remove staples, paper clips, rubber bands, sticky notes, and tape from photos. These will damage materials.
- Photos: Select main photos to scan and place in a binder that tell the overall family history.
 - Photos that have duplicate information, or might be less significant, can be filed in a photo box.
- Letters/documents: Most likely you will scan all letters and documents and store in folders or enclosures.

3. WRITE STORY INFORMATION OF PHOTO/DOCUMENTS

3.1 Capture the family stories in your photos and documents. Write down what you know and leave a record.

- Create a “Story Template.”
 - DATE of photo/document
 - FAMILY NAME (broad category)
 - INDIVIDUAL NAMES in the photo, or AUTHOR/NAMES in letter
 - OCCASION, e.g. trip to Yosemite, 50th anniversary
 - LOCATION, e.g. place, town/city, state, country
 - YOUR NAME and DATE as the provider of the information
 - ADDITIONAL NAME who identified the photo or wrote on the original’s back
 - NAME of SCANNED FILE or GROUP (unscanned photos in a box)
 - File/group names allow scanned/physical photos to be matched with story
 - STORY ANECDOTE, e.g. short or amusing story about the photo/document
- Fill in template on computer or handwrite using a No. 2 pencil or archival pen. Use bond paper.
- Keep printed story with photo. Place in clear sleeve with photo or on back of the photo (use photo corners).
 - For groups of photos in a photo box: place story on an archival card with the group.
 - Archival companies have solutions for grouping photos into easily labelled envelopes or sleeves.
- Use photo corners (not yellow stickies, glue, tape, staples, paper clips) to attach descriptions to photos.
- Writing on the back of photos.
 - Some say never write on the back of photos, especially with ink of any kind.
 - Some are OK with writing carefully along the edges of a photo, never in the center or with pressure.
 - If you do write on the back of photos, use these pencils:
 - For old, fiber-based photos: No. 2 pencils.
 - For more recent plastic-coated photos: Stabilo All black, red or white pencils.

Date:	_____
Family Name:	_____
Names:	_____
Occasion:	_____
Location:	_____
Info provider names/date:	_____
Scanned filename:	_____
Story anecdote:	_____

4. SCAN IMPORTANT PHOTOS AND DOCUMENTS

4.1 Scanning your important photos will both archive and broaden who sees and knows your family stories. They can be shared through email and social media, digitally edited, and printed at different sizes. Many companies are available to scan your photos and documents for you. Or you can scan them yourself.

4.2 File Name convention.

- Develop a convention for naming your scanned photos and documents. Consistent usage is key.
 - How will you search for particular photos/documents. By date? By Family name?
- Go from general to specific.
- Dates: use YEAR-MONTH-DAY, use XXs for unknown dates, or “circa” for approximate dates.
Examples: 1937 0324. 193X. 1937 03XX. 1930 circa (ca or c).
- ID: Family Name, Individual Names, Occasion, Location, Letter/Will/Deed, Version.Filetype (e.g. jpg, pdf).
- Version #: When you edit photos, you may wish to track the version, v1, v2, final, original.
- Scan #: To scan a group of photos in order to preserve context, label the sequence Scan 01, Scan 02.
- Example:

Date_Family Name_ Individual Names_Occasion_Location_Ltr/Will/Deed_Version#_Scan#.filetype
1937 0324 MacInnis Earl May Family Trip Boulder Dam Scan 01.jpg

4.3 File storage preparation. Scanned photos and documents create large files. Have plenty of disk space, hard drive, or cloud storage available.

4.4 Photo preparation

- Prepare your work space
 - Wash and dry hands. For better handling, it’s OK not to wear gloves.
 - Clean scanner surface. Spray lens cleaner on a lint-free cloth, then clean scanner glass.
- Handle photos by the edges, remove paper clips, staples, rubber bands, etc.
- Clean photo surface with a soft brush (cloth can scratch the surface).
- Remove photos from frames and albums, if possible to do without damage.
 - Photograph the frame or album first so the photos can be returned to the right place.
 - Albums: if possible, remove the photo from the album to scan, or remove the whole page. Last resorts are to place the album on the scanner or photograph the pages.
 - Do not remove very old photo types from their cases, e.g. daguerreotypes.
- Scan photos in groups. A good start is to organize them chronologically.
- Scan letters and envelopes, save multiple pages in a PDF file.

