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

Class 2: Caring for Photos, Albums, and Scrapbooks

February 2025

American Ancestors
by New England Historic Genealogical Society

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Meet today's presenter

Todd Pattison
Conservator

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Nature and Deterioration of Photographic Materials

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Wide Range of Photographs

- Many different substrates
- Various chemistry involved
- Exposure to light a similarity

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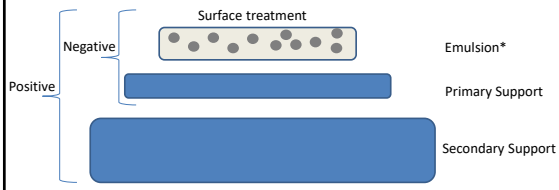
Basic Photograph Structure



*Emulsion - a binder and image material (usually silver)

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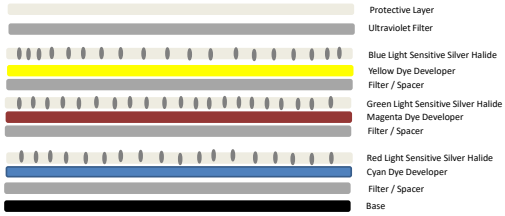
Color Photograph Structure



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Wide Range of Materials

- Paper
- Chemicals
- Gelatin/Protein
- Metal
- Glass
- Plastics

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Causes of Deterioration

- Poor quality materials
- Instability of certain processes (ex: nitrate)
- Residue or unstable chemicals – poor processing
- Unstable Color Dyes

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Poor Quality Materials

- Often used acidic material
- Becomes brittle over time
- Can break or snap when handled
- Does damage to photograph

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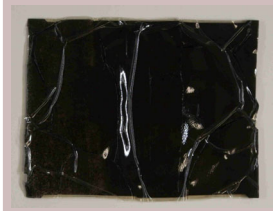
Instability of Process



- Some photographic processes are particularly vulnerable to deterioration
- Nitrate film bases need special attention as they can be dangerous

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Unstable Chemicals

- Both photographs are the same process
- Different amounts of fixer left in paper
- Both have issues but not to the same extent

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Natural Chemical Breakdown

- Mirroring
- Silver is ionized and free to move around the emulsion; reflects visible light
- Natural chemical reaction

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Unstable Color Dye

- Blue or other dyes fade resulting in color shift
- Chemically unstable material used
- Cold storage slows fading

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Nature and Deterioration of Photographic Albums and Scrapbooks

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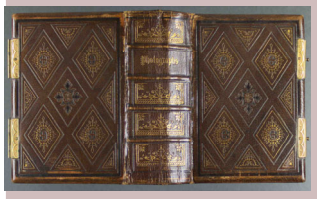
Materials



- Paper
- Board
- Photographs
- Adhesives
- Tapes
- Metal fasteners
- Covering materials

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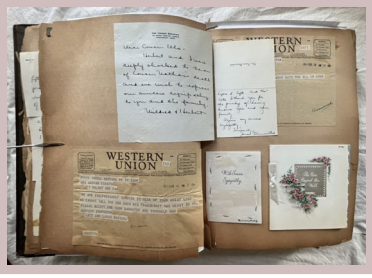
Scrapbooks are Especially Complicated



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Range of papers in scrapbooks

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Paper Quality

- Paper from 1850 to 1950 generally have shorter fibers – cheaper paper often used in photograph albums and scrapbooks
- Over time, acids break chains of glucose molecules resulting in loss of paper strength
- Environmental factors can increase this deterioration process
- Scrapbooks often have a range of different papers, unlike books which usually have a single source of paper

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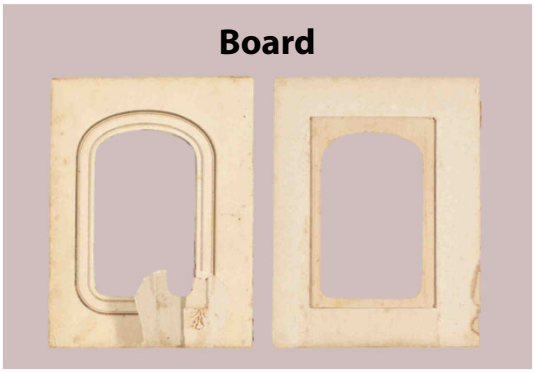
Board



