

Caring for family history documents

Family history documents include a wide range of items such as photographs, certificates, letters, newspaper cuttings and memorabilia.

The longevity of these items can be threatened by numerous factors. By taking the simple precautions outlined below, you can preserve your family history documents and there should be no need to seek the help of a conservator.

Copying originals

To avoid unnecessary wear and tear on original documents, make several copies for reference and circulation to family members.

Ensure that equipment such as scanners and photocopiers are clean before placing your documents on them. As an added precaution, documents can be copied while they are inside a plastic sleeve. This will keep your documents clean and help to support fragile documents during copying. Avoid continual copying of original documents. When photocopying, save an extra copy to make copies from in the future. To ensure that copies will be long-lasting, copy onto archival paper.

Scanners are useful for copying both documents and photographs. When scanning, save images to a file and make subsequent copies from the file rather than re-scanning the original.

Storage

Ideally, family history documents should be stored off the floor and away from external walls or windows, to protect them from dramatic fluctuations in temperature and humidity. Storage areas must remain dry to prevent mould growth and water damage. Keep storage areas free of dust, dirt, insects and rodents, which can cause permanent harm to your family history documents.

Family history documents should be stored in protective plastic sleeves and storage boxes. These protect your documents from light, dirt, dust, insects, rodents and unnecessary wear and tear. Items should be stored in boxes large enough to avoid the need to fold or roll them. Only fold or roll items if your storage space is limited. Folding weakens the paper and rolling can make it difficult to view the item without damaging it.

Any box that you have handy will provide protection to your documents, but do not use ones that have been used to store food – these attract insects and rodents. If your budget allows, the ideal solution is to store your documents in archival storage boxes. These are available from specialist suppliers.

Place fragile or damaged documents in plastic sheet covers with an archival card support that is 5mm smaller in width and height than the plastic sleeve. Always check the labelling on plastic sheet protectors and only buy ones made from polypropylene or polyethylene. Cheaper alternatives will cause irreversible damage to your family history documents.

Do not have your family history documents laminated. This is an irreversible process that permanently embeds the document in plastic.

To hold individual documents together, either store them in a single plastic sleeve or use plastic paper clips. Never use metal paper clips, staples and pins. These can rust and cause irreversible staining to paper items.

When to call a conservator

Do not repair tears with pressure-sensitive tapes such as 'sticky', 'magic' or 'masking' tape. With age, these tapes become difficult to remove and cause staining on paper items. If you cannot live with a torn document, refer it to a conservator to be repaired.

Do not try to remove pressure-sensitive tape and stains, or to repair and flatten your family history documents yourself. These treatments should be carried out by a qualified conservator.

Information from the State Library of Victoria, Australia

<http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/explore/conservation-guides/caring-family-history-documents>

Links for more information

American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works WIKI -

http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Main_Page

Has many guides to preserving your treasures directly linked from their home page. This includes much working knowledge from conservators on materials and techniques used to preserve and treat works of art and historic artifacts.

Library of Congress Preservation Pages

<http://www.loc.gov/preserv/familytreasures/index.html>

Much information written in a friendly tone to help you preserve and protect your documents and photographs. Plus what to do if something gets damaged or want to create a family time capsule, scrapbook or album.

Where to get preservation materials?

I've bought materials from CAB Search though this was at a family history fair. I've not ordered anything from any of these online so have no advice to offer on which company is best in this regard.

Conservation by Design

<http://www.conservation-by-design.co.uk/productlist-acidfree.html>

Family Tree Folk

<http://www.familytreefolk.co.uk/>

CAB Search

<http://www.cab-shopping.co.uk/>

Your local Family History Society may offer acid-free and archival products for sale and you can often buy them from vendors at genealogy events.