4.5 Scan settings

These are general suggestions for creating digital archives, digital editing, and printing. A good resource for more detailed information is Wayne Fulton: <https://www.scantips.com/>

- Black/white vs. Color setting: Scan all images in color, allows for more options later.
- Resolution. DPI (dots per inch for print).
 - 300 DPI: Good for letters. OK for reprinting a photo the same size as the original. Not for enlarging.
 - 600 DPI: The standard for most photo scans, printing, and most enlargements (to 8”x12”, for example)
 - 1,200 DPI: for small photo (2”-3”) scans, and to print enlargements of small photos
 - 1,200 – 2,400: for important photos
 - 3,000 DPI: for slides

NOTE: Scan calculation for a 4x6 photo: (4”x 600 DPI) x (6”x 600 DPI) = 2400 x 3600 pixel dimension. A 4”x6” photo scanned at 600 DPI can be enlarged to 8”x12” print with no quality loss (300 DPI typical print resolution).

4.6 Select a file format to save your scanned images.

- TIFF file format - Photos
 - Uncompressed file format so no image data is lost. Large files that use lots of memory.
 - Best image quality for important archival images. Not supported everywhere. Mainly for print.

- JPG file format - Photos
 - Compressed file format. Smaller files than TIFF. JPG files degrade with each edit/save.
 - A standard, everyone uses JPG. For emailing, posting online, or printing.
- PDF file format – Letters and documents
 - A format for documents which allows multiple pages to be saved in a single file.
 - A standard, widely used. For emailing, posting online, printing, and archiving.

4.7 Save scanned photo/document files in multiple locations

- The “3-2-1 Rule:” Have 3 copies, in 2 places, 1 off-site.
 - Options: Hard, portable, flash drives, DVDs (archival 75-year life, 4.7GB), cloud service (off-site).
- It’s suggested to re-write your files to new storage every 3-5 years to keep current with latest technology.

4.7 Metadata, descriptive data that can be added to your photo

- Many photo editing programs offer Metadata capability.

5. TRANSFER FAMILY PHOTOS/DOCUMENTS TO ACID-FREE ENCLOSURES, BINDERS AND BOXES.

5.1 Protect your photos/documents from insects, dust, and pollutants that may cause damage. Store your physical photos and documents in quality inert or acid-free enclosures.

Photo or Doc → Polyester-type Sleeve or Acid-free Paper Folder → Acid-free Binder → Acid-free Box or Shelf

- Separate different types of material.
 - Store negatives separately from photo prints.
 - Store newsprint by itself, it’s very acidic. Some say scan a newspaper clipping and then discard it.
 - Store cyanotype (blueprints) and dye transfer images with non-buffered paper.
- Do not take old albums apart, interleave pages with acid-free, buffered bond or tissue paper.
- Do not use yellow stickies, paper clips, staples, tape, or rubber bands as they may damage items over time.
- Keep photos/documents FLAT in archival sleeves and folders.
- Unfold letters and store alongside envelopes.
- Do not overstuff file folders with photos/documents. If storing upright, snug is OK so they do not bend.
- Use pencil or archival ink pen to write on folders and boxes.
- Use acid-free photo corners in albums, never glue or use other stickies with photos/documents.

5.2 Store in your house where climate is controlled; not in attics, garages, basements where temps fluctuate.

- Well-ventilated area with circulating air (to prevent mold growth), with low humidity.
- Temperature below 75 degrees F. Cooler is better.
- Keep out of direct sunlight, store away from light.
- Keep off the ground and away from heating or cooling vents.

RESOURCES:

Some companies that offer archival supplies:

Archival Methods: archivalmethods.com

Exposures: exposuresonline.com

Gaylord Archival: gaylord.com

Hollinger Metal Edge: hollingermetaledge.com

Light Impressions: lightimpressionsdirect.com

University Products: universityproducts.com

Some helpful websites (current as of 15 November 2020):

<https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives>

https://www.calarchivists.org/Publications/Preserving_Your_History

<http://www.ala.org/alcts/preservationweek/advice/flatteningphotos>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/08/smarter-living/how-to-preserve-your-family-memories-letters-and-trinkets.html>

<https://www.scantips.com/>