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Adhesives and Tapes

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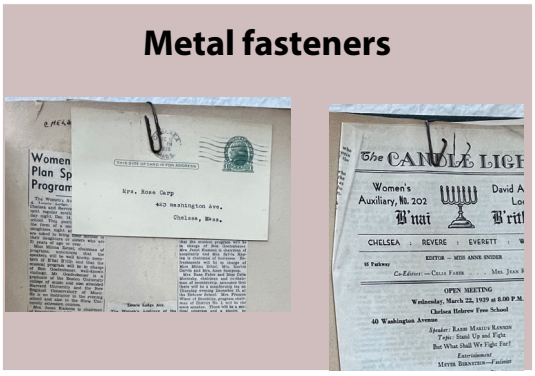
Metal fasteners



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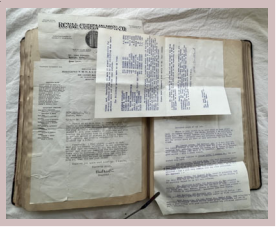
Overlapping Materials

- Objects are sometimes folded to fit volume
- Can increase the thickness of the volume, stressing the binding
- Objects can get damaged when attempting to open them
- Reformatting or imaging – difficult to capture all the information



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Binding Structures

- Can find traditional binding structures but…
- Many tied using two holes
- Some use metal screw post
- Most restrict opening of the volume and lead to damage

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Most Photograph Albums Have Restricted Openings

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Separate covers and pages held together using two holes

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Metal Ring Attachment

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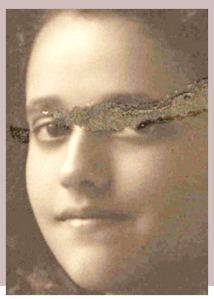
External Factors Causing Deterioration

- Heat
- Humidity
- Light
- Pests
- Poor storage
- People



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Relative Humidity

- Amount of moisture in the air compared to the total amount of moisture that could be held at that temperature
- Changes in humidity can lead to structural damage in all types of photographs

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Light Damage

- Fading from light exposure
- Permanent damage
- Certain photos are at greatest risk – albumen prints, color photographs, etc.

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Tarnishing

- Silver over a copper plate
- Silver tarnishes when exposed to oxygen
- Important that seals are intact

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Animals and Insects

- Burrowing into material, eating, nesting, shredding
- Be vigilant about checking on collections!
- Pest management

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Poor Storage

- Photos rubbing against each other
- Too many objects in one box
- Different size objects jumbled together

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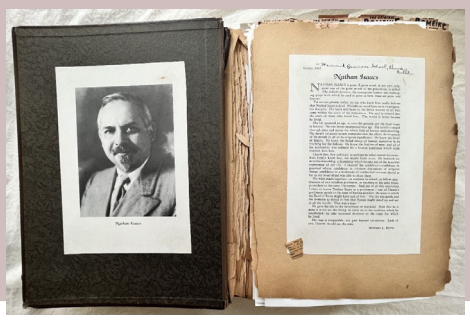
Poor Handling



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Maintaining a Steady Temperature

- Extremes in temperature can cause permanent damage, especially high heat.
- Seasonal climate changes can drastically affect your collections.
- Need to maintain a stable environment!
- Pay special attention to where materials are stored

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Humidity

- Common photographs use a gelatin layer, which softens in higher humidity
- Photos can block or stick together

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Blocked Photos

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Mold

- High humidity can also lead to mold
- The emulsion layer is particularly susceptible
- Separate from rest of your collection
- Can be a serious health hazard

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Light

- Dark storage is best
- Can minimize light exposure by limiting time exhibited
- Can also get copy made to exhibit while storing original

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Air Quality

- Reduce air pollutants
- Some air purifiers can emit gases that are harmful to materials
- Pests are attracted by food and like dusty areas; keep collection spaces clean!

