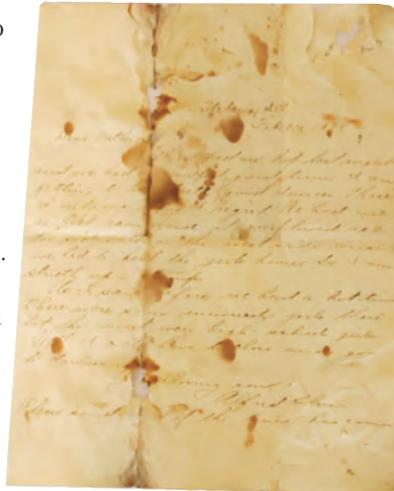


# Protect your family history

## Make sure your efforts to preserve the past are not endangering it

By Rachael Lea Ward

It might be appealing to stick that shoebox full of letters you inherited from your grandmother in the attic for safe keeping, but if you do, be warned: you may have just fallen victim to donut box storage. Many years ago I volunteered for a small museum where staff stored historic documents and artifacts in donut boxes. This system started as the institution's well-intentioned solution for their minimal budget and limited storage space. Unfortunately, they did not realize the long-term effects of storing pieces of history inside cardboard boxes.



***This letter was discovered in an attic without temperature or humidity regulation. It is extremely brittle, has faded ink, signs of pest damage, and severe staining.***

Like many smaller historical entities across the nation, this museum survived due in part to goodhearted individuals who saw the need to preserve their local history, but lacked the knowledge and financial means to correctly protect it. Aside from trained archivists and museum professionals, few people understand the proper methodologies required to preserving historic artifacts. Without delving into great scientific detail, untreated cardboard, like that of the donut boxes, is a highly acidic material prone to rapid deterioration. In the case of the donut boxes, nearly twenty years of acidic off-gassing left the paper documents inside stained and embrittled.

It is my hope to share with you the necessary knowledge to prevent a similar situation from happening with your own documents. While archival quality products and methods are the best way to preserve, if you or your institution is unable to afford them, have no fear. You can still lengthen the life of your documents by understanding the main threats to their safety and doing no further harm.

### Six main threats to your historic documents

#### 1. Light

- Sunlight and florescent lighting emit high levels of ultraviolet radiation, which is harmful to printed and handwritten paper, as well as most objects, and accelerates the deterioration process.

#### 2. Temperature

- Temperatures that are too low or too high and fluctuate rapidly can greatly harm paper documents. Stable climate temperatures are essential.

#### 3. Humidity

- Humidity that is too high promotes the growth of mold on your documents and encourages pests. In reverse, objects can become brittle when humidity is too low. Ensure steady relative humidity to limit stress.

#### 4. Humans

- Humans are a big threat to historic documents and artifacts. Oils from human hands and sweat can cause irrevocable damage to paper documents. Often, documents become damaged as a result of excessive handling and improper handling.

#### 5. Pests

- Silverfish and roaches love paper and can quickly destroy your documents. Occasionally, mice and household pets pose a threat to improperly stored objects, too.

#### 6. Inherent vice

- An inherent vice is the propensity of an object to deteriorate due to its construction, age, use over time, or basic character. An example of inherent vices includes the acid content naturally present in cardboard and in pulp-based paper products.

### Preserving Your Documents

First, create a dedicated and uncluttered workspace away from daily commotion. You never know how long it might take to preserve your documents; therefore it is impor-



***My family was once guilty of harboring a few “donut boxes” of our own that house old family letters. Thankfully these were stored in a climate- controlled area which lessened their deterioration.***

tant to minimize contact between unsafe surfaces. Do this by providing your documents with a protected place to rest using a sturdy table covered with clean unbleached muslin, acid free tissue, or acid free paper. If these materials are not available, using a clean sheet will suffice.

Work slowly and do not rush. Handle documents with great care and as little as possible. Use nitrile gloves, available at most hardware stores, or archival gloves when directly touching the documents. If you do not have access to either option, scrub your hands with unscented soap to reduce oils. Refrain from handling the document on any damaged edges and limit time spent touching it.

