

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

Surveying Your Collection

Judy Lucey, judy.lucey@americanancestors.org

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 to 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. It does NOT include organizing, or an inventory. These steps come later.

Use the survey worksheet (included in this workshop) 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,
- 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 a 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 American Ancestors 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.

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 on Caring for Your Belongings

<https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-conservation/caring-for-your-treasures>

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>