

Conserving Our Personal Collections



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What materials do you have that are unique? What do they tell future generations about the times we live in? What happens to them when you're gone? We are going to discuss various aspects of materials that are accumulated during family history research and how we can organize, conserve and protect them for the future.

Differences between libraries, archives and manuscript collections:

As we perform our genealogical research, we often accumulate a lot of paper. Some of it is published, some of it is unpublished, and some of it may be one of a kind. When we travel to various repositories, there are three basic types that we may use; libraries, archives and manuscript collections.

Libraries have books, circulating or non-circulating, published materials. These can often be found in more than one place. Libraries are actively adding and removing books and reference materials to stay up-to-date on the latest trends and information. This is usually our first point of reference when we begin our genealogy research, a search of secondary sources to find out what has already been published on our ancestors.

Archives may also be a stop on our research plan. These are often government or organizational entities which store groups of records that are maintained in the manner they were created with nothing removed, or reorganized. The National Archives and Records Administration, for example, stores and preserves documentary materials created by various federal government branches and bureaucracies.

Manuscript collections may be found in various places such as in libraries, archives and even in people's homes. They contain unique, one of a kind items, personal documents or collections that may be rearranged and culled for historical and educational value. They are often unpublished, not microfilmed or disseminated in any way and quite frequently a gold mine of information contained in letters, diaries, photos and other materials.

As beginning genealogists, we are directed to "home" sources, and these are often the items that initially catch our interest and get us into genealogical research in the

beginning. Family heirlooms with a story of an uncle or great grandfather from a war, or a beautiful sampler or handmade item or even photos or family memoirs are in this category. They are often personal objects passed down through the family that signify our heritage. Examples of personal manuscript and heirloom items might include some of the same things that you might find in a manuscript collection or museum, samplers, quilts, military items such as uniforms and medals, letters, diaries, photographs, school records, account books, mass cards, passports, membership cards or pins; just about anything that people might keep as a personal memento of an ancestor.

After we've been researching for a while, family members often hear that we're the "family historian" and tend to "donate" more materials that they have in their homes. There are often elderly people with children who aren't interested and rather than see it go into the trash, we often rescue these materials for "future generations." Our source materials grow and our research expands and we need a way to organize and preserve the materials we've accumulated.

We need a way to determine what is a "collection," and needs to be preserved and what is just working materials that can be recycled when it has been entered into our database. We should consider where our materials will go after we're gone, and PREPARE.

Things to include in a collection include heirloom documents (ORIGINALS), handwritten bible entries, certificates, passports, baby books, letters, diaries, account books, oral history interviews, audio and videos, photographs and other unique, unpublished materials. Many of these things are items that our ancestors may have used daily or considered precious enough to keep and display in their homes. Each item should be a unique, one-of-a-kind item with documentation of where it's from (provenance), and where it should go. Examples include heirloom photographs of all kinds (tin types, ambrotypes, slide collections, etc), textiles (quilts, samplers), objects (scrimshaw, military items), family movies and videos, all of which will require unique methods of preservation and should be grouped together for storage purposes. Some of our research materials may also fall into this category, such as research notes and correspondence logs, showing your research path and progress, handmade family trees, and group sheets. Computer printouts do not qualify unless they are a unique, one of a kind item that cannot be recreated elsewhere.

Some of the materials that we use daily, however, can easily be found elsewhere, and do not need "special collection" designation. We need to distinguish between things that are not found anywhere else, and things we can look up at the library or online. Books and pamphlets, brochures for repositories, research guides, anything printed off the internet can all be separated and do not need archival preservation. Our working genealogical files should have copies of our heirloom documents, not the originals.

After deciding what we should keep and organize, we need to keep like items together, since this will simplify storage. Often, different types of materials will need different storage containers, despite all of them needing the same storage conditions, cool, dry environments out of direct sunlight.

Use manuscript collections that you have used in your research as a guideline for organizing and documenting your collection. Remember that manuscript collections are often rearranged for ease of use. If you have all the papers jumbled together, it may be difficult to find which one you need, when you need it. Find a system that suits your thinking process as well as the materials, such as by type of materials, chronologically or by family. It does not matter so much how you organize, just that you do.

Preservation methods

Dissemination – make copies and share

Stay current with media changes

8mm film to VHS to DVD to ???

5" floppy disk to 3.5" floppy disk to CD to DVD to jump drive to ???

Preserve originals in appropriate containers

Types of containers for different materials

Make provisions NOW for your materials! If you organize and sort now, if the unexpected happens, your family will know what has to stay, and what can go (label books to keep, donate or decide later). You may want to designate your relevant genealogy books to the local genealogy library or other organization. Family heirlooms should be identified as descending to particular individuals and if you want to donate materials to special collections, it NEEDS TO BE ORGANIZED or they won't take it or take the time to go through it and it may still end up being thrown away.

Examples

Letters from James B. Morehead Collection 1954-1956

James B. Morehead Collection 1933-1985

Personal Journals and Diaries, 1978-present

Check out these websites!

<http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/conservation/index.html>

Minnesota Historical Society has information about repairing and preserving heirloom items

<http://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/>

"Nucmuc" Search other manuscript collections for family history information

<http://www.archivalmethods.com/>

Materials for preserving documents, photographs and other heirlooms

<http://www.globalgenealogy.com/archival/>

Books for further reading

Long, Jane S. and Richard Long. *Caring for your Family Treasures: Heritage Preservation*. Heritage Preservation, Inc. Harry N. Abrams, New York, 2000.

Mannon, Melissa. *The Unofficial Family Archivist: A Guide for Creating and Maintaining Family Papers, Photographs, and Memorabilia*. Archivesinfo Press, 2011.

Sturdevant, Katherine Scott. *Organizing and Preserving your Heirloom Documents*. Betterway Books, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2002.

Taylor, Maureen. *Preserving your Family Photographs*. Betterway Books, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2001.

Tuttle, Craig. *An Ounce of Prevention: A Guide to the Care of Papers and Photographs*. Rainbow Books, 1995.

Williams, Don. *Saving Stuff: How to Care for and Preserve your Collectibles, Heirlooms and Other Prized Possessions*. Fireside Printing, 2005.