

## **Ten Tips for Preserving Your Family Treasures**

There is a lot of information available regarding preserving your family treasures especially online. Some of this information is incorrect and misleading. Being a good consumer of information is as much a part of preserving your family treasures as taking steps for their long-term care. This article provides ten tips to preserve your family's collection as well as links to trusted websites for more information.

### Resource

American Library Association, "[Low-Cost Ways to Preserve Family Archives.](http://www.ala.org/alcts/confevents/upcoming/webinar/042914)" (free webinar) <http://www.ala.org/alcts/confevents/upcoming/webinar/042914>

### **Tip 1: Provide a Good Environment**

Providing a cool, dry, stable, and clean environment is one of the best things you can do to preserve your family treasures. The ideal preservation environment is 60-70° Fahrenheit and 40-50% relative humidity (rH). Fluctuations in these conditions should be minimal ( $\pm 5^\circ$  F and  $\pm 5\%$  rH). Light, dust, and pollutants should be kept out of storage areas as much as possible. Providing a good environment reduces the rate of organic deterioration, keeps insects and mold away, and limits exposure to potentially harmful light and dust.

These strict conditions may not be achievable at home. So what can you do?

- Store your materials where you live. If you are comfortable (not too hot, not too cold, not too humid), your documents will be better off.
- Keep collections away from heat, water, and light sources. The environment should be cool, dry and stable to reduce the threat from insects and mold.
- Do not store important items in the attic, basement, garage, or shed unless these areas are climate controlled.
- Store items at least six inches off of the floor and away from outside walls to avoid water damage.
- Watch for evidence of environmental damage including fading, warping, pest damage, and mold.
- Monitor the environment. Inexpensive temperature and humidity monitors can be purchased at your local home improvement store or online.

### Resources

Northeast Document Conservation Center, "[Temperature, Relative Humidity, Light and Air Quality.](https://tinyurl.com/nedccleaflet2-1)" <https://tinyurl.com/nedccleaflet2-1>

American Institute for Conservation, "[Caring for Your Treasures.](https://tinyurl.com/aictreasures)" <https://tinyurl.com/aictreasures>

## **Tip 2: Provide Proper Enclosures**

An enclosure can be anything that provides protection from the elements: a box, envelope, folder, page protector, etc. What makes a proper enclosure?

**Size matters.** A good enclosure is slightly larger than its contents. If it is too small, it may cause damage (think of shoes that are one size too small for your feet). If the enclosure is too large, the contents can move around and crash into the sides. This is particularly bad for brittle and fragile items. The enclosure should have enough space around the object to allow you to remove and replace the object without difficulty.

**Materials matter.** Paper enclosures are a good choice if you need a rigid support or if you need to limit light exposure. Paper enclosures should be buffered and have a pH between 7.0 and 8.5 and be lignin free.\*

Plastic enclosures reduce the need for handling and are good for collections that you like to look at often. Choose photograph and page protectors made of polyester (trade names include Mylar and Melinex), polypropylene or polyethylene. If you can't determine what type of plastic it is, don't buy it. Avoid vinyl. As it ages and deteriorates, vinyl releases harmful gases that accelerates discoloration and causes paper to become brittle.

**\*Warning:** When choosing enclosures from vendors you must be an informed consumer. The term "Acid Free" and "Archival" are marketing ploys. This does not tell you if the chemistry of the materials will harm or protect your artifacts. If you are unsure of the actual pH, ask the manufacturer. If you see a vendor mentioning that a plastic sleeve is "acid free" or "archival," do not trust that vendor unless they also tell you what type of plastic it is. When purchasing enclosures you want to know specifically what that material is and its pH.

### Resources

Northeast Document Conservation Center, "[Storage Enclosures for Books and Artifacts on Paper.](https://tinyurl.com/nedccleaflet4-4)" <https://tinyurl.com/nedccleaflet4-4>

Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts, "[Selecting Storage Materials.](https://tinyurl.com/ccahastorage)" <https://tinyurl.com/ccahastorage>

## **Tip 3: Handle With Care**

The way you handle your collections can greatly affect their condition and longevity.

**Do not eat or drink around collections.** Food and drink, even water, can cause permanent staining and can attract insects, mice and other undesirable critters that may feast on your family bible.

**Wash your hands.** Clean your hands and dry them thoroughly prior to using your

collections. This is especially true for photographs and textiles, which are very sensitive to the oils and dirt on our hands. Wear gloves when handling metal objects or photographs.

**Mark carefully.** Use a strip of buffered paper such as [Permalife™](#) to mark a place in a book rather than sticky notes, paperclips or dog-earring the page. Copy paper that is manufactured to the strict NISO standards for permanent paper can also be used. Check the paper's wrapper. If it has an infinity (∞) symbol, it is a buffered paper.