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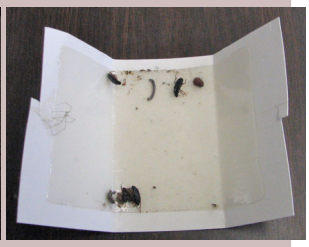
Pest Monitoring



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Appropriate Housing Materials

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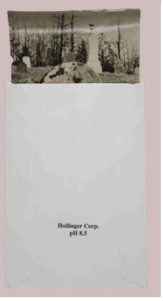
Protective Enclosures for Photographs

- Paper can be a good choice
- Choose materials that have passed the Photograph Activity Test (PAT)
- Suitable plastics: polyester, polypropylene, or polyethylene
- **Do not use** polyvinylchloride (PVC)
- **Do not use** glassine enclosures



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Durability and Permanence

- ***Durability***
  - –the initial strength of materials
- ***Permanence***
  - –the stability of those materials over time

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Storage Enclosure Options

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Storage Enclosure Options

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Storage Enclosure Options

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Storage Enclosure Options

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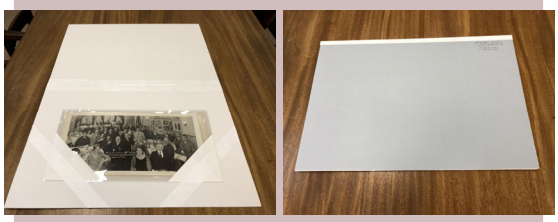
Storage Enclosure Options



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Storage Enclosure Options

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Storage Enclosure Options

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Cased Images

- Three-dimensional

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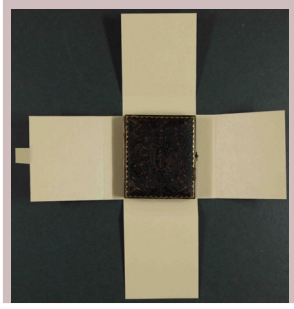
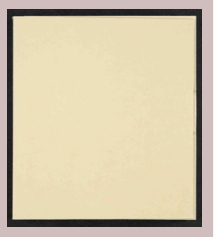
Storage Enclosure Options – Cased Images





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Storage Enclosure Options – Cased Images

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Framed Photographs

- Frame is a protective enclosure
- Often don't know the quality of materials used
- Should use UV filtering glass or plexiglass
- Frame surrogates instead of originals whenever possible

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Framed Photographs

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Framed Photographs

- Make sure photographs are not touching glass
- The emulsion can adhere to glass with moisture
- Not usually possible to treat successfully – bond is stronger with glass than paper support

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Importance of Interleaving

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Boxes for Albums and Scrapbooks

- Boxes should fit precisely to the book – needs exact measurements
- Can store other family papers in box with the scrapbook
- Can signify value
- Can label easily

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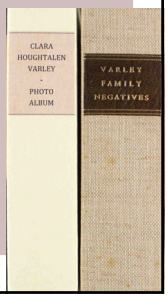
Boxes for bound materials

- Different boxes have different costs
- Phase boxes often constructed from one piece of material
- Cloth-covered drop spine boxes are more expensive
- Can send a message about importance of material enclosed



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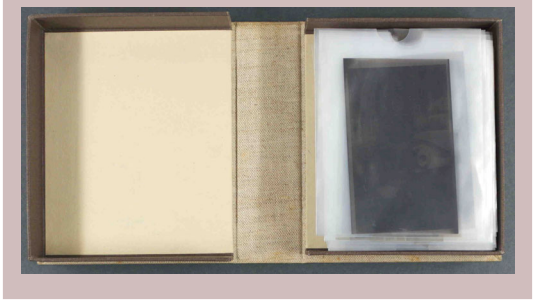
Storage Options



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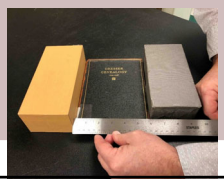
Measuring

- Need exact measurements
- Books are not always square, but boxes are
- Devices for measuring with sliding ruler
- Can use any square material and a ruler



