

Getting Started: Surveying Your Collection

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Getting Started

As family historians we hold on to everything—from photos to letters to diaries to heirlooms to genealogical notes to receipts. As you become known as the family “keeper” and relatives pass on items to you, piles can quickly multiply. Organizing helps reduce the risk of losing your items and taking some preservation measures prevent damage to fragile papers, photos, and other items.

Before beginning the process, it’s important to establish a goal. You may be:

- Working on your genealogical research
- Writing a family history book
- Donating to a repository
- Giving to the next generation
- Downsizing

As an at-home archivist, you will start by completing three basic steps or passes through your collection:

1. Survey the collection: Identify what you have
2. Triage possible and existing preservation issues
3. Place items in proper enclosures: Do I need to re-house anything?

Surveying the Collection

A survey looks at general subject matter, identifies formats of material, any pre-existing arrangement, notes the condition of materials and preservation needs, as well as, rehousing needs. A survey focuses on the current state of the collection. A survey does NOT include organizing, nor is it an inventory. These steps will come later.

Use the survey worksheet (included in this course) to note:

- Families in the collection, including allied families
- Major contributors to the collection (who provided/created the information)
- Current location of items
- Current arrangement of items (if chronological, by family, alphabetical, or no organization)
- Current storage of the collection (number of cartons)
- Types of documents and special formats included in the collection
- Current preservation and conservation issues that will need to be addressed
- Supply needs to ensure proper storage of the collection in the future

SAVE . . .

- Genealogical research
 - Family group sheets, charts
 - Compiled genealogies, narratives
- Vital records (originals and copies)
- Journals, diaries, ledgers
- Correspondence, cards, invitations
- Deeds, estate papers
- Bibles with family records
- Educational and military records
- Scrapbooks, autograph books
- Photographs, photo albums

What about . . .

- Newspapers
 - Keep clippings of obits, announcements
 - Entire newspaper?
- Genealogical research collections
 - Pamphlets, brochures
 - Conference or class materials
 - *Weed out duplication!!!!*
- Club, church, or genealogy newsletters
 - Anything related to your family?
 - Consider keeping representative copy

To begin your survey:

- ✓ Gather all materials together in one area
- ✓ Clear a large workspace with plenty of light
- ✓ Have a genealogical chart or report handy
- ✓ Have your survey worksheet ready
- ✓ Wash your hands!

Identifying Preservation Issues

Preservation is “the practice of maintaining artifacts by providing a stable storage or display environment in order to minimize further damage or deterioration”. Preservation helps to prolong life of the collection and items. At NEHGS we store all paper and other materials in archival quality enclosures from archival supply vendors so we can preserve the materials from any harm or further deterioration.

Conservation is to take action to prevent deterioration or loss through some sort of treatment done by a professional conservator. A conservator may conduct specialized cleaning or remove agents that cause damage. They may repair book binding or repair badly damaged papers.

Preservation issues to consider include:

- Rust, wear, or remnants from fasteners (paper clips, staples, tape, rubber bands): Remove staples, paper clips and rubber bands from documents *carefully*. Avoid using liquid glues or metal fasteners on paper documents and photographs. Stainless steel paper clips are fine to use to clip documents together if the paper is strong enough. If some of the paper in your collection is brittle or fragile, avoid using fasteners.
- Fading and discoloration from light: Protect materials from direct exposure to light sources. Light, especially sunlight and fluorescent lighting, accelerates deterioration. Consider displaying copies of photos and documents instead of originals. If you choose to display original photographs or



documents, display them in a hallway or another area of the house away from windows or other light sources. It is always preferable, however, to frame copies and store the originals!!

- Warping or distortion from temperature: Ideal temperature is 60 to 70 degrees F but no greater than 75 degrees F. Avoid storing records in attics and basements or any area in your home that can experience large temperature fluctuations.
- Tears at folds and creases: Remove letters from envelopes and store flat. Unfold other paper documents and store flat. Over time folded documents will tear at the folds.
- Mold from humidity: Relative humidity should be less than 65%. This will help prevent mold growth and insect activity. Try to store papers in an interior room in your house away from heat and water sources.

Storage and Enclosures

Acid is a substance that eats away or dissolves things. It's added to the production of paper so that it is easy to write on. "Acid-free" paper means that the paper has a pH of 7 (neutral) or slightly above 7 (alkaline). If a paper is "acid-free" with no buffering agent, over time it will become acidic.

Lignin is a compound found in plant cell walls and provides the strength in wood. Think about those browning newspaper clippings—this is due to the lignin causing acid to the paper fibers

Buffered paper means that a buffering agent (usually calcium carbonate or magnesium carbonate) has been added to the paper pulp, neutralizing the acids. Paper that is "lignin-free" usually has a buffering agent added to it so the paper lasts a very long time.

Best Practices for Storage:

- Store books, documents and photographs in clean, insect free areas. Keep temperature and humidity moderate and stable.
- Store family papers and other ephemera in acid-free, lignin-free folders and boxes.
- Items handled frequently should be placed in plastic enclosures. Just keep in mind not all plastics are created equal. Try to purchase archival quality plastic enclosures. Look for plastic sleeves made of polyethylene, polypropylene and polyester.
- Most scrapbooks and photo albums sold commercially are not made for long-term preservation of materials. Invest in albums or scrapbook materials which have alkaline buffered paper. Interleave existing scrapbooks and photo albums with buffered paper.
- Try to keep like items together. Don't mix photographs with documents or newsprint as this can lead to problems. The chemicals from one type of paper can be absorbed by other types and cause discoloration and disintegration.
- Store oversized paper and collections flat, try not to roll or fold. If you have a large family chart, for example that is rolled, secure it in an archival quality paper tube that is buffered with low-lignin content. Make sure the tube is about two inches longer than the document. The National Archives provides a very good photo demonstration of this technique at <https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives/storing>



- Photocopy newspaper clippings on lignin-free paper or you can purchase de-acidification spray to neutralize the acidic breakdown of the newspaper. If you choose to preserve your newspaper articles and clippings, purchase archival quality enclosures from a reputable vendor. If you want to keep and store newspapers, refold newspapers along the center fold with the edges aligned.

Purchasing Archival Supplies:

Purchase your supplies from a reputable archival vendor. The cost will be more but you will be insuring the long-term preservation of your family treasures. The size and shape of the enclosures you purchase should match as close as possible to the size of the documents or ephemera you have. In some cases, you may need to order custom size enclosures. See our separate list of Archival Supply Vendors.

Online Resources

As you undertake the project of organizing and preserving your own research and family papers, it is always important to learn and understand the various methods for caring for your treasures. Here are several websites that do a very good job of covering the basics.

American Institute for Conservation, Guides for Taking Care of Your Personal Heritage

<https://www.conservation-us.org/about-conservation/caring-for-your-treasures#.WZRhjTUVjcs>

Library of Congress, Preservation and Collection care www.loc.gov/preservation/care/

Northeast Document Conservation Center, Preservation of Private and Family collections

<https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preserving-private-and-family-collections/caring-for-private-and-family-collections>

The Family Curator, hosted by Denise May Levenick, a family historian and blogger

<http://thefamilycurator.com/>

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration <http://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives/>

New York Times Article – *Tips on Archiving Your Family History, Parts 1, 2 and 3* published on May 29,

2013, June 5 and 12, 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/29/booming/tips-on-archiving-family-history-part-1.html?pagewanted=all> This series of articles covers preservation issues involving everything from old documents to cassette tapes to preserving digital images.

“In a Pile or a File: Organizing Genealogical Research”

<http://www.timeforitnow.com/genealogy/book/preface/>

