DIY: Creating a basic personal archive

Prepared by Stephanie Wright, Timelines Research Co.

By no means exhaustive, or academic, this is a basic step-by-step tutorial to begin the process of turning collections of family photographs, documents, and home movies into a personal archive. This does not cover items such as military medals, textiles or books, though the basic steps of collecting, sorting and storing in a safe environment apply.

Building an archive does not require a lot of fancy technology, or specialized equipment, the main investment is time. This is not a guide to conservation, though some of the steps you can take to preserve your collection will mean less conservation efforts down the road; additionally, special attention paid to items requiring conservation will benefit the collection as a whole. This will become obvious as you sort and begin to consider long-term storage for your items.

A lot of the items you need for this can be found at Staples or art or office supply stores; specialized items can be ordered through suppliers like Carr McLean or Light Impressions.

Goals of a family archive:

- To identify a collection of photographs, documents, ephemera and items
- To organize the collection in order to access, share and enjoy each item
- To preserve it through smart, easy storage for the longest time possible

Common enemies to the items:

- Direct sunlight
- Insects and rodents
- Adhesives
- Sulphur compounds found in wood and rubber
- Trapped moisture
- High humidity and the moulds that result
- The oils in our hands
- Poor storage methods that strain or cause damage to certain items

The steps to create a functioning personal archive:

- Gather
- Sort
- Identify
- Store
- Digitize - optional

Step 1: Gather

Tools:

- Polypropylene or an archival-quality storage container with a snap-on lid
  - How do you tell if a plastic container is made from polypropylene? Look for the recycling symbol on the bottom, with the number 5 and the letters "PP"
  - Rubbermaid has a line of polypropylene storage container
- Acid-free paper and pencil
- Archival storage bags, if needed

Notes:

This is an obvious step, but it might be a good time to contact family members who have scrapbooks, videos, loose images and documents stored away. If nothing else, gathering everything you want to protect and putting it into a single labelled container is a big help when it comes time to organize the individual items.

Consider separating anything that is mouldy – or covered in what looks like a white dust or that has been through a flood or has water damage – along with important scrapbooks that mean more kept intact than the individual pictures and clippings would if they were removed from it. Separate these items by either putting them into separate or individual containers, or even just in plastic bags for a short time. You do not want to compromise the entire collection by mixing undamaged items with ones that may have live mould spores or trapped moisture.

Use the paper and pencil to create labelled, loosely organized areas in your containers if necessary. For example, if you know a lot of unidentified photographs came from one side of your family, separate them with a labelled divider so more images can be identified as closely as possible down the road.

Store the collection in a place that is cool and dark; consider leaving a couple of pairs of cotton gloves inside the container for future use. Add to the collection as new items are found.

Step 2: Sort

You may consider combining Steps 2&3 together for your actual process, so that information isn't lost and each image, once sorted, is identified properly; even consider doing Step 5 concurrently so images are handled as few times as possible and to cut down on time.

Tools:

- A large, flat and clean space (keep drinks on separate surfaces)
- Cotton gloves, if desired

- Storage containers – use the containers from step one plus additional ones if needed
- Binders – you can get them from Staples, there aren't any that are designated archival quality but they have some made from polypropylene
- Acid free binder sleeves – ideally one per image
- If needed:
    - Specialized archival solutions for oversized items, slides or negatives
    - A small metal spatula or similarly shaped item that will help to separate photographs from adhesives such as a sticky photo albums

Notes:

This is your opportunity to establish a hierarchy, and to cull what is not important. Literally sort your items into piles that make sense to your collection. Items you may want to address later can be grouped into one container, organized loosely and left until you are ready to tackle them. Dispose of the items you don't want. Group the other images by date, content or family unit – whatever works for you and insert each one into a sleeve, and pop that sleeve into a binder.

If you are going to digitize, you may want to do Step 5 concurrently with this one and scan the images before you put them into sleeves.