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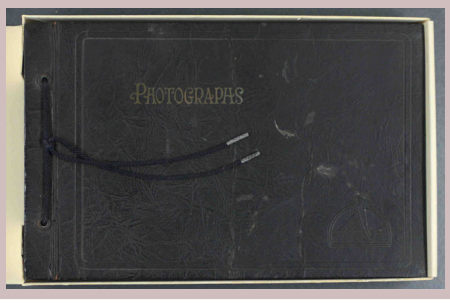
Storage Options



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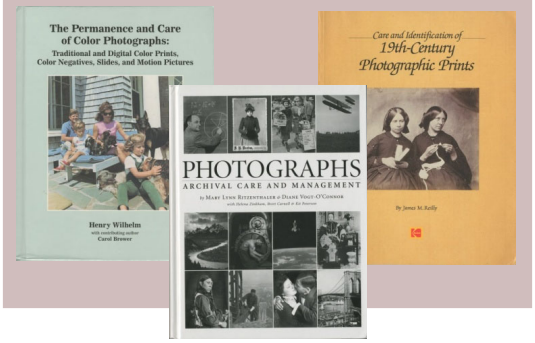
Follow Industry Standards



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Handling Photographs, Albums and Scrapbooks

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Gloves and Hand Washing

- Clean hands are good for most materials **BUT…**
  - Photographs are an exception as trace oils from skin can cause damage
  - Wear form fitting gloves – not cotton
  - Avoid touching image areas

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Albums and Scrapbooks

- Albums and scrapbooks tend to open poorly
- A wide range of materials–often fragile or brittle
- Photos may be poorly adhered and easily damaged as pages are turned

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Cradles

- Use cradles for bound volumes that do not open well
- Check for reasonable opening—every album is different— **Don't force it to open flat**
- Commercial cradles – but can use clean towels or pillows

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Reformatting

- Distribute copies as widely as possible to make sure information is preserved
- Many ways to capture information, especially with increased quality in camera phones and low-cost flatbed scanners
- May need to take Scrapbooks apart to capture all information safely
- Especially fragile items may require professional imaging

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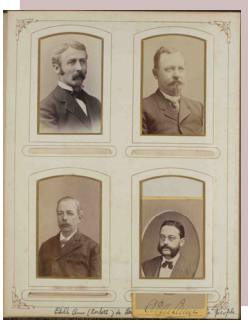
Reformatting



- Information on pages and photos
- Often information on verso
- Photos can be slipped out
- Potential for damage to photo and album if not done carefully

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Reformatting

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Imaging Cased Images

- Can have information on back of photo or case
- Packaged image removed from case

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Imaging Cased Images

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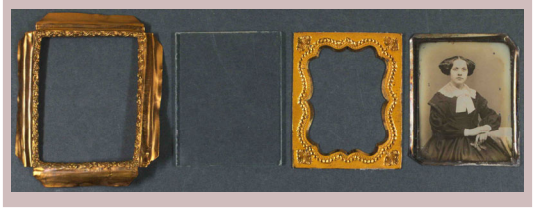
Imaging Cased Images

- Multiple parts need to be removed to get to image



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Printing Negatives

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Printing Negatives

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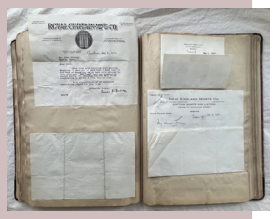
Overlapping Materials

- Objects are sometimes folded to fit volume
- Objects can get damaged when attempting to open them
- Can be difficult to capture all the information
- May need multiple images of one page



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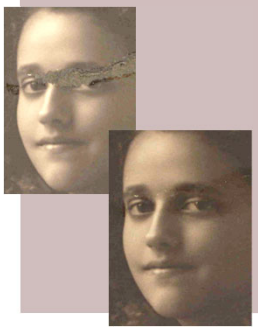
Conservation



- Why are you considering conservation?
- Why is the object important?
- Will conservation treatment achieve the desired outcome?

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Physical and Ethical Considerations

- You are changing the original artifact—need to document that process
- Items are at greatest risk so the conservator should be trained in that specialty
- Proper materials are essential
- Doesn't solve all preservation issues
- Treatments are not always reversible

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Cleaning

- Should only clean with a soft brush
- Any moisture can damage some photographs
- **Never** clean daguerreotype plates!

