

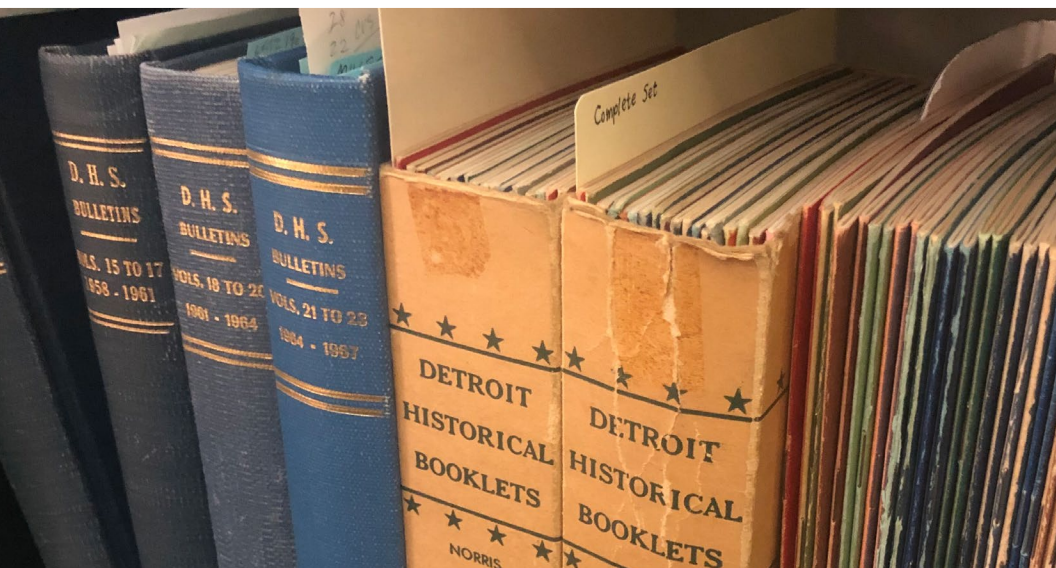
# 100 YEARS

*100 Stories*



## HOME ARCHIVAL GUIDE

Presented by the Detroit Historical Society



*Your guide to build your own at-home  
archive!*

DETROIT  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY



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## 100 YEARS 100 STORIES

The Detroit Historical Society is proud to be the city's story keeper for 100 years. Our job is to tell Detroit's stories and why they matter. We take that role seriously, but we also believe it's important that families, neighborhood block organizations, and cultural communities have the knowledge of how to protect their own historical documents and family heirlooms that will last generations. We know there is power in preserving and telling one's own story, and in order to be your historical society for the next 100 years, we know that your voice is necessary in telling the city's story.



What we may not realize is how our own personal histories are not only important to one's own familial legacy, but critical in understanding the full collective history of our city. In truth, that which is preserved becomes what is remembered. When that material culture is protected, it enriches our understanding of community ties and our shared story. Family artifacts can be absorbed into a public collection, becoming a part of our societal archive – one of the most critical means through which we come to understand our past and ourselves. When items from historically marginalized communities are not protected, their account of life in Detroit and, to a degree, an understanding of their presence in the city is at risk of being lost.

DETROIT  
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This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Detroit Historical Society! In 1921, several prominent Detroiters founded the Detroit Historical Society, meant to preserve the

history of their booming industrial town. For 100 years, the Society has encouraged historical scholarship, preservation and education. Today, the Society manages the Dossin Great Lakes Museum and Detroit Historical Museum while caring for a collection of more than 250,000 historical artifacts.

To learn more about the centennial celebrations we have in store, visit [detroithistorical.org](http://detroithistorical.org).





## USE THIS AT-HOME ARCHIVAL GUIDE TO HELP PRESERVE YOUR HISTORY!

This guide, developed by our own conservation and archive experts, will serve as an introduction to the practice of home preservation by letting you in on museum standard best practices as well as our own tricks of the trade. This guide contains three sections:

### **PART ONE: BASIC PRESERVATION GUIDELINES**

While historic material is as varied as the people collecting it, a few general guidelines can extend the life of all the items important to you or your family history. Broadly, “historic material” is any physical or digital item that provides some record of the past. Since photographs, photo albums, and other paper-based items comprise the bulk of family collections, this booklet is geared towards that material. However, a list of resources for the conservation of other historic artifacts can be found at the end of this section. *(Pages 4-7)*

