

Caring for Family Treasures: A Basic How-to from Storage to Donation

By Anne A. Salter

This leaflet is suitable for distribution to donors, members, interested parties, and others seeking information on how to care for their family treasures. Within its content are the answers to many frequently asked questions that are answered daily by museum, archives, and library professionals.

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he responsibility of “clearing out the past” can be daunting. Whether you are faced with an entire household of keepsakes or several boxes, the task is both an emotionally draining and time consuming operation. Depending on the circumstances, you can expect the process to take as much as a year. Knowing how to make the process work to your advantage will make it an easier, challenging, and rewarding event.

It is important to maintain perspective. It took years if not generations to accumulate items. You cannot expect to sort them carefully or properly in a week. Invest some time into this process and the benefits will outweigh the aggravations.

The guidelines in this leaflet are designed to make your task easier, provide key information to assist you in avoiding errors, and encourage you to examine your “collection” carefully and thoroughly for your family’s future interest as well as the interest of the general public.

Here are quick and easy steps for organizing and sorting large collections to help you get started. Later, information on the donation process is also included. Whatever your situation, make sure you give yourself time to do the job right.

STEP 1 DIVIDE AND CONQUER

Most collections will fall clearly into these three areas. It will be easier to evaluate your materials if you separate them into these basic categories:

- Papers, Books
- Photographs and visuals
- Objects

STEP 2 EVALUATION

Two types of value exist in collections—historical and monetary. The popular television series *Antiques Roadshow* has made the public aware of the monetary value of materials. The same awareness has not been placed, however, on the historical value. Historical value is something's ability to improve the understanding of a period of time and its culture. Historical value means a non-monetary value of items with historical significance either now or in the future.

For a monetary value, find an appraiser. Appraisers are often able to provide expertise on an assortment of items. Local museums or historical societies may have a list of referrals. Find book or map dealers listed in the yellow pages and contact them. Always ask for references. A third option is to go to a flea market and ask dealers for referrals.

STEP 3 DONATION

Donating items to a local museum or historical society is not only a valid option but often it is an act of altruism. Such institutions are able to continue providing quality research libraries and excellent museum collections because of willing donors. Many are not able to purchase items. You may find that making an out-right gift and taking a tax deduction is more lucrative than selling. Make sure you consult a tax expert before making this final assumption.

In any event, it is helpful for all involved to know some basics. These include the value of the item—appraised and market—and the provenance of the item.

What is the monetary value of an item?

You should have your items appraised before you



Typical items found in a personal collection.

consider donation. This provides the donor with knowledge of the appraised, not the market, value of the materials, and also assists the receiving institution. Remember that the market value and the appraised value are often quite different. To obtain an idea of the market value, go to flea markets and see what prices are on similar items.

Avoid asking an institution how much they would offer for an item. You should already have a price based on your knowledge of the item's appraised value and the market value. Do your homework and be well informed before you make a donation.

Provenance means “where the item came from.”

Provide as much information as you can on each item. This ensures that the receiver has documentation and history for future researchers. For example, if you know that the item belonged to your great-grandmother, provide her name, her children's names, and her parent's names and where they lived. Include some information on how she used or enjoyed the item. If you know where it was made, that is very useful information as well. Be as specific as you can, with names, locations, dates, and creators when available.

STEP 4 KEEPING AND CARING FOR ITEMS

Deciding to keep vintage materials is a major decision requiring specific maintenance. Storage, care, and handling are considerations. Consider if donation is a better option by asking the question, “Will the collection be broken up or lost at a later date if not donated now?” Many families divide papers, correspondence, or pictures among siblings, thus destroying the continuity of materials. The best use may be to donate them in their entirety to an interested institution. Such a gift ensures that the materials remain as a collection.

Care and handling basics

If you decide to retain the collection, consider keeping it together and providing the proper care and housing that it would have received if it had gone to a professional institution including:

- Storage in a proper atmosphere
- Storage in acid-free containers
- Adequate documentation
- Reproduction for display purposes

Storage in a proper atmosphere

All items should be properly stored in a controlled environment. Avoid attics and basements or any rooms that are damp or have overhead pipes capable of breaking and flooding.

All images courtesy of Tom Narney



Helpful items for storage and monitoring the environment—an array of acid free containers and folders; a mask to minimize mold and dust contact; plastic paper clips; pencil; and temperature/humidity reader.