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Cased Images

- Multiple parts work together: preserver, glass, mat and image plate
- Seals need to be replaced

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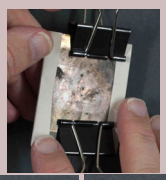
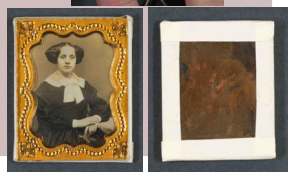
Cased Images

- Important that all edges are covered
- Keeps oxygen out
- Use special tapes
- Can clip images and glass to hold together





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Flattening Rolled Photographs

- Unroll a small part at a time to check image
- Humidify before trying to flatten

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Flattening Rolled Photographs

- www.srmarchivists.org/resources/preservation/preservation-publications/how-to-flatten-folded-or-rolled-paper-documents/
- www.postalmuseum.si.edu/collections/preservation/flattening-documents.html

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Documentation

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Documentation

Conservation Treatment Report

Item: Unidentified School Photo on board

Dimensions: 356 x 431 mm

Conservator: Todd Pattison
Completion date: 12/5/2019

Condition before treatment:
The object is housed in two plastic sleeves that are smaller than the object. The photograph is adhered overall to an acidic and brittle mounting board that has a paper layer on the recto with embossed and printed decoration. The mounting board is brittle and has broken in half horizontally; there are losses at the edges that are also the result of the brittle board breaking. The photograph is torn horizontally and is now in two pieces; damage that corresponds to the break in the mounting board. There are small losses to the emulsion layer of the photograph along the horizontal tear. There are pressure-sensitive tape repairs to the mounting board on both the recto and verso; the tape may be filmoplast P or similar "archival" tape. There is no information on the verso of the mounting board.

Treatment performed:
The object was lightly dry cleaned. The photograph and top paper layer were mechanically removed from the board. Tears in the photograph and paper layer were mended with Japanese paper and wheat starch paste. Th brittle mounting board was replaced by two layers of 20 point Bristol and the paper layer and photograph were adhered with wheat starch paste. The treatment was documented photographically and in writing. The mounted photograph was returned in a new folder.

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Taking an Album or Scrapbook Apart

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Taking an Album or Scrapbook Apart

- Inclination is always to keep an item together
- Condition: Is it falling apart? Are the photos well attached? Is the binding intact?
- Are there threats present that will continue to damage the items within?
- Is it much safer to handle as individual pages or items?

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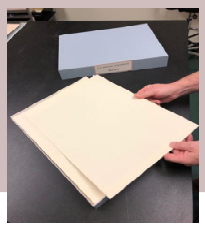
Disbinding and Boxing Scrapbooks

- Can better contain loose material
- Folders can be used to turn pages, minimizing the possibility of damage
- Disbinding and foldering can make it much easier to reformat



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Documenting the Order

- Photograph each page (including front cover, inside front cover, inside back cover, back cover)
- Place pencil number on every page or leaf
- Use sub-numbering system for loose materials
- Have storage supplies ready if possible
- Make note of loose items

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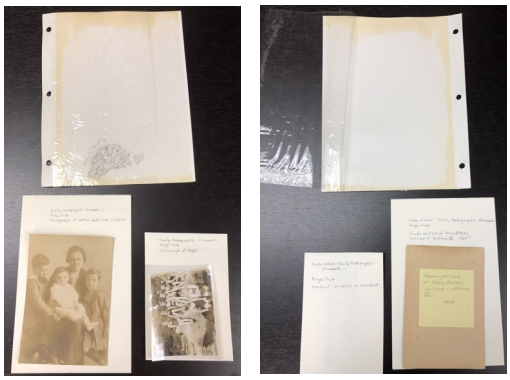

