

Words from the Past: Preserving Your Letters

Save Letters & Make History

Where do you keep the documents and letters from your family's history? Are they in your basement, garage or attic? Did you know that simply moving them to a dry, central location in your home will extend the number of years that your family will be able to read these treasures? This brochure outlines museum-tested techniques for simple, easy and inexpensive care that will help you prolong the life of your personal documents.

Letters provide an unparalleled connection to the past. These priceless personal items are resources for future generations. They carry both the individual stories of your family and the broader historical narrative of your local, national and global communities.

Caring for your family letters does not have to be an overwhelming project. The most important things you can do to preserve these paper treasures are organize and store them in the proper environment.

Preservation:

Preservation \ Pres`er*va•tion \, n.
[Cf. n. F. pr[*e*]servation.]
The act or process of preserving, or keeping safe; the state of being preserved, or kept from injury, destruction, or decay; security; safety; as preservation of life, fruit, game, etc.; a picture of good preservation. *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary* (1993)



Cover and letter excerpt appear courtesy of Andrew Carroll/The Legacy Project.

Storing Your Treasures

Ideal storage conditions for your documents should have stable temperature and humidity levels. What you like and find comfortable will probably be suitable for your collection, too.

A good place to store documents would be in a closed container, on a shelf, in an interior closet. Storage with little or no exposure to sunlight will help prevent fading.

Move your documents out of your attic, basement, garage and away from exterior walls where environmental conditions fluctuate.

Handling Your Documents

- Clean hands are essential when handling documents. Do not use hand lotion.
- Keep pens, food and drinks away from your collection while working.
- Let the documents tell you how they want to be handled. Do not try to force the paper into a state it resists; this could cause irreparable damage.
- Consult the preservation resources section to find references on how to flatten a folded letter.



Getting Started

- Create a clean workspace for your preservation efforts.
- Collect the letters and documents you want to save.
- Remove letters from their envelopes to avoid excessive wear and tear. Pair the letter with its envelope and keep them together.
- Remove paperclips and staples, they can stain and harm paper.
- Lay out your documents in the workspace. Group the documents according to size and consider how frequently you will want to access the collection. This will help you to assess requirements for storage.



... the only pleasure I now see is in perusing your very precious letters.

Civil War Letter from Confederate Soldier William Steele to Annie McFarland, 1864

Archival Containers

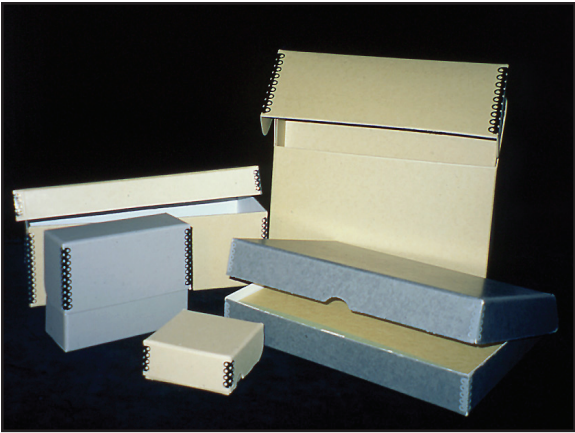
“Archival quality” suggests that the container is safe for long-term storage and does not contain harmful chemicals.

Look for board boxes with lids that are marked “lignin-free” and “acid-free.” The boxes should be at least ¼ inch longer on all sides than the documents. See the preservation resources section for a list of suppliers.

Avoid storing your documents in shoeboxes and corrugated, cardboard boxes.

Organizing Your Collection

- Obtain containers to fit your storage space and collection.
- Consider using archival folders to subdivide your collection. This can help protect documents of various sizes from damage if they shift in the container.



- Arrange the documents in an order that will be most useful for you and will make sense to family members.
- Record, in detail, the contents of each container. Place this list with the container and put a copy in a central location.
- Never put sticky notes on items you want to preserve because the adhesive will leave a residue.
- Label the exterior of the container.

Need More Help?

- Bring your documents to a conservator or preservation specialist to remove tape and stains, mend tears, mount or frame. Locate professionals, trained in the care of paper materials, through the American Institute for Conservation.

Congratulations! These are the first steps in preserving your family history.

Preservation Resources

National Postal Museum
www.postalmuseum.si.edu/stamp/5d_preserving1.html

National Park Service
“How to Flatten Folded or Rolled Paper Documents”
www.cr.nps.gov/museum/publications/consveogram/13-02.pdf

American Institute for Conservation
<http://aic.stanford.edu/public/select.html>

The Legacy Project is a national, all-volunteer initiative that seeks out and preserves American wartime correspondence. Since 1998, it has received more than 75,000 letters (and e-mails) from every conflict in American history, including Operation Iraqi Freedom. Consult the online guide, “How to Preserve Your Letters” at: www.warletters.com

The National Postal Museum Library is among the world’s largest postal history and philatelic research facilities, with more than 40,000 books, journals, catalogs and archival documents. The library is open to the public by appointment Monday to Friday, 10:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Please call (202) 633-5544 to arrange your visit.