### **PART TWO: DIGITAL PRESERVATION**

Digitization is a simple, cost-effective, and space-saving tool in your historical preservation arsenal. Digitizing documents and photographs allows you to copy, share, and enjoy them without repeated handling, which can damage fragile materials. Digitization also ensures that you have back-ups in case your materials are unexpectedly damaged or lost. The following guidelines will help you to preserve digital versions of photographs, documents, and audio recordings (such as oral histories). These guidelines are aimed at ensuring that you preserve as much digital “information” as possible during digitization. *(Pages 8-9)*

### **PART 3: ORAL HISTORY PRESERVATION**

An oral history is a first-person retelling of experiences, from the mundane details of daily life to extraordinary events. Oral histories are just as valuable as printed ones, and even easier to preserve thanks to accessible technology. For thousands of years, history has been shared with the next generation through storytelling. Oral histories have been essential to the preservation of culture, language, and intergenerational connections. Even today, oral histories continue to preserve the knowledge, collective consciousness, and identity of peoples and cultures around the world. *(Pages 10 -11)*

**THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS!**



Regardless of whether your items are three-dimensional (furniture, clothing, sculpture etc.) or two-dimensional (photographs, negatives, documents etc.), keeping them in a dark, cool, dry, acid-free, and undisturbed place is the most helpful preservation measure you can take. In order to minimize the risks posed by light, moisture, acidity, and physical damage, consider taking the following steps:

**1. Make and use copies whenever possible.**

- Each time you handle a photograph or document, you risk bending, staining, or losing it. Displaying your original photographs behind glass is also risky, as it exposes them to sunlight (which discolors and fades them). Copying offers you the best of both worlds; fragile originals can be left undisturbed, and copies can be displayed and enjoyed. See Part 2 for scanning and copying guidelines.

**2. Do not store material in the basement, attic, or garage.**

- Although these are commonly used for document storage, they are among the worst places to keep historic material. They often have high humidity, drastic swings in temperature, and low airflow, all of which place your collections at risk. Basement storage may also expose your items to flooding damage.
- You should aim to keep your items in a room that stays between 55 and 70 degrees and between 40% and 60% relative humidity (your thermostat may measure humidity, or you can purchase an inexpensive hygrometer at most hardware stores). Conditions outside of these recommended ranges can severely damage organic material. Humidity is particularly dangerous, causing wood artifacts to crack or warp, photographs and negatives to stick together as the emulsion layer separates from the paper backing, and photographs and documents to discolor due to mold growth.

**3. Avoid acidic paper and boxes.**

- Cardboard boxes, regular “office” folders, and standard printer paper are all highly acidic materials. When these materials break down, they can discolor the papers and photographs they are touching. Purchasing storage materials labeled “archival” is not a guarantee of safety either, as this term is not regulated. Instead, look for products marked “acid-free.” Although they may be more expensive, they will extend your items’ lifespan. See Sections D-E. for more information on buying acid-free conservation supplies.

**4. If you must handle items, use care.**

- Historic materials (especially photographs) should be handled with cotton or nitrile gloves to protect them from skin oils, which may discolor them. You should also avoid using staples, paper clips, rubber bands, or adhesives of any kind on your documents and photographs, as they may cause irreversible tearing and abrasion.



As you begin the process of preserving your historical items, the following step-by-step guide will help you to identify goals and strategies that work for you and your collection.

### 1. Inventory Materials and Identify Goals

- Identify the items you have. Knowing exactly what you have not only lets you know what you lost in case of a disaster, but also helps you plan how much time, effort, and money preserving it will require.
- Which of your materials should you preserve? Just because something is old does not mean that it is worth the time and effort required for preservation.
  - ▷ Museums and archives (DHS included) often use a method called “representative sampling” in building, organizing, and preserving a collection. Look at the collection holistically and assess if a handful of items can “tell the story” of a hundred. Representative sampling can help you work within your time and money limitations.
  - ▷ Here are a few common reasons to discard some of your materials:
    - ⇒ Poor condition: documents and photographs may be so degraded that you can no longer read or view them.
    - ⇒ Duplication: duplicates of your materials exist in your own or other family members’ collections
    - ⇒ Lack of information: photographs with unidentified people and places may not be useful to you. You are not obligated to save everything.
- What, if anything, do you want to display? Will you be displaying copies or originals? If you choose to display originals, you will need to place them out of direct light and you may not be able to add matting without the risk of damage. See Section C. for more details on displaying photographs.
- What, if anything, do you want to share with others? Sharing necessitates making copies (digital or physical), and you may need to purchase scanning equipment.

