



Preserve Documents and Photographs

A primary responsibility of historians is to preserve original documents and photographs for future generations. There are a variety of methods to accomplish the task. The following guidelines are some general rules; links to detailed information from reliable sources are provided.

Documents

One-of-a-kind documents such as letters, diaries, invoices, receipts, ledgers, early hand-written records, and some photographs should be conserved then properly stored. Use the copies or digital images for research, not the originals.

Handling Original Documents

- ◆ Always handle original documents with cotton gloves to protect them from skin oils
- ◆ Don't mark original documents with pencils, pens, or other implements
- ◆ Don't place labels on original documents, label the storage sleeve
- ◆ Don't expose the document to bright lights or sunlight
- ◆ If necessary, mend an original with an archival product such as "Filmoplast", not self-adhesive tape.

Preserving Original Documents

The originals of many documents such as deeds, wills, and maps are kept by the County Clerk's office. Some county level offices have already digitized their collections. That leaves the one-of-a-kind documents in your office to be preserved. You can:

- ◆ Gently remove staples
- ◆ Make a photocopy on archival safe paper for your use
- ◆ Scan the document on a flatbed scanner. **Do not** pass it through a sheet-fed scanner.
- ◆ Photograph the document using a digital camera or phone.

Storing Original Documents

- ◆ Store flat in an archival safe sleeve, out of direct light, in a climate controlled room, if possible.
- ◆ Store original photographs out of direct sunlight, use a copy for display purposes
- ◆ If the document is folded, it should be carefully unfolded and preserved open as repeated folding and unfolding will create stress and tears
- ◆ Never store original documents in basements or attics.

Note: The Parks Service and National Archives have detailed information on the correct archival-safe materials for storing documents, photographs, and fabrics. See:

- ◆ <https://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/conservation/18-02.pdf> and another at
- ◆ <https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives/storing>



Photographs

Well-written descriptions of a person or place can create a mental picture but photographs provide the next best thing to being there.

Note: Before reading this topic, you may want to read, “*Identify Photographs*”.

Handling Photographs

- ◆ Always handle original photographs with cotton gloves to protect them from skin oils
- ◆ Don't expose the photograph to dust, fluorescent lights, or sunlight
- ◆ It is best not to write on a photo; but, if you add a name or date to the back of the photograph, make sure it's an approved photographic pen.

Preserving Photographs

There are several methods for preserving photographs without damaging the original. You can:

- ◆ Have a qualified photographer make a 35 mm negative of the photo which will allow you to have copies made in different sizes.
- ◆ Scan the photo on a quality flatbed scanner at 600dpi. Rather than a .jpg file, scanning the photo as a tif. file, which produces a large file, gives you the ability to enlarge the photo without any loss of quality
- ◆ Take a photo of the photo with a digital camera or phone. The exposure to the flash on older film cameras was considered detrimental to the original but professionals today find that digital cameras or phone cameras no longer present a danger. Some digital cameras will take a good photo without the flash. Test both.
- ◆ Slides are best copied using a flatbed scanner with negative and slide capabilities.

Note: Digital scans of photos or slides can be color corrected using a variety of programs.

Storing Original Photographs

- ◆ Store photographs in archival sleeves, **never** in a magnetic album, even those marked as safe
- ◆ Keep original photographs out of direct sunlight, use a copy for display purposes
- ◆ Store in a climate controlled room, if possible.
- ◆ Never store original photographs in basements or attics

Notes:

1. Some negatives are combustible and care should be taken when storing them. The book, “*Preserving Your Family Photographs*” by Maureen A. Taylor © 2001 provide details.
2. Photographs are automatically copyrighted by the photographer. Before using any photograph obtain permission to use the photograph. Attribution example: “*Used with Permission of Edward Aswad*”. If the photographer is deceased and you are unable to obtain permission from the person now holding the copyright, be sure to attribute the photo as in this example; “*Photo taken by the Stacey Harrington Studio*”.

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Storing Digital Copies Safely

You've taken the time to preserve documents and photographs through the use of a film negative or digital image. Now protect the copies by:

- ◆ Storing the film in a fire-proof safe
- ◆ Copying the digital images to a server or flash drive and storing in a fire-proof safe or a different location.

Note: Some people store images in the cloud but there is no guarantee it will not be lost or hacked.

Note: The use of CDs and DVDs as permanent storage is not recommended. The ability to read a CD or DVD may not be available in 5, 10, or 20 years. If you have stored images on these media, be prepared to move them to a newer technology.

Additional Information Resources

- ◆ Northeast Document Conservation Center— <https://www.nedcc.org/>
- ◆ Library of Congress— <http://www.loc.gov/preservation/care/photo.html>
- ◆ History of Photography— <http://library.harvard.edu/sites/all/themes/HarvardLibraryPortalTheme/timeline/index.html>
- ◆ 2009 Presentation by Ray LaFever, "Managing Your Historical Photographs"