

ARCHIVING AND PRESERVING YOUR FAMILY PAPERS & PHOTOGRAPHS, Franklin A. Robinson, Jr., copyright 2005, all rights reserved

1. **First, do no harm.** If you do not know what to do, then do nothing and consult a professional.
2. **Acid free, acid free, acid free** – anything you want saved, or is worth saving, needs to be housed in as much of an acid free environment as possible. If the packaging does not say “acid free” or “archival” then assume it is not. Any paper that is wood pulp based is off limits. A good strong cotton bond or “Perma-life” acid free paper will last the longest. Like anything made well, the better the paper the higher the cost. Handle photographs and negatives with white cotton gloves, those fingerprints are acidic.
3. **Do not encapsulate** – things need to breathe and have air flowing to keep dry and mold free. Photographs can go into archival sleeves, negatives as well. Paper should be flattened, and then housed in acid free folders. Remove all staples, paperclips, and fasteners, (as long as removing them will not harm the document), number the pages “1 of 2”, “2 of 2”, any notation should be done in pencil on the reverse side of the page in [brackets] to denote that these notes are not part of the original document.
4. **Identify, identify, identify** – on photographs, letters, or any other documents write down who is pictured (first and last name), who is writing the letter, who has received the letter, etc. If a letter is signed (or to) “Grandma”, note in brackets, in pencil [Proper Name] – you may know who Grandma is but will your x-great, descendants! To make annotations, for paper, use pencil, for photographs a pencil or an acid free marking pen.
5. **If something is important then PRINT IT OUT** – whether it be an e-mail, photograph, whatever, do not assume everyone will be computer savvy or know what you have saved on your hard or flash drives. Migrate your material so it is the most up to date program available. Computer programs are like dinosaurs they just die a lot quicker. CDs, DVDs, video have a shelf life of at most twenty-five years – in the best of conditions. A hard copy is still the best for posterity. A recent study has shown that old shellac and vinyl records will outlast DVD and CD’s by decades.
6. **Colder is better.** In storage of negatives, film, paper, anything manmade, heat, moisture, dust, and mold are the enemies. Cold and dry with a low relative humidity is best. Basements are, as a rule, the worst storage places – even a hot, dry attic is better (although not by much).
7. **Darkness good, brightness bad.** Light fades, any type of light fades. For framing, use acid free matting and UV (ultra-violet protective) glass. It is more expensive but your art/photograph/document will last decades longer. Do not hang items in direct sunlight – even if they have UV glass protection.
8. **Weed it out.** Not everything is worth saving and if you don’t someone else will. If you have multiple copies of something, save two and get rid of the rest. Be realistic about what will be useful to future generations in telling your story and your family’s story. And remember, none of us are saints; it is most often the reality of life that is of the most interest to researchers of the past – even if it doesn’t put you or your family in the best light, it is part of the story.
9. **Don’t be stingy.** Be generous with copies of your photographs and documents, if they can be copied without harm to the original. If you were to suffer a fire, water, wind, or earthquake damage you may be glad someone else has a copy to replace your original.
10. **What are we doing with this stuff?!** There is no time like the present to make sure that once you are gone (and we all will go) your prized papers and photographs go to a good home. Whether it be a relative, an appropriate archives or historical society don’t leave anything to chance, put it in writing, i.e. a will, trust, or some other document. Make sure that the person you charge with disposition of your papers and photographs knows your wishes and has a copy of your written directive. Have you designated a digital executor-someone who has your passwords, etc. to access your computer? As they say in the musical *Hamilton*, “Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?”

RESOURCES

Gaylord

<http://www.gaylord.com/Archival/c/Archival?gclid=CLvViNPw6MECFY4F7Aod6mAAyQ>

University Products

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

- **Corporate Headquarters:**
- University Products Inc.
- 517 Main Street
- Holyoke, MA 01040

- **Phone Numbers:**
- Toll-Free Sales: 1.800.628.1912
- Sales: 1.413.532.3372

- **Fax Numbers:**
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American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, <http://www.conservation-us.org/>