Writing names in the family Bible or on the backs of photographs helps your grandchildren identify who is who in the family tree. A 100% [pure graphite pencil](#) is the best option for writing these notes. If you want to use an ink pen, opt for a pure pigment pen such as [Pigma Micron™ pens](#). Pigment inks are more stable and lightfast than other types of pens. Avoid ballpoint and felt tip pens, markers, and highlighters.

#### **Tip 4: Display responsibly**

Enjoying your collections by displaying them is a great way to use your collections. Here are some good tips for safe displays.

**Keep away from light.** All light is damaging. Light exposure causes fading and embrittlement of paper, photographs and textiles. If you hang these things on your wall, keep them away from windows and lighting fixtures. Before hanging, watch the sunlight patterns as the day/season progresses. Hang your pictures in areas that do not receive direct or bright indirect light.

**Choose a good framer.** Any materials that come in contact with your collections should be made of the best quality materials and should not cause damage. When taking your photos and family papers to be framed, be sure to ask what the pH of the mat board is, what kind of glazing is used (UV blocking glass or Plexiglas™ are good choices), and how the item will be attached to the backing board (non-adhesive methods are best).

**Consider Using Facsimiles.** Consider having a high quality reproduction of valuable-to-you documents made so you can display or use that and keep the original in a good enclosure. This is a great idea for things like family records, photographs, children's drawings, video/film, and newspaper articles.

#### Resources

Northeast Document Conservation Center, "[Matting and Framing Art and Artifacts on Paper.](https://tinyurl.com/nedccleaflet4-10)" <https://tinyurl.com/nedccleaflet4-10>

Library of Congress, "[Preservation Guidelines for Matting and Framing.](https://www.loc.gov/preservation/care/mat.html)" <https://www.loc.gov/preservation/care/mat.html>

## Tip 5: Be Prepared For Disasters

In a disaster your safety comes first. Objects can be replaced, you cannot. You should have a plan for yourself and your family in case of an emergency. Once you have that plan in place, you should have a plan for your most valuable objects.

- Decide what is important to you and your family to save if you have time to take possessions with you when you evacuate.
- Keep vital records and treasured documents in one easily-accessed location in case you have to “grab and go.”
- Before doing any DIY salvage, be sure you aren’t causing more damage. It’s best to check with a professional conservator before undertaking any treatment.
- Consider storing digital copies of vital records on a secure and encrypted cloud storage service

### Resources

Department of Homeland Security, [“Make a Plan.”](#)

<https://www.ready.gov/make-a-plan>

FEMA, [“Protect Critical Documents and Valuables.”](#)

<https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/133454>

FEMA, [“Document and Insure Your Property.”](#)

<https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/133450>

Library of Congress, [“What To Do If Collections Get Wet.”](#)

<http://www.loc.gov/preservation/emergprep/dry.html>

Council of State Archivists, [“Rescuing Family Records: A Disaster Planning Guide.”](#) (\$12.00)

<https://tinyurl.com/cosarescuing>

American Institute for Conservation, [“Disaster Response and Recovery.”](#)

<https://tinyurl.com/aicdisasterresponse>

## Tip 6: Disaster Recovery

Should your home or office succumb to water damage there are steps to take to recover your important documents.

**Reduce the humidity.** Humid conditions encourage mold growth. Often your first impulse is to turn up the heat to dry out your space. Do not turn up the heat unless you can reduce the humidity. Otherwise you will encourage mold growth.

**Air dry wet books and paper.** You can often air dry papers as long as they are uncoated (not shiny, like a magazine). Spread them out to expose as much surface area as possible. Fan books open as best as possible. Slip wax paper or parchment paper sheets every few

pages to encourage the books to stay open and allow air to get inside. Place fans so that they blow above and around the documents, not directly at them. Check on papers and books often. Reposition as necessary to get wettest parts exposed to the circulating air.

**Wet books and paper on coated paper.** Coated paper, such as you find in magazines and some books, will stick together when wet and essentially “glue” themselves shut. Once this happens, it is very difficult to reverse. Documents and books with coated paper should be wrapped in wax paper or parchment paper and placed in the freezer until the water sublimates or you have time to treat them. Air drying may be possible if you slip a piece of wax paper or parchment paper between EVERY page and air dry. You will likely end up with a lot of distortion that may or may not be fixable.

**Avoid home remedies for mold and mildew.** Bleach and Lysol are damaging to paper-based objects, photographs, textiles, etc. Isolate moldy materials and consult a professional before attempting treatment. Books and paper documents can be frozen. Other materials may or may not be safely frozen.

