

## Archiving 101: Organizing & Caring for Family Photographs

by Heather Potter

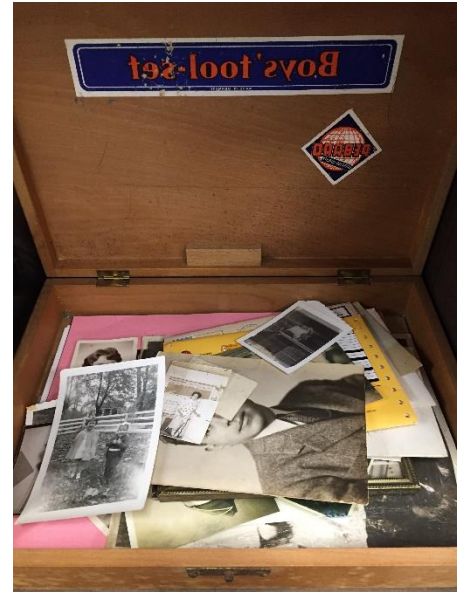
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Family pictures are more than a photograph of a loved one; each image is a historical document. These photographs reflect history, they inform us, they change our impressions of our ancestors, and tell the significant stories of our past. Yet, many family photograph collections remain tucked away in the basement or attic. While tackling your family photograph collection may seem daunting, there are a few easy steps you can take to get started. I would like to introduce a new three-part series called *Archiving 101: Organizing & Caring for Family Photographs*. This three-part series will walk you through how to start tackling your family photo collection.

### *Part 1: Surveying your Family Photograph Collection*

How many of you have boxes of family photographs that are mixed up in no order? Multiple family groups mixed, along with multiple formats? Often, we get family photos passed down to us, but they remain tucked away in the closet and we don't know what to do with them.

One of the best ways to get started with sorting through your family photos is to begin by surveying what you have. By doing this you will have a better understanding of what you physically have, and it will help inform you on how to prioritize future photo projects. This can be especially helpful for large family photograph collections. While you may be eager to rush right in, here are a few pointers on how to prepare before you start.



- 1) Make sure you set aside a designated amount of time. Typically, no more than three hours, as your eyes and memory start to tire and you may misidentify or misplace image groups.
- 2) Prepare a clean workspace. It is super easy to pull a box of photos out and rummage through it, but this is usually when damage can be done. It's usually when you work too quickly that something rips, or worse you leave copies of your fingerprints on the images because you weren't wearing gloves.
- 3) Gather supplies, paper and pencil, or your computer; powder-free nitrile gloves or white cotton gloves, and freshly washed hands.

Once you have a designated space and time set aside to work on your collection, you are going to start by surveying your materials to see what is in those boxes you have. Your goal is to learn what you have and take notes along the way.

There are lots of ways you can approach surveying your materials, and ways you can customize this to meet your needs. I recommend keeping it simple at first by creating a basic inventory with notes about items you find along the way. You can always go back and break out sections for more robust descriptions, and research in the future. This is just the first round of exploring your collection.

Start by gathering all the photographs you have in one central location or go around your house documenting as you go from room to room. While you are looking at your materials this is what you will want to record in your initial survey:

- **Quantity**—How many envelopes, boxes, bins, or albums do you have? You do not need to count every single individual photo within the box but notating what is in each box is a good start.
- **Format & Dates**—What photographic formats are represented in your collection? Quantity and format will vary from family to family. Some families may not have many photos, while others may have a lot. Make sure to note the different formats and estimated dates of materials in each container.
- **Identification**—As you start to look through each container of photos, take notes as to who, what, when, where, and why these images were taken. Groups of materials often get separated over time, so notating some basic identification about photos will allow you to reunite materials later.
- **Preservation**—Has anything been damaged by water or pests? Are any items broken, faded or moldy? This is the perfect time to notate these issues so you can quickly go back and address them when your survey is done.

Now that you have a better idea of what information you need to gather and why we should include these categories into a survey, I want to show you how you can organize this information into an excel spreadsheet. I love a spreadsheet because it is customizable and allows me to create as many unique fields as I want. Start simple and you can always go back and add more detail to the spreadsheet.

Basic fields you will want to include are:

- **Container Number**—number every container to make it easier to locate.
- **Container Type**—how are they stored? Boxes? Albums? Envelopes?
- **Home Location**—where in your house are these containers located?
- **Description**—write a brief description of what you find: people, places, locations.
- **Dates**—write out dates, years, or item circa dates.
- **Preservation Issues**—now is your time to notate what photos may have suffered damage.
- **Notes**—a spot for cool things you find, or materials you want to go back and look at later.

Here is how it will look in excel:

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Container Number	Container Type	Home Location	Description	Dates	Preservation Issues	Notes
2	1	Cardboard box	Closet in the den	Mix of old family photos and photos from when I was a kid, some appear to be when we lived in New York. Others are images of when we moved to Raleigh. Possible old photos from the Day family, mom's line.	1950s, 1980s, 1990	Several of the snapshots have stuck together possibly due to humidity or water	
3	2	envelop	Desk drawer in the den	Easter photographs from 2012	2012		
4	3	plastic tote	Closet in the guest room	Mixed. Family photo albums from high school (3 albums), 4 photo boxes of college photos	2003-2009		
5	4	box of photo albums	Closet in the guest room	Holiday photograph albums from Grandma Day of mom when she grew up in Rochester, NY	1950s-1960s	Images are in sticky photo albums, should possible be disassembled.	Great photo of mom at Christmas, album with blue cover, flagged
6	5	banker box of slides	Closet in the bedroom	Grandpa's old slides, not sure, maybe a mix of family photos and photos of flowers	1960-1970s	Appear to be in good condition	
7							

After your survey is completed, next step will be prioritizing your photo projects and organizing your collection. Make sure to check out Part 2 of *Archiving 101: Organizing and Caring for Family Photographs* in the next issue.

\*Have additional questions on preserving your family photo collection? Feel free to contact me at [hpotter@filsonhistorical.org](mailto:hpotter@filsonhistorical.org) \*