For VHS cassettes, and 8 and 16 mm film reels, remove the cardboard sleeve (but keep it if it is dated or has written comments about the context or content of the film) and keep the actual reels/cassettes in their plastic canisters. Home film was not nitrate-based like professional film, so there is less concern when it comes to flammability of these items.

Scrapbooks and albums need to be considered both as unique individual items and as mini-collections of many individual items. If the album or scrapbook is of particular interest as it exists intact – for example, if it is full of handwriting and personal snapshots of a grandmother's friends who have no bearing on the current family, or if removing the images will likely destroy them, then a scrapbook might be left as is, packaged as a whole and labelled as a single item. The scrapbook itself may not last as long as the images you've stored separately. Thus, if an album is full of important images, it is important to remove the images if the album is not of archival quality. *Unless it states it is acid free or archival, assume it is not safe.* Carefully remove images from it, using your spatula, identifying if there are captions or notes associated with the images and retain that information for the next step so it isn't lost.

Slides and negatives should be put into specialized sleeves made for their shape so they aren't accidentally lost.

Step 3: Identify (and create and organizational structure, or "labelling pattern," to track each item)

You will need to develop a method to organize your project so each each image, document, etc. is labelled in a way that will be relevant to you and understandable for others, who may want

to access the archive. This labelling pattern is ideal when you can add to the collection later and have new items fit seamlessly with the old so the collection is cohesive.

Tools:

- A basic three-column spreadsheet with the columns labelled: Item ID, Description and Notes on your computer or by hand. You will be adding information to the columns as you go through your project
- White labels (one per item) and in order to duplicate the labelling system on each item as well as in your spreadsheet
- A pencil (we use pencils in archives to reduce risk of damage to our artefacts)

Notes:

Make documents retrievable or easily found. Identify them with a consistent labelling pattern and group them together in one binder, or multiple binders. If you are scanning, your digital labelling can mimic the structure of your physical organization plan that you created for your originals.

It is the first column of the spreadsheet you have created that is the most important for the functionality of the archive. The additional columns just increase the amount of information you give someone as they browse through it and also decrease the amount of handling of the individual images/documents.

For example: one project I did involved images from late 1800s to 2000s. Using two binders, I set my labelling pattern up like this series of I.D.s: 1800_001, 1900_002, 1900_003, 1910_004, and so on – the first half of my "document ID" referenced the decade the image was from, while the second part was a running total of images. It did not matter if the running total was not chronological to me so when new images were added to a decade, they still fit the labelling pattern, i.e., 1930_008, 1930_050, 1940_009. This structure also allows you to add additional information later on and to identify the image, for example as, 1900_002_portrait, etc.

On my spreadsheet, the labelling pattern looked like this:

Item ID	Description	Notes
1800_001	"Auntie Emily, 1801"	Oversized, not in binder
1900_002	Probably Dan, Chris, Jordan, about 1905	
1900_003	White house	
1910_004	Canadian soldiers goofing around	Very damaged

Fill out a corresponding label for each item and attach the label to the appropriate sleeve – this is where you put the original image or document in the first place (in Step 2). You will likely be going through a binder of sleeves at this point. Alternatively, as with 1800_001 (above), fix the label to the envelope, tube or other specialized archival storage solution for oversized, bulky or delicate items that do not fit into binders.

The spreadsheet is your "index" to the entire collection. Put a copy of it into the front of each binder and inside each container. Now you have a well-organized, easily navigable collection of images!

Like your oversized documents and images, label your film with labels applied directly to the VHS cassette or film canister and put any unpackaged film into a plastic sleeve and label it.

If your collection of individual images is large, you can use the sort tool in your spreadsheet software (Excel or something similar), if you are creating it on your computer. In my example, each of the decades will group together, essentially creating a timeline of family photographs. Again, it did not matter to me that the running total of items was not chronological – they just helped to create a unique identifier for each item. In your binders of photographs, you can then rearrange the actual documents to reflect the sorted index, or not, depending on how organized you want to be.