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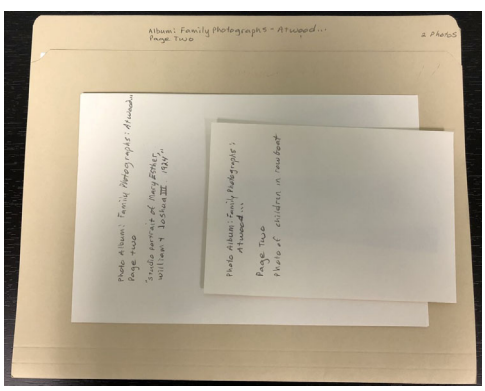

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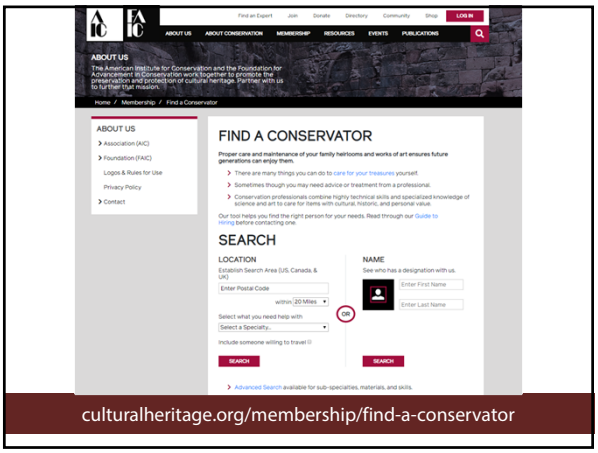

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Making Your Own Scrapbook

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Choosing Albums

- **Many commercially made scrapbooks**
- Look for permanent/durable paper, boards, adhesives and coverings materials.
- **Avoid** anything self-sticking – it will typically use the same adhesives as pressure-sensitive tape
- **Avoid** so called "magnetic albums", which use the same pressure-sensitive adhesive

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Photo Corners

- Can be used on more than just photos
- Allows for attachment with easy non-damaging removal
- Commercially made but also easy to make
- Can also use envelopes and pockets

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Plastics

- Often contained in commercially available scrapbooks
- If you have to use plastic: polyester, polypropylene, or polyethylene
- **Do not use** polyvinylchloride (PVC)

Plastic deterioration

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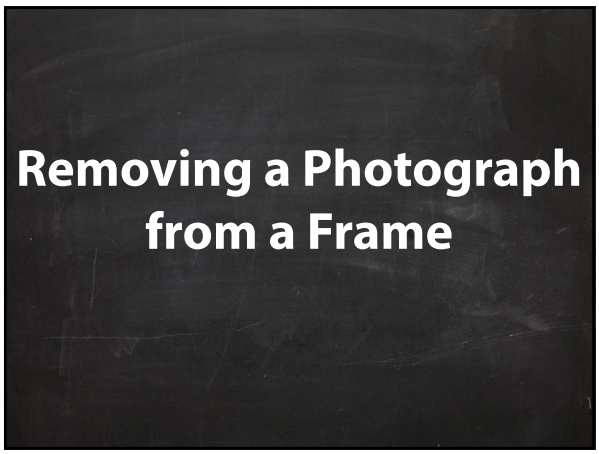

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New England Historic
Genealogical Society
Object
Accession No. 2018-136

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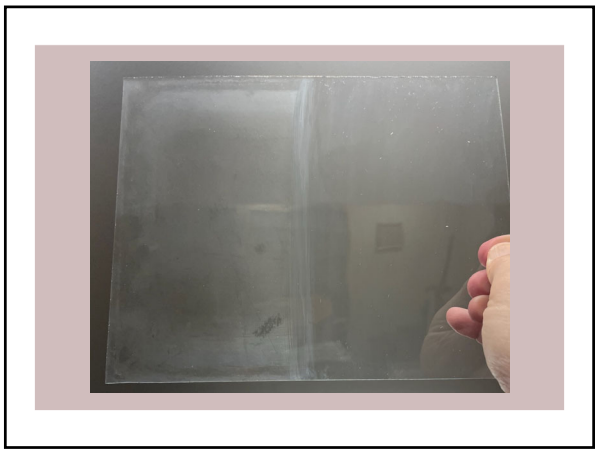

