

AMERICAN ARCHIVES MONTH OCTOBER 2021

CELEBRATING THE AMERICAN RECORD WITH PHOTOGRAPHS

Lasting Impressions:

Tips for Preserving Your Family's Photos



If you've visited your local historical society or the archives, then you know that archives—and the professional archivists who work in them - make sure that all important records are preserved and made available to research by generations to come. Those records include photographs, which are a rich source of information about our individual heritage and collective history.

Your family photos are part of that history, too. No doubt you'd like them to last a lifetime and longer . . . With proper care and storage, you can achieve that goal. Here are some helpful tips for making sure that the photos you cherish today will make lasting impressions!

“A Picture’s Worth a Thousand Words . . .”



The best protection for your photographs and paper is a cool, dry, stable environment (i.e., moderate temperature and relative humidity with relatively little fluctuation, clean air, and good air circulation, no natural or fluorescent light, and good housekeeping).

Don’t store your valuable paper collections in an attic or basement, which commonly are subject to excessive heat and/or moisture. Avoid storing materials beneath or close to such water sources as washing machines, bathrooms, or air-conditioning equipment. And be sure to consider what is in the room above your collection.

Heat causes damage. Don’t hang valuable photos over radiators, heating ducts, heat producing appliances, or fireplaces. Books, documents, or photographs with long-term value should be housed away from heat sources.

Light causes fading and other damage. Keep photos in the dark as much as possible; don’t put them in direct sun or bright light. Hallways or other rooms without windows are best. Install shades and/or heavy curtains where you can’t avoid windows. If you must display a photograph in direct sun or bright light, consider obtaining a high-quality scan of the photo and displaying the digital print instead.

- **Indoor pollution rapidly damages paper** and is a growing problem in energy-conscious spaces with good insulation. Any valuable photo on display should be protected by a preservation-quality mat and frame. The glass or plastic covering, which protects the item from pollutants and dirt, should contain UV filtering.
- **Photos, letters, clippings, and other family documents should be stored unfolded** because folding and unfolding breaks paper along the fold lines. Storing photos and documents in folders rather than envelopes is recommended because envelopes can cause damage as items are removed and replaced.
- **To preserve wedding pictures** (or photos of any important family event) as long as possible, be sure the photographer takes a roll of black-and-white film. Although technology improvements have extended the

life of color prints and negatives, color materials still do not last as long as traditional black-and-white photos and negatives.



- **If you produce color photo prints at home from an inkjet printer**, these prints are not considered to be preservation quality, and no standards govern their longevity. To maximize the quality and durability of this type of color print, it's best to use the inks and photographic paper recommended by the printer manufacturer rather than third-party inks or papers.
- **When considering whether to use paper or plastic enclosures for your photos**, select enclosures that pass the Photographic, Activity Test (PAT). This test ensures that the enclosure will not react chemically with your photos. Supplier catalogs should indicate whether a photographic storage product has passed the PAT. To read more about the PAT, visit their webpage at <http://www.archivaladvisor.org/>
- **When storing photos in an album**, use “photo” or mounting corners (available from preservation suppliers), not “magnetic” pages (which actually contain adhesive that can stick to or react with your pictures). Choose a photo album with buffered or neutral, good-quality paper and/or polyester, polypropylene, or polyethylene pages – not vinyl or PVC.

- **Make multiple backups of all digital photos and other valuable media.** Videotape, magnetic disks (hard drives and floppy disks), CDs, and DVDs have a limited life expectancy and are subject to both gradual and catastrophic failure.



LASTING IMPRESSIONS

Photographs increasingly are viewed as important resources for unique information about many facets of public and private life, as well as the natural world and the built environment.

You can significantly prolong the life of the photographs in your care by:

- Keeping them in cool, dry, dark, and clean storage environments,
- Applying safe handling techniques, and
- Using appropriate-quality housing materials

Lasting Impressions: Care of Traditional Photographs

Photographs increasingly are viewed as important resources for unique information about many facts of private life, as well as the natural world and the built environment. Whether your repository houses vast collections of photos or just a few “treasures,” here are some tips on care of traditional photographs.

You can significantly prolong the life of the photographs in your care by:

- Keeping them in cool, dry, dark, and clean storage environments
- Applying safe handling techniques
- Using appropriate-quality housing material

This quick reference guide highlights the key factors involved in implementing these strategies.



Providing a Stable Environment

Storage Location:

- Keep photographs in a stable, cool (55-70 degrees F), Dark clean, and dry environment (30-50% relative humidity (RH)).
- Avoid storing photographs in attics, garages, basements, and spaces that are vulnerable to water leaks, such as directly below pipes or one floor below sinks.
- If photos must be stored in “risky” locations, first house them as described below, then place the boxed photos in high-quality plastic tubs with tightly secured lids.

Storage Conditions:

- Too-dry conditions (<30%RH) make photographs brittle. Too-damp conditions (>60%RH) cause mold growth on photos.
- Even small environmental improvements help photos significantly. For example, by moving photos from a hot, damp attic (85degrees F and 80% RH) to a cooler, drier room (75°F and 60% RH), the photos will survive 3.5 times longer. Moving photos to an environment that is 68 F and 40% RH will increase their usable lifetime by a factor of 10.
- Air conditioners and dehumidifiers are good tools for achieving a stable, cool, dry environment – as long as they don't leak and are kept mold-free.

Furniture:

- Use powder-coated metal shelving, vertical storage cabinets, or horizontal map cases.
- Avoid wooden, plastic, or composite shelving if possible, especially those with unfinished or freshly painted surfaces.

