

**Preserving Your History**  
*Protecting Your Family Papers and Photographs*  
**Genealogical Society of Santa Cruz County (GSSCC)**  
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Preservation is the stabilization of documents in order to provide for their continued long-term use. It involves determining the importance of your papers and photographs, placing them in order, enclosing them within proper storage containers in a stable environment, and documenting the extent and condition of your collection.

Appraisal	Decide how much your records tell about your family's history
Arrangement	Place your family papers in some sensible, accessible order
Holdings Maintenance	Place your collection in acid-free containers and a stable storage environment
Description	Write down what you have, where it is, and what condition it is in, so you and your descendants will be able to access your documents

**Agents of Deterioration**

Inherent Vice is the quality of an object to self-destruct or to be unusually difficult to maintain. It may be a weakness in the chemical or physical makeup of an object introduced during its manufacture. Newspapers deteriorate easily from the inherent vice of the low quality, wood pulp paper from which they are made. Mitigation involves isolating them in storage and making preservation photocopies or digital copies.

Heat speeds up the chemical deterioration of both paper and photographs. Mitigation includes not storing collections in attics or basements, maintaining temperature under 70 degrees, and avoiding temperature fluctuations by placing documents in acid-free containers.

Relative Humidity (RH) is the amount of water present in the air. Optimal RH ranges from 35% to 60% (ideal RH 50%). When RH rises above 60% it will lead to mold growth and when RH drops below 30% it can result in dried and brittle paper. Mitigation involves reducing RH fluctuations by using acid-free containers and possibly the use of a dehumidifier.

Light, particularly ultra violet light causes photochemical deterioration - fading, especially to photographs. Mitigation includes keeping documents out of direct sunlight by storing documents and photographs in acid-free storage containers or displaying them in frames with UV protection.

Pollution such as car exhaust can cause surface damage to papers and photographs. Dust particles and soot can cause mechanical deterioration by abrasion and encourage the spread of mold and insects. Mitigation includes using acid-free storage containers and routinely dusting and vacuuming shelves and storage areas.

Pests can cause physical loss of papers and photographs. Pests feed upon organic layers of documents which results in irretrievable loss of surface and staining of documents. Mitigation includes use of acid-free storage containers, routine monitoring and cleaning of storage areas, and maintenance of stable environmental conditions.

## **Examples of Deterioration**

Fungus/Mold/Mildew is characterized by a musty odor and often variously colored powdery or sticky substances which weaken the paper support of documents. The best mitigation is maintaining RH below 60% and ensuring that storage areas are protected from water intrusion. **CAUTION** – mold spores may be hazardous. For incidents of mildew or mold, always wear a protective face mask or respirator. For a minor incident in your storage area, you may wipe down shelves with a bleach and water solution. If the mold problem is substantial, or impacts documents and photographs, call for assistance from a professional conservator.

Tide Lines / Liquid Stains result from water damage to documents. Mitigation includes ensuring that documents are kept out of damp environments and that when being viewed, that caretakers maintain a workspace clear of liquids which may cause spills.

Foxing is a rust-brown measles-like spots found on paper in older books and prints and is evidence that fungi have been at work, but they are no longer active. Foxing is a result of the chemical reaction between iron impurities in the paper and the organic acids released by the paper. Mitigations include ensuring that RH remains below 60%.

Flaking of pigment/ink is a full or partial detachment of the medium layer (paint or ink) from the support layer (paper). Mitigations include ensuring RH remains below 60% without fluctuations and that caretakers use proper handling techniques to avoid abrading documents and photographs.

Yellowing and staining is the discoloration of paper, mainly to yellow, which is an indication of acidity, leading to brittleness and damage. Mitigation includes maintaining stable RH, reducing exposure to ultraviolet light and pollutants.

Cockling is a type of undulation (wrinkling or rippling) which occurs on a paper surface. Other types of undulations include waviness, dimples, etc. Mitigations include keeping RH below 60% without fluctuations, ensuring the use of proper framing and avoidance of spills when working with documents.

Mechanical Forces may be natural (earthquake or wind storm), accidental (damage shelving or falling documents), human (improper handling and storage or even vibrations from a busy near-by road) and can occur quickly or slowly over time. Mechanical loss includes holes, tears, and distortion. Mitigation includes proper handling of documents when viewed or moved, and ensuring stable storage shelving.

## **Holdings Maintenance Basics**

Holdings maintenance is the term used to describe those preservation actions that are designed to prolong the useful life of records and to reduce or defer the need for conservation treatment by improving the physical storage environment. Techniques include improving storage by replacing acidic storage materials with acid-free materials, removing damaging fasteners, storing objects of similar type and size together and maintaining a clean and stable storage environment.

In the case of photographs your hands are one of the biggest dangers. Oils from hands will cause the emulsion to deteriorate and leave permanent fingerprint stains. Always use clean, cotton gloves with photographs!

