

Organizing and Preserving Born-Digital Items

Stephanie Call, Associate Director of Archives and Education, stephanie.call@nehgs.org

If you've done any genealogical research in the past 25 years, chances are you've amassed several digital files: be it digital images, emails, audio and video, GEDCOMs, or other electronic formats. It's just as important to consider your electronic research trail as part of your family collections and think about how you're going to preserve, organize, and pass on these materials to future generations and even repositories.

Lifecycle of Digital Stewardship

The basic steps to digital stewardship are as follows:



Create, Organize, Describe

There is a strong likelihood that you create digital files on a daily basis—and probably don't think too much about it. To start applying best practices going forward, consider:

- 1) How should you create your records?
- 2) How will you be able to most easily find your record?
- 3) How will you be able to use your records at a later date?

As you create a digital record you should think about:

Organization

- File names – unique and descriptive, e.g.: scall_falconry_71912.jpg
- Folder structure – use a logical hierarchy
- Metadata – add “data about data”; often done within an photo editing software

Preservation

- Back-up - Save in different locations and in different formats
- Check-in – make sure you can still open files

Appraise and Select

You shouldn't keep every digital file you create. Ask yourself: Might I need this to substantiate a claim? Is there a legal or financial/tax reason why I should preserve this? Does this item have intrinsic or historical value which makes me want to keep it indefinitely?

Store to Preserve

There are two options for storage of digital records: Cloud storage (such as Google Drive, Dropbox, Apple iCloud, etc.) and External storage (such as flash drives, CD-Roms, external drives, etc.).

Pros and Cons of Cloud Storage

Pros	Cons
Sync data from multiple devices and access data anywhere from any device	Security and privacy concerns
Provides backup and recovery of data	File type restrictions
Inexpensive storage option for small amounts of data	Companies and services are not permanent and can change

Pros and Cons of External Storage

Pros	Cons
You can store an unlimited amount of data outside of your device	Drives can be damaged or lost
Provides a backup for your data if your device is lost or damaged	Data can rot and decay over time
Cheaper than cloud storage	More expensive than an internal drive of equal capacity

Actively Preserve

- ✓ Back up your files- Save them in different locations and in different formats.
- ✓ Do an annual check-up on your files- Pick a date and make it an annual occasion, where you schedule time to open your files and make sure you can read them.
- ✓ Copy files and/or Save to the latest version - Every five years, or whenever there is a software update, save your files to the newest version. If you no longer actively use that file, save it in a preservation format (see end).
- ✓ Practice the 2/2/2 Rule: 2 copies, 2 different formats, 2 different storage locations

Access, Re-Use, Transform

What is the future for your digital files? Do you want to give these digital records to family or an archive?

Following best practices as outlined above:

- Create a summary description of the files, with your inventory
- Create intelligent file names that include date, location, and context
- Use open formats (PDF, TIFF, JPEG)
- Provide 2 copies in 2 different formats that can be maintained in 2 separate locations
- Keep in stable and moderate temperatures
- Create new media copies every 5 years to prevent data loss
- Pass along digital passwords

Preservation File Formats

Media Type	File Format	Preservation Format	Access Format
Audio	AC3, AIFF, MP3, WAV, WMA	WAVE	MP3
Email	PST	MBOX	MBOX
Plain Text	TXT	TXT	TXT
Portable Document Format	PDF	PDF/A	PDF
Raster Images	BMP, GIF, JPG, JP2*, PCT, PNG*, PSD, TIFF, TGA	Uncompressed TIF	JPEG
Video	AVI, FLV, MOV, MPEG-1, MPEG-2, MPEG-4, SWF, WMV	FFV1/LPCM in MKV	MP4
Word processing files	DOC, WPD, RTF	Original Format	Original Format

Resources

Eastman's Online Genealogy Newsletter, GEDCOM Explained [easy to follow information on GEDCOM basics], <https://blog.eogn.com/2014/05/24/gedcom-explained/>

Library of Congress, Personal Archiving: Preserving your Digital Memories [Includes step-by-step instructions for handling digital photographs, digital audio, digital video, e-mail, personal digital records, and websites], <http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/index.html>

Library of Congress, Why Digital Preservation is Important for Everyone [video on the issues that are singular to preserving digital content; requires AdobeFlash 10.1 or greater to play], <http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/multimedia/videos/digipres.html>

Modern Software Experience, A Gentle Introduction to GEDCOM [basic fact sheet on what GEDCOM is, and isn't], <https://www.tamurajones.net/AGentleIntroductionToGEDCOM.xhtml>

Photo Metadata.Org, How to Embed Photo Metadata [how-to for a variety of photo applications], <http://www.photometadata.org/META-Tutorials>

The National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program of the Library of Congress, Preserving your Digital Memories [PDF booklet with detailed information on preserving born-digital content], http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/documents/PA_All_brochure.pdf

University of Michigan, Preserving Personal Digital Files [PDF document detailing methods of preservation for a variety of born-digital content as well as information on choosing cloud storage and metadata and concepts of metadata], <https://www.lib.umich.edu/files/services/preservation/PreservingPersonalDigitalFilesGuide.pdf>

Please note that this course was originally created by Oscar Gittemeier (Georgia Library Association), Wendy Hagenmaier (Society of Georgia Archivists), and Michelle Kirk (Atlanta ARMA) and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). It was adapted for use for the NEHGS online conference, Virtual Preservation Roadshow, Class 3: Organizing and Preserving Born-Digital Items, June 2020.