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Preservation Perspectives: Caring for Family Papers

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PRESERVATION PERSPECTIVES: CARING FOR FAMILY PAPERS

BY BILL STOLZ

KENTUCKY HISTORY LIBRARIAN, KENTON COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

Do you have old family letters at home or in your collection? Has someone come to the reference desk with a folder of old letters from World War I and asked for assistance with identification or preservation? More often than not, family papers and photographs are the “riches” we inherit from parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. These “paper treasures” offer insight into our family history and are of great value to genealogists and historians. While preserving paper-based items can be a challenge, there are a few easy tips to protect, preserve, and prolong the life of the documents.

KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE

The term “family papers” encompasses a variety of paper-based documents, including letters, diaries, financial records, business records, school records, military records, and so on. Sit down with the collection and ask the following:

- What type of material do you have (letters, diaries, order books, business records)? Create an inventory of the items. An inventory is simply an organized list of the material. Archivists create inventories, or finding aids, to provide researchers with a guide to a specific collection.
- What condition is the material in? This is an excellent time to examine the material thoroughly and prioritize items by the condition. Damaged or deteriorating items should be taken to a conservator for advice and an estimate on stabilization.
- Can I care for these items properly? If the answer is no or causes worry, it is time to consider donating the material to an archival repository. Donation not only insures proper care and the continued preservation, but it allows the material to be made available to future generations of researchers.

STORAGE ENVIRONMENT

One of the biggest concerns is often the storage environment. The major question to ask is “what is above and next to the storage area?” Documents should be stored away from light and all heat and water resources, and at least 4-6 inches off the ground. Basements and/or rooms next to or below water heaters or plumbing should be avoided at all costs. One leaky water heater can spell the end to your family collection. You want a space where the temperature and humidity remain as constant as possible. It is recommended the temperature be between 65-70 degrees Fahrenheit and with relative humidity of 30%-50%. There are various devices on the market today to test both temperature and humidity.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Many tools are readily available and can be used immediately for archival work. Of course, a clean workspace is a must, free of food and drink, and with good lighting. Pencils, especially soft lead like a #1, are excellent for labeling everything from letters to photographs. You will need a computer and scanner, if you and/or your repository plan to make digital reproductions. Last but not least, you will need archival supplies, such as acid-free folders and boxes, gloves, and a microspatula.

SUPPLIERS

There are national suppliers of archival material. Gaylord Archival and Hollinger Metal Edge are two reputable companies. While the cost of supplies can add up quickly, these materials are essential for the protection and longevity of your collections. A good question to ask as an individual and/or organization is “how much can we afford?” There are also preservation grants offered on the state and national level.

BASIC TIPS

Here are a few tips that you can follow to protect and preserve your collection(s) for the future.

- Remove letters from envelopes and/or remove all types of fasteners (staples, paper clips) and any organic matter, like hair (yes, hair) or dried flowers/plants. Take great care in removing staples. The office staple remover is not recommended as it can tear off the entire corner of an item. Instead, use a microspatula or similar tool. This is also a good time to make sure your Tetanus shot is current before you start playing with 100-year-old metal fasteners.
- Correspondence that is folded should be opened and flattened. A handy, and inexpensive, flattening method is to place the correspondence flat between sheets of acid-free paper, stack a few heavy books on top (those encyclopedias make excellent candidates) for a few days, and then check the status.
- Identify the author and recipient, if known, for each letter when it is not clearly listed. Often the envelope will have the information along with the date and addresses. This is where the pencil comes in handy. The information can be written in the upper left or right hand corner in brackets []. If all the information is available in the letter or can be transferred, it is up to you whether or not you want to keep the original envelopes. Though, at times, envelopes may contain post scripts written after the letter was sealed, or there might be a note written by the recipient.
- Store items in acid-free folders with the goal of roughly 25-30 pages per folder. You don't want to overstuff or make the folders difficult to handle. Folders can then be placed in an acid-free box.
- If you have scrapbooks or bound volumes, it is a good time to stabilize them. Scrapbooks with newspaper clippings and other ephemera can be interleaved and/or wrapped with acid-free paper. Heavier or fragile volumes should be stored flat.

- Remember when organizing to keep like items together (Smith family papers or Grandma Jones' diaries). Separate, but store together, the formats (i.e. letters, photographs, and so on). Identify individuals, families, places, and date, if possible. Organize material chronologically, alphabetically, or by individual/family.
- Scanning has made sharing and displaying material much safer and easier. Digital images of letters can be posted online or emailed to researchers, while photographic prints can be used for exhibits and displays.

THE RESOURCES ARE OUT THERE

The [National Archives and Records Administration](#) (NARA) and the [Library of Congress](#) both provide great information on preservation and collection care online. State and regional organizations, like the [Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives](#) (KDLA), [Kentucky Council on Archives](#), and the Midwest Archives Conference sponsor webinars, workshops, and conferences which provide excellent opportunities to gain additional skills and knowledge. Also, think about contacting an archivist from a local university, the local history department of a public library, or through the KDLA.

Caring for family papers can be stressful, so remember that donating these items to a local archival repository can help ease the burden, while providing the proper care and storage for your "family treasures" and making them available to future generations of researchers, genealogists, historians, and students interested in history. In the next issue of *Kentucky Libraries*, we will tackle basic preservation tips for photographs.

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