The best environment is one that does not go above fifty percent or below forty-five percent humidity for most mixed collections. Temperatures should not go above seventy or below sixty-eight degrees for the same reasons.

Storage in acid-free containers

Several companies sell acid free products. They range in size and style from tissue paper to oversize boxes. Plan to invest in these products to ensure that your collection is well housed. Three companies in particular with a wide range of products are the Hollinger Corporation, University Products, and Conservation Resources.

Adequate Documentation

For each item in your collection, especially photographs, try to document it as thoroughly as possible. Provide names, dates, and events when possible. Avoid writing on backs of photographs. Either photocopy the original and write on the copy or create a log that coordinates information on paper to a penciled number on the back of the photo. Always use pencil on photos and write lightly. Ink will eventually bleed through, causing damage. So will stickers. Photocopying will not damage pictures unless you repeatedly expose the photo to the process. Carefully handle all items that are photocopied and avoid letting someone else copy them for you unless they are a professional archivist, librarian, or curator.

Reproduction for Display Purposes

Many families like to display their photos. Direct sunlight on photographs can slowly destroy them, causing fading and cracking. The best solution is to have copies made and display these. Another solution is to have the photos properly framed by a professional framer who provides services to a museum or archives.

GETTING ORGANIZED

You are ready to begin sorting and storing—what next?

The Element of Three

To keep the process of clearing an estate or household simple, apply these three activities:

- Overview
- Sorting
- Inventory

Within that process, separate items into three categories:

- Papers
- Photographs or visuals
- Objects

Most collections will fall clearly into these three areas. You can create your own inventory check list by using the samples provided for you in this leaflet.

The Overview

You need a clear picture of the entire situation. Three basics are:

- Location
- Situation
- Condition

Knowing the location, situation, and condition for items in your care will assist you in a variety of ways. To simplify the process, consider that you are going to complete three basic steps. While conducting this exercise, draw yourself a grid such as the one below.

Step 1: Locations and Item Types

Examine the general locations in which your items are housed. Go to the basement and make a list of what you find. Do the same for the attic, closets, and the rooms in the house. Remember to apply the element of three—papers, photographs, and objects. Be specific with object types. For example, list objects as furniture, clothing, jewelry, and breakables. Keep it simple.

Location	Item type	Situation	Condition	Action
Basement	Photographs Books Papers	Water heater	Temp./Humd.	Relocate
Attic	Furniture Books Papers	Extremes of temperature	Pest infested	Relocate
Closets	Clothes Books Papers Photos	Plastic bags	Potential disaster	Remove plastic
Rooms	All three types	Direct sunlight	Light damage	Close drapes

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS *(by donors)*

Why should I bother saving anything? It is up to you whether you save items. Without retention of material culture, our heritage would be less rich. Think what might be of interest in thirty years that may seem mundane now. What possessions provide insight into your family's history? Then think like a scholar who is trying to write your family's history and is searching for information. What would you save to provide that information?

How much is something worth? There are two types of value—monetary and historical. It is not possible to put a price on historical value. Monetary value can be obtained by consulting an appraiser. Market value can be obtained by visiting flea markets, antique stores, and rare book dealers.

How do I get my collection evaluated? Consult an appraiser.

How do I find an appraiser? By contacting your local historical society for references or looking in the yellow pages under rare book dealers. Also try the American Society of Appraisers or the Appraisers Association of America.

Can I donate a gift over a period of time? Some institutions will make this arrangement possible. Make sure you consult with a tax expert before finalizing such an arrangement.

Can I put stickers or tape on my papers and books to repair them? This is not a good idea because both leave sticky residue that can harm materials. Let a professional do the job. It is best to do nothing rather than something that will have to be reversed.

Should I have books rebound? This process can devalue your books. If it is a rare book, do not rebind it. Instead, have a book box made for it. Consult the local bindery to see if they will custom make a book box, or consult archival vendors.

Should I organize my papers before donating them? This is not necessary. A professional archivist will provide this expertise. If an original arrangement exists, archivists prefer to maintain it. If no arrangement exists, you can best spend your time providing identification and other information.

How do I find an archivist? You can easily find an archivist by consulting with your local university or

contacting the Society of American Archivists.

