



Creating
FAMILY ARCHIVES

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*A Step-by-Step Guide to
Saving Your Memories for
Future Generations*

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**SOCIETY OF
American
Archivists**

CHICAGO

Introduction

In all of us there is a hunger, marrow-deep, to know our heritage—to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning.

— Alex Haley, author of *Roots*

Your life is a compelling history. To those who love you most, and to generations yet to be born, it's as enthralling as the most spell-binding bestseller. It's a composition that was crafted before you entered this world—and it's still being written.

The words are there. They're in the stories you tell your friends and in the letters from your relatives. The images are there, too, in the photographs that are piled in drawers or uploaded to social media. And the sounds are there, in audio cassettes of family members reminiscing and in the files on your computer. These materials just haven't been organized and preserved.

But they will be, for you hold in your hands a book that will motivate you to bring your materials together into a collection that you and your family will cherish. By organizing these materials, you'll preserve your past, enrich your present, and inspire hope for your future. You and your family can soon benefit from richer communication, strengthened relationships, and the sense of identity and belonging that archival collections have brought to thousands of lives. This book is about protecting and preserving objects that represent the collective memory of your family and community.

You may feel intimidated by the thought of getting your collections organized. You aren't alone. Every day in my consulting practice, I meet people who share your apprehension. But I know that creating a family archives is easier than you might think.

What Is a Family?

Family is the unifying thread that runs through our lives. In its narrowest definition, a family is a group typically consisting of one or two parents and their children living together in a household. Family structures also include single parents, childless couples, blended families, or other variations on the family unit.

More broadly, *family* can be defined as a group of people who are related by blood or marriage or are the descendants of a common ancestor. A family may also consist of people who are treated with a special loyalty or intimacy, so that a group of friends can be important members of the family unit. For the purposes of this book, I define *family* as two or more people who share goals and values and have long-term commitments to each other.

The concept of families may also be extended to communities. A community is often identified according to such characteristics as race, ethnicity, religion, ability, language, or interest. Community can also be the focus of grassroots political action, social justice, and advocacy. Religious organizations, political organizations, businesses, community groups, voluntary associations, and other collective enterprises create materials that document their purposes, policies, and activities. Families may hold the records of such organizations, and this material may be significant too.

Preserving family history allows future generations to learn about their rich history and life experiences. By protecting your materials you ensure that your history and heritage will be part of your community's collective memory. Documenting and preserving your life and family history connects personal history with the broader historical context of communities, regions, and the nation and contributes to the broader processes of communal memory-making.

Family history also deals with everyday life, with real people (ordinary and extraordinary) making decisions that affect their world. Studying your family's history can help you discover underdocumented aspects of life. Family history and firsthand experiences can challenge ways of thinking about such issues as immigration, identity, nationalism, labor, sexuality, and education, among other topics. The documents can also compensate for absences in the public record, which is vital for capturing the histories of traditionally underrepresented populations like people of color, ethnic minorities, diaspora communities, members of the working class, the LGBTQ community, and women.

Who Are Archivists?

Have you ever wondered who safeguards our collective history? Archivists do. Archivists organize and protect permanent records and historically valuable documents. The repositories in which they work provide the materials with environmentally controlled, secure physical and digital storage, and archivists oversee the proper handling and use of these records. They also make them available for research. Archivists are professionals who are experts in managing a wide range of diverse historical materials, from ancient manuscripts to the latest in digital technology. Archivists are educated and trained to preserve, organize, and provide access to these important materials so that our historical record is complete. They're also on the forefront of preserving digital content, creating strategies to adapt to ongoing changes in scale, technology, and standards.

Although this book can't replicate the vast range of knowledge and expertise that archivists have or the equipment, materials, and environmental controls to which they have access, I share some of the techniques that professionals in archives use that you can adapt for your papers, photographs, and other artifacts. In addition, the best strategies for preservation of family and personal history items that I recommend aren't necessarily the same preservation policies adhered to within professional archives, but they are techniques that individuals at home can afford, implement, and sustain.

