

Preserving Your Family Heirlooms

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Taking Inventory of Your Family Heirlooms

Start with a simple list.

Go through your house, room by room, and floor by floor in a methodical manner. Sometimes I have items displayed and forget they are family heirlooms.

Think about your family heirlooms including:

- letters and documents, diaries
- photographs (in albums, frames and boxes)
- Military memorabilia
- textiles such as quilts or needlework or clothing
- furniture
- Collections (stamps, insects, coins, baseball cards, for example)
- artwork
- small personal items such as eyeglasses, hair (this was a big item back in the day), wallets, desk implements, jewelry, etc.
- dishes and cookware
- recipes
- books and Bibles
- garden implements
- tools
- sports equipment
- musical instruments
- weapons
- vehicles
- real property

Establish Ownership and Guidelines for Your Plan

Ownership and possession

General review of your inventory

- Help needed from other family members or specialists?
- Items the most at risk for damage, further deterioration, loss
- Need to physically divide your heirlooms or lay them out - work space
- Grouping like materials (metals, paper, textiles, wood, large, small, unknown)
- Quarantining items with considerable obvious damage or from a storage area with issues
- Photographs
- More detailed cataloging approach
- Assessment triage

HEIRLOOM INVENTORY

Date	Description of Artifact and Its Condition	Provenance
9/20/20	Box of handkerchiefs, crochet doilies and lacework Some yellowing, fold lines, no obvious pest damage	Inherited from Gr. Angie E. Holmes, Mother Elizabeth H. Gilbert, Aunt Mary C. Holmes Others from same sources already passed to my siblings and children (check them for future inventory)
9/20/20	Babybook of George Leslie Gilbert, Jr. 1918 In leather-bound scrapbook, very discolored, pages brittle and breaking around the edges; image transfer between pages	Inherited from Gr. Mattie A. Gilbert, assembled by her from 1918 - c. 1940
9/20/20	Silver tea set includes large coffee pot, smaller tea pot?, sugar and creamer, tray Tarnished and some lost of silver finish (unsure if plated or some other?)	Inherited from Gr. Mattie A. Gilbert, believe it was purchased by her early in her marriage to Gr. George L. Gilbert
9/20/20	Box of papers #1 related to the work of Gr. Mattie A. Gilbert with the Settlement Houses and Dept. of the Blind in Talladega, AL Papers are not organized, some are folded and have rusting staples or paper clips leaving marks, some are very fragile	Inherited from Mother Elizabeth H. Gilbert who presumably inherited them from Gr. Mattie A. Gilbert at her death My sibling has some also
9/22/20	Red velvet hat with lace and a ribbon Condition good but dusty	Uncertain, maybe Mother Elizabeth H. Gilbert's? era uncertain?
9/22/20	Photographs Box #1 black and white snapshots, some portraits in cardboard frames, mixed subjects and topics but appear to be from the 1940's and 1950's Condition is fair, a few are faded and scratched, some have writing or other blemishes on the pictures, many unidentified	Inherited from Mother Elizabeth H. Gilbert, photos from their early married life and when my sister and I were children growing up in San Diego. Father, George L. Gilbert Jr. probably took most of them since he was a photographer in WWII.

Tackling the Agents of Deterioration - Definitions and Risks

You will observe issues with your heirlooms. These are the different agents of deterioration, listed in the order as they affect family collections. Many agents work together resulting in the damage you see.

- Adverse temperature
- Adverse relative humidity
- Light and radiation
- Pests
- Pollutants
- Physical forces
- Dissociation
- Water

- Criminals
- Fire

Understanding the Cause and Result of Different Types of Deterioration

Observation - assessment of your heirlooms, risk vulnerability, obvious signs of deterioration

Heirloom	Material type	Common signs of deterioration	Possible causes
Documents and letters, books, Family Bibles	Paper (cellulose) Ink Coating	Yellowing Crackling	Dryness (too low relative humidity) Acids in the paper, binding or container
Photographs, negatives	Paper (various) Glass Metal Wood plastics	Scratches Delamination Fading Stickiness	Dust Adverse temperatures Light exposure Contamination Physical forces
Textiles	Cotton, wool, linen, silk, Polyesters (organic), combinations	Brittle Yellowing Fold lines moth holes	Pests Light exposure Adverse temperature and relative humidity
Metallic objects (weapons, dishes and cookware, collectibles, Military memorabilia) Dishes	Various alloys Iron, steel, silver, copper, bronze, brass, nickel Ceramic, stoneware, bone china, glass	Rust Acidic accretion Tarnish Discoloration Crazing Chipping Discoloration	High humidity High temperatures Atmospheric pollutants (dusts, salts, oils, chemicals) Physical forces

Extracted from IPI's Guide to Sustainable Preservation

When you see the signs of damage it is time to dig deeper and understand the source and extent.