I want copies of all my papers and photographs before I

donate them. Is it reasonable to ask the institution to do this? This depends on the size of your collection. Asking for a selected number of letters or photos is admissible, but requesting that all be copied is unreasonable. You can ask for a reduced rate and let the institution decide how to provide the service for you.

I want to give some of my papers to one library but the rest to an historical society. Is this a good idea? It is not a good idea to separate collections. Choose the best depository by asking yourself which facility has the best means of caring for the items while providing a research environment that is welcoming to its patrons. You want your collection to be used and cared for at the same time.

How should I clean items? Do not clean items unless you are a professional.

Should I contribute funds toward the processing of these papers? This has become a more common need for institutions. With the cutbacks in funding prevalent in many places it is helpful to institutions when donors provide funds for processing. Try to strike a bargain between funding and priority processing.

What is a reasonable expectation of time for an archives to process papers? This depends on many things including number of staff, the priority assigned to the collection, and the amount of time it takes to process materials. You should consult the archivist about the future of the collection and the priority the collection will be given in the cataloging queue.

What institutions are the major providers of standards and procedures for the museum and archival profession and how do I contact them? These are the American Association for State and Local History, the American Association of Museums, and the Society of American Archivists.



A grouping of equipment not suitable for archival-type collections—stickers, pens, plastic envelopes, stapler, highlighter, and metal clips.

Step 2:
Assess the Conditions

At least four conditions are threatening to items. Note threatening conditions for each item when appropriate.

- Water—potential disasters or mold and mildew
- Light—fading and brittleness
- Temperature/Humidity—mold and mildew
- Pests—eat/infest items

Location	Item type	Condition
Basement	Photographs Books	Temp./ Humd.
Attic	Furniture Books	Pest infested
Closets	Clothes Books Papers Photos	Potential disaster
Rooms	All types of items	Light damage

Step 3: Observing Situations

Application of the following basic information will save you time and energy in the long run and help you pinpoint the most important areas in need of immediate attention.

Storage

The way in which materials are packed can often be an issue. For example, many people believe it is wise to put items in plastic bags. Unfortunately, this practice can be more harmful than helpful. Plastic bags have the potential for setting up a small ecological center that creates bacteria, mold, or dampness leading to other problems. Avoid placing items in plastic bags and if items are already in these, remove them as soon as possible.

Potential Disaster

Are items stored in direct sunlight? Is the temperature and humidity in the room extreme? Where are the items located in relation to radiators, floor vents, overhead lighting? Are they under leaking pipes? Is there evidence of pest infestation, mold, or mildew that might affect adjacent materials?

If you can answer yes to any of the questions above in relation to your collections, seek immediate solutions. Close drapes to eliminate sunlight; move infested materials away from the collection; relocate items away from potential water leaks; turn on the air conditioner.

By this time, you have gathered data that is helping to establish your total overview. Your chart should resemble the one on the right.

WHERE DO I BEGIN?

Once you have surveyed your house and created your overview report, you are ready to take the plunge. The rule of thumb is to begin in a spot where items are most vulnerable.

Depending on your choice, go to the section that matches your selection:

The Basement

Environment

Items stored in basements are often subject to mold and mildew. They are subject to water damage in a basement primarily from two sources: ground water entering the basement from outside and leaks from inside pipes or water heaters.

Storage

If you have to store items in a basement temporarily, here are some precautions you can take. First make sure that items are not resting on the basement floor. Avoiding this situation can help to prevent water damage. Use wood pallets covered with plastic. They will keep the items off the floor and the plastic will keep the items from resting directly on a wooden surface. Wooden surfaces contain acid which may migrate into materials and cause damage.

Next, consider the containers. During this phase, it is best not to invest in any high cost archival materials. These materials are only being stored temporarily—one year or less. Instead, find sturdy packing boxes with the ability to close the top. Wrap items in acid-free tissue paper because cardboard boxes are also a source of acid migration. Avoid using any type of plastic enclosures. Plastic sets up a microenvironment, much like a terrarium, that can create further damage.

Location

Next, decide where in the basement you can store your items away from water heaters and overhead pipes. If you cannot avoid an overhead pipe, invest in a good tarp to cover the boxes. This will help prevent a total soak-through in case of a leak. Never store anything of value near a water heater. It can be not only a source of water leaks, but also a risk for fire. Finally, check on your items weekly to evaluate the situation. Have a plan “B” for where to move materials in case of problems.

