

Preserving Your Family History Research: Documents, Bound Volumes, & Photographs

Caring for Photos, Albums, and Scrapbooks

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Photographs offer a window into your ancestor's lives: what they looked like, how they dressed, their surroundings, etc. A photograph represents a moment in history. For genealogists, photographs may also provide clues to your research and even help hook the next generation of family historians. The care and proper storage of your photographic collection is crucial for your family's legacy.

Brief History of Photography (before digital photography)

Understanding the history of photography can help identify the age of an item in your collection (and by extension, offer some clues as to who is pictured). And by knowing the type of photograph you have, you can better plan for preservation and storage. Below is a brief look at a number of different formats that you may have in your collection and when they were popular.

Photo Type	Dates (years of popularity)	Basic Description
Daguerreotype	Popular 1839-1860's	a unique positive (no negative was produced); cased
Cyanotype	Released 1842	blue tint (similar to a blue print)
Ambrotype	Popular 1854-1860's	emulsion on glass with a back layer to form positive; usually cased
Tintype	Patented 1856	Wet collodion emulsion on lacquered iron plate base; sometimes cased
Carte-de-Visite (CDV)	Patented 1854, popular 1860's	created for visits to friends, family, business associates, customers; Usually albumen print; on card 4" x 2.5"
Stereograph	Popular 1850's-1920's	viewed through stereoscope for 3-D perspective
Lantern Slide	Popular 1860's-1940's	wet collodion emulsion on glass base; viewed via "magic lantern"
Cabinet Card	Popular 1870's-1880's	albumen, gelatin, and collodion emulsions; often include photographer and studio address
Gelatin Dry Plate	Popular 1880-1925	Gelatin emulsion on glass base; A negative
Platinum Print	Popular 1890's	Made to look like a platinum print
Silver Gelatin Print	Created 1874; popular 1900-1930's	Gelatin emulsion on paper; amateur photography with release of Brownie camera
Nitrate Negative	Released 1930's	HIGHLY combustible
Acetate Negative	Released 1930's	Chemically unstable; also known as Safety Film
Polyester Negative	Released 1940's	Most color photos use a polyester base for the negative
Slide (35mm)	Released 1940's	Positive image on a transparent base
Internal Dye Diffusion Transfer	1972-2008	Also known as Polaroids or Integral Film
Kodachrome II	Released 1965	Most color photos; very common

Tips for Dating Photographs

- What type of photograph is it? (see above)
 - Stylistic elements
 - Border
 - Tinting
 - Tax stamp
 - Subject matter (fashion)
- Studio/photographer directories (see resources at end)

Photo Albums and Scrapbooks

Photo albums and scrapbooks are artifacts from a previous generation; they were curated by an ancestor in a particular order. Understanding this order can provide historical context, help identify unmarked photos, and even lead to genealogical discoveries. Caring for these bound items presents unique challenges. You have to mitigate the use of various format types and materials, consider the binding and current housing of the album, and ultimately decide whether it should be separated or kept together.

When to Keep it Together

- Inclination is always to keep an item together; do no harm!
- Condition: Is it falling apart? Are the photos well attached? Is the binding intact?
- Photographer: Is it a prominent studio/photographer?

When to Take it Apart

- What are the items attached to?
 - Disintegrating paper
 - Material of album
 - Use of adhesives
- Are there threats present that will continue to damage the items within?

Documenting the Order

If you decide to remove the elements from the original casing, you will need to document the order of presentation.

- ✓ Photograph each page (including front cover, inside front cover, inside back cover, back cover)
- ✓ Have storage supplies ready if possible
- ✓ Make note of loose items
- ✓ Document one page at a time

Common Preservation Issues

Photographs of all kinds are susceptible to damage from all angles: external and internal. These include:

Internal threats

- Internal flaws - poor processing (ex: sulfiding)
- Materials used (ex: fading dyes)
- Natural chemical breakdown (ex: mirroring)

External threats

- Environment
 - Temperature
 - Relative humidity
 - Light
 - Insects and animals
 - Disasters
- Poor handling*

***Tips for Handling Photographs**

- Hold by edges with clean hands or gloves to avoid contact with emulsion
- Label enclosures instead of photograph (if compelled to label photograph write softly on the back by an outer edge)
- Avoid use of paper clips, binder clips, rubber bands, post-it notes
- Limit handling of original photos by creating and using copies

Photo Preservation Basics

- Lay items flat
- Remove fasteners (paper clips, etc.)
- Remove sticky notes, etc.
- Separate items (cased and iron photos)
- Remove from old developing packets
- Remove from frame?

