

**SAVING LIVES:
PRESERVING YOUR FAMILY HISTORY
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ENVIRONMENT AND HANDLING

Climate

One of the most basic preservation needs of your documents is reasonable climate conditions. While most of us will not be placing documents into museum-quality climate-controlled environments, we can remove them from truly dangerous or harmful conditions. Extremes of temperature and humidity or frequent fluctuations in those conditions cause organic materials such as paper to deteriorate because of expansion and contraction. Paper and photographs do well in similar climate conditions to those that characterize comfortable indoor conditions for human beings. The temperature should be within the range of 65° to 71° Fahrenheit. 45 to 50 percent humidity is good, although it can be somewhat drier. However, a humidity level below 30 percent is considered undesirable. Even if you can't achieve ideal conditions, try to keep fluctuations to a minimum. Fluctuations cause the fibers of the paper to expand and contract, weakening the paper.

It's easy to see that we frequently store our family historical documents under some of the worst conditions. Attics tend to get very hot and dry in summer and chilly in winter. Items stored in them can also be vulnerable to attack from insects and rodents. Basements are frequently damp, which can encourage mold growth, and are subject to flooding. As with attics, insects and rodents can be problems in basements as well. Obviously, unheated garages and storage sheds are not desirable locations. You should also be wary of commercial storage units that have no climate control. Keep your papers and photographs under normal household conditions. A closet on an inside wall is a good choice.

Ultraviolet Light

Another hazard to documents, photographs, and works of art is ultraviolet light. Exposure to UV rays causes ink, dyes, and pigments to fade. It can also trigger chemical reactions that are damaging. Avoid displaying items where they will be in direct sunlight. Fluorescent lights also give off UV rays, so it's preferable to work with your documents under incandescent light. Documents should not be exposed to light when you're not working with them.

Pollution

Pollution in the form of gases and particulates can cause lasting damage to your treasured documents and photographs. Atmospheric pollutants such as nitric and sulfuric acids and ozone chemically attack the fibers of paper. Particulates such as dust and smoke particles can mar the surface of a document and settle into the fibers causing abrasion. Particles can also hold damaging chemicals against the surface of paper, thus providing an avenue for deterioration. These destructive processes often proceed faster in the presence of moisture and light. Providing a clean, stable environment for your collection will help insure its longevity.