

March 13, 2013

Preserving Family Papers and Photos

From the Preservation Division at the National Archives

This Thursday the National Archives holds its Preservation EXPO in Washington DC so you can learn more about how to preserve a whole range of media that document family history as well as our national history.

We would love to have you come. But maybe you can't be in Washington DC March 14th to visit the National Archives Building for the Preservation EXPO. If not, here are tips to help your papers and photos last as long as possible.

How do I preserve my family papers and photos?

Proper storage and safe handling practices are key to preserving paper and photographs. Your personal documents last longer when stored in a stable environment similar to what you find comfortable yourself: 60-70 degrees F; 40-50% relative humidity (RH); with clean air and good circulation.

High heat and moisture accelerate the chemical processes that make paper brittle and discolored, and that deteriorate photos. Damp environments may cause mold growth or encourage pests that use the documents for food or nesting material.

So the central part of your home provides a safer storage environment than a hot attic, a damp basement, or a garage.

Light also damages paper and photographs, especially light with abundant ultraviolet such as fluorescent fixtures and daylight. Light exposure has cumulative and irreversible effects; they promote chemical degradation and fade inks and dyes. Permanent display of valuable documents is not recommended. Photocopies, digital images or photos of documents can be substituted for display.

Store personal papers in appropriate sized enclosures, a folder, box, portfolio, etc., that provide physical protection as well as protection from light and dust.

Use an enclosure made of stable permanent quality materials that will not contribute to the document's deterioration. See Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler's "[Preservation of Archival Records: Holdings Maintenance at the National Archives](#)" for information on storage and handling.

How can I safely mount my documents, memorabilia, and photos into albums or scrapbooks?

The method you use to assemble scrapbooks, photograph albums or memory books can enhance the preservation of the items or can cause irreversible damage.

Avoid mounting with the following materials: white glue, rubber cement, pressure-sensitive tapes and films, staples, or hot glue gun adhesives. These materials do not age well and can physically damage and discolor paper and photographs.

Avoid albums with self-stick pages (“magnetic pages”) because the adhesive used on the mounting page is poor quality.

There are several safe alternatives for mounting. Valuable items such as birth certificates, family letters, and photographs should be mounted without use of glue or other adhesives. Use clear envelopes and sleeves made of stable plastics such as polyester and polypropylene to hold the materials and as album pages. Another good mounting method uses corners made from stable plastics (such as polypropylene and polyester) or from stable paper.

Plastic and paper corners used to mount photos should be made of a material that has passed the Photographic Activity Test (PAT). The PAT test determines if a storage material will cause fading or staining of photographs.

The PAT test, developed by the American National Standards Institute, appears in a national standard named ANSI IT9.16, Photographic Activity Test. Many manufacturers test their products with the PAT and advertise storage materials that have passed the PAT.

Paper corners to be used with paper memorabilia need to meet the standard for permanent paper ANSI/NISO Z39.48, Permanence of Paper for Publication of Documents in Libraries and Archives. This standard specifies the characteristics of paper that is long lasting and that will not harm documents with which it is in contact.

How should I frame and display my photographs and documents?

Decorative frames, available at many stores, are appropriate for everyday snapshots. Often these frames lack a mat or spacers to keep the document or photograph from contact with the glass, or have a poor quality acidic paper mat.

Unfortunately, many unmatted photos have been damaged or permanently stuck to glass when fluid seeped between the glass and photo. This fluid may come from liquid cleaner sprayed on frame glass or beverages spilled near the frame.

Never use liquid cleaners around photographs and artwork. Many cleaners are corrosive and can cause immediate fading and staining if they, or their vapors, come in contact with a photo or a document.

Mat important personal photographs or photographic artworks with museum quality mat board for the window mat and the backboard. Mat board for photos should have passed the ANSI IT9.16 Photographic Activity Test (PAT).

Photo corners work well to secure a photo to a backboard when the window mat will cover the photo edges and hide the photo corner. But do not use photo corners on unmounted prints larger than 20 x 24 inches, or very fragile photos.

Large or fragile photos should be attached to the backboard with stable paper hinges adhered to the back top edge of the photo and then secured to the backboard. Hinging should be left to a qualified framer or conservator.

Once a treasured photograph or document is properly matted and framed, do not display it in direct sunlight, or under bright lamps, near heat sources or in damp locations such as basements, kitchens or bathrooms. Typical diffuse home lighting is not harmful over the short term, but display in rooms that receive direct sunlight can cause rapid fading.

Light will cause fading and other irreversible damage that may become objectionable over time. So avoid extensive display of treasured documents and photographs that you want to pass on to future generations. Instead, make and display a duplicate copy while the original is stored safely in a storage container with other valued papers and keepsakes.

You can find more information on preservation on the National Archives website at www.archives.gov/preservation.