Family History Materials: Basic Guidelines for Preservation

PROPER ENVIRONMENT – CLEAN, COOL, DRY, AND DARK

Clean:

- Maintain good housekeeping practices with a regular schedule of cleaning, replacing air filters, and dusting/vacuuming
- Keep collections away from the vicinity of food, open windows, sources of fumes (cleaning products, paint, car exhaust, sources of smoke)
- Periodically inspect for insect and mold infestations
- Use non-chemical methods to eradicate problems, including sealing areas of pest access, cleaning regularly, and improving air circulation
- Use of chemicals on or near historical materials is not recommended (can be absorbed into paper, accumulated residues can pose a health threat when handling treated materials, chemicals can be an agent of deterioration)

Cool and Dry:

- Keep temperature and humidity moderate and controlled as much as possible to maintain stable conditions; the ideal temperature is anything below 72° Fahrenheit and the ideal humidity range is 45-50% for paper, 30-50% for photographic materials
- In general, consider storage and display in room conditions that are comfortable for people
- Use thermometers and humidity monitors to keep an eye on conditions
- Allow for good air circulation by leaving a few inches of space between shelves/storage cabinets and the wall, between stored items (such as shelved books) and the wall
- Make sure storage areas and displays are away from sources of heat and water (fireplaces, air vents, windows, sinks)
- Avoid storage or display in areas with extreme fluctuations (attics, basements, garages); this includes exterior walls where humidity changes are affected by outside weather
- Ideally, an interior room or closet offers the most stable environment

Dark:

- Ideally, choose a space with no windows and where lights are normally kept turned off
- If windows are present, prevent sunlight from shining directly on items (use curtains, shades) or choose a location where sunlight won't shine on the space
- Minimize exposure to ANY type of light
- Limit the amount of time and intensity of light by turning lights off when not needed and using lower wattage light sources, where possible
- Use UV filtered glass or acrylic on framed items
- Limit display time to give items a "rest"; ideally, change displays every 6 months; avoid displaying items on a permanent basis

PROPER STORAGE – USE ARCHIVAL QUALITY ENCLOSURES

"Archival quality" means:

• Enclosures made of stable materials that won't react with their contents

- Unfortunately, no standards for items touted as "archival"; recommend purchasing products from suppliers specializing in materials for archival storage
- Check specifications in catalogs or with the supplier
- Check references in literature or websites about preservation for further recommendations for sources of supplies
- Consult with conservation/preservation departments of libraries/museums or conservation businesses

Paper products should be:

- Lignin free
- Acid free (can test products with a pH pen; NEVER use the pH pen directly on historical materials)
- Archival paper products are either buffered or unbuffered
- Buffered paper has an alkaline additive that makes it resistant to absorbing acids from the surrounding environment; has a pH of 7.5 to 9.5 (pH is a measure of acidity or alkalinity above 7 is alkaline, below 7 is acidic)
- Buffered paper is appropriate for storage of most books, documents, black and white photographs/negatives, photographs that are brittle or mounted on brittle boards, and textiles with fibers originating from plant sources (cotton, linen)
- Unbuffered paper is acid free but with no alkaline additive; not resistant to acidic deterioration, so replace periodically or store inside larger buffered enclosures; has a pH range of 6.5 to 7.5
- Unbuffered paper is appropriate for the storage of color photographs/negatives, blueprints, albumen photographs (popular in the mid to late 19th century), items with sensitive dyes or coatings, and textiles with fibers originating from animal sources (wool, silk)
- Advantages of paper products porous, opacity is a barrier to light, protects contents from dust, less expensive than plastic products, easy to write on
- Disadvantage of paper is that contents must be removed to view them; extra handling increases potential for damage, abrasion, and fingerprinting

Plastic products must be:

- Inert = chemically stable with no coatings, plasticizers, or additives
- Currently acceptable plastics include:
- Polyester film dimensionally stable and stiff, transparent, trade name is Melinex, also known as Mylar
- Polyethylene flexible, filmy appearance, inexpensive
- Polypropylene heat resistant, acts as a barrier against moisture and vapors, uncoated version is as rigid as polyester, softer versions have proprietary surface treatments which may or may not be archival (check specifications)
- Never use products with vinyl in the name, especially polyvinylchloride (PVC); chemically unstable, emits a strong smell as it degrades, and can aggressively deteriorate paper
- If it smells "plastic-y", don't use it!
- Advantages of plastic products transparency allows viewing without removing contents from the enclosure, provides protection from direct handling of contents, provides a barrier to moisture and air pollutants, durable
- Disadvantages include not breathable (can trap moisture and outgassing products of contents in conditions of high humidity), no protection from light, electrostatic charge can attract dust and pull off flaking components, more expensive than paper, difficult to label

