

**Low-Cost Ways to Preserve Family Archives**  
ALCTS Webinar Celebrating Preservation Week  
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## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

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### ENVIRONMENT

If you are unsure that a space in your home is suitable for storing family archives I suggest you purchase a hygrothermograph so you can keep an eye on conditions in that space (temperature and humidity). Dataloggers collect information electronically 24/7 and allow you to examine the information in more detail using software. NEDCC has a nice leaflet about monitoring equipment and what the options are at <http://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/2.-the-environment/2.2-monitoring-temperature-and-relative-humidity>. So does the National Park Service at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/publications/conservoogram/03-03.pdf>. If you have an idea of conditions during all seasons of the year and are confident that they aren't too damp, or too hot, then it's probably okay to keep your collections in that space.

If you have a small closet or space that you wish to use for collections storage the best way to control conditions there is to ensure it is properly insulated and sealed against rising damp and moisture movement through exterior walls. Keep your collections off the floor and away from the walls. Make sure they are carefully wrapped or packaged to limit damage from sudden fluctuations in temperature or humidity.

Silica gel packets as a dehumidifier inside boxes are only good if they go into the container when they are super-dry, and the container is sealed. If not, they will equilibrate with their environment and there will be no benefit for having them in there.

If you are storing your material in a dry environment plastic or paper enclosures are both suited. If you have something that you handle every so often that you can see in a plastic enclosure without removing it plastic might be preferred. Just be sure you have considered how you will label your object at the item and/or folder level.

You probably don't need to worry about humidifying space for storage of family archives if you live in a dry climate, but smaller collecting organizations may wish to consider doing so. Extended periods of storage in a dry climate may be less risky than in a damp climate. Just be aware that materials like adhesives and leathers can dry out and become brittle much quicker than they would in a more moderate environment.

If you have metal artifacts dry conditions are your best bet for long-term storage. Typically a small organization might keep metals on the top floor where it tends to be especially dry during the winter months when central heating is turned on.

If you aren't sure about light on your objects on display play it safe. Move sensitive objects like watercolors and color photos away from sources of natural light. Always avoid natural light being direct on any item on exhibit in your home. "Low-e" window films should block about 99% of the UV light coming through your window glass, so yes, these will help protect images on your walls from premature fading.

## ORGANIZING FAMILY ARCHIVES

One participant asked how to catalog a large family collection, and wondered if there was a database solution. I consulted with Amy Schindler, Director of Archives and Special Collections at the Criss Library, University of Nebraska, Omaha for advice on this one. Sorry to say she says there is no easy database solution, but she suggests you keep it simple. Use Excel or Google spreadsheets with columns for title (brief description), date, box #, folder #, and notes. If you are digitizing, add a column for the digital file name. Please don't use software that others will have to buy a license for in the future just so they can try to convert that version of the database software in hopes of accessing the data.

## CARE AND HANDLING

Avoid the use of hand creams and lotions that could offset to family archives. Wash and dry your hands thoroughly before handling valued collections to protect them from oils, acids, and dirt. If gloves seem like a better option, use disposable nitrile gloves rather than latex (which some people are sensitive to) or cotton (cotton gloves can make it hard to pick things up or turn pages, actually causing damage, and they are slippery!). You can buy them at most large hardware stores.

## BOOKS AND PAPER

Keep comic books, magazines and similar soft-cover material in a polyester "L-sleeve" (with the left and bottom of the sleeve sealed, like the shape of the letter "L"), or in a polypropylene or polyethylene zip-lock back with a stiff piece of best quality board stock behind your item to give it additional support. Alternatively, purchase a "4-flap" enclosure that fits the item at hand – not too big, never too small.

One participant asked if it was better to store letters from WWI folded in their original envelopes, or if they should be removed and stored flat. Folded letters can be quite bulky, and leaving them folded they may, over time, be more difficult to open. Also, pulling things out and replacing them into the envelopes, folding and

unfolding so they can be read, can cause unnecessary wear and tear. Best practices suggest that you remove the letter from its envelope and store it flat with the envelope behind it inside a folder.

Newsprint is a problem from a preservation perspective because the paper is such poor quality to begin with. It tends to yellow and become brittle very quickly. If you have clippings the best advice is to make a preservation photocopies on permanent paper, such as Permalife (see the list of suppliers, below). You can keep the originals but provide the copies for researchers to use, or to share with your friends and family.

If I had my choice between paper clips and staples I would choose the clips, since these can be easily removed with minimal damage to the artifact. If you use paper clips choose plastic coated ones or stainless steel so that rust is not an issue. Staples, if used, should also be stainless steel, so shop for these from one of the archival suppliers listed at the end of this Q&A report. Alternatively, keep papers together by placing them inside a folded sheet of paper.

