Caring for Documents

History NEBRASKA CONSERVATION

Ford Conservation Center

2017

About Documents

People collect important and meaningful papers throughout their lives that mark milestones and commemorate events. Over time these marriage certificates, family photographs and children's drawings get shuffled together in old boxes, and are often stored in locations like basements and attics. These collections fall into varying states of disrepair from poor storage, wear, and mishandling. The following are some steps and tips to best preserve your personal archives for the future.

Handling

Many paper-based items become damaged through mishandling. As paper ages, it can become weak and brittle. When examining your documents, first make sure the table and surrounding area is clean. Use clean hands when handling documents. This will prevent oils from your hands transferring to the document, which causes staining over time. When handling photographs and negatives, wear clean cotton gloves to prevent fingerprints or scratching the sensitive surface. An easy method for moving oversized or flimsy paper items is to carefully pick up the item with each hand on diagonal corners of the document. Use only the fingertips to ensure gentle maneuvering.

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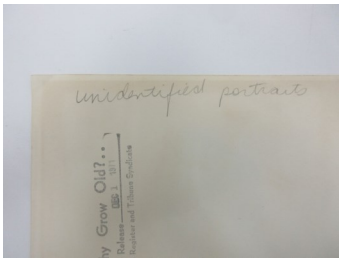
Organize and Document



Before preservation activities can begin, papers, photographs, and mementos should be organized and documented. One way to do this is to organize papers by family member or date, for example. After the papers are organized, items that should be duplicated for family members or for display can be separated out.

It is not advised to write directly on historic documents to label them. Labeling the folder or sleeve they are stored in is preferable in every instance. However, if you must label items directly, use a soft number two pencil, lightly on the reverse in a lower margin or corner. Avoid using ink pens or stamps, markers, or self-adhesive labels. Ink pens and felt tip markers are irreversible; they can bleed, or transfer to other pages and are likely to run if the paper becomes wet. If you cannot label directly on an item, such as a tintype, you can label the folder or sleeve using a Pigma® Pen. Do not use these pens directly on your item.

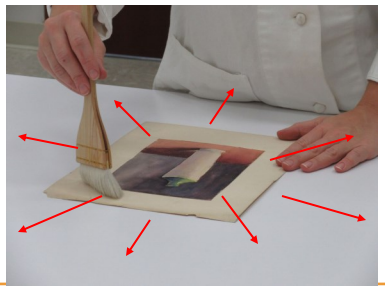
Cleaning Documents

"Paper-based items can be cleaned if they are structurally sound and do not have friable, or loose, media."

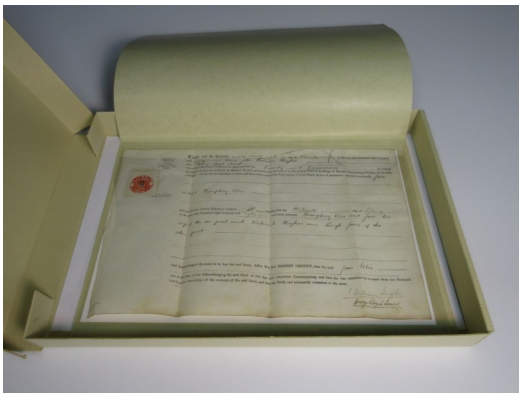
Dusting is an easy, preventive measure that can help to reduce surface dirt and particulate matter. Paper-based items can be cleaned if they are structurally sound and do not have friable, or loose, media. Do not attempt to clean items that have tears, or have media like pastel or charcoal. If you are unsure about the condition of your document, consult a conservator first. You will need a soft hair brush, such as a traditional Japanese Haké brush (pronounced ha-kay). This can be purchased from art supply or hobby stores and from conservation suppliers. Do not use any liquids or household cleaners to clean family papers or photographs.

Procedure

Prepare a clean workspace and lay the document down flat. Gently apply light pressure on one side of the paper with one hand to secure the paper, and dust with the other hand. Start at the center and dust out, being sure to extend beyond the edges of the item. Turn the item and repeat this motion, moving around the entire document until the dust is removed.



Housing and Storing Documents



Proper storage (also known as housing) is the first line of defense for preserving paper-based items.

