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Basic preservation tips for family papers and personal archives

Remember the day you became a Bat Mitzvah? The day you graduated from high school? Did you save your exams from college? Did you ever keep a diary? Write letters home from camp? Do you have pictures, letters, "blue books" or your diploma tucked away somewhere? What about photographs of your mother's graduation or your own children's?

Many people hold on to at least some mementos throughout their lives, but few of them keep the records in conditions that ensure their survival into the future. The Jewish Women's Archive can help you preserve and prolong the life of these documents, photographs, and other media. Here is a brief primer to get you started on preservation.

When thinking about preserving your family papers and photographs, there are two ideas to keep in mind: the storage enclosure -the box, album or folder that contains your items, and the storage environment -the conditions, mainly temperature and humidity, that the items will encounter.

Here are the top three things you can do to protect your personal archive over the long term:

1. If you have stored it in the basement or attic, remove it ASAP. The best place to store valuable documents or disks is in a cool and dry place with stable temperature and humidity. Ideal temperature is 68 F and humidity is 40% (give or take a couple degrees and a few percentages). The key is consistency. A linen closet, which is generally away from outer walls vents and overhead pipes, is a good solution, especially if you can make room on a shelf/off the floor. Light is deleterious to photographs, paper, and disks, so limit light exposure as much as possible.
2. Keep like items together. Mixing photographs with documents or newsprint leads to problems. The chemicals from one type of paper can be absorbed by other types and cause discoloration and disintegration. Newsprint is highly acidic and unstable. It is better to photocopy clippings onto acid-free paper rather than risking damage to the rest of your collection.
3. Handle with care.
 - a. Make sure the enclosure you choose is strong enough to support what you are storing in it. A sturdy box not only provides a barrier between your precious memories and the elements, but it also minimizes the chance that the box will collapse if/when you move it.
 - b. Do not use conventional cardboard; it contains chemicals that are harmful to your materials. Acid free boxes and folders are available from many different sources on the Internet. They are not inexpensive but they will save you, or later generations, a lot of heartache.
 - c. Boxes should be sized according to what you want to store in them. If the box is too big, the documents and prints will slouch and crease; if it's too small, they will be cramped and the pressure can lead to sticking.

- d. When you need to handle photographic prints (especially older ones), wear a pair of lint-free cotton gloves. If gloves are not available, eliminate oils and grime from your hands by washing them thoroughly before touching photographic objects
4. It may surprise you to know that long-term preservation of digital information requires more ongoing attention than paper documents or photographs. Removable media (such as floppy disks, USB drives, CDs, and DVDs) are all fragile. Not only do they tend to fail (including CD and DVD blanks labeled "archival quality"), but in a few years, the hardware and even the software required to read the content may no longer be available. The only really safe way to be sure you can access your material in five or ten years is to back it up in more than one way—make duplicate copies on disk, back it up on a hard drive, or—safest of all—use a service that backs up your files in "the Cloud." To make matters even more complex, the formats in which the information is stored also change over time. For instance, even current versions of software (e.g. a new version of Word) may not be able to read word processing files created 10 years ago. For help, go to the Library of Congress [Personal Archiving](#) website.

Finally, remember to enjoy your memories! Just because an object or document is old, does not mean you can't look at or handle it. In fact, if it is just kept in a box, out of sight, there is little chance that the next generation will appreciate it and take the trouble to preserve it.

For more information on preserving your family papers, begin with these online resources:

- Northeast Document Conservation Center: [Resources for Private and Family Collections](#)
- The American Institute for Conservation of History & Artistic Works: [Caring For Your Treasures](#)
- National Archive and Records Administration: [Caring For Your Family Archives](#)
- Library of Congress: [Preservation](#)

For archival supplies we recommend one of the following companies:

- [Gaylord](#)
- [Hollinger, Inc.](#)
- [Archival Products](#)

How do I find an archive for papers I have collected or inherited?

The Jewish Women's Archive is a *digital* archive; we do not collect physical material. If you have photographs, letters, scrapbooks, and other objects that would be of interest to researchers or others beyond your personal circle, you should make an effort to find a repository that will accept and care for them. Start by thinking about what context makes the most sense for your materials. Is there a local or state historical society or a professional or college archives that could provide access to those who would be most interested in your life experience or career? If you need help finding an appropriate repository, contact the Society of American Archivists at www.archivists.org.

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