

# Family Archive Preservation Checklist

*A working list for protecting and organizing a family history*

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Work through this at your own pace. Do the perishable things first — you can't recover a recording or a photograph once it's gone, but the rest will wait for you.

## Take stock

- Walk through everything you have — photos, letters, documents, films, recordings — before touching the parts
- Make a rough inventory of the whole collection

## Save what's dying first

- Digitize magnetic tape — VHS, camcorder, audio cassettes, reel-to-reel — first; it may already be failing
- Copy fading color photographs and slides (roughly 1950s–1980s)
- Copy newspaper clippings; store the acidic originals away from other items
- Scan thermal paper (old receipts, faxes) before it disappears

## Keep the order and the story

- Keep each person's collection together; note where it came from (provenance)
- Note how things were arranged before you reorganize (original order)
- Label every item — who, what, when, where
- Write on photo backs only in the margin, with a soft pencil, never a pen

## Protect the originals

- Handle with clean, dry hands; hold photographs by the edges
- No tape, rubber bands, metal clips, or lamination
- Store cool, dark, dry, and stable — not the attic, basement, or garage
- Use acid-free, lignin-free folders and boxes for the irreplaceable items

## Digitize

- Scan photographs and documents at a good resolution
- Digitize at-risk tape and film first
- Keep both the digital copies and the originals

## Back it up (the 3-2-1 rule)

- Three copies of anything you can't lose
- On two different kinds of media
- With one copy stored off-site or in the cloud
- Check files periodically and migrate to current formats over the years

### **Make it findable**

- Choose one consistent structure (by family line, person, or type) and hold to it
- Name digital files consistently — date, person, subject
- Write a simple finding aid: a one-page index or spreadsheet of what's where

### **Know when to bring in help**

- A large or chaotic collection that's beyond a weekend
- Fragile or failing material where a wrong move is irreversible
- A collection meant for a repository or an institutional standard