For housing documents and photographs, use acid-free folders and storage containers obtained from reputable archival supply companies. Records must be placed in folders or envelopes that are large enough to accommodate them safely. A full folder should be no thicker than 3/4 “. Place highly acidic records (such as newspapers) in polyester sleeves (polyethylene or Mylar) or within a folded piece of archival bond paper. Any notations recorded on a folder should be written in No. 2 pencil and labeled before placing documents and

photographs within them. *Overfilled boxes* - damage will occur to documents as they are forced in and out. *Under filled boxes* – documents will bend and slump, and eventually become distorted. Acid-free spacer boards should be used in partially filled archives boxes to keep records upright.

Fasteners, tape, and sticky notes should NEVER be placed on documents, photographs and original art work. Never use lamination or sticky page photo albums. Metal fasteners cause rust, causing permanent staining and distorting of paper. Fasteners should be removed prior to placing papers and photographs in polyester sleeves and folders. Use a micro spatula to remove staples - working from the back, a micro spatula can be used to carefully lift the shanks of staple. Once opened, the staple should be carefully removed from the front.

To avoid damaging the emulsion layer of a photograph, place a small piece of acid-free paper between the photograph and the micro spatula before lifting the staple off. Consult a conservator to evaluate the possible removal of the following type of fasteners: rubber bands, colored cloth tape, grommets, or glues. Do not attempt to open folded records that resist gentle action or that are stiff, brittle, or badly damaged. Instead, leave the records folded, and plan to have them examined by a professional conservator

### **Storing Photographs**

Polyester sleeves (polyethylene or Mylar) may be used for photographs. Only photographs without damage may be cleaned with a soft, natural hair brush before placing inside polyester sleeves. Begin dusting at the center and brush out to a photograph's edges. Dust cloths should never be used to surface-clean or wipe photographs because they will work the dirt into the emulsion and abrade the surface resulting in permanent damage.

Assign each image a number that will help you find them later – make an inventory or database of your image information. Write on the back of photos with a No. 2 pencil (only along the edge and don't press down hard) House each original print in individual acid-free enclosures (either paper sleeves or polyethylene or Mylar sleeves). Raise the top sheet of a polyester sleeve as far as possible while inserting a document to help minimize static electricity. Label the outside of the paper envelope – but do so before you place the photograph in it. If you intend to store film negatives, it is best to use acid-free paper enclosures or sleeves.

### **Preservation Photocopying**

Paper-to-paper copying of documents should be made on archival bond paper. Preservation photocopying should be used to make duplicates of documents with inherent vice such as newspapers, telegrams, dittos, and faxes. Do not run historic documents through automatic feed devices. Fasteners should be removed before copying. Damaged or fragile records in polyester sleeves should not be removed from sleeves for photocopying. Bound volumes should not be forced flat on copying surfaces. If needed, take photographs of bound book pages while holding down pages with weights. Remember that digital copies are for access only, not preservation. Always keep your originals and preservation photocopies.

### **Storing Books**

Books in poor condition and all scrapbooks and albums should always be stored horizontally. When it is necessary to store a book on end, choose spine down - making sure the book is supported from both sides. It is best to house delicate books and albums in appropriately sized, acid free book enclosures or boxes.

### **Disaster Plan**

Prepare for the most likely emergencies in order to prevent or mitigate disasters. Have an inventory or database of your collection ready. Have a list of important items in case of evacuation. Have the contact information for professional conservators near at hand.

## Long Term Disposition of Your Family Papers

What will be the future of your family papers and photographs? If not passed down to family members, one alternative is to donate to a genealogical society, historical society or museum. There are many issues to be considered if you wish to pursue this ...

- \* size and longevity of the institution in question
- \* the existence of professional staff
- \* the physical nature of the building (is it climate controlled?)

Society of American Archivists' - *"Guide to Donating Your Personal or Family Papers to a Repository"*  
[www2.archivists.org/publications/brochures/donating-familyrecs](http://www2.archivists.org/publications/brochures/donating-familyrecs)

## Holdings Maintenance Guidance

National Park Service Conserv-O-Grams and Museum Handbook  
<http://www.nps.gov/history/museum/publications/index.htm>

Northeast Document Conservation Center [www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/overview](http://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/overview)

National Archives & Records Administration [www.archives.gov/preservation](http://www.archives.gov/preservation)

## Locating a Conservator

American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works  
<http://www.conservation-us.org>

## Archival Supplies

Gaylord Library & Archival Products  
<http://www.gaylord.com>

University Products  
[www.universityproducts.com](http://www.universityproducts.com)

Light Impressions  
<http://www.lightimpressionsdirect.com>

Hollinger/Metal Edge  
[www.hollingermetaledge.com](http://www.hollingermetaledge.com)