

Top ten things you can do for your family papers

1. Provide the Right Environment

Store material in an environment that is not too hot, not too cold, not too damp and not too dry. 60 to 70 degrees is ideal, and relative humidity or Rh between 40 and 50%. Large swings in temp and particularly Rh is bad for material. Get them out of the basement and attic and into a closet, preferably one that does not abut an outside wall.

2. Avoid Light

Light causes permanent and irrevocable damage to materials. Store them in the dark. Prolonged exposure to sunlight is especially damaging to materials with color, such as color photographs, textiles, and watercolors. It is best to display a copy rather than an original. Make sure framed material is in UV filtered glass.

3. Zip It. Isolate Infested Material Immediately



If you notice something that has mold, mildew or insects in it, isolate it immediately by sealing it in a zip-lock style bag. Mold and insects can cause serious damage to collections, so the key is to contain the problem as soon as possible. Then, you'll need to resolve the issues that lead to the mold or insect outbreak (typically this means improving the environment and eliminating food sources, such as dust, crumbs, etc.); and then to clean (best done by a professional) or discard the affected materials.

4. Use Archival Quality Products

Use enclosures sold from a reputable library or archives vendor such as Light Impressions, Conservation Resources, Gaylord, Metal Edge, Hollinger, or University Products. Even then, double check the facts and don't believe the hype. Products are often advertised as "archival," however there is no standard for what is or isn't archival, so don't go by this term alone. Paper enclosures are often advertised as "acid-free," which is a misnomer. This term typically means something that is Ph neutral, or has a Ph around 7 or 8. Some enclosures are buffered with calcium carbonate, which makes their Ph around 9. The calcium absorbs acid as papers deteriorate over time, keeps the enclosure Ph neutral longer and helps preserve the paper. Do not use buffered enclosures with photographs or hand-colored prints—the buffering has been shown to accelerate the deterioration of these types of materials. If using plastic sleeves, make sure they are polypropylene, polyethylene, or Mylar. Avoid polyvinyl chloride (PVC) sleeves. A safe bet is to use photographic enclosures that have passed the PAT (Photographic Activity Test). For paper enclosures, select one that is low lignin, as lignin accelerates deterioration.

5. Never Use Tape or Glue. Never Laminate. If It's Not Reversible, Don't Do It.

There is no such thing as archival tape! Never tape, glue or laminate anything that you want to preserve long-term! Adhesives used in tape, glue and the lamination process will cause more damage over time than they prevent. If something is torn, put it in a Mylar sleeve. Professional conservators use wheat starch paste and Japanese tissue to mend tears, a completely reversible process that is safe. A good rule of thumb to follow is that if a process is not reversible, then it should not be done.

6. Label Carefully and Accurately

Use pencil, not pen (once again, reversible). While the safest alternative with photographs is to put the information on a separate sheet of paper, this is not always feasible. If you have to label something like a photo printed on RC paper, be careful. This paper is coated with resin and using a pencil will etch the surface and indent the reverse side. If writing lightly with a pencil won't do it, then use a pen with water-based, acid-neutral ink, such as those sold by Light Impressions. Label along the outside of the image on the back. To label a CD or DVD, write along the inner rim where the data layer is not located using the same type of pen. Make sure you include a question mark if you are estimating the date, author or subject of something—it is best not to mislead your successors.

7. Handle Carefully, Too



Handle items carefully, preferably by edges or margins. For handling large items, such as maps, lift them using their diagonal (kitty-corner) edges. If working with photographs, CDs, DVDs, film and other material easily damaged by the oils contained in human skin, wear white cotton gloves. If you must clean a CD or DVD, use a clean, dry cotton cloth to wipe in a straight line radiating out from the center, never in a circle. Don't wear gloves to handle most paper items, though. Paper documents are more prone to being damaged by someone wearing cotton gloves than not, because the gloves make it difficult to pick up paper. Just make sure your hands are well washed and avoid excessive over-handling. Don't eat or drink while working with material. Not only can you cause immediate damage, you may attract rodents and insects, which can cause on-going problems.

8. Avoid Paper Clips, Rubber Bands, and Staples

Paper clips and staples rust over time, causing damage. Additionally, they can cause rips or tears. Rubber bands lose their elasticity over time and will dry up and stick to material. It is best to use a folded piece of acid-free paper to keep materials together. For bulky items, such as a scrapbook which is losing its pages, you can tie it up using flat cotton "book tape" available from a library supplier, such as Gaylord.



9. Make and Use Copies

Rather than displaying originals and exposing them to light for long periods of time, it is preferable to have a copy made. Prioritize making copies of items that are fragile or which are on inherently unstable material (cheap wood-pulp paper such as that used for newspapers, most color photographs, Thermofax paper, etc.). Photocopying newspaper clippings and faxes onto acid-neutral, buffered paper is a relatively inexpensive and easy way to preserve them long-term.

10. Don't Think That Because You've Digitized It, You Have Preserved It

Did you know that floppy disks went from being 8" to 5.25" to 3.5" within a 10 year period of time? Software, hardware, file formats, and storage media change quickly and the computer industry is becoming less and less concerned about backwards compatibility. You cannot necessarily expect a new version of a software program to open an old file, especially a file more than a few years old. If you are digitizing something because you want it available long-term, you must undertake an ongoing commitment to migrate the file from format to format and from storage media to storage media.

For more information...

Stop by the Edmund S. Muskie Archives and Special Collections Library to talk with an archivist. We're open from 9am to noon and 1 to 4 pm, Monday through Friday.

...or, check out these online resources

Cornell University Library. *Digital Preservation Management*. Available at:

http://www.library.cornell.edu/iris/tutorial/dpm/eng_index.html.

An online tutorial that discusses all the major issues surrounding the long-term care and maintenance of digital assets.

Iowa Conservation and Preservation Consortium. *Tip Sheets*. Available at:

<http://web.grinnell.edu/individuals/stuhrr/icpc/tipsheet.html>.

Includes information about making and preserving scrapbooks, making a time capsule which will last the test of time, caring for audio cassettes, and making enclosures.

National Park Service. *Conserv-O-Grams*. Available at:

http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/publications/conservoogram/cons_toc.html

These pamphlets give you step-by-step instructions on how to store and care for a variety of material, including textiles, leather objects, artifacts, and stone objects.

Northeast Document Conservation Center. *Leaflets*. Available at:

<http://www.nedcc.org/leaflets/leaf.htm>.

Leaflets cover a broad range of topics, including some great tips for preserving family papers. My favorite tip is on how to eliminate mildew odor from books: "[C]reate an enclosed chamber. This is most easily done by using two new, clean garbage cans, one large (with a lid) and one small. Place some type of odor-absorbing material in the bottom of the larger can, i.e. baking soda or odor-absorbing clay kitty litter. The object to be "deodorized" should be placed in the smaller can, which is then placed inside the larger can. Do not allow the deodorizer to touch the books. The lid should then be placed on the larger can, and the chamber should be left overnight or until odor is significantly reduced. It may take many days. Leave in a cool place, checking once a day to make sure no mold is growing." NEDCC offers conservation, microfilming and digitization services.

Northeast Historic Films. *Services*. Available at:

<http://www.oldfilm.org/nhfWeb/services/services.htm>.

NHF is a local moving image archives that also provides conservation and preservation services to public and private clients. They offer film-to-video transfers, such as digitization of 16mm and 8mm film, as well as cleaning and repairs.

Stanford University Library, Preservation Department. *CoOL: Conservation OnLine*.

Available at: <http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/>.

Includes information on dealing with audio material, films, mold, and a variety of other conservation-related topics.