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Preserving Family Documents and Photographs

How do I preserve my family papers and photographs?

Preservation of paper and photographs requires proper storage and safe handling practices. Your family documents will last longer if stored in a stable environment, similar to that which you find comfortable for yourself: 60-70 degrees F; 40-50% relative humidity (RH); with clean air and good circulation. High heat and moisture accelerate the chemical processes that cause brittleness and discoloration of paper and deterioration of photographs. Damp environments may also result in mold growth or be conducive to pests that use the documents for food or nesting material. So the central part of your home provides a safer storage environment than a hot attic, a damp basement, or a garage.

Light is also damaging to paper and photographs, especially light with high proportions of ultraviolet such as fluorescent and natural daylight. The effects of light exposure are cumulative and irreversible; they promote chemical degradation and fade inks and dyes. For this reason, permanent display of valuable documents is not recommended. Photocopies, scans, or photographs of documents can be used as substitutes.

Family papers should be stored in appropriate-sized enclosures, such as a folder, box, portfolio, etc., that will provide physical protection as well as protection from light and dust. The enclosure itself should be made of stable permanent quality materials that will not contribute to the document's deterioration. See Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler's "Preservation of Archival Records: Holdings Maintenance at the National Archives", www.archives.gov/preservation for information on storage and handling.

How can I safely mount my documents, memorabilia, and photographs into albums or scrapbooks?

The method you use to assemble scrapbooks, photograph albums or memory books can enhance the preservation of the items or can cause irreversible damage. Avoid mounting with the following materials: white glue, rubber cement, pressure-sensitive tapes and films, staples, or hot glue-gun adhesives. These materials do not age well and can physically damage and/or discolor paper and photographs. Avoid albums with self-stick pages ("magnetic pages") as well, because of the adhesive used on the mounting page. There are several safe alternatives for mounting. Valuable items such as birth certificates, family letters, and photographs should be mounted without the use of glue or other adhesives. Instead, use envelopes and sleeves made of stable plastics such as polyester, polyethylene and polypropylene to hold the materials and as album pages. An acceptable alternative mounting method uses corners made from the same stable plastics or paper.

Plastic and paper corners used to mount photographic memorabilia should be made of a material that has passed the Photographic Activity Test (PAT). The PAT is a test that determines whether or not a storage material will cause fading or staining of photographs. The PAT test method is outlined in the International Organization of Standardization (ISO) standard named ISO 18916:2007, Imaging Materials -- Processed Imaging Materials -- Photographic Activity Test for Enclosure Materials. Many manufacturers test their products with the PAT and advertise storage materials that have passed the PAT.

Paper corners should also meet the standard for permanent paper ANSI/NISO Z39.48, Permanence of Paper for Publication of Documents in Libraries and Archives. This standard specifies the characteristics of paper that is long lasting and will not harm other documents with which it is in contact.

How should I frame and display my photographs and documents?

Decorative frames, available at many stores, are appropriate for everyday snapshots. However these frames either lack a mat or spacers to keep the document or photograph from contact with the glass, or have a poor-quality acidic paper mat or backing. Unfortunately, many unmatted photos have been damaged or permanently stuck to glass when fluid seeped between the glass and photo. This fluid may come from liquid cleaner sprayed on frame glass or beverages spilled near the frame. Never use liquid cleaners around photographs and artwork. Many cleaners are corrosive and can cause immediate fading and staining if they, or their vapors, come in contact with the photograph.

Important family photos or photographic artworks should be matted using museum-quality matboard for the window mat and the backboard. The matboard should have passed the ISO 18916:2007 Photographic Activity Test (PAT). Photo corners are ideal for securing a photo to a backboard when the window mat will cover the photo edges and hide the photo corner. But do not use photo corners on unmounted prints larger than 20 x 24 inches, or very fragile photos. Large or fragile photos should be attached to the backboard with paper hinges adhered to the back top edge of the photo and then secured to the backboard. Hinging should be left to a qualified framer or conservator. Dry mounting should be avoided.

Once a treasured photograph or document is properly matted and framed, do not display it in direct sunlight, under a bright lamp, near a heat source, or in a damp location, such as a basement, kitchen or bathroom. Studies show that typical diffuse home lighting is not harmful over the short term, but light will slowly cause fading and other irreversible damage. So avoid extensive display of treasured documents and photographs that you intend to pass on to future generations. Instead, make and display a duplicate copy while the original is kept safe with other family keepsakes.

Selected Sources of Supplies

Archival Methods, www.archivalmethods.com 866-877-7050

Conservation Resources International, www.conservationresources.com 800-634-6932

Creative Memories, www.creative-memories.com 800-962-9580

Gaylord, www.gaylord.com 800-962-9580

Hollinger Metal Edge, www.hollingermetaledge.com 800-862-2228 (CA), 800-634-0491 (VA)

Talas, www.talasonline.com 212-219-0770

University Products, www.universityproducts.com 800-628-1912

Information about conservation practices and help in locating and selecting professional conservation services

American Institute for Conservation, www.conservation-us.org 202-452-9545

→ Will give you a list
of conservators in your
state

Visit www.archives.gov/preservation for information on preservation of archival records.