Lighting:

- Minimize the exposure of photos to both natural and indoor lighting. Keep light levels low (50-100 lux or 4.6-9.2 foot-candles) to reduce the risk of images fading and paper damage.
- Lower window shades use ultraviolet (UV) filters on light sources and avoid displaying photos under intense light.
- Protect framed photos by using glass or acrylic glazing with built-in UV filtering.
- Use window mats to keep photos from sticking to the glass or acrylic.
- Use copies of photos for exhibits, not originals.
- Put different images on display every few months to cut down on total light exposure.

Housekeeping:

- Clean storage and workspaces to prevent infestations of insects or mold and to prevent dust that can scratch image surfaces to contain mold spores.
- Use slightly damp, clean microfiber cloths without any cleaning chemical. Then vacuum with a HEPA-filtered vacuum.
- When cleaning near photos, avoid all use of air fresheners, scented products, and chemicals, including bleach and ammonia.



Handling Photos

Do:

- Keep workspaces clean and uncluttered to provide a safe, flat surface on which to place photos.
- Keep your hands clean. Further protect images by wearing clean cotton or nitrile gloves to prevent image staining and fading from fingerprints.
- Hold photos gently but firmly without touching the image areas.
- Remove images from paper sleeves by flexing the sleeve and pulling it away from the image, rather than by pulling the image.
- Cover photos when not actively working with them to protect them from light and dust.
- Broken or cracked glass plates or photos with flaking emulsions should be stabilized by a conservator. Handle them as little as possible.
- Place a rigid support under fragile images before lifting or moving them.

Don't:

- Wear hand cream or lotion when working with photos.
- Touch an image surface (i.e., an emulsion).
- Press or tap images together.
- Trace over an image or write on paper (such as the image envelope) directly over an image.
- Hold a photo by the corner or between your finger and thumb, as this can crease or crack the emulsion.
- Leave images uncovered for a period of time so that they are exposed to light or dust.

Lasting Impressions: are of Traditional Photographs

Housing Photos

Selection of Materials:

- When purchasing boxes, envelopes, folders, or sleeves, look for materials that are acid-free, lignin-free, and chemically inert.
- Avoid acidic adhesives that react with silver and chemicals, as they may stain gelatin.
- Select housing materials identified by suppliers as having passed the Photographic Activity Test (PAT) specified in ISO 18916:2007
- Ideally use housing without seams or adhesives, such as four-fold flap envelopes.
- If you use sealed envelopes, place the emulsion side away from the seam, as acidic adhesives in seams may cause damage.
- If you choose plastic materials, select uncoated polyester, polypropylene, or polyethylene.
- Never use albums that have self-adhesive magnetic pages.
- For cyanotypes (blue-line-on-white-background or white-line-on-blue-background images), don't use buffered paper housing.



Basic Techniques:

- House individual photos in protective enclosures (such as seamless envelopes, sleeves of lignin-and acid free paper, or sheets of uncoated polyester, polyethylene, or polypropylene) to keep out gritty dirt and dust.
- Label the sleeve or envelope before placing the image inside.
- Place one image in each enclosure or use acid and lignin-free interleaving.
- Keep all enclosures within a single box that is the same size as the box interior, even if this size is large for some images.
- Ideally store negatives, prints, and transparencies in separate boxes.
- Avoid using deacidification sprays, glassine, paper clips, self-stick removable notes, rubber bands, and unidentified glues and plastics, including plastics binders.
- The better organized a collection is, the more carefully it is likely to be handled – and therefore the more likely it is to survive!

Slides and Transparencies:

- Use uncoated plastic housing that is made of polyester, polyethylene, or polypropylene, or paper housing that is acid- and lignin-free.
- Don't use plastic housing if local humidity is uncontrolled, as emulsions may stick to the plastic.
- Once they are in enclosures, place the slides or transparencies in acid-and lignin-free folders and boxes or in acid-and lignin-free binders.



Prints:

- Use uncoated plastic envelopes/sleeves or acid-and lignin-free paper enclosures (or window mats) that pass the PAT test.
- Then place the prints in acid-and lignin-free folders, binders, or boxes for support. The boxes can be either shallow and horizontal (solander boxes) or vertical (document storage boxes).
- Use plastic only when the materials will receive a lot of viewing and the relative humidity is between 30% and 50%.
- Use photo corners to secure items in mats or arrange for hinging by a trained professional.
- Choose acid-and lignin-free paper when the prints are damaged, brittle, flaking, or distorted; when housing monies are limited; or when relative humidity isn't controlled.

Negatives:

- Use buffered paper sleeves/envelopes that have passed the PAT test, especially for acetate and nitrate negatives.
- Store the sleeved negatives vertically on their long edge in acid-and lignin-free boxes.
- Alternatively, negatives may be placed in acid-and lignin-free binders or a file system without acidic adhesives.
- For non-acetate color film, use either uncoated plastic or acid-and lignin-free paper.

Cased Images:

- Place daguerreotypes, tintypes, and ambrotypes in paper envelopes, then flat in boxes.
- Daguerreotype Definition - (noun) a photograph made by an early photographic process; the image was produced on a silver plate sensitized to iodine and developed in mercury vapor.
- Store loose tintypes in paper enclosures.
- Boxes and enclosures must be acid-and lignin-free.



Albums:

- Use acid-and lignin-free boxes or slipcases that have passed the PAT test.
- Avoid albums with black or colored pages.
- Don't deconstruct albums and house the images separately. Instead, seek help from a conservator.

