

FAMILY PAPERS AND PHOTOGRAPHS TIPS FOR LONG - TERM CARE

- Keep in a Safe Place
- Maintain a Stable Environment
- Limit Exposure to Light
- Keep Storage Places Clean
- Use Appropriate Storage Materials
- Handle Materials Safely
- Seek Advice

“Depending on the care taken by their guardians, things of beauty as well as cultural or historical value may last for one or two more generations at most — or may be joys nearly forever.”

— Joyce Hill Stoner
in *Caring for Your Collections* (Harry Abrams, 1992)

Causes of Deterioration

Family papers and photographs are fragile treasures and precautions must be taken to prolong their lives. Understanding the causes of deterioration will help families avoid placing them in jeopardy.

• Keep in a Safe Place

Give careful consideration to where you store your family letters, Bibles, licenses, newspaper clippings, albums, photographic prints, negatives, and slides.

Papers and photographs should not be stored in potentially hazardous areas, such as near sources of water (under water pipes or in bathrooms), heat (near vents, on outside walls, over radiators or fireplaces), or light (near windows, under light fixtures). Keep papers and photographs off the floor to avoid damage from minor leaks, bumping, and easy access by pests.

If your papers and photographs are locked or tucked away where you do not see them, remember to check them periodically. This inspection will detect possible problems before damage occurs.

• Maintain a Stable Environment

Keep papers and photographs in an area where temperature and relative humidity fluctuations are minimal and air circulation is good. Select a place that is dry and cool throughout out the year. Attics, basements, and outbuildings are often the most hazardous places to choose. Areas that are prone to be moist and damp may be conducive to mold growth, and insect and pest infestation, and may cause fasteners to rust and stain papers and photographs.

• Limit Exposure to Light

All paper and photographic materials should be stored in darkness. When viewing them, limit the amount of time the materials are uncovered. Avoid looking at papers and photographs in direct sunlight. If an item needs to be displayed, consider using a photocopy or facsimile instead. If the original item must be displayed, position it in a dark area away from direct sunlight, such as an interior hallway, and keep lights turned off as much as possible.

• Keep Storage Places Clean

Store and handle your papers and photographs in clean areas that are not prone to dust, grime, or soot. Avoid use of food and drink when handling materials to prevent damage from spills or soiling from hands. If they must be left out when not in use, cover them to prevent accumulation of dust and dirt. Place a sign near the covered materials to alert others that care needs to be taken.

- **Use Appropriate Storage Materials**

Ideally, papers and photographs should be stored in an acid-free box for protection, but at a minimum the box should be sturdy enough to support the weight of the materials inside. Papers and photographs stored loose in drawers, piled on top of furniture or left on the floor can easily be damaged. Wooden boxes are not suitable for long-term storage of valuable items. The storage box should be clearly labeled to alert others that it is for safekeeping. In addition, loose papers and photographs should be placed inside acid-free folders. Label folders with a pencil. Avoid overfilling the folders. Items should not extend beyond the folder to prevent crumbling and bending of pages. Fragile and torn materials should be in their own individual folder or enclosure to provide needed support. Ideally, separate photographic materials from paper items, either in different folders or locations. Segregate highly acidic materials, such as newspaper clippings, from other paper materials. Consider photocopying newspaper clippings onto acid-free paper. Supplies for storing family papers can be purchased from archival suppliers and some local stationery stores.

Avoid attempting to repair historic records. Even minimal repairs with pressure sensitive tapes will cause unnecessary damage in the years to come. All tapes should be avoided. Seek advice from a paper, photograph, or book conservator when repairs are needed.

- **Handle Materials Safely**

Special care should always be taken when handling family papers and photographs. Prepare a place to view records so materials can be used safely. Avoid folding and unfolding items to prevent weakening on the fold lines. Oversize items should always be supported on a piece of mat board larger than the item. Self-stick notes, fasteners, rubber bands, glues, and tapes should not be used.

- **Seek Advice**

When in doubt about how to store, handle, or treat your family papers or photographs, seek advice. If you are not interested in your family papers and photographs, consider locating an interested family member or local historical society or library that may be able to care for them. Your local library or historical society may also be a resource for tips on caring for family papers and photographs.

Seek advice from a paper, photograph, or book conservator when you consider repairing, cleaning, flattening, dealing with mold and pest infested materials, or conservation treatment. If your papers or photographs are valuable or severely damaged, they should be examined by a conservator for conservation treatment and storage options. It may be difficult to locate a conservator through the Yellow Pages of your telephone book. The American Institute for Conservation (AIC) can provide a referral to a conservator or Regional Conservation Laboratory. AIC's telephone number is 202/452-9545.

Conservation treatment should be considered for items that have been damaged in handling or storage or that show signs of deterioration (staining, discoloration). The Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts (CCAHA) will provide a condition assessment and a treatment plan for a small fee (typically \$75.00). Shipment of materials in safe, specially designed containers can be arranged by calling CCAHA in advance. If you are interested in bringing or sending an item to CCAHA, call us at 215/545-0613.

CCAHA is a nonprofit regional conservation laboratory serving other nonprofit cultural, educational, and research institutions, as well as private individuals and organizations throughout the United States. The Center specializes in the treatment of art and historic artifacts on paper, rare books, photographs, and library and archival materials. It also offers on-site consultation services; educational programs and seminars; internships, fellowships and apprenticeships; and emergency conservation assistance. Visit our WWW Site: <http://www.ccaha.org>