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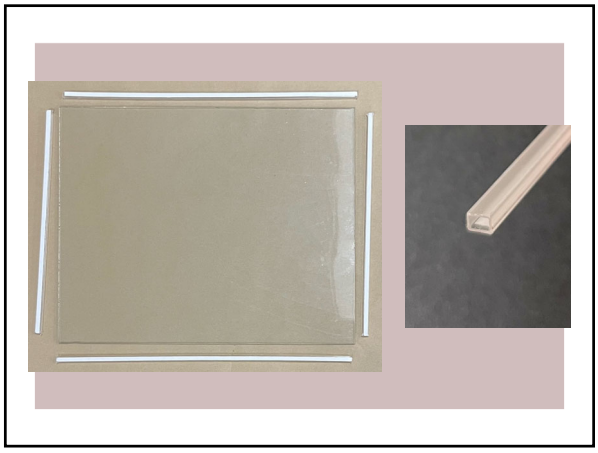

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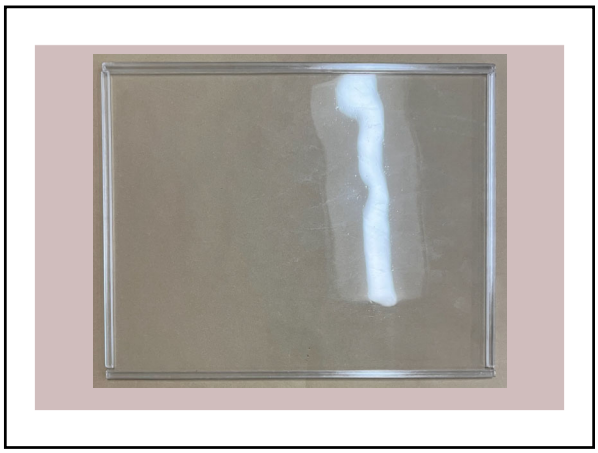

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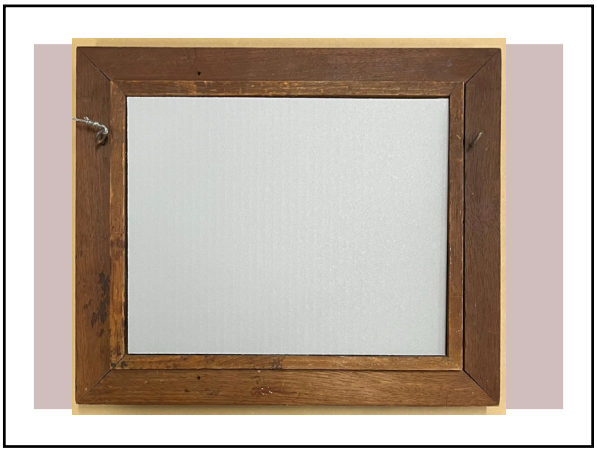

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Other Reasons to Remove a Photograph (or another object) from a Frame

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Other Reasons to Unframe

- Examine the quality of the matting
- Conservation assessment of the object
- Find out if any information is hidden
- Replace the glazing

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Desdamona Carter
Relict of Joe Carter
Applicant for Pension

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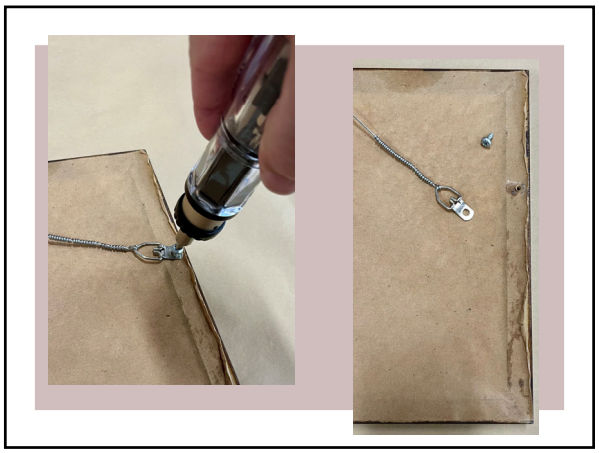

