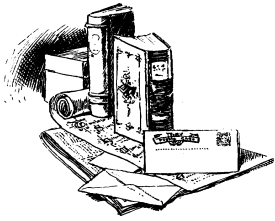


# Preserving Family Papers and Documents

*The first step is to decide what should be saved.* Not everything old is precious, and many recent items will become precious with time. Material commonly considered to warrant preservation as part of a family's papers are:



individual's business or professional work (**WE HAVE ANOTHER HANDOUT FOR ORGANIZATIONS LOOKING FOR HELP IN MANAGING THEIR RECORDS**)

- letters with family and friends
- noteworthy letters, reports, minutes, newsletters and the like relating to an individual's business or professional work (**WE HAVE ANOTHER HANDOUT FOR ORGANIZATIONS LOOKING FOR HELP IN MANAGING THEIR RECORDS**)
- diaries
- scrapbooks
- autograph albums
- photos and photo albums, if identified (**WE HAVE A SEPARATE HANDOUT JUST FOR PHOTOS**)
- newspaper clippings about family members
- personal financial account books (common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century)
- citizenship, land grant, and military documents
- birth and marriage documents
- genealogical information (sometimes contained in family Bibles)
- a broad category called "ephemera" (which includes such things as commencement programs, wedding invitations, programs from school plays in which a family member starred, etc.).

Less likely to warrant preservation are such things as: receipts; bills; canceled checks; check registers; newspaper clippings on state, national, or world events; greeting cards; what is now commonly referred to as "junk mail"; unidentifiable fragments of letters; unidentifiable account books.

*The next step is to organize the papers.* This is not as complicated as it might seem at first, even if your collection includes papers from several generations of family members. Letters should be organized first by *recipient*, and then either by sender or by date. Official documents, newspaper clippings, and ephemera should be organized by *the family member named in them*. Diaries, scrapbooks, and autograph albums should be organized by *creator*. Genealogical material should be kept together as a set.

## STORING PAPERS

After you've organized the papers, work on storing them properly. The two most common causes of deterioration for papers are 1) overexposure to light; 2) poor storage environment. Papers should, therefore, be stored away from light—this can be accomplished by placing them in boxes, but open containers or framed items should be shielded from light as much as possible. Papers should also be stored in a space with the same environmental conditions—temperature, humidity, and protection from mice and bugs—as your living quarters. The worst places to store papers are unfinished basements, attics, garages, "mini-storage" rentals, barns, and sheds.

The best way to store papers is in archival-quality folders within archival-quality boxes (archival-quality folders inside metal filing cabinets is an acceptable alternative). "Archival quality" refers to material that is free of the acids and lignin normally found in paper and cardboard, and impregnated with an alkaline "buffer" (magnesium or calcium) against the acids in the papers you will be storing. Archival quality materials are not available in most office supply stores (a list of suppliers is included toward the end of this handout), and cost somewhat more than regular folders and boxes—but they will help preserve your papers for generations to come.

Folders should not be overfilled, and should be labeled with the general contents (for example: “John Jones correspondence, 1890-1925”). Do not use nicknames, family relationships, or free-standing first names to identify contents: “Uncle Henry’s letters,” “Tiger’s Scrapbook,” or “Jane’s photo album” may not mean anything to your great-great grandchildren. Because removing and reinserting letters into envelopes causes deterioration over time, it is best to store letters flat and attached (with a plastic or stainless steel paper clip) to its envelope. **Torn or damaged items should not be repaired**, except by a professional conservator (see below). Virtually all tapes, glues, and other mending supplies will damage items in the long run. A badly damaged item can be safely stored in a folder by itself. Newspaper clippings should never be stored in contact with any other form of material, because they are highly acidic and will damage whatever they remain in contact with. They can be stored in their own folders or, for more permanent preservation of the information they contain, photocopied (and the originals disposed of).

## DISPLAYING FRAMED DOCUMENTS

Exposure to light can hurt documents. Locate framed documents on the least sunny walls in your house. Better yet, make a color photocopy of the document and keep the original in dark storage. Metal frames are preferable to wood. Never frame a document so that the item is in direct contact with the glass. Use a 100 percent rag matte board and remove any wooden or cardboard backing used in old frames. Dark storage is especially important for documents containing handwritten entries and signatures, and for documents containing color printing.

## REPAIRING OR RESTORING DAMAGED ITEMS

The only safe and reliable way to repair or restore a damaged item (torn, water damaged, mold damaged) is to employ the services of a professional conservator. The Technical Services Department of the Wyoming State Archives (307/777-7932) may be able to provide information on questions to ask when interviewing conservators, and provide names of conservators in the Rocky Mountain Region.

## A WORD ABOUT “VALUABLE” DOCUMENTS

Family papers can have three types of value: value to the family, broader historical (or “research” value), and monetary value. Any single item can have from none to all three of these values, in any combination. Items with monetary value are the most rare, however. For example, after approximately 1860 nearly all documents (including land grants) with a presidential “signature” were in fact signed by an authorized secretary or (after about 1945) by a mechanical device called an “autopen”. Documents—usually the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Gettysburg Address, and various Old West “wanted” posters—on medium-brown, rough-textured, crinkly “parchment” are reproductions that have been widely available for many decades. The American Heritage Center cannot give monetary appraisals or formally “authenticate” documents; the American Society of Appraisers ([asainfo@appraisers.org](mailto:asainfo@appraisers.org) or 703/478-2228) may be able to assist in finding a qualified appraiser in your area.

## WHERE TO BUY QUALITY PRESERVATION SUPPLIES

Some archival-quality storage supplies are easy to find; others require a little more effort. Some sources include:

- Light Impressions, Rochester, N.Y. (1-800-828-6216)
- University Products, Holyoke, Mass. (1-800-628-1912)
- Gaylord Bros., Syracuse, N.Y. (1-800-448-6160). Call and ask for their catalogs.

## AMERICAN HERITAGE CENTER

2111 Willett Drive (Centennial Complex)

### Postal Address:

University of Wyoming  
P.O. Box 3924  
Laramie, WY 82071

**Phone:** 307-766-4114

**FAX:** 307-766-5511

**e-mail:** General: [ahc@uwyo.edu](mailto:ahc@uwyo.edu)

Reference: [ahcref@uwyo.edu](mailto:ahcref@uwyo.edu)

**Website:** [www.uwyo.edu/ahc](http://www.uwyo.edu/ahc)

