

Archiving 101: Organizing & Caring for Family Photographs

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Part 3: Handling, Labeling, and Storing Family Photographs



In *Part Two of Archiving 101*, I discussed how to prioritize photo projects and organize your family photograph collection. The last part of this three-part series will discuss how to properly handle, label, and store photographs. You have spent time organizing and identifying your family photos, but the most important step is proper storage. Photographs unlike paper are more fragile and can deteriorate quickly if they are not handled, displayed, or stored correctly.

Handling

Most damage done to photographs is caused by mishandling.

- Resist the urge to quickly shuffle through stacks of photographs.
- When sorting images, make sure to work on a clean uncluttered surface, and never stack objects on top of images.
- Always avoid touching the surface of an image, salts present in your skin can damage the image. It is best to wear either [clean cotton gloves](#) or [Powder-Free Nitrile Gloves](#). I prefer the nitrile gloves as they give you more dexterity. If you go with cotton gloves make sure to periodically wash them on delicate so they remain clean of debris.
- Never curl or bend images, the uneven pressure can cause tears and the emulsion on the surface to flake off.

Labeling

It is extremely important to record information about your materials, but improper labeling can damage your photos.

-Only use lead pencil, No. 2 or softer to write on the backs of photographs

-*If coated surface use [photo marking pencil](#)

-NEVER use felt-tipped or ballpoint pens, ink can damage and bleed through

-Place identification on enclosure when possible

-*Label albums with pencil or [The All-Stabilo Pencil](#) for black album paper

-Avoid self-sticking labels and tape—the adhesive of both degrades over time and leave mucky residue on photographs. If there are already labels, I recommend leaving them, as removing them can also cause damage.

If you have a lot of information you want to “attach” to an image. Don’t write all of it on the back. There are some great worksheets available where you can record this additional information such as Name, Dates, Photographer Information, and Notes about clothing etc. Author Maureen Taylor offers several great worksheet templates in her book, “Family Photo Detective” available at the Louisville Free Public Library.

**These items can often be found at your local art supply store*

Storage Environment and Photograph Storage



When storing photographs remember they are extra sensitive to environmental conditions. Make sure the temperature in your home is consistent, store materials in a cool, dark, and dry space. In addition, avoid storing photos in a garage, basement, or attic. All three of those locations often fluctuate in temperature & humidity and can be subject to atmospheric pollutants such as dirt, dust, and bugs.

Proper storage is also important because it protect yours photographs for dirt, dust, and light exposure. If an acidic product such as paper, and cardboard encounters photos, the acid can migrate, causing permanent damage and decay. Therefore, it is very important to use good quality **Acid Free** and **archival safe** materials for the preservation of your treasured memories.

In an ideal world all your family photographs would be stored in archival quality storage boxes and photo sleeves; however, archival supplies can be expensive. I recommend investing in a few archival supplies for your old and frail items. If you decided to order from Gaylord Archival Supply, make sure to look for the P.A.T. (Photograph Activity Text) which means it is a product approved for storing photos. Here are a few ways to store materials:

- Archival Photograph Sleeves—[Polypropylene sleeves](#) are archival safe plastic sleeves that cover photographs allowing you to hold and view the images. These sleeves come in varying sizes. They are NOT recommended for already damaged photographs.

- P.A.T. Archival Boxes—These [archival storage boxes](#) are the perfect solution for small to mid-sized family photograph collections. They come in varying sizes and allows you to store your materials loose within the box. The one downside of these boxes is you must shuffle through the box to locate photographs and the photographs shift a bit when moving the box.
- Record Storage Box—Also known as a banker box, is a great way to store large family photograph collections. While you can purchase [archival record storage boxes](#), they often can be cost prohibitive. As a more affordable options I would recommend basic [banker boxes](#) when using archival folders to store your photographs. You can place photographs in archival safe folders and then place the folders in the record center box. Make sure not to underfill your box making the folders slouch or over stuff the box both of which can cause damage. This storage method would also allow you to create a comprehensive folder listing.
- P.A.T. Archival Folders—storing photographs in [archival folders](#) is a great solution for large photograph collections. You can sleeve items and then place them in the folders. These folders come in varying tab sizes, colors, and are offered in both letter and legal. The important part when ordering folders is that they are acid-free and buffered (which helps acidic migration).

These are just a few examples of some of the basic supplies you will need for labeling and housing your family photographs. Make sure to check out an archival supply company such as [Gaylord Archival](#) or [Light Impressions](#) for additional photograph storage supplies depending on the types of formats you have in your collection.

Thank you for following my three-part series on Archiving 101: Organizing & Caring for Family Photographs. If you have additional question on preserving your family photograph collection, feel free to contact me at hpotter@filsonhistorical.org