Many of the items that hold our history may never make it to an archival collection, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't be preserved. When you apply the techniques used by professional archivists, you, too, can explore—and learn from—your history.

What Kinds of Family Materials Can Be Preserved?

Both archivists and the users of their collections are interested in the long-term preservation of archival materials as well as ensuring continuous access to them. Consequently, archivists are concerned with preserving both physical (also known as analog) and digital resources (including those that are digitized and those that are “born digital”). Digitized materials function as surrogates of analog materials. A digital scan of a Polaroid photograph and an MP3 audio file of a digitally reformatted cassette tape are examples of digitized versions of analog items. Items are born digital if they began life in digital form. A Word document, an email, and a photograph from a digital camera are examples of born-digital items.

I often advise my clients with personal or family collections to begin by organizing their analog items, then digitizing their items, and finally protecting their digital files. (In fact, that's how this book is organized.) By organizing the physical items first, you create a structure that can be duplicated digitally. However, as you'll learn, your digital items are more at risk of being lost permanently. If that's of concern to you, you may want to consult the latter chapters first.

How Is This Book Organized?

Throughout this book you'll find practical tips for organizing your materials based on archival principles that get results. The first half of the book (chapters 1 through 7) lays the foundation of archival techniques; the second half (chapters 8 through 14) delves into specific record types. Depending on your needs and

interests you may not have to read each chapter or section, so skip around as you see fit.

Chapter 1 guides you in establishing your goals and planning your project. Your archives project can be as small or as complex as you wish. In chapter 2, you'll learn about preservation basics—just enough of what you need to know before you begin. Chapter 3 provides tips on how best to handle materials in good condition, those with some traces of damage, and those at risk of irreversible damage. Chapter 4 invites you to revise your plan by reviewing your collections and considering what you have in one place. Chapter 5 offers insights on how to appraise your collections and prioritize your work. Given your limited resources, you'll want to focus on the materials that matter most to you. Chapter 6 explains what type of archival supplies you should invest in, including boxes, folders, enclosures, and other tools. In chapter 7, you'll learn some basic archival processing techniques.

Chapter 8 focuses on paper-based collections and how to safeguard them, and chapter 9 describes how to protect your photographic memories. Chapter 10 addresses preserving scrapbooks and photographic albums. Chapter 11 guides you in saving your books and bound volumes from damage and keeping them in good condition. Chapter 12 advises on how to store and display your collections. Chapter 13 discusses how to digitize your collections. Finally, chapter 14 addresses how to preserve digital collections.

The book concludes with ways to connect with a growing community of family archivists, helpful resources, and a glossary of common archival terms.

Throughout the book I've provided examples to illustrate archival techniques. Some instances are from my own experiences working with my own family archives or serving as a consulting archivist with other family collections. The majority are fictitious scenarios based on the diversity of family history collections in the United States. Names, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are the products of my imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Let's Begin!

The records of people's lives are important and worth preserving. Family and personal collections represent an opportunity for individuals to give voice to their perspectives, to ensure that the cultural record reflects their lived experiences, and to share their stories with others if they choose. They represent the breadth of human experience—including religious affiliation or spiritual beliefs; socioeconomic status; gender, gender identity, and sexual preference and presentation; disability status; citizenship status; and family roles and responsibilities. You can uncover the history of the underrepresented and disenfranchised and bring light to their experiences, helping others to learn more about their history and to appreciate the richness of American heritage. Collections represent the multicultural and ever-evolving society in which we live and the stories, identities, and accomplishments of everyday people. As we visit with these materials, we connect with those who have gone before us.

Are you ready to start saving your history? You'll come to understand history as you never expected to and, even more extraordinary, how your family formed the history of so many places. You'll discover similar physical traits, temperaments, and talents that are the intangible bonds that connect a family through generations. You'll realize that you're a part of a much larger group than your immediate family—you're a member of a community that spans continents and epochs.

Because this book is about preserving the archives of *you*, as well as of *us*.