Monitoring - collect data

- Temperature and Relative humidity - monitors that you can move around
- Light sampling - blue wool test
- Air quality monitoring (dust, pollutions from vehicles, industrial pollution)
- Live pest traps

These items can be purchased from Archival companies, or some can be purchased from Office supply stores, hardware stores or over the internet.

Strategies to stabilize, preserve, and restore heirlooms

Stabilize your heirlooms by using the visual analogy of the box. Work from the outside box inward, evaluating and then minimizing the agents of deterioration as much as possible.

Evaluating

1. Home - where in your home are your heirlooms located?
2. Room
3. Storage area
4. Housing
5. Artifact container

Where do I start?

Do you need to relocate your heirlooms within the home?

Can you move your heirlooms to a different room? Or a different place in the room?

How are your artifacts housed today?

- Archival quality housing for your items depends on what it is, the material it is made of, and how accessible you need for it to be.
- Consider the fragility of the items
- Artifact containers
- Companies that specialize in archival quality containers can also provide guidance on types of materials and options for containers

Does Preservation include cleaning, flattening, washing or repairing?

Restoration - taking it back to original condition, or near original condition; repairing significant damage

- Usually best left to the experts
- Costly
- Depends on the value you place on an object

What are your priorities?

1. Prioritize your plan:
 - A. the most valuable

- B. the most at-risk
- C. the most signs of deterioration
- 2. Establish a budget
- 3. Time phase your steps
- 4. Update your plan periodically

Plan for Preserving My Family Heirlooms

Priorities

1. Relocate photo boxes # 2 - 5 in basement to environmentally-controlled library
 - Time: 3 days
2. Regular dusting and vacuuming with HEPA vac in library area
 - Time: 1 week to obtain microfiber cloths and filters, set up schedule (order while working on other items)
3. Sort photo box #1
 - A. categorize: damaged, unidentified, decade
 - Time: 2 weeks
 - B. research approach for damaged photos
 - Time: 1 week (do in parallel with 3A)
 - C. consult family members for identification
 - Time: 3 months (after categorizing, in person if possible, otherwise need to scan)
 - D. develop a plan to scan and catalog and store photos by decade
 - Time: 1 month (need to upgrade software and take a class on using it)
4. Research and purchase storage/display housing for silver tea set
 - Time: 3 weeks (consult expert)
5. Detail inventory of handkerchiefs and doilies
 - Time: 2 weeks for research, 1 week for washing/flattening; meanwhile purchase containers and cases, 2 weeks to store
 - Research methods to stabilize fabrics
 - wash and flatten
 - purchase archival storage containers
 - purchase display cases

Budget

- \$ 50 Storage sleeves and boxes for photos (need various sizes - measure)
- \$100 Storage and/or display case for silver tea set
- \$ 35 Storage rolls for textiles, boxes and tissue
- \$ 25 Miscellaneous pens, cleaning supplies and filters

Resources for further study

General Overview

<https://www.legacy.com/advice/21-most-common-family-heirlooms/>
<https://www.archivalmethods.com/blog/storing-family-heirlooms/>
<https://www.rootstech.org/category/heirlooms?lang=eng>

Inventory forms

<https://www.familytreemagazine.com/freebie/free-family-artifacts-heirlooms-form/>

Environmental evaluation

Image Permanence Institute, Mechanical System Quick Reference Guide
www.imagepermaneinstitute.org
https://s3.cad.rit.edu/ipi-assets/publications/hvac_reference.pdf

Agents of Deterioration and Risks

A Preventive Conservation Approach to the Storage of Collections
 Carolyn L. Rose, Catharine A. Hawks, and Robert Waller, Chapter 3, pg. 48
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Robert_Waller4/publication/335682131_A_Preventive_Conservation_Approach_to_the_Storage_of_Collections/links/5d74393b92851cacdb293dd2/A-Preventive-Conservation-Approach-to-the-Storage-of-Collections.pdf

IPI's Guide to Sustainable Preservation

https://s3.cad.rit.edu/ipi-assets/publications/sustainable_preservation_practices.pdf

NARA website (with links to other sites)

<https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives>

KSHS website (with links to other sites)

<https://www.ksks.org/p/preserving-paper-and-digital-records/12261>

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