Choose enclosures that:

- Completely cover their contents
- Sturdy enough to hold the weight of items

- Large enough for items to be easily inserted and removed without resistance or danger of catching and tearing
- Many styles and sizes of archival quality enclosures are commercially available in either paper or plastic (cover sheets, sleeves and bags, envelopes, folders, binders, boxes)

PROPER HANDLING – HANDLE WITH CARE AND PROVIDE APPROPRIATE SUPPORT

Handle historical items with:

- Freshly-washed hands: advantage is high tactile sensitivity; disadvantage is potential transfer of skin oils or perspiration onto historical materials (unless hands washed often)
- Cotton gloves: advantages include "breathability" and are re-useable; disadvantages include poor tactile sensitivity, can transfer dirt, and can easily catch on and tear fragile items
- Plastic gloves: advantages include good tactile sensitivity, better grip than cotton, inexpensive, and disposable; disadvantages include making hands sweat, easily punctured, many people are allergic to some types of plastics

Always provide support when handling or moving fragile, brittle, or oversize items

- Use a folder or a rigid piece of cardboard
- Prevents potential for tearing or cracking items, items "flying away" or being accidently dropped

Never use tape for repairs

- Too strong a repair for fragile paper
- Usually made of acidic materials, adhesive properties can degrade over time, staining the item where affixed
- To preserve the information and reduce handling of the original, make photocopies onto acid free paper or make a digital scan
- If deemed of value to repair, consult a conservator

Preservation tips for documents:

- Don't force items to unfold if they are brittle (humidify to relax the folds)
- Remove acidic materials (newspaper clippings, pressed flowers) which can stain in direct contact with historical items; if retaining, house them in their own enclosures
- Remove rusty fasteners (paper clips, staples) and rubberbands; these materials stain and deteriorate paper as they degrade
- Avoid using adhesives, tape, or sticky notes on historical paper
- Store documents flat and unfolded to original page size, if possible
- Store documents of similar size together to avoid problems of bending, tearing, or inadequate support of adjacent items
- Don't overstuff folders; 10-15 documents per folder are enough, depending on thickness and organization
- Pack document boxes sufficiently to keep contents upright and supported, but not too tight
- If not enough documents or folders to fill a box, use spacers or acid free filler boards to pad the empty space; this will provide support for the contents and prevent sagging

Preservation tips for books:

 Protect the spines and bindings of old books - don't force books to open any wider than necessary and never lay them open face down

- When opening a fragile, heavy, or oversize book, lay it on a flat surface and use support (such as another book) under its cover
- Provide boxes for books that are of particular value, are fragile or in pieces, or have shedding leather ("red rot")
- Ideally, the box should be made to fit the dimensions of the book
- If the box is larger than the book, pad the empty space with acid free tissue to prevent potential damage of the book sliding around inside
- If possible, shelve books by similar size to provide support for each other
- Make sure bookends, if used, are of sufficient size and weight to keep shelved books upright and to prevent sagging
- Oversize books should lay flat on shelves no more than 3-4 to a stack (for ease of retrieval)

Preservation tips for photographs:

- Handle photographs and negatives by the edges to avoid getting fingerprints on the emulsion (image side)
- Use enclosures described as passing the Photographic Activity Test (PAT)
- Avoid overstuffing enclosures ideally, each photographic item should be in its own enclosure
- Interleave or house negatives so that they aren't in direct contact with prints
- Avoid labelling directly on photographs; label their enclosures instead
- If photographs must be marked, use a soft lead pencil on the back along the edges or borders
- Never use ink on photographs; ink can bleed through prints or transfer to adjacent materials

Sources for advice include:

- American Institute for Conservation (provides a referral list of conservators)
- Conservation/preservation departments of libraries or museums
- Conservation labs and conservators that offer treatment services