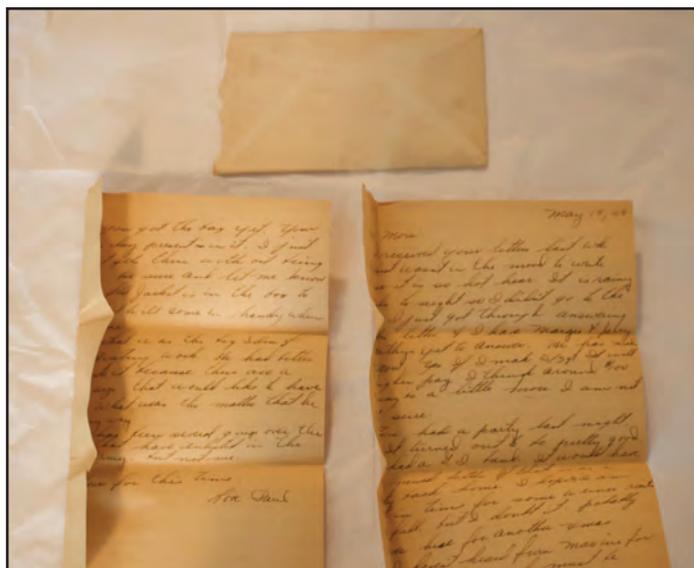
Remove all fasteners, such as paper clips, staples, rubber bands, or tape, on the document to prevent rust stains, chemical reactions, and damaging creases. However, fasteners should be left alone if detaching them will cause harm to the document. Documents should be kept flat and without creases. However, do not force a document flat. Remember the golden rule: do no harm. Store papers in acid-free archival boxes, folders, or polyester film sheets.

**W**hile archival quality is best, if you cannot afford to purchase them, look for containers that are labeled acid free. Many clear plastic sheets available at office supply stores are acid free, as well as select office folders. Look for wording such as acid free or made with polypropylene material. Plastic containers and totes should be avoided, but if you do not have other options, use totes labeled with a “5” or “PP” recycle symbol. This indicates the tote is made mostly with polypropylene resin and less likely to harm than other plastics. Never use lamination. Be aware, however, that substituting archival quality storage is not without risks and may eventually cause damage. Retinue checks on your documents are crucial to look for any signs of sudden deterioration. Should this occur, consider another container. Always label any storage containers, doing so with acid free ink pens or pencils. Never write directly on a document. If you must write on a document, use a pencil and press lightly.

Also, individual items should not touch. Place acid free tissue between layers of documents to prevent contact. Store rag paper, paper made with cotton fibers, and pulp paper, paper made with wood, separately due to their different innate natures. For example, newspaper clippings should be stored separately from leftover graduation announcements. This will diminish deterioration.

Do not store items in attics, basements, sheds, or garages, unless the temperature is adequately regulated. Aim for temperatures at or below 72° Fahrenheit. Avoid storing near food sources. When possible, objects should be taken out of direct contact with sunlight and florescent lighting and moved to areas with less radiation. Curtains, shutters, UV-blocking window film, or florescent screens might be worth investing in. Keep materials away from outside walls, air vents, heaters, or areas with heavy water vapor presence, such as a bathroom. Store documents at a stable relative humidity. Ideal humidity ranges between 45% and 55%.

Great care must be made when displaying a document



**As mentioned, it is recommended that you store documents flat. Do not keep items folded inside the original envelope. Instead, separate each piece with acid free tissue and store together.**

or for items still frequently utilized. Never fasten a document to keep it from moving unless the fastener is of archival quality with correct methods. If you must mount your document in a frame or it is already framed, ensure the backing is made from acid free mat board. For multiple documents being recurrently viewed, consider placing them into polyester sleeves and into an acid free three ring binder.

Digitizing your documents is also an important part of the preservation process, especially if you do not have the ability to preserve them any other way. Document scanners may be utilized for more sturdy documents. Brittle paper or paper with faded ink should only be photographed.

**F**inally, when in doubt, ask a professional! Contrary to what you might believe, curators, archivists, and other museum professionals enjoy sharing their knowledge with those curious enough to ask. Having trouble locating someone? There are many professional resources available online. So, take a look at your current document storage. If you find a donut box or two, do not panic. Intention to use these preservation methodologies to the best of your ability and actively work toward that golden rule: do no further harm. 

*Rachael Lea Ward is a public historian from Mt. Zion, Illinois, and a member of the ISHS Advisory Board.*

### **For further reading:**

How to Preserve Family Papers and Photographs: National Archives,” archives.gov, last modified August 15, 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives>.