### 2. Organize Materials

- Label your materials: your photographs and documents are most useful to you, your family, and future historians if they can be dated and their subject matter identified. Use an acid-free pen to label the outside of an acid-free paper or plastic sleeve covering your material, or a soft pencil on the back or margin of the material itself.
- Create categories: organizing your materials into labeled acid-free folders and boxes allows you to better locate individual images and documents in the future.
- Identify what preservation supplies you will need.
  - ▷ First, determine the size and nature of your materials. You may need appropriately-sized acid-free sleeves for individual documents and photographs, as well as acid-free folders and boxes.
  - ▷ Next, determine where you will be storing your materials. Remember that light, humidity, and extreme temperatures can damage your materials. If you choose to store items in your basement you will likely need a dehumidifier, as well as plastic tubs to prevent damage in the event of a flood.

### 3. Budget Resources (time and money)

- Shop around for supplies. There are several companies that specialize in conservation supplies for museums and libraries, but they are also expensive (see Section E. for a list). You may be able to find better-priced acid-free materials at comic book stores or at craft stores like JoAnn’s and Michael’s.
- Be realistic: balance the space, time and money you have for the project with the amount of material you hope to save.
- Pace yourself: start with what is most important to you and work from there.

**1. Most home collections have at least one photo album.**

Unfortunately, albums are far from ideal for long-term image preservation. You may wish to consider replacing your albums with alternative storage methods for the following reasons:

- Older albums are typically made with acidic paper, which degrades your photographs.
- “Magnetic” or sticky album pages are usually polystyrene, which off-gasses and discolors photographs. Most store-bought plastic binder sheets are also made of polystyrene and should be avoided.
- Adhesives used to attach photographs to album pages can also stain images.
- Leather-covered albums can attract pests.

**2. To remove your photographs from an album:**

- Carefully remove each page from the album.
- Cut out individual images, leaving the acidic paper on the back attached. Trying to peel the photo from the page will often cause more damage to it than the acidic paper itself, with residual glue tearing off the photo's surface layer.
- Place your paper-backed photos in individual acid-free paper or plastic sleeves, and place the sleeves inside an acid-free folder or box. Store your materials flat whenever possible to minimize stress on them. If you must store them upright, make sure they are closely packed together so that they cannot curl.

**3. If you are committed to saving an old album, here are some tips to make it safer:**

- Remove each album page, photograph or scan them in order, and replace them in the album.
- If photographs have come loose, use photo corners instead of adhesives to replace them in the album.
- Add acid-free paper between album pages to protect the image surface.
- When opening the album, avoid breaking its spine by supporting the cover as you turn the pages. Avoid letting the album lie open with the front and back covers flat.

**4. Alternate methods for displaying photographs:**

- Display copies of original photos whenever possible to minimize light and handling damage.
- Do not laminate your photographs. Lamination can damage your photographs with heat, pressure, and plastic off-gassing that is not reversible.
- When framing and mounting original photographs, take care to protect them from contact with acidic backing materials as well as frame glass; use an acid-free mat to separate the photograph from the glass. If exposed to enough moisture, even “archival glass” can stick to the emulsion layer of photographs (as well as most paper materials) if they come into direct contact. Obviously, this may damage the photograph if it ever has to be removed from the frame. Ensuring that space remains between frame glass and photographs also promotes airflow, discouraging mold growth.



Fortunately, a few basic preservation supplies are all you will need to protect most collections.

- Plastic or acid-free paper sleeves for photographs, negatives, photographic slides, and paper documents
  - ▷ Look for polypropylene or polyethylene and avoid polystyrene. Unlike polystyrene, polypropylene and polyethylene do not off-gas. Off-gasses yellow photographs and hasten their deterioration.
  - ▷ Polyethylene also goes by the brand name Mylar, and can often be found in comic book, scrapbooking, or other hobby stores as well as at the specialty vendors below.
- Acid-free paper for adding between the pages of albums or other bound materials
- Acid-free folders if you wish to organize your materials
- Acid-free pens for labeling
- White cotton or nitrile gloves for handling your materials
- Safe plastic or acid-free cardboard storage boxes of varying sizes. The brand name Sterelite offers moderately priced plastic boxes that are relatively safe for long-term storage.