Someone asked about a low-cost way to digitize newspapers. This is a bit out of scope for our webinar, and I don't know the context, but I think the short answer for you is probably "no". To do it right you need to make sure that you not only have a digital image but also a way of searching the content. For information about digitizing newspapers at the institutional or collection level, start here:

- University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University Library, 4.0 Best Practices for Newspaper Digitization, at [http://www.library.illinois.edu/dcc/bestpractices/chapter\\_04\\_newspaperdigitization.html](http://www.library.illinois.edu/dcc/bestpractices/chapter_04_newspaperdigitization.html).
- Library of Congress, National Digital Newspaper Project. <http://www.loc.gov/ndnp/>

I was asked how long one needs to keep financial and legal papers. It's not something I know enough about to answer with any authority. However, if you have a financial advisor, or a family lawyer, they would be the best persons to ask. State to state, country to country I'm sure it can vary, depending on what you should keep/need to keep, and what you should definitely throw away!!!

One viewer wondered if there were any special considerations for caring for accordion-style books with staple bindings. If the item is older the staples may not be stainless and can rust, so protect against storing them in areas that may be even slightly damp for extended periods. Depending on the quality/weight of the paper the foredge fold could tear, so handle them carefully with this note in mind.

And that lock of hair? Keep it in a sealed, plastic bag with a piece of good quality card stock inserted behind it to give the bag some support. Handle it as little as possible. Protect it, as other things, from excessive heat and light.

Um, the strangest question about books and paper had to do with preserving Wheaties boxes, with or without the cereal. If the boxes are unopened I think it's safe to leave them intact. If the box is open but not the cereal bag, again, I think just keep it the way it is. If the cereal bag is open throw the cereal away. Be wary of pests!!!

## Photos

Enclosures for use with photographs of any format should have passed the Photographic Activity Test (PAT) - <https://www.imagepermanenceinstitute.org/testing/pat>. If you aren't sure, call Customer Service and ask! If they don't know, find another product.

Most of the negative sleeves that came from the processor, like Kodak, are fairly stable, but older ones may not be safe to use.

If you are wondering about the use of buffered versus non-buffered paper enclosures for use with photographs, I think the PAT test should be the first question to consider. Buffered enclosures (usually containing a 3% alkaline reserve) should not be used with cyanotypes (or blueprints), because they are alkaline sensitive and can be bleached. Use unbuffered enclosures for color photographs as well, as they can also bleach or colors can shift. For most photographic images using buffered or non-buffered enclosures shouldn't be a significant area of concern.

Preserving color slides isn't easy. They tend to change color as they age and they are sensitive to heat. Henry Wilhelm has provided the preservation community with a wealth of information and advice in his book *Permanence and Care of Color Photographs*; the chapter on slides is online at [http://www.wilhelm-research.com/pdf/HW\\_Book\\_18\\_of\\_20\\_HiRes\\_v1c.pdf](http://www.wilhelm-research.com/pdf/HW_Book_18_of_20_HiRes_v1c.pdf). If you have family archives that include slides you might want to consider (1) having them scanned so you have copies, and then (2) keeping them stored properly in your home freezer (see <http://www.filmforever.org/> for even more info).

Mounted Photos: The secondary supports on old, mounted photos are often very brittle and can break easily if the object isn't handled very carefully. Never pick them up by a corner or an edge. They need to be handled so the weight and dimensions are fully supported at all times. I suggest that you encapsulate each photograph in polyester with a piece of heavy, best quality board behind it, one that is slightly larger than the mount. This will provide some protection during storage and use.

Scanned Photos – File Naming: Most important is to be consistent. I think the best way to name a file is by date the shot was taken in the format YYYY\_MM\_DD\_Filename.jpg (just as an example about the extension, jpg). This way they can be easily sorted into chronological order. Don't use 1975\_3\_2; use 1975\_03\_02 so they sort correctly. If you don't know the exact date use 1975\_xx\_xx\_filename.jpg. If you are using accession numbers that's also helpful. If you want to add it to the filename be consistent about the order – example: 1975\_03\_02\_1999-12345\_JohnBrown.jpg (with 1999-12345 being your accession number). You can also use folders to organize the files, e.g., the folder name can be JohnBrown. Photography professionals use photo-editing software to add metadata to their digital photos. Adobe Bridge (CS5) is one option. You can use as many metadata fields as you wish but be consistent in your naming schema. Here is one website at the Library of Congress that might help you get started: <http://blogs.loc.gov/digitalpreservation/2011/10/mission-possible-an-easy-way-to-add-descriptions-to-digital-photos/>

One participant asked about a company that can make prints from 5 x 7 glass negatives, and another asked whether tin types and glass slides can be copied. NEDCC in Andover, Massachusetts specializes in handling fragile material and can make high quality copies processed to last for many years to come. You may have a local photographer with a "real" darkroom that can help you.