**Consult professionals for advice.** Before undertaking any treatment consult a conservator or preservation professional. You can do more damage with DIY treatments.

#### Resources

American Institute for Conservation, [“Find a Conservator.”](#)

<https://tinyurl.com/aicfindconservator>

### **Tip 7: Tips for Preserving Non-paper Collections**

All collections benefit from a controlled environment and good handling practices.

While we do not have room here to address all non-print media, here are some tips for the common items in home collections. A good place to find preservation information on non-print materials is the [American Institute for Conservation](#).

<https://tinyurl.com/aictreasures>

#### **Textiles**

Textiles are very sensitive to handling and can deteriorate quickly if they are exposed to poor environmental conditions. Many of the dyes in textiles are sensitive to alkaline conditions.

- Store textiles in pH neutral enclosures wrapped in pH neutral tissue paper. These can be purchased through vendors who specialize in conservation supplies (see Tip 9).
- If you display textiles, be sure they are well supported in their frames and are not exposed to light, dust and other pollutants.
- Cleaning should be undertaken very carefully and follow established conservation guidelines (read: consult a professional for valuable-to-you items).
- See the [AIC Textiles page](#) for additional information. <https://tinyurl.com/aictextiles>

## Photographs and Film Negatives

Photos and film negatives are very sensitive to the environment. Dust, light, pollutants, and handling can cause irreparable damage. As with textiles, some photographic processes can be alkaline sensitive.

- Choose pH neutral paper enclosures for photographs. If all you can find are alkaline enclosures, they are a better choice than no enclosures at all.
- If opting for plastic enclosures, choose polyester, polypropylene, or polyethylene sleeves and pages. Avoid vinyl and “magnetic” photo album pages as these cause damage.
- Wash and thoroughly dry your hands before handling. Handle photos and negatives by the edges only.
- Using gloves can help minimize damage from skin oils and dirt. Choose either plain 100% cotton gloves (no grip), or nitrile gloves (available online or at the drug store).
- Use photo corners (paper, polyester or polypropylene with an acrylic adhesive) to attach photos to support pages in albums. Avoid tape, glues or adhesives even if they are sold as “archival.”
- Provide who/what/when/where for photos and documents.
- Label photos on the back with a 100% [pure graphite pencil](#).
- Create high quality facsimiles if you have important photographs you want to display. Store the originals in a good enclosure in a good environment.

If you choose to send your photos to a vendor to have them digitized:

- Ask questions regarding how they handle the originals during digitization, what type of scanner they are using (auto feed, flat bed, overhead, etc.), and what their process is should one of your photos be damaged during scanning.
- Request both TIFFs and JPEGs and keep both. TIFFs are large, lossless files that will take up a lot of space on your computer. It may be best to keep these on an external hard drive. JPEGs are smaller files and are easier to share but to make the files small some raw data is sacrificed. Consider the TIFFs the originals, and the JPEGs the use copies.
- If you get DVDs back, import the data to your computer. Label the files in a way that makes sense to a human reader (e.g. replace “DN0284.jpg” with “Mary Smith, New York City\_1972”) for easier identification.
- Request your originals back. Save these in a good enclosure in a good environment. If you lose a digital facsimile or the file is corrupted, you can always re-scan the original.

### Resources

National Archives, [“Digitizing Family Papers and Photographs.”](#)

<https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives/digitizing>

Library of Congress, [“Personal Archiving.”](#) [see especially *Introduction to Scanning*]

<http://digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/>

### **Home movies on film**

Film has many of the same preservation issues as still photo negatives.

- House film, wound around cores, in vented polypropylene film cans. These will not rust like metal cans.
- Inspect film carefully prior to projecting. If any sprockets are torn or the surface of the film is damaged, do not project the film.
- Inspect your projector and be sure it is clean and operating normally.
- Reformat your home movies to reduce wear on the originals.
- After reformatting, keep the originals in a good enclosure in a stable environment.
- See if your area hosts a [Home Movie Day](#). Often these events will have professionals there to evaluate your film and give preservation advice.

### Digital objects

Digital documents rely on machines to read the data and translate that data to human-readable form. They are vulnerable to format and hardware obsolescence, chemical instability, and often fail unpredictably and completely.

- Having multiple copies of electronic documents mitigates the total loss of any one file. Make digital copies; send them to family members and/or to a cloud-based file sharing service.
- Name and organize your files in a way that makes sense to a human reader.
- Back up your data and check it regularly to see if the files open normally.
- Transfer your older documents to the newest version when you update your software.
- For very important documents, print them out on buffered printer paper and store them in a good enclosure in a stable environment.