### Preservation supply vendors:

- Gaylord Brothers  
Phone: 800-448-6160  
Website: [www.gaylord.com](http://www.gaylord.com)
- University Products  
Phone: 800-628-1912  
Website: [www.universityproducts.com](http://www.universityproducts.com)
- Light Impressions  
Phone: 888-222-2054  
Website: [www.lightimpressionsdirect.com](http://www.lightimpressionsdirect.com)
- Hollinger Metal Edge  
Phone: 800-862-2228  
Website: [www.hollingermetaledge.com](http://www.hollingermetaledge.com)

### Additional information specific to a variety of historic material:

- National Park Service Conserve-o-Grams
- Northeast Document Conservation Center
- DHS Collections staff!  
Phone: 313-833-1805  
Website: <https://detroithistorical.org>



### 1. Choose your equipment

- To digitally preserve photographs and documents, you will need to scan them. Scanners with a bed where you can lay your items flat are ideal, as they hold the object steady during scanning and do not risk twisting or tearing your materials.
- Most ordinary flatbed scanners can comfortably handle 8"x10" pages. If you are dealing with larger-format photos, you may need to seek out special oversized equipment (your DHS archivists can advise you!). To properly scan negatives, you will need a scanner with a backlit lid attachment.
- The Epson V600 is a reasonably-priced scanner for documents and photos up to 8"x10" and for negatives. It is a smaller version of the scanners used at DHS.

### 2. Set up your equipment

- After setting up your scanner according to the product instructions, you will need to choose settings for your scanning session. You can usually access these settings by pressing "Advanced" or "More" on your scanner's control panel.
- File type: "TIF" is a widely supported, lossless (high quality) format for images. It is the archival standard and the best choice for your scans. Other common formats such as JPG, PNG, and PDF can result in lower-quality images with lost details.
- Color mode: Even if your documents are black and white, you should scan them in 48-bit color mode (confusingly, some software refers to this as 16-bit mode). This mode will ensure the colors and details in your scan are as true to life as possible.
- Resolution: Resolution refers to the level of fine detail in an image and is counted in dots per inch (DPI). You should always scan your images at 600 DPI or above, which not only ensures accuracy but also gives you the ability to later "blow up" the image without losing that accuracy.

▷600 is a good DPI for 8"x10" items, but small items will require progressively higher resolutions to capture fine detail. Aim to scan 5"x7" images at 800 DPI, 4"x5" at 1200 DPI, and 35mm slides at at least 2400 DPI (the typical maximum for home scanners)



### 3. Scan your items

- Before each scanning session, wipe down your scanner's glass surface with a lint-free cloth and cleaning solution to remove any dust or fingerprints.
  - Remember to handle your items as little as possible. It may expedite your process to scan an entire folder or box of items at once, so that they can be put away safely afterwards.
  - When scanning, position your item as squarely on the scanning bed as possible. Make sure that its edges are not hanging off the glass, or they will not be scanned. You can use your scanner's preview setting to check that the entire item is within view.
- After each scan, take a look at the image and compare it with your original item. Ideally, you're creating a nearly exact reproduction. If you feel that details and colors are being lost or altered, re-check your scanner.



The guidelines in this section apply to both digital audio materials (such as oral histories) and digital images (photographs and documents). For more information about creating high-quality oral history recordings, see Part 3.

### 1. File names:

- Once you have created digital files of any kind, you should name them in ways that will help you to locate them in the future. A basic approach to file naming might include the original item's date along with a one-word descriptor, followed by numbers if you have multiple items within a single category: for example, 19870628-wedding-01.tif.
- You may also want to organize your digital items into folders for easier location. You can use digital folders as parallels to the physical folders you have in your archival boxes.
- Many image programs (such as Photoshop and Lightroom), as well as most standard computer operating systems, allow you to “tag” files with text. As you would when labeling your physical photos and documents, you can use this feature to record the names of subjects and the place and date of the photo.

### 2. Preserve originals, edit copies

- Be sure to respect the integrity of your original scans and audio files. While there are all sorts of reasons you may choose to edit these files (ranging from experimenting with Photoshop's scratch repair tools, to cropping and resizing photos to share online, to splicing together two audio interviews), always make sure you're working from a new copy of the file rather than from the original digital file.

### 3. Backing up

- You should always back up your files in as many digital and physical locations as possible. Multiple back-ups ensure that your files are preserved in case of software issues or physical damage to your technology. Common back-up methods include:

▷Your own dedicated external hard drives, which can be purchased online or at any computer store. Even better if you are able to store one copy in your home and one copy in another location, in case of disaster. Consider giving a hard drive to a family member or asking them to keep their own digital copies.

▷Cloud-based services such as Google Drive, Dropbox, One Drive, and iCloud. These services are specifically designed to store files; do not rely on social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, or Photobucket for long-term storage. These sites may re-size, compress, and even delete your materials.

▷M-Disc: At one time, burning copies of files to CD-Rs or DVD-Rs was a popular back-up method. However, these discs are susceptible to degradation. M-Disc is a newer version of the same technology, and is more appropriate for long-term storage. If you are able to purchase these discs, many computers manufactured in the last decade are capable of burning files onto them.

