

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 such as light, moisture, insects and physical damage. 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.

Storing documents

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 documents. Avoid unnecessary exposure to light, which can cause paper to become yellow and brittle. Light will also fade inks, colours and some photographic formats.

Family history documents should be stored in protective plastic sleeves and storage boxes. Use well-fitting enclosures: too large and the item might slip around, too small and its edges will be crushed. 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.

Plastic sleeves are particularly useful for family history documents as they allow examination while providing protection from fingertips. Always check the labelling and only buy plastic sleeves made from polypropylene, polyethylene or Mylar. Cheaper alternatives like polyvinyl chloride (PVC) will cause irreversible damage to your family history documents.

Sleeves are available that contain pockets of varying sizes so that diverse materials can be placed together in a binder or box. This is a useful way of keeping discrete but non-uniform collections together.

Place fragile or damaged documents in plastic sheet covers with an archival card support that is 5 mm smaller in width and height than the plastic sleeve, for extra support.

Do not laminate your family history documents. This is an irreversible process that permanently embeds the document in plastic and adhesive. Documents treated in this manner will become permanently disfigured.

To hold individual documents together, either store them in a single plastic sleeve or use plastic paperclips. Never use metal paperclips, 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, make an appointment with a professional conservator to discuss appropriate treatment.

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.

Further information

Visit the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials website for more information about commissioning a conservator.

For advice, please get in touch with our Ask a librarian service at www.slv.vic.gov.au/visit/ask-librarian.

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