### Resources

Library of Congress [“Keeping Personal Digital Video”](#)

<http://digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/video.html>

Library of Congress [“Keeping Personal Digital Audio”](#)

<http://digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/audio.html>

Library of Congress [“Keeping Personal Digital Photographs”](#)

<http://digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/photos.html>

Library of Congress [“Keeping Personal Digital Records”](#)

<http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/records.html>

### Tip 8: Access and Preservation Go Together

Preservation does not mean sticking your collections in a box and putting them in a dark (and climate controlled!) room forever. If items are not used, you won't know what condition they are in or whether those digital files are corrupted.

- Inspect items regularly inspect them for mold and insect activity. Be sure they are clean and have no damage.

- Label enclosures adequately so you know what is inside. This will also reduce rummaging through boxes to find what you need.
- Rotate displays to give items a break from being out, and to show off other items. This gives you a chance to inspect items regularly, too.
- Document items for insurance purposes should disaster strike (describe valuables and take pictures of them, perhaps part of a [home inventory](#)).

### Tip 9: Be An Informed Consumer

There is a lot of misinformation out there when it comes to preservation information and repair instructions. Trusted organizations include:

- [American Institute for Conservation](http://www.conservation-us.org/)  
<http://www.conservation-us.org/>
- [American Library Association Preservation and Reformatting Section](http://www.ala.org/alcts/mgrps/pars)  
<http://www.ala.org/alcts/mgrps/pars>
- [Association of Moving Image Archivists](https://amianet.org/)  
<https://amianet.org/>
- [Conservation Online](http://cool.conservation-us.org/)  
<http://cool.conservation-us.org/>
- [Library of Congress Preservation Directorate](http://www.loc.gov/preservation/)  
<http://www.loc.gov/preservation/>
- [National Archives and Records Administration](https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives)  
<https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives>
- [Northeast Document Conservation Center](https://www.nedcc.org/index.php)  
<https://www.nedcc.org/index.php>
- [Society for American Archivists](https://www2.archivists.org/)  
<https://www2.archivists.org/>

There are several vendors that specialize in conservation-quality supplies. Listing here does not imply endorsement. Again, be an informed consumer.

- [Gaylord Brothers](https://www.gaylord.com/)  
<https://www.gaylord.com/>
- [Hollinger Metal Edge](https://www.hollingermetaledge.com/)  
<https://www.hollingermetaledge.com/>
- [University Products](https://www.universityproducts.com/)  
<https://www.universityproducts.com/>
- [Talas](https://www.talasonline.com/)  
<https://www.talasonline.com/>

### Tip 10: Leave the Repairs to the Professionals

You can attempt a DIY book repair, but if your collection is valuable to you sentimentally or monetarily, it is best to [consult a professional conservator](#). A good conservator will give

you a range of options from a simple enclosure to full treatment. She should be able to discuss with you, in plain language, what your choices are and how the treatment will affect your material. Do not be afraid to ask questions until you are satisfied that you know what the treatment will be and what to expect your object to look like when it is done.

### Resources

American Institute for Conservation, "[How to Choose a Conservator.](#)"

<https://tinyurl.com/aicchoose>

American Institute for Conservation, "[Find a Conservator](#)"

<https://tinyurl.com/aicfindconservator>

## **Bonus Tip 11: Enjoy and Share Your Collections**

The best thing you can do with family treasures is to use them and enjoy them. With a little planning and care they will be around for generations to come.

*By Beth Doyle, Executive Director  
North Carolina Preservation Consortium  
doylencpc@gmail.com  
<https://ncpreservation.org>*

*Leona B. Carpenter Senior Conservator  
Head of Conservation Services Dept.  
Duke University Libraries  
b.doyle@duke.edu  
919-660-5985*



*Any advice, vendor, and/or product information is provided solely by the author and does not necessarily represent or reflect the views or policies of Duke University or Duke University Libraries, North Carolina Preservation Consortium, or the American Institute for Conservation.*

The North Carolina Preservation Consortium (NCPC) is an independent, nonprofit, nongovernmental organization dedicated to the preservation of collections in libraries, museums, archives, and historic sites; monuments, memorials, and outdoor art; archaeological sites and collections; historic and cultural architecture; and private collections of family treasures. NCPC supports proper care and handling; storage and environmental control; disaster preparedness; conservation; and collection security. NCPC is committed to preserving tangible and intangible heritage for present and future generations.

Become a member today at <https://ncpreservation.org/join/>

For our newsletter and to sign up for our listserv go to <https://ncpreservation.org/news/>