Location	Item type	Condition	Situation
Basement	Photographs Books	Temp./ Humd.	Water heater
Attic	Furniture Books	Pest infested	Extremes of temperature
Closets	Clothes Books Papers Photos	Potential disaster	Plastic bags
Rooms	All types of items	Light damage	Direct sunlight



An example of a too heavily packed box. It is too heavy to carry, overloaded and cannot have a top, and the books are piled too high.



The incorrect way to store books, on their text block.



How to properly store books, spine down, in a box.

The Attic

Environment

The attic in many ways is the opposite of the basement. Instead of mold and mildew, your items are subject to heat and low humidity. This type of environment is especially punishing to photographs. Low humidity dries the chemicals used to stabilize photos—the gelatins. Prolonged storage in an attic can cause photos to crack and dry out. The same is true for wood-based items, especially furniture with veneers.

As with basements, try to limit the time items will be stored in an attic. Consider other risks such as animal intrusions—squirrels, raccoons, and insects.

Storage

Despite containers and their make-up, many rodents can chew through and begin eating your materials. Use what resources are available to you to make your attic pest free. Try to find possible areas of intrusion and have them sealed. Have a pest control company advise you on how to keep insect destruction at a minimum.

Location

The same principles apply with attic storage as with basement. Keep items off the floor, away from pipes, chimneys, or leaks and keep them in closed containers. If you have photographs in your collection, do not store them in the attic.

The Closet

Environment

Closets have the luxury of being located in the house proper where air-conditioning and heating create a more stable environment, preferable to attics and basements.

Storage

Avoid storing heavily packed boxes on overhead shelves. Pulling an overloaded box down and dropping it or overloading it and moving it can permanently damage items. For any box, regardless of storage space, avoid packing it beyond your capacity to easily pick it up and move it. This is especially true for storing

books. Use more boxes and avoid creating fewer, heavier boxes that you cannot easily move. Keep items stored on shelving and off the floor. Avoid storing them under areas where you know pipes are concealed. The same rules apply as for the attic and basement—keep items off the floor, keep them in boxes that have lids, away from pipes and leaks, and never in plastic bags.

Location

Of the three environments—basement, attic, and closet—the closet appears the most benign. Yet it is fraught with problems, often unobserved. Pipes concealed in ceilings and walls are often the source of much heartbreak for treasures stored in closets. During harsh winters when pipes freeze and break they often create water damage, especially in areas such as closets that may be positioned on an outside wall. Make sure you know the situation before you store items in closets.

The Garage

Garages are often used for storage. Like basements and attics, the conditions are very poor for storage of paper-based collections, fabrics, and photos. Use the following rule of thumb if you must use a garage:

- Keep items off the floor.
- Use shelving that is wide enough to accommodate materials.
- Avoid areas with a potential for leaks.
- Make sure boxes have lids.
- Once items are on shelves, cover entire shelving unit with a tarp for extra protection.
- Remember that garages are often a security risk if not locked properly.
- Paint, fertilizer, gasoline, and other items with fumes are harmful to your treasures.

In general when storing items in any space, it is a good rule of thumb to observe the following:

- Keep items out of direct sunlight.
- Use blinds and drapes to minimize sunlight.
- Keep air conditioning and heating at a constant temperature and avoid fluctuations in the relative humidity.

- Keep items dusted.
- Vacuum the room regularly to avoid dust build up on items.
- Use facsimiles of rare items for displaying photos and letters.

INVESTING IN YOUR COLLECTIONS

Once you have decided to keep items, the next step is investing in their long-term storage and maintenance. The most basic investment is proper containers. The type of container is important, as is the size of the container in proportion to the item. There are many resources available today that produce excellent quality products. These are listed in the resource section of the leaflet.

GROUND RULES FOR STORAGE

Several basic rules apply when storing materials in acid-free containers. Follow these rules for the best results.

Always use quality products. Do not buy materials from non-archival vendors claiming to sell archival materials. Archival vendors are plentiful these days. You can choose from a number, including Hollinger, University Products, and others. Light Impressions specializes in photo products but also carries a number of items for paper- and fabric-based collections. Obtain catalogs from various vendors and shop for the best prices. Call and ask vendors if they will custom cut folders. This can save time and money.

