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SMARTER LIVING

How to Preserve Your Family Memories, Letters and Trinkets

By KELSEY MCKINNEY FEB. 8, 2018



Getty Images

Denise Levenick is her family's historian. She's not a professional archivist, but she's a well-practiced one, running a blog called [The Family Curator](#), and always trying to learn more. But even her family makes mistakes.

A few years ago, Ms. Levenick's son lost almost everything of sentimental value to him when his washing machine blew out, a pipe burst and the plastic bin where he had put all of his old stamps and heirlooms for safe keeping became a pool of water where mold grew.

The accident, of course, couldn't have been prevented. But the damage to his beloved records could have been mitigated had he been slightly more strategic with his storage strategy. A [breathable archival box](#), instead of a plastic bin, could have prevented water from puddling, and keeping that box in the closet, where

there are no exposed pipes and little humidity, could have saved those precious heirlooms. But people often don't think about their family papers and keepsakes until it is too late.

Good archival practices might not be the most exciting of hobbies, but it could be the key to keeping your family history intact for future generations.

Storing love letters, photographs and other important papers

Recently, someone wrote to Mary Oey, a conservator at the Library of Congress, asking for help archiving her father's personal papers. He was a Holocaust survivor, and he had used his diaries and papers as primary sources to teach schoolchildren about his experience. He had laminated them to keep them safe, and — Ms. Oey gave a mournful sigh as she told this story — lamination is a terrible way to preserve documents. There was no way to save this patron's history.

“The only way to extricate paper from lamination is to use lots of solvents to dissolve the plastic,” Ms. Oey said. “Some stiffer laminations, we don't know how to get off, and it doesn't protect the document. The lamination itself can ruin a document beyond repair.”

Not only is the lamination process itself likely to harm delicate papers, it also places undue stress on objects that can cause them to tear, yellow or become brittle prematurely.

For items like **papers and fragile documents**, the best thing you can do is to control the environment they're stored in, said Maureen Callahan, an archivist for the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College.

“Water and vermin are the greatest enemies of paper,” Ms. Callahan said. “Folks also often store family records in basements or attics, where heat and humidity can fluctuate wildly and where water is more likely to enter.”

Your best bet? Ms. Oey said it's a clean, dark space, like the top of a linen closet.

With items like **printed photographs and albums**, making things clean and neat will go a long way.

“Neatness for photographs is almost as important as storage,” Ms. Oey said. Very important photographs can be stored in high-quality paper folders (check to make sure they are acid free and lignin free) or in good plastic sleeves like Mylar. But an important caveat to remember: not using a sleeve is preferable to a cheap one that will scratch.

Every conservator who spoke to The Times recommended cardboard boxes over plastic bins for storage, because they don't breed mold as easily and dry out quicker. But if you want to get fancy, the best option is to buy acid-free archival boxes, online or from vendors like the [Container Store](#). They can be a bit pricey, but hold up best against moisture and mold.

And just as important as knowing what to do is knowing what *not* to do.

“All conservators would agree with me when I say we have seen miles and miles of terrible sticky tape,” Ms. Oey said.

So remember: No tape (it sticks). No paper clips or staples (they can rust). Definitely no lamination. And absolutely no plastic bins that can fill up with water.

Other strange heirlooms (wedding dresses, record collections and more)

Family archives can include all sorts of strange ephemera. Maybe your grandmother had an extensive record collection, or there's a box of photo slides sitting in your garage that you have no idea what to do with.

Whatever the case, individual items like these don't have any catchall rules besides common sense. But Ms. Oey encourages individuals with archiving goals they don't know how to accomplish to **seek out experts who are available**.

Most major collecting services have resources on their website about preservation no matter what you're trying to preserve. There are expert tips easily accessible for [audio and visual materials](#), [furniture](#), [paintings](#), [historical silver](#), even [individual digital film types](#).

Most libraries have an online reference system called Ask a Librarian that allows individuals to talk to preservationists who can advise them on how to best take care of the strange item, or point them toward an expert who can provide assistance, or help them find a conservator who might mend the item (though that can get pricey). A great place to start is the [Library of Congress website](#).

And that old **wedding dress** that's still in the closet? It's best to let a professional preservationist handle it, experts said. [The Association of Wedding Gown Specialists](#) has a list of guidelines and recommendations on its site. (Though, if you still want to go it alone, the same rules apply: Have a professional clean it, then store it in an acid free box in a cool, dark space away from water.)

Digitizing those love letters and printed photos

Just as with paper archives, **the most important part of archiving digital files is storage**.

"How you store your files and where will always be the most important form of preservation anyone can do," Ms. Oey said. Computers, for example, are not safe in and of themselves. Anything important to you should never have only one digital file.

The key with digital archiving, archivists say, is duplication. Every important file should have three copies. Ideally, those three copies should be stored on at least two different storage media. Ms. Levenick said that she personally uses a 3-2-1 method for backing up: three copies, two different media and at least one away from home. For example, you might store two digital wedding albums on your desktop and in a cloud based storage.

The first step to a good digital practice is high resolution photographs. Ms. Oey recommends snapping photos of your items in good (preferably natural light). "If you have a nice digital camera like an SLR, that's great, but honestly an iPhone [or other smartphone] will work just fine." (Any smartphone camera will do.) You can also [use a service](#) to do this for you for 60 cents a pop.

The second step is storing those files just as safely as the original documents. While your digital photographs aren't going to get soaked through by a burst pipe, keeping them in well-maintained environments is equally important.

"If you are using physical storing, you need to regularly migrate off one hard disk and onto another," Ms. Oey said. That includes hard drives, flash drives, CDs and anything else. "Doing this every three to five years on average will keep your files safe and up to date."

Online storage solutions can be weird and confusing, but luckily there is already a [handy and thorough guide on Wirecutter](#), a New York Times company that reviews and recommends products, to help you choose.

Digitizing audio, video and everything else

Audio and video preservation are often neglected by family archivists because they are more technical than common sense, but they are no less important.

Audio recordings — like reel-to-reel, cassette, mini-tapes from answering machines — can be easily translated to digital form as MP3 files, but not in a high enough quality to replace the original recording.

Several archivists said that you could spend anywhere from \$400 to \$40,000 digitizing audio, and that letting a vendor handle it is definitely the way to go (unless you want to make a hobby of digitization).

But if you have a large collection, it'll be more expensive. Many vendors charge around \$15 to digitize a cassette. The [Association for Recorded Sound Collections](#) has a [list of vendors](#) and plenty of resources on preserving physical sound and digitizing it.

Preserving video follows much of the same rules. The trend is toward storing video in digital formats instead of carrier-dependent formats. Again, if you want to make a hobby of it, there's plenty of info to dive into. [The Institute of Museum and Library Services](#) has a [thorough detailing](#) of all the trials that go into digitizing video and deciding how to do it.

But for those who just want their videos safe, vendor help is the way to go. Most [video conversion vendors](#) will charge you around 20 cents per foot for 8mm, Super 8mm and 16mm film conversion.

Turning to other heirlooms, vinyl records, for example, can be particularly dangerous and easy to destroy, so it's recommended that you take those to a [local vendor](#). As with every other kind of archiving, if you have something weird or uncommon, it's probably best to call an archivist and grab some specialized tips.

Do your best, but don't archive everything

Preventive care of heirlooms is always easier than trying to repair a broken item.

"Death and decay is inevitable, and not everything is worth saving," Ms. Callahan said. Curation, everyone agreed, is maybe the most important part of archiving.

"Be discriminating," she said, adding that if record-keeping becomes overwhelming "you're far less likely to go through them, and folks from the next generation probably won't know what to make of them."

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