



BILLINGS FARM & MUSEUM

ADVICE FROM AN ARCHIVIST: HOW TO ORGANIZE AND CARE FOR YOUR FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS

Looking for a spring project? Many of us have photographs that record significant events, activities, and people from our lives. With a little planning, the right tools, and archival supplies, you can organize your family photographs and save them for future generations.

ORGANIZE:

The first step is to locate and gather your photographs together. Find all of your loose photographs and any photographs stored in non-archival albums or scrapbooks. Albums containing photographs glued to pages or on self-stick pages are especially susceptible to damage. The adhesive will eventually bleed through to the front of the photograph, stain the image, and may permanently bond the photograph to the page. Try to remove at home only if the photos are already very loose and can be safely pried from the sticky surface with a flat microspatula. It may be best to contact a conservator or archivist for guidance if you encounter this problem.



Photographs stored in archival plastic sleeves

HOW TO ORGANIZE AND CARE FOR YOUR FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS

ORGANIZE:

Next, sort your photographs. Sort chronologically, by subject, theme, or by people, whichever makes the most sense to you. Then gather your tools:

- **ARCHIVAL BOXES OR BINDERS**
- **ARCHIVAL ENVELOPES, FOLDERS, AND / OR PLASTIC SLEEVES**
- **NITRILE OR COTTON GLOVES**
- **A SOFT BRISTLE BRUSH (LOOK FOR GOAT HAIR BRISTLES) OR A DUST CLOTH**
- **BASIC LEAD PENCIL**
- **MICROSPATULA**

Always wear protective nitrile or cotton gloves when handling your photographs. Wearing gloves will help you avoid leaving fingerprints, dirt, and scratches on your photographs. If your photographs are dusty, clean gently using a soft brush or a clean cotton dust cloth. Never use or immerse photographs in water. And never bend, fold or roll a photograph.



Archival boxes, folders, paper and plastic enclosures;
nitrile gloves, dust cloth, microspatula, and pencil.

HOW TO ORGANIZE AND CARE FOR YOUR FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS

STORAGE: ARCHIVAL BOXES, PAPER, AND PLASTIC ENCLOSURES

Place individual photographs in archival paper enclosures or polyethylene, polyester, or polypropylene sleeves to prevent damage to the image surface, edges, and corners. Use paper or plastic that have passed the Photographic Activity Test (PAT). Archival suppliers include this information in the product descriptions (see the **SUPPLIERS** section for recommendations). If the PAT test results are not available, purchase from a different supplier. Look for paper envelopes or folders that have a neutral PH and are lignin-free. Plastic sleeves should not contain additives. **Never** use plastic sleeves made of polyvinyl chloride (PVC). PVC contains plasticizers and other additives that will damage your photographs.

Both paper and plastic are suitable for photograph storage but there are advantages and disadvantages to both. Paper envelopes and folders are opaque and protect your photographs from moisture and damaging light. Photographs should not be exposed to excessive light which causes fading, discoloration, and embrittlement. Light damage is cumulative and irreversible. All types of light- indoor and outdoor- are damaging but particularly avoid direct sunlight. Color photographs are more susceptible to light damage than black & white photographs.

Another advantage of paper is the ability to record information on paper envelopes or folders. Always write on the envelope before placing the photograph inside. Try to avoid writing on the photograph, but if you must, write in pencil on the reverse near the edge. Paper enclosures are designed to hold a single photograph and removing and placing it back in the envelope increases the likelihood of damage from handling. Paper may not be a good alternative for photos that you may want to view frequently.



Photograph, c. 1945, ready to go into an archival paper envelope

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STORAGE: ARCHIVAL BOXES, PAPER, AND PLASTIC ENCLOSURES



Photographs in archival plastic sleeves inside a folder stored flat in a clamshell box

Plastic enclosures allow you to view a photograph without removing it, reducing the chance of fingerprints, scratches, or other damage caused by handling. Using plastic storage pages inside an archival 3 ring binder is a convenient way to store most family photographs. Archival plastic album pages are available in several formats and sizes and are a good alternative for collections that are frequently viewed. Unlike paper, plastic is difficult to write on. Also, moisture is damaging to photographs and can get trapped in a plastic enclosure causing the image to stick to the plastic. Never store photographs enclosed in plastic sleeves in an environment that's damp or is susceptible to an accident involving water.

PAPER

OR

PLASTIC?

Paper envelopes hold a single image and are better for storage of infrequently viewed photographs.	Plastic album pages hold 1-4 images and are ideal for images frequently viewed.
Paper protects from damaging light but removing and returning the image to the envelope may cause abrasions and creases.	Plastic allows viewing without removing the image, reducing damage from handling.
Paper envelopes and folders are easy to write on.	Plastic is difficult to write on. Special markers are needed to write on sleeves.
Paper protects and buffers photographs from moisture and is better if your photographs are stored in a damp environment.	Plastic sleeves can trap moisture causing considerable damage if stored in a damp environment.

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STORAGE: ARCHIVAL BOXES, PAPER, AND PLASTIC ENCLOSURES

Once your photographs are in archival sleeves or envelopes, place them in archival boxes or binders, either flat or upright. The size of the box should match the size and shape of the enclosures so that the photographs don't shift inside the box. Photographs should lay flat or stay upright without sagging, bending or folding. If the box isn't full, use a spacer board to keep items upright. Boxes protect your photographs from moisture, dust, insects, critters, and damaging light. They should be at least four inches off the floor and have tight lids.

ENVIRONMENT

A good storage environment is the most important preservation measure for photographs and negatives. Boxes should be stored in a cool, dry, stable environment. Avoid storing photographs in attics that may get to hot and basements that are often damp. An environment that's too dry may cause paper prints to become brittle and curl; a warm, damp environment encourages mold and mildew. General guidelines for photograph storage are between 30% - 50% relative humidity at a room temperature below 70°F. Colder temperatures (40°F or below) are recommended for negatives and color prints. Never store where the photographs are susceptible to a water accident.



Stereographs enclosed in plastic sleeves fit securely in this box to minimize movement



Three ring archival binder with archival plastic sleeves

GATHERING YOUR FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS AND TRANSFORMING THEM INTO A COHESIVE COLLECTION WILL PROTECT YOUR PHOTOGRAPHS AND PRESERVE PRECIOUS MEMORIES FOR YEARS TO COME!

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SUPPLIERS

Here are some recommended suppliers of archival materials:

- **Gaylord Archival**- <https://www.gaylord.com/personal-preservation-family>
- **Hollinger Metal Edge**- <https://www.hollingermetaledge.com/modules/store/index.html?dept=15&cart=158763961976020701>
- **Print File Archival Storage**- <https://printfile.com/>
- **Talas**- <https://www.talasonline.com/archival-storage>
- **University Products**- <https://www.universityproducts.com/photo-products>



Storage in a document box with a spacer board to hold images upright.