

FAMILY PAPERS PRESERVATION AND ORGANIZATION

WHAT ARE FAMILY PAPERS?

Buried or tucked away in closets, drawers, attics, and garages are different kinds of "family papers." Family papers are those things that we have saved because they mean something to us - they are our paper treasures - and they tell us something about ourselves, our families and our friends: how we've lived our lives and what we value most. Family papers include diaries or journals, financial records, letters and cards, school papers and records, and legal documents.

In some cases these papers are important only to our families, in other cases they may have value to our community. This brochure will help you determine what kind of papers are good to save for the long run, how to prolong the life of what we save by preservation and organization, and what papers are good to share with our communities.

WHAT TO SAVE

It is important to carefully select what you choose to save forever, because unfortunately you can't save everything! Consider saving those family papers that contain information that is unique, significant and in the most concise form. While this varies among families, examples of papers to save include letters, diaries, photographs, check registers and legal documents such as deeds.

PRESERVING YOUR TREASURES

The place you store your papers is critical to their preservation. It is important to avoid heat, moisture, and light. Mildews associated with dampness can actually eat away at paper

over time, light exposure will fade writing and images, and heat will make the paper brittle and dry and cause deterioration.

Here are some good general rules for saving treasured papers:

- **STORE PAPERS IN A COOL, DRY PLACE WHERE THERE IS LITTLE TEMPERATURE FLUCTUATION AND NO EXPOSURE TO WATER IN ANY FORM.** Ideal conditions are a temperature of 65-75 degrees Fahrenheit, and a low relative humidity of 50% + 2%. Attics and basements are usually not suitable places for storage due to extremes of temperature and relative humidity.

- **KEEP PAPERS AWAY FROM LIGHT.** A metal file cabinet is probably the ideal home storage, protecting papers from light, water and even fire. Make sure that your storage unit doesn't sit in direct sunlight. A dark, dry closet where papers are stored inside containers will work.

- **STORE PAPERS INSIDE BOXES OR FOLDERS.** Never keep papers, or even diaries or magazines loose inside drawers or other containers. Dust, light, ink and liquid spills can ruin paper left unprotected. Archival-quality boxes, folders are acid-free and provide a stable environment for preserving materials. Keep in mind that some containers such as wood and cardboard can actually damage your personal papers. Archival supplies, especially boxes and folders, provide the best housing and should be used whenever possible because they are acid free and provide a stable environment for preserving materials.

- **DON'T CROWD PAPERS.** Make sure that stored papers, photographs, letters, artwork, etc. lie flat (without heavier objects on top of them) or are stored upright in folders. Papers or bound volumes which bend or lean will be damaged over time. Upright folders (into which diaries and journals can also be put) should be packed snugly inside boxes with just enough "give" to easily move items in and out. If a box has empty room behind the last folder, bend mat board or crumple bond paper (not newsprint!) to fill up the space supporting folders and allow them to stand upright.

- **STORE DIFFERENT TYPES OF PAPERS SEPERATELY.** It is best to store different formats separately: keep all art works together and store flat; keep letters together in file folders; put all bound diaries and journals in the same box; keep financial records near one another in file folders, etc. This will help you to keep items organized by type and will also cut the risk of one format (a heavy diary) damaging another (a single letter).

- **SOME MATERIALS TO BE CONCERNED ABOUT.** Some materials by their nature will self-destruct over time and/or damage items around them. These include: NEWSPRINT (NEWSPAPER), GLUE, RUBBER BANDS, METAL PAPER CLIPS AND ADHESIVE TAPE. If possible these should be removed from papers before storing them permanently. Never glue or tape paper into scrapbooks. Plastic paper clips can be substituted for metal ones.

It is best to photocopy valued newspapers or clippings and toss the original. Newsprint is highly acidic and, unless treated, will be highly damaging. If you can't bear to part with newspapers, telegrams, or clippings, enclose them in their own containers and such as archival sleeves and **DO NOT LET THEM TOUCH ANY OTHER PAPERS.**

ORGANIZATION

When organizing your saved materials, keep your filing system simple! Generally speaking, each collection of materials will be unique, and have different organizing needs, but remember to keep your categories of material simple and clear. Look through your "archives" completely before you begin and try to find the broadest possible categories for organizing papers. This will help you, your family and community members who might use your documents to find things quickly and easily. Here are some suggestions for organizing family papers:

- **OLD FAMILY LETTERS:** If you have found a set of old letters which the original owner kept in a particular order that still makes sense to you, keep it that way. The way people organize their papers often tells us a lot about them. If there is no order to a set of

family letters, it is generally best to organize correspondence by author first, and then by date. Try not to combine or interfile one author's letters or pages with another.

- **LEGAL AND FINANCIAL RECORDS:** Depending on the number of documents, these can either be organized by author or institution (all records from one bank together) or in simpler cases where few records exist, by type (selected receipts for one year together). Choose the method which seems easiest and most straightforward. It is best not to organize these material by subject, since one document can easily have multiple subjects.

- **BOUND VOLUMES:** Don't take things apart that are bound together, such as a volume of drawings, a journal, or a scrapbook. If you want to note a particular page, you can use a slip of acid-free paper as a bookmark, or make a color photocopy of that page. Remember, the person who created the volume intended for it to stay intact. As keepers of our family history, we must respect the intentions of these original authors. Valuable information in the form of dates or notes will be lost too, if volumes are taken apart.

SOME OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- **ORAL HISTORIES AND FAMILY PAPERS.** As a way of supplementing your family papers, you might want to consider interviewing family members on tape. For more information see the bibliography below as well as the brochure in this series *Doing Oral History*.

- **SHARING YOUR PAPERS WITH LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETIES OR LOCAL LIBRARIES.** In some cases, your family papers may contain good information about your local community. In letters, or in collections of memorabilia there may be information about the early history of a community - its businesses, individuals, or buildings. Your local historical society or library may be interested in copies of relevant materials - or, if you choose, the entire collection of family papers. In some cases one might prefer not to have the

responsibility of preserving family records. Donating them to an appropriate organization can be a good solution.

- ALISON MOORE

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The Society of California Archivists exists to support and develop those who collect, care for and provide access to the documentary heritage of California and adjoining areas.

Brochure series editors: Robin Chandler and Alison Moore
Graphic Design: Carol Kummer

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