For information about storing photographic slides and negatives, see the resource from the National Archives at <http://www.archives.gov/preservation/storage/negatives-transparencies.html>. A nice selection of products and systems is available from University Products and other suppliers of archival-quality supplies and materials at [http://www.universityproducts.com/cart.php?m=product\\_list&c=1667](http://www.universityproducts.com/cart.php?m=product_list&c=1667).

The Ohio Historical Society has a great Collections Blog, with a nice posting about how to care for tintypes, <http://ohiohistory.wordpress.com/2011/08/05/what-do-you-know-about-tintypes/>. Loose ones should be stored in individual enclosures.

One participant asked about photographs/negatives that can spontaneously catch fire. Nitrate film is an early film stock that is extremely flammable. Even electrostatic energy sparks can cause ignition. If you have very old

photographic negatives or moving picture film from about 1890 to 1950 you need to have a close look to see what it is you have. NEDCC has a good leaflet to assist film identification at [http://www.nedcc.org/assets/media/documents/05PH\\_01FilmBaseGuide.pdf](http://www.nedcc.org/assets/media/documents/05PH_01FilmBaseGuide.pdf).

Take a look in the archival supplies catalogs for ideas about systems for storing various types of photographic formats, and we know there are lots out there, which is why caring for photos can sometimes be so complicated.

Again, don't plan to start disassembling old photo albums and scrapbooks that won't come apart easily. Leave them as is and store them in a good quality fitted box.

## AUDIO/VIDEO

When I used the term "upright", that means on edge as opposed to lying flat. This is the best way to store optical discs and video tapes. The Home Film Preservation Guide, sponsored by the Association of Moving Image Archivists, recommends that movie film be stored *flat*. See their web site for more information at <http://www.filmforever.org/>. Their guide also includes information for the best way to freeze film in a home freezer.

I recommend reformatting VHS tapes to DVD if you choose to convert what you have to digital format. There are combo units that you can buy for home use if you have a lot you want to convert, but if you only have a few you should look around and see if you can find a small business or vendor in your area that can do the work for you. Cultural organizations should work with a professional service to ensure that their copies are of highest quality.

Paul Messier and Tim Vitale have a nice website with more information for storing videotape at [http://videopreservation.conservation-us.org/trad\\_mig/storage\\_videotape.html](http://videopreservation.conservation-us.org/trad_mig/storage_videotape.html).

## FRAMING AND DISPLAY

If you have something like a newspaper article that is already damaged, but that you'd like to display, I suggest you get it scanned or copied photographically and make a print using good quality paper. Display the copy and put the original away somewhere safe.

As an alternative to using UV filtering Plexiglas it is possible, when an item is being framed, to use a sheet of UV filtering polyester film between the glazing and the top mat, but it takes a bit of skill to set it in place so it's not noticeable. I wouldn't recommend its use if the item you are framing could lift off easily, as the film is electrostatic to some degree.

Shadowboxes are a great way to frame and display 3-dimensional objects, as long as they are made with best quality materials. You don't want the frame to cause the contents to deteriorate prematurely.

If you are framing needlework all the other rules apply: make sure your framer isn't using pressure-sensitive tape and that all framing materials are best quality. Hang it away from sources of natural light, as some yarns can fade quite quickly, depending on the dyes that were used. It's best to frame with glass so it stays clean, but make sure the needlework doesn't touch the glass. More information at <http://www.mnhs.org/people/mngg/stories/textiles.php>.

As for preserving wedding gowns this is also outside of today's program, but there was a good article in the NY Times last year that you might want to review. It's very practical and readable and I think it's offering up some good advice: [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/fashion/weddings/proper-care-for-wedding-gowns-field-notes.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/fashion/weddings/proper-care-for-wedding-gowns-field-notes.html?_r=0).

## TREATMENT/STABILIZATION

Unrolling/Flattening Objects: Treatment can be complex and advising people how to do things and be sure they do it right can be tricky, so if you have objects that are rolled or folded and difficult to open please don't force it or the paper could crack and break and the object will be badly damaged as a result. If you do want to attempt opening something yourself I suggest you work in warm, humid weather, a time when paper objects will naturally be more relaxed. You may be able to slowly, very slowly, over weeks if necessary, unfold/unroll very, very carefully, keeping the edges that you are opening lightly weighted as you go. Take your sweet time. Keep your object in that warm, humid environment the entire time. It might open for you, it might not. If not, stop and find a paper conservator that can assist you.