▷Copies: Scanning your materials ensures that you have a digital file that you can print at any time, making as many copies as you would like without re-handling your materials. You can print your copies from scans at home, or send them to printing facilities that may be able to print in larger formats. The paper you use for physical copies will depend on your intended use and aesthetic preferences (for example, plain paper versus high-gloss photo paper).

These steps are geared towards helping you to preserve a friend or family member's oral history, assuming you are the interviewer. The interview format often leads to more dynamic, fruitful, and clear storytelling. If you wish to record your own personal stories, consider asking someone to serve as your interviewer; doing so puts you at ease and helps you tell your story clearly.

### **1. Make a plan**

- Decide who you would like to interview and why. Many people want to record the oral histories of aging family members, whose unique memories of family and cultural history could be in danger of being lost due to mental decline or death.
- Discuss your plan with your desired interviewee, and make sure they are willing to record their story. Find out if there are any topics they would especially like or dislike talking about, and choose a convenient time and location for the interview.

### **2. Decide how you will record your oral history**

- Your stories will be safest from degradation if you preserve them in (backed-up) digital form, rather than on fragile materials like cassette tape. Most laptops and smartphones have recording capabilities, although an external microphone will generally give you better audio quality.
- Phones and laptops usually record audio in MP3 format. However, if you use an external microphone that can record in WAV, your audio quality will benefit from it.

### **3. Prepare for your interview**

- Oral histories are not just rambling reminiscences—they are structured recollections guided by an interviewer. Consider what topics you would like to cover, and what questions you can ask to address those topics. Write your questions down so that you can refer to them during the interview.
  - ▷ Create open-ended questions using phrases such as “tell me about...” “describe...” and “what do you remember about...” These types of questions allow your interviewee to fill in the personal details that make oral history compelling.
  - ▷ Phrase questions as simply as possible.
  - ▷ “Story Corps” (an oral history nonprofit) provides many prompt ideas for oral history interviews on their website (<https://storycorps.org>)
  - ▷ For further inspiration, you can listen to the DHS’s oral history collection online (<https://detroit1967.detroithistorical.org/collections/browse>)
- Plan for a maximum interview time of 2 hours, after which interviewees may become tired and lose concentration.
- Share an outline of your interview plan with the interviewee in advance so that they can prepare their thoughts.



#### 4. Set up your equipment

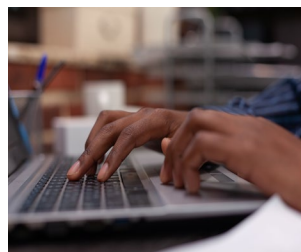
- Before beginning an interview, test your equipment to ensure functionality. Make sure that the microphone can pick up both you and your interviewee from where you are sitting.
- Check if the microphone is picking up any disruptive background noise like motors, fans, or pets. If it is, consider relocating to a different room or shutting windows and doors to minimize outside noise.
- Make sure that your interviewee is comfortable and has everything they need (such as water or a blanket) before you begin. Do your best to put your interviewee at ease both physically and emotionally.

#### 5. Conduct your interview

- Begin the interview by identifying yourself, the date, and where you are. Ask the interviewee to identify themselves and optionally to provide some basic information, such as where they are from and how old they are.
- Ask one question at a time for the sake of clarity.
- Allow your interviewee the time to think before speaking, even if doing so leaves silences in the recording. If your interviewee needs a break, don't hesitate to take one.
- As your interviewee answers your questions, do your best to stay quiet. Instead of signaling that you're listening by speaking ("hmm" or "yes"), nod or take notes. The focus of the oral history is the interviewee; speaking could obscure or distract from their words.
- If your interviewee responds to one of your questions with a simple "yes" or "no," try asking follow-up questions such as: how, why, when, where, who, "tell me more about your role," or "describe how you felt that day." If your interviewee mentions a place or person you don't understand, ask for clarification or spelling.
- Use your prepared questions as guidelines, but allow the interviewee to drift onto other topics if they wish. Often the most interesting parts of an oral history emerge from digressions.
- To end the interview gracefully, consider asking your interviewee to broadly assess their experience with the topics you discussed.

#### 6. Save and share your recording

- Once you have stopped the recording, make sure to save it and back it up on external hard drives, the Cloud, and/or by sending it to other people. See Part 2 for more information on organizing and preserving digital files.
- Consider sharing your oral history with friends, family, and community groups. Your local neighborhood group, city history museum (such as DHS!), local university, or online oral history archives may be interested in adding your history to their collection. These organizations appreciate your support in expanding the historical record.





*The things we leave behind shape the story of what is remembered. You deserve to be remembered.*

Looking for more history? Visit **[detroithistorical.org](http://detroithistorical.org)** for:

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