Buy in bulk and save money. Find out if the vendor will sell you products in rolls. That is also an economical way to go if you have a large collection. Find a friend who is interested in buying similar products and buy in bulk. Often the more you buy, the lower the price per item.

Always fit your folder to the container, not the item. When storing materials in flat boxes or flat files, always cut the folder to fit the container, and not the item. This avoids items slipping inside the box container or being covered up by larger items. Uniform size allows for easy leafing through material, streamlines removal, and causes less wear and tear on materials. For example, if you are storing an oversized map, do not cut the folder to fit the map, cut it to fit the map box in which it will be stored. Label folders with the opening facing you so you can easily remove an item without having to pull out the entire folder. This is helpful with map cases and flat files.

Use tops when available. This will allow you to keep dust away from your collections and keep them as clean as possible. Adjust shelves, if necessary, to allow for tops on record center boxes. Failure to use box tops can result in items being vulnerable to water damage and dust.

Store items properly (as previously outlined).

Proper storage has already been discussed. A few more suggestions to consider are these:

- Do not store items on top of each other unless protected by tops.
- Do not overload storage boxes.
- Do not allow boxes to overhang shelves. They can be tipped off or bumped into causing damage to the items within.

PREPARING FOR LONG-TERM STORAGE

Items must have certain maintenance performed on them before they are stored. Remove paper clips and rubber bands.

Unrolling or unfolding items is paramount. You may have to flatten the materials first. This is easily accomplished with care and patience. Before starting, however, it is best to take the item to a local museum, archives, or library and get the opinion of a trained archivist or curator about the best method to use and instructions. Depending on the type of item and its condition, flattening can be accomplished through the use of archival weights or through rehydrating in a humidity chamber. However, both processes must be done carefully to avoid cracking the item, particularly with brittle photos and documents. The process can take weeks.

Simple weights can be made by using bricks wrapped in newspaper and acid-free paper. A simple humidity chamber can also be built in the home. Read some of the literature on preservation and conservation of archival materials for suggestions.

Selecting Containers

Most paper-based collections fit well into the standard letter or legal size archival boxes. Use matching folders and fill boxes enough so the items are in an upright position, but do not over load the box. Avoid having folders slump down in a box. This situation will damage your materials and cause creasing and folding.

Always label folders in pencil. This provides an opportunity to re-cycle folders for other purposes and avoids damage from inks.



An example of how oversized items should be stored unfolded, flat, and in a proper size box that doesn't cause any creasing or pressure on the edges.

Invest in a steel-based map or flat file if your collection contains large maps or prints. Wood is attractive, but not conducive to storage of materials. This investment will provide not only the proper flat storage for these items; it will add some additional fireproofing for the collection. Avoid wooden-based storage files or those with a painted surface that has not been properly baked. If the flat file has any odor to it, do not buy it.

Congratulations. You have made the investment of a lifetime in your life's times; its photographs, letters, documents, and keepsakes. Your family history is an on-going process and proper care will ensure that family treasures can be handed down to the next generation or serve as a resource in an institution dedicated to preserving cultural heritage. Your investment in doing it right will never depreciate.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Conservation Online

palimpsest.stanford.edu

Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC)

100 Brickstone Square
Andover, MA 01810-1494
978-470-1010
Fax: 978-475-6021
E-mail: nedcc@nedcc.org

Image Permanence Institute (IPI)

Rochester Institute of Technology
70 Lomb Memorial Drive
Rochester, NY 14623-5604 USA
585-475-5199 phone
585-475-7230 fax
email: ipiwww@rit.edu
www.rit.edu/%7E661www1/sub_pages/8contact.htm

The Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts (CCAHA)

www.ccaha.org

SOURCES OF ARCHIVAL/MUSEUM SUPPLIES

The Hollinger Corporation

www.hollingercorp.com
800-634-0491

University Products

www.universityproducts.com
800-336-4847

Conservation Resources International

www.conservationresources.com
800-634-6932

Light Impressions

www.lightimpressionsdirect.com
800-828-6216

OTHER SOURCES

American Association for State and Local History

www.aaslh.org

American Association of Museums

www.aam-us.org

American Society of Appraisers

www.appraisers.org

Appraisers Association of America

www.appraisersassoc.org

Society of American Archivists

www.archivists.org

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