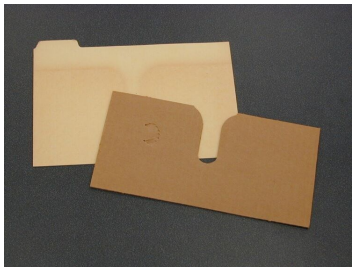
Three layers of protection are recommended for paper-based items. The first layer is a clear plastic sleeve, made from polyester, polypropylene or polyethylene. This allows for easy handling and protects items from dust, dirt, and fingerprints. Only these plastics should be used, as they are inert, and will not become sticky, discolor over time, or deteriorate your documents and photos. One item per sleeve is advised. Plastic sleeves are recommended especially for delicate papers like newspaper clippings, carbon papers, and typing paper.

The second layer is a folder to house individual sleeved items, or several paper items of similar size. Be sure not to overstuff folders and be sure that the folder or sleeve completely covers the object. If an item sticks out on the top or sides of the folder or sleeve, it can easily become torn or creased.

Folders come in many different thicknesses, sizes, and styles and are available from conservation suppliers. Be sure to choose folders that are acid-free, lignin-free, and are made of high-quality rag or alpha cellulose. Lignin is an acidic component in cellulosic materials that deteriorates rapidly, and is capable of transferring acids to nearby materials. This is why it is important to always choose lignin-free storage materials.

The third layer of protection is a storage box, which helps to protect paper items from light and dust exposure. Boxes should be acid-free, lignin-free, and made of high-quality rag or alpha cellulose. Enclosures like boxes will also act as a buffer to protect papers from swings in temperature and relative humidity. There are many different shapes, sizes, and specifications of boxes available from conservation suppliers for all types of items.

When packed properly using three layers of protection, a range of items can be housed together in the same storage box. Be sure to stack items horizontally from largest to smallest. Do not overstuff boxes, or compress items to make them fit. If three layers are not possible, protect your paper-based documents with two layers, either in a folder *or* a plastic sleeve *and* place them in a storage box.



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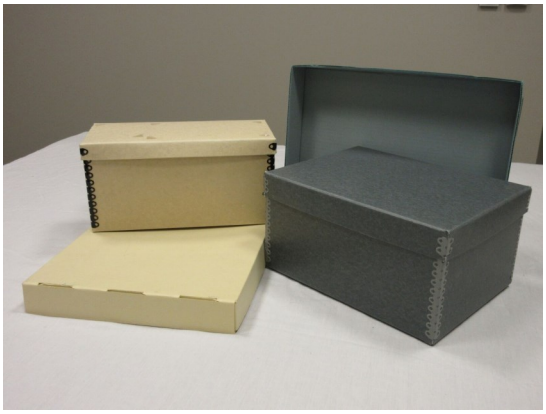

Additional Storage Materials

Some specialized materials can also be used for the following storage needs:

- A piece of alkaline buffered MicroChamber® paper can be placed behind a document in a sleeve or folder as a simple way to reduce acids in the item. This zeolite-impregnated paper (Conservation Resources International) acts as a molecular trap to neutralize harmful products that cause acidity and lead to degradation. This is useful for newspaper clippings and is recommended for most paper documents.
- Interleaving tissue can be used inplace of plastic sleeves, although it does not offer the same level of protection. Look for terms like acid-free and lignin-free, and alkaline buffered.
- Alkaline buffered housing materials, like folders and boxes, can add extra protection for paper documents, but should not be used on blueprints/ diazo prints. The buffering agent can cause discoloration in these particular materials.

"The best preventive measure is to house the scrapbook in a storage box made from lignin-free, acid-free rag or alpha cellulose board."

Scrapbooks

Scrapbooks or other collections of bound paper items may have adhesive components and backing pages of unknown material composition. These can be complex items with a range of condition issues from one page to the next. The best preventive measure is to house the scrapbook in a storage box made from lignin-free, acid-free rag or alpha cellulose board. This will keep all the pieces together while providing dust and light protection. As a further measure of protection, each page can be interleaved with thin tissue paper to prevent ink transfer and acid migration from poor quality papers. Remember to choose acid-free, and lignin-free tissues. Alkaline buffered tissues can be used to interleave pages containing high acid content items, such as newspaper clippings. Consult a conservator if you are interested in having individual items preserved or need items removed from backing pages. Do not attempt to remove scrapbook or photo album items that are firmly adhered.

Display

Flat paper-based items can be matted and framed using acid-free, lignin-free, rag or alpha cellulose board mats. Double-sided tape or pressure-sensitive tape of any kind, such as Scotch® tape, results in staining and should not be used on original objects. Instead, acid-free, lignin-free photo corners should be used. Consult a conservator for information on safe framing materials and best methods (see *Matting and Framing*).

