

How to Store and Preserve Your Family Treasures

by Liz Mangum Shellum
for the Knight Family Reunion 2022

Papers and Photos:

- Before permanently storing items, scan them at the highest resolution possible and digitally save the files. Include any information you have about the source, the people involved, the location, the occasion, etc. Consider adding these images online to Memories on FamilySearch.
- Store items flat and unfolded. Pick a box large enough to allow space. If items are tightly curled already, don't force them flat.
- Avoid unnecessary staples and paper clips, as well as tape, glue, or rubber cement. Don't remove any staples already in use.
- Use a pencil to label photos. Future generations will not automatically know who the people are.
- Use acid-free paper between newspaper items.
- Store papers and photos separate from pens, crayons, food, or candles.
- Storage boxes are ideally archival cardboard boxes with a lid, like a bankers box. Acid- and lignin-free folders are useful to separate groups of items. Plastic boxes are waterproof but not acid-free and can damage items.
- Store boxes in a room cooler than 75 degrees F and 65% relative humidity. Watch for drafts and heat vents, and avoid storing boxes near them. Basements, attics, and garages can be problematic due to heat fluctuations, possible flooding, and humidity. Do your best.
- Handle items as little as possible. Hands should be clean and dry before touching things; consider using gloves to handle fragile items.
- Consider framing or displaying a photocopy of important items to preserve the original.
- For papers or photos that are already moldy, water damaged, or insect infested, digitize what remains and consider throwing the items away.

Artifacts:

- Choose to save items that are meaningful to you AND that make sense for you to store. Consider if someone else might be better suited to storing the physical item.
- Label and document the origin of the item. If your posterity doesn't know it is an heirloom, or the story behind it, the more likely it will be thrown out.
- Photograph items from all sides, and add the photos and origin story to FamilySearch.
- Like other treasures, artifacts should be kept clean and dust-free, and away from light. Cardboard archival boxes are a great choice for most items. Make sure cleaning products used are safe for any paints, stains, or other finishes.
- Decide whether an item should be used and loved as it wears out, or stored away out of sight. Maybe Grandma's quilt is perfect to sleep with but maybe you want to save it forever.
- When handling artifacts, lift them from the sturdiest section (likely NOT the handle).
- For jewelry: Store diamonds separately so they don't scratch other items. Wrap silver in a silver cloth. Have jewelry professionally cleaned.
- For textiles: Generally, store items flat. Avoid sunlight. If you choose to hang the item, use special preservation-safe hangers.

Audiovisual items:

- Use professional services to digitize items and save the files in multiple places. Playback equipment becomes obsolete over time, and disks and tapes can deteriorate.
- Audio files can be added to FamilySearch Memories. Video files can not be added yet.
- Transcribe audio recordings. Add information about the recording date, place, people involved, and original format. It's easier to find information in a text file than searching through audio files.

Digital Files:

- Use the 3-2-1 Rule. Important digital files should be stored in at least three places, in at least two types of media storage, in one place other than your house. Use cloud storage, external hard drives, labeled DVDs or CDs, flash/thumb drives, or multiple computer drives.
- Consider paper prints as an additional media storage type. Digital-only files like emails, texts, or even photos are easily lost. A book that sits on your shelf is secure from crashed hard drives, accidental deletion, or a lost device.
- Let other people know where to find digital items, along with how to access the files.
- Label and group files. Use names instead of titles like "Mom" and create groupings that make sense to you. Label files with the year the photo was taken, not the year you are scanning or uploading it.
- Make sure you are collecting files from all important sources like cell phones, cameras, emails, texts, and social media.
- Revisit your backups often. Check to make sure storage is actually capturing what you think it should be.
- Consider what is important and what isn't. We are taking more photos than ever and storing everything from every device becomes massive quickly.

Share what you have.

Create a photobook of war medals, Grandma's recipe cards, quilts, woodwork, antique dishes, love letters, Christmas ornaments, wedding dresses, etc. Many people would rather store a copy of a photobook than the actual items themselves. It allows extended families to value an item without fighting over physical possession. If you find you no longer can appropriately store the item, offer it to other family members before discarding or selling the item. Share photos and digitized records on FamilySearch.

Remember:

Your ancestors didn't intend for you personally to have to store everything they ever owned for the rest of time. Digitize everything, then physically store what you reasonably desire, and share the rest. When things become spoiled or unusable, it's okay to discard things.

Sources:

Smithsonian Institute Archives: <https://siarchives.si.edu/blog/six-tips-preserving-family-archives>

National Archives: <https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives>

FamilySearch blog:

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/blog/family-history-preservation-preserving-your-familys-letters-and-documents>