Step 4: Store

Notes:

No tools needed here. Move your binders and individual items back into your storage containers leaving some air space in each one. *Avoid packing mouldy or water-damaged items with your binders of undamaged images and documents.* You may want to designate one container for intact scrapbooks and albums and just leave them loose in the container. That removes the need to package them individually to make them safe to be stored with other items.

VHS tapes and film reels (in their canisters) should be stored on their sides and stacked. Storing them on their sides will encourage the loops of film to sag, which will distort and stretch the film. They can be stored separately from the scrapbooks and albums or together if that makes sense to the way you have organized your archive (i.e. the cassettes are relevant/associated to other items stored in the container).

Deciding where to put the containers is the last job – in a closet in a spare bedroom, in a basement that is not damp, or under a bed. Wherever you choose should be out of the way, cool and dry. Your collection is now protected from each of the major enemies listed above.

Step 5: Digitize

Tools:

- Computer and scanner that work together
    - Currently, Timelines uses the EPSON Perfection V700 Photo and I have been very happy with the results – it is a higher-end flatbed scanner, not a photographic scanner, which would likely be triple the cost.

- - At the very least, you need to be able to scan at 300DPI and at 200% and save to a TIFF file
- 1 or 2 hard drives for saving files
- Cloud storage (optional)

Outsourcing:

- Plan to outsource film and VHS tapes including audio and discuss with the digitizing professional about migration and file management to ensure the files they create don't become unusable (see below for more notes on long term management).

Notes:

Creating a second, digital version of your images means you can leave the original untouched, share them and make changes or corrections with photo editing software.

The other reason to scan is to guarantee against damage or loss of the original – in the case of fire or water damage.

In order to serve the above purposes, the scanned images must be both easily found and retrievable – two concerns that can become important when the scanning process is not fresh in your mind, when someone else tries to access the images, or when technology advances and common file formats and/or storage methods evolve.

To prepare for all those inevitabilities, your personal archive must be well thought out. Your organizational structure is already set up (Step 3), so it makes good sense to translate the labels to your digital file naming; this way, you will have a digital archive that matches the physical one you have created.

Additionally, you need to develop a migration plan:

To protect your images for if/when TIFF files become obsolete, make a plan to regularly view your images, maybe each Christmas or Thanksgiving when you have family and friends around. Put a reminder in your computer or family calendar to pop up each year at the same time with a note to review the file format.

To avoid lost images if storage methods are no longer compatible with updated computer hardware, save your images in more than one place. Currently, the best place to save them is in the cloud, but ensuring you have multiple copies on external hard drives is never a bad idea. Unless you need a cheap way to share images, avoid CD/DVD copies. You could put a small external hard drive in a safety deposit box in order not to have all duplicates in the same house in the event of a disaster. Updating or saving the files to a new storage device, if necessary, when you are also updating file formats is another great idea.

Finally, you can also print a copy of each of the images if you wish. Labelling them with their corresponding file name and putting them in (yet) another binder makes for an immediate and very easy finding aid. Store that binder in a different place than your actual collection of originals; if your house burns down, your computer blows up and TIFFs become abruptly incompatible, at least you will have an image of what was in your collection!

Scanning best-practices:

- Scan photographs, slides and negatives at minimum 300dpi and 200% as TIFF files
    - JPG files are lossy – literally meaning they lose information each time you save them – not bad for the initial scan, but down the road when you have to migrate your collection onto new storage devices and into new file formats, we gamble that a non-lossy format will serve you better.
- Do not use ICE or other software that comes with your scanner to do the scanning
- Scan documents at 100%
- De-screen newspaper clippings and items with obvious grain in paper (grain will become evident after you scan and view the image on your computer screen)
- Lighten mid-tones for future printing needs and scan for clarity and trueness of image

There are many other specialized practices for damaged, unique and particularly old items but if you follow these steps, you will prolong the life of your items without damaging them and when you are ready, you can speak to a conservator if you want to specifically address items which need attention.