In many cases, the best solution is to display a copy of the original. A digital print can provide copies for display, and when framed, a color facsimile will look like the original. Photographs can also be displayed this way. Displaying a copy saves the original from cumulative light exposure, which causes irreversible damage to paper-based items. This is also useful for displaying part of a larger artifact, such as the marriage record pages inside a family Bible.

Papers and important documents can be duplicated by a number of processes including photocopying, digital imaging, and high resolution scanning. Copies used to share information or for genealogical research help to save original documents from structural damages.

When duplicating original materials it is important to remember that photographers or processing technicians can damage items, as they are not always trained in special handling. Tightly curled photographs can be broken easily and brittle documents can be torn. Fragile items should be taken to a professional that you trust. Consult a conservator to discuss local options for digital imaging.

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Environmental Conditions

There are a number of controllable environmental factors that directly affect the preservation of paper-based items.

Humidity and Temperature

The most important aspect of storage is to provide a stable environment without major fluctuations in temperature and relative humidity. Relative humidity levels in the range of 30-50% are thought to be best for paper-based materials. High humidity increases the risk of mold growth, while humidity that is too low may result in the embrittlement of organic materials. Temperatures should be kept within a narrow range and should not exceed 72° F. Important paper-based documents should be stored in a cool and dark space, such as a closet or desk in a living part of the house. Avoid storing paper-based items in attics and basements where environmental fluctuations tend to be more drastic.

Light Exposure

"Light exposure is cumulative...Once ink fades, it cannot be restored."

It is also important to protect paper-based items from overexposure to light, which exacerbates deterioration and causes discoloration. Ultraviolet light from the sun is extremely damaging to paper and media, but UV light is also emitted from indoor light sources, such as fluorescent bulbs. Exposure can be partially limited by using window shades and applying UV filtering films to windows, and sleeves to fluorescent lights. Remember: Light exposure is cumulative and the surest way to protect your object is to keep it out of direct light (both natural and artificial) and limit the amount of time your paper-based items are on display. Once ink fades, it cannot be restored.

Consulting a Conservator

Deteriorated paper is much weaker than the newer kinds of paper we encounter on a daily basis. Items that have been tightly rolled or folded for a long time may need the attention of a conservator. They can often be safely and successfully flattened and repaired by a professional paper conservator. This type of work requires expertise and experience, and should not be attempted at home. Some common problems, such as tears, creasing, and detailed cleaning require the attention of a professional paper conservator. If you are unsure about the condition of a paper-based item be sure to contact a paper conservator for advice.

Additional Resources

American Institute for Conservation. *Caring for your Treasures*[3]Retrieved from http://www.conservation-us.org/docs/default-source/public-relations/paper.pdf?sfvrsn=2

Northeast Document Conservation Center. *Storage Methods and Handling Practices*. Retrieved from https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/4.-storage-and-handling/4.1-storage-methods-and-handling-practices

Library of Congress. *Preservation Measures for Scrapbooks and Albums*[3]Retrieved from https://www.loc.gov/preservation/care/albums.html

Northeast Document Conservation Center. *Surface Cleaning of Paper*[3]Retrieved from https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/7.-conservation-procedures/7.2-surface-cleaning-of-paper

Conservation Suppliers

Conservation Resources International
5532 Port Royal Road
Springfield, VA 22151
Toll free: (800) 634-6932
www.conservationresources.com
Archival housing/storage supplies, photographic supplies, general

Gaylord Archival
P. O. Box 4901
Syracuse, NY 13221-4901
Toll Free: (800) 448-6160
www.gaylord.com
General conservation supplies, housing supplies

Hollinger Metal Edge, Inc.
6340 Bandini Blvd
Commerce, CA 90040
Toll Free: (800)-862-2228
www.hollingermetaledge.com
Archival housing/storage supplies

Light Impressions
100 Carlson Road
Rochester, NY 14610
Toll Free: (800) 975-6429
www.lightimpressionsdirect.com
Photographic supplies, housing, matting and framing supplies

University Products
517 Main Street
P. O. Box 101
Holyoke, MA 01041
Toll Free: (800) 628-1912
www.universityproducts.com
General conservation supplies, housing and matting supplies

Talas
330 Morgan Ave
Brooklyn, NY 11211
Telephone: (212) 219-0770
www.talasonline.com
Conservation supplies, photographic supplies, general

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Ford Conservation Center
1326 S 32 Street Omaha, NE 68105 402-595-1180
nshs.grfcc@nebraska.gov history.nebraska.gov/conservation-center