Photo Storage Basics

- Store photographs separate from papers
- When using paper enclosures:
 - Need to be acid-free and lignin-free
 - Note: all storage material needs to have passed the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) Photographic Activity Test (PAT)
 - Unbuffered (pH 7) paper; buffered materials can react negatively to certain photo types
- When using plastic enclosures:
 - Use uncoated polyester, polyethylene, and polypropylene. Do not use PVC plastics
- Enclosures stored in archival folders; folders stored in archival boxes
- Environment
 - Avoid exposure to light (especially direct / intense light)
 - Protect from atmospheric pollutants
 - Most photos need cool storage conditions: maximum temperature 64°F (18°C) and maximum 50% RH
 - Color photos need cold storage conditions: maximum temperature 40°F (4°C) and maximum 50% RH
 - Avoid locations with moisture and dramatic temperature and R.H. fluctuations like basements, attics, garages, barns
 - Inspect periodically

References

Taylor, Maureen A. *Preserving Your Family Photographs: How to Care for Your Family Photographs* (2010)

Taylor, Maureen A. *Photo Organizing Practices: Daguerreotypes to Digital* (2014)

Dating Photos

Taylor, Maureen A. *Fashionable Folks: Bonnets and Hats 1840-1900* ([Westwood, Mass.] : Picture Perfect Press, c2011)

Taylor, Maureen A. *Fashionable Folks: Hairstyles 1840-1900* (Picture Perfect Press, c2009)

Photographer Directories

Gagel, Diane VanSkiver. *Ohio Photographers 1839-1900* (Nevada City, CA: Carl Mautz Pub., 1998)

McKay, William A. *A Directory of Delaware Photographers, 1839-1900 and Beyond* (New Castle: Oak Knoll Press, 2017)

Ries, Linda A. and Jay W. Ruby. *Directory of Pennsylvania photographers, 1839-1900* ([Harrisburg, Pa.]: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1999)

Directory of Maryland Photographers, 1839-1900 by Ross J. Kelbaugh

<https://www.amazon.com/Directory-Maryland-photographers-1839-1900-Kelbaugh/dp/0914931008>

Steele, Chris and Ronald Polito. *A Directory of Massachusetts photographers, 1839-1900* (Camden, Me.: Picton Press, 1993)

Select Online Resources

The American Institute for Conservation (AIC): Preservation Options for Scrapbook and Album Formats

<https://cool.conservation-us.org/coolaic/sg/bpg/annual/v10/bp10-14.html>

Craig's Daguerreian Registry: The Acknowledged Resource on American Photographers 1839-1860

<http://craigcamera.com/dag/>

Digital Print Preservation Portal <http://www.dp3project.org/>

Image Permanence Institute

Storage Guides: <https://www.imagepermanenceinstitute.org/imaging/storage-guides>

Graphics Atlas: <http://graphicsatlas.org/guidedtour/#timeline-wrap>

(Also note under “Resources” publication list and “Forms of Image Deterioration”)

Library of Congress: Preservation Measures for Scrapbooks and Albums

<https://www.loc.gov/preservation/care/albums.html>

National Park Service Conserv O Gram: Cold Storage for Photograph Collections

<https://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/consveogram/14-10.pdf>

Northeast Document Conservation Center's Technical Leaflets:

Section 5 Photographs” includes Identification; Preservation; Storage Enclosures

<https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/overview>

(Relevant leaflets also under Emergency Management, Storage and Handling, and Reformatting)

Wilhelm Imaging Research: *The Permanence and Care of Color Photographs* (PDF version 35 MB)

http://www.wilhelm-research.com/book_toc.html