

Preservation Practices for the Home Archivist

Kyla Ubbink shows you how to look after those important documents, photographs and other heirlooms that are so important to family historians

As a genealogist, it is inevitable that the family begins to think of you as the caretaker of their history. Boxes of documents, photographs, heirlooms, and other archival miscellanies start being deposited into your hands and naturally, you would like to do your best to save what is important. Although your home is not a publicly funded archive with state-of-the-art climate control, shelving or pollution filtration, there are many simple and practical preservation practices to ensure the longevity of your family's archives.

Artifacts are affected by several agents of deterioration that lead to their ultimate destruction. The first major cause of damage is direct physical force; mechanical damage such as tears, creases, breaks, and losses caused by handling and use. The next most damaging factor is pollutants coming from the atmosphere and introduced through our skin during handling, but also found inherently in lower qualities of paper and poorly produced photographs. Pollutants lead to chemical deterioration physically breaking down the artifact on a molecular level causing brittleness, discoloration, and eventual crumbling. Ultraviolet (UV) radiation from light also damages artifacts on a molecular level, the infrared (IR) spectrum catalyzes chemical reactions, and many dyes react to various wavelengths of light resulting in fading or a shift in hue. Humidity and temperature changes result in warping, and glue failure; high humidity results in mold growth and low humidity results in desiccation of paper-based materials and textiles leading to brittleness. The last factors are ones we hope to never have to deal with: pest and mold infestations, or a disaster such as a flood or fire. These events do occur and we must know how to act in order to minimize loss.

When it comes to protecting archival materials, the most effective use of resources is to purchase and use acid-free boxes and acid-free file folders. These paper-based boxes come in a variety of sizes to fit documents, photographs, textiles, and objects. They will protect the artifacts from dust and light, filter pollutants, keep items organized, slow changes in humidity and temperature around the artifact, and keep out mold and pests. 'Buffered' boxes contain substances like calcium carbonate or magnesium which act to neutralize acidic pollutants from the atmosphere more effectively than non-buffered boxes.

For long term storage, choose a place in your home where the temperature and humidity is steady. Avoid attics, basements, and garages, usually a spare room set up as a home office or home library is most appropriate. If you must use a basement room, ensure archival materials are kept at least twelve inches off the floor in case of flooding. Install a humidity gauge and monitor the climate. Use portable humidifiers and dehumidifiers to maintain the climate, being diligent about

emptying and filling the water reservoirs as required. Place the boxes on sturdy shelving, preferably made of enameled steel.

Practice cautious handling techniques when researching and viewing the archival materials. Wear gloves to keep the oils from your hands from staining and deteriorating the paper, or wash and dry your hands well every hour while you are handling and viewing the artifacts. Placing paper artifacts in clear polyester sleeves (Mylar) will give them support and allow the user to read them without damaging them further.

Making digital copies of the most frequently used archival materials is an excellent means of providing a version of the artifact that can be referred to without damaging the original, and which can also be shared others through e-mail, websites, and other digital forms of communication. Digitization can be accomplished through scanning or digital photography, and should always be done at the highest resolution and best quality possible. Save files in a non-compressed format such as '.tiff'. Always keep the original, high-quality '.tiff' version, making duplicate '.jpeg' and compressed versions for sharing online where the '.tiff' file will be too large to upload or send.

Should the worst happen, and your materials are caught in a flood or fire, or become infested by pests such as silverfish, book-lice, and moths, or are subjected to mold, seek out the advice of a conservator. Freezing is one method of preventing mold growth in wet archival materials, or to halt mold growth in items already infected by mold or pests. The materials will still require a professional conservator to dry them out properly, or to remove the mold or pest infestation which will go dormant in a frozen state; however, freezing prevents the spread of the contamination or provides you time to find drying space for wet materials.

KYLA UBBINK is a professionally accredited archival conservator. Operating Ubbink Book and Paper Conservation since 2005, she also teaches preservation for the Archives and Records Management Program at Algonquin College, frequently speaks at conferences and provides workshops on preserving archival materials for amateurs and professionals alike.

For more information on Kyla Ubbink, visit www.bookandpaperconservation.com.