Alternatives to Pressure-Sensitive Adhesives: The adhesives that you use in direct contact with your family treasures should be durable and not cause damage, and should also be easily reversible. Pressure-sensitive tape, like masking tape, Scotch tape, or anything like it that sticks just by pressing on it, can discolor, dry out and fail, or get sticky and ooze over time. Most leave residues that are almost impossible to remove completely. Mounting corners are one option. For books and paper use wheat starch paste as your adhesive and Japanese tissue for hinges and as strips or pieces for doing repairs. NEDCC has a good leaflet at <http://nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/7.-conservation-procedures/7.3-repairing-paper-artifacts> with a recipe for making the paste, but you can also make it in the microwave (it takes less than a minute at full power, but watch it because it bubbles up quite quickly, so stop and stir every 10 seconds or so until it's fully translucent). Also see the leaflet Matting and Framing from the Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center at <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/conservation/treasures/pdfs/Matting-and-Framing.pdf>.

Bugs are attracted to lots of things that we store in the home – paper, cloth, foodstuffs, etc. Wheat starch is not exception, but it's not the reason for having bugs in the first place. Cornell University has an excellent web site for how to practice integrated pest management in the home. The idea is to prevent damage from pests in ways that minimizes harm to both people and the environment. <http://www.nysipm.cornell.edu/publications/homesbro/>

Cleaning Textiles: One participant asked whether textiles should be cleaned or left in the condition in which they are found. There are so many variables to consider with historic textiles, so it's best to consult with a specialist that can advise you. I don't recommend that you try to clean anything old or historic by yourself.

If you are bringing things out of a damp space it may smell funny, but you may not see any active mold. Take the time to air them out thoroughly. Please don't spray them with Lysol to reduce the odor. NEDCC has a bit of information for treatment to reduce the odor at <http://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/ask-nedcc/fags>.

## ENCLOSURES/SUPPLIES

If you want to use a plastic tote storage box to store your files it it's probably okay, but remember to keep your collections inside of folders, at least, before placing them in the box. A sealed tub is not a substitute, however, for keeping your family archives in a better environment if at all possible.

If the choice is to store in paper versus plastic boxes, in both cases buying best quality materials is a good way to promote longevity. Poor quality materials can off-gas products that may contribute to deterioration of your collections, especially if the box is sealed. Plastic can protect against moisture and wetness but not against fire, when most plastics will melt and burn. Dense paperboard can afford better protection, in some instances, against fire by slowing its rate of movement into the box's contents. Remember, too, that plastics and paperboard do deteriorate naturally over time. If your container seems compromised it's time for a replacement.

Don't laminate anything!!! Your original is now sealed in a tomb of plastic and the process cannot be reversed. It has no value. It will not last any longer with the laminate than it would have without. Put objects into plastic enclosures so they can be easily removed from the enclosure without causing damage.

I'm sorry if I was confusing about labelling. Plastic is very hard to label, that's why I prefer to use paper enclosures and write my notations in pencil. Pencil is chemically stable and lightfast and so there's very little risk of losing the information. If you need to write on plastic I suggest using an Identi-Pen, or a "Micron 5" archival ink pen, available from several of the suppliers listed below. I don't suggest using these pens on original material.

Archival Products, [www.archival.com](http://www.archival.com)

Archivart, [www.archivart.com](http://www.archivart.com)

Conservation Resources International, [www.conservationresources.com](http://www.conservationresources.com)

Gaylord Brothers, [www.gaylord.com](http://www.gaylord.com)

Hollinger Corporation, [www.hollingercorp.com](http://www.hollingercorp.com)

Light Impressions, [www.lightimpressionsdirect.com](http://www.lightimpressionsdirect.com)

Metal Edge, Inc., [www.metaledgeinc.com](http://www.metaledgeinc.com)

Talas, [www.talasonline.com](http://www.talasonline.com)

University Products, [www.universityproducts.com](http://www.universityproducts.com)

## WORKING WITH A CONSERVATOR

The American Institute for Conservation has a database to help you locate a conservator in your area with whatever the specialty you need at <http://www.conservation-us.org/>. They also have a good leaflet that you should look at titled "How to Choose a Conservator". If you just want to consult with a specialist good places to find local experts that may willing to help out at little or no cost would be at state libraries, archives and museums, and at larger research libraries, public libraries and historical societies.

## EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

One participant reminds us that it's a good idea to store your family archives at least 4" off the floor, but I prefer to suggest 6", especially if you are storing material in a basement or other space that is at risk of minor flooding.