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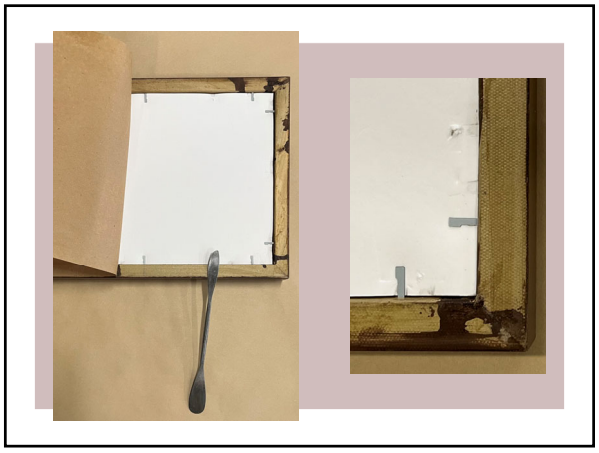

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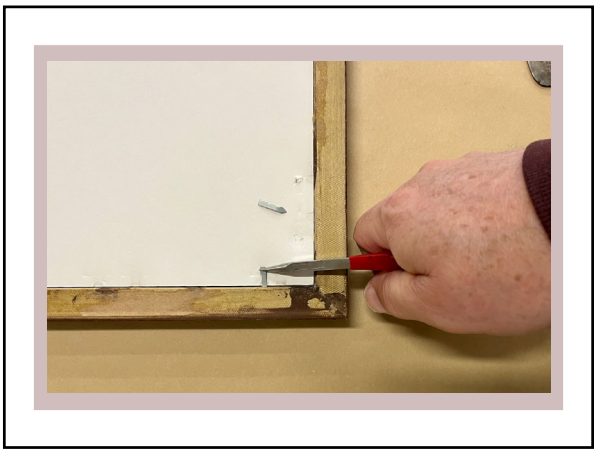

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Néshimonas daughter
" aged 10 years - goes to School " Colored girl of the period

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Desdamona Carter
Relict of Joe Carter
applicant for Pension
Desdemonas daughter
aged 10 years – goes to
School" Colored girl
of the Period
was introduced to
Genl Forrest at Ft. Pillow
So glad to see me he shook my
arm off.

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NEHGS 756

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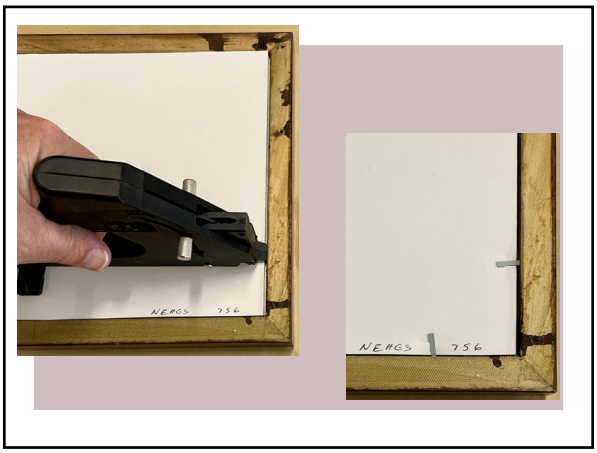
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NEAGS 756

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QUESTIONS?

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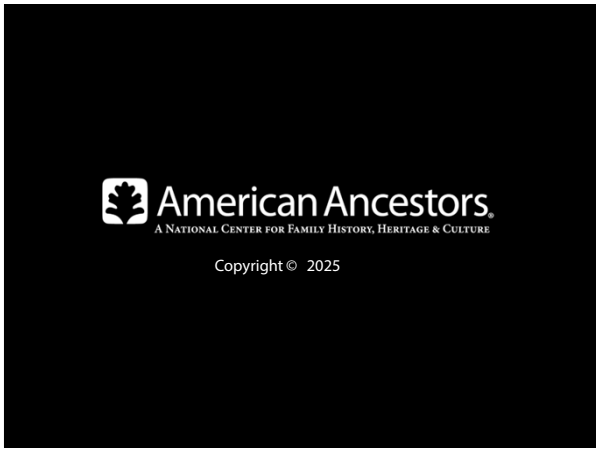
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