

Documenting Family History

Collecting and saving family papers and oral histories.

Whether your ancestors landed at Plymouth Rock or Ellis Island, whether they arrived by plane, train, bus or boat, or were native to this country, there are certain written documents which you may have and want to preserve, in order to pass on to succeeding generations the unique story of your family's part in American history.

This is not a guide to genealogical research. Rather, it is intended to help you preserve the documents used during your research into your personal or family history, as well as to preserve for your use and for future generations the materials that help document your family history.

Family history is more than just birth, marriage, and death dates. It is the story of individuals' interaction with the community and other individuals. Sources for family histories, provided by written documentation as well as oral tradition, are valuable to family members, to historians, and to the community. The records used to research family history are an important part of our documentary heritage providing a direct link to our common past. Your family's history lives through documents like photographs, letters, legal and financial papers, artistic endeavors, news clippings, home movies, diaries and journals – all those materials that document transactions and sometimes clutter our homes – are the stuff of history.

Why keep Family History?

Your family history is of great interest not only to your own family, but to historians, scholars and students from grade school to graduate school. A school essay written in the 1890s may reflect that time of great change better than a textbook ever could. A photograph of your great-grandmother in her bicycling outfit may interest a costume designer as well as your daughter. Letters exchanged between family members during the Second World War can provide personal insight and opinions that are helpful in understanding the humanity in historical events. Letters often express what life was like more clearly than any history book.

Our story and that of our ancestors is the story of our community, our country, and our world. That story becomes history when it is organized and preserved for future generations.

What to keep

What to keep depends on the breadth of the collection and the age of the materials. In general, the older the materials and the smaller the amount, the larger percentage you should keep. For example, if you have a small number of bills and receipts documenting the purchase of livestock from the early 1900s, some letters, and a Bible listing births, deaths and marriages, you would keep them all.

However, if you found numerous folders of bills and receipts from the 1990s, folders of letters, diaries, journals, income tax materials going back decades, along with boxes of news clippings and photographs, you could be selective in the materials you to retain. A trained archivist can help you select those documents that most clearly reflect the life of those family members involved and can direct you to potential repositories that might be interested in the materials you do not wish to retain. Overall, it is often common sense which dictates what family papers should be retained.

Too often, family documents are thrown away or destroyed in an effort to censor family history. No family is perfect; it is often the imperfections that add color to family history and provide the greatest insight. Rather than destroying the historical record, consider placing a time restriction on those items that you feel could embarrass individuals still living. Seal those documents in some way – in archival-quality enclosures – and indicate the date after which they may be opened. If you place your family papers in a repository such as a library or archives, discuss restrictions on the collection with the staff before the donation is finalized.

Think about whether a document is unique or whether it shows common activities likely recorded elsewhere. The following are suggestions of records that usually have historical value. *It is by no means exhaustive and no one collection will contain all of the materials listed:*

- Audio, video and home movies
- Certificates such as birth and/or baptism, confirmation, bar/bat mitzvah, marriage
- Correspondence – retain envelopes which have dates and addresses
- Creative works such as paintings, drawings, needlework, prints, etc.
- Diaries and journals
- News clippings – make sure they are dated and the publication noted
- Newsletters - especially family letters and those not already retained elsewhere
- Membership records such as unions, service clubs, etc.
- Memorabilia such as ribbons from veterans' reunions
- Military records
- Photographs and slides
- Real estate transaction records
- School records such as report cards and diplomas
- Scrapbooks
- Wills and estate papers
- Written materials, especially those not published, such as articles, essays, and poems

Organizing family papers

Resist the urge to reorganize any family papers unless there is absolutely no organization evident. Letters and other documents found together often tell a story or give added meaning to one another which would be lost if they are separated. Those business papers from your great-grandfather's store may reveal more information when viewed with the correspondence he kept with them.

Create an inventory of the family papers in your possession. Referring to the inventory to locate the item you need will cut down on the handling of fragile documents and photos by you and others using your collection for family history research.

Photos often have separate storage needs from paper documents. Old photos such as tintypes or those in cases could damage the documents stored with them. Consider storing the photos separately, but recording specific information about the photo with the papers so that the relationship is not lost.

Placing family papers in a repository

Letting go of your family documents may seem a very difficult step to take. You may want to make copies of some items to keep within the family. A historical repository, however, can provide storage conditions that guard against fire and water damage, theft, and environmental degradation, while providing access to the materials by scholars and other researchers. Any restrictions you place on access will be upheld. Your family members will always know where to find the papers, and future generations may wish to add their own documents. More importantly, historical research will be enriched by your family's contribution.

For more information on the process of transferring family papers to a repository, consult the Society of American Archivists publication, *Donating Your Personal Papers to a Repository*, available at www.archivists.org or from the Documentary Heritage Program (DHP) Regional Archivist.

What is Oral History?

Oral history is the process of eliciting and preserving a person's spoken recollections of events and experiences based on first-hand knowledge. Oral history can enhance the paper trail of the past by providing voices for silent photographs and clarifying meaning in written documents.

Guidelines for Oral History Interviewing

Good oral history isn't just taping someone talking. It takes careful planning in deciding the focus of the interview, selecting persons to interview, and developing appropriate questions and interviewing skills. Finally, completing the donor agreement/release and planning for the transcribing and proper preservation of your tapes is crucial to achieving a quality product.

Before you interview:

- Do background research in order to draft questions for likely topics; know as much as possible about the person being interviewed.
- Do your legal homework **before** the interview! Have an oral history agreement and donor release form which both you and the interviewee sign that releases all copyright and literary rights to the taped sessions, and permits unrestricted research and educational use of the interview tapes, transcripts and copies, and provides for possible donation of the taped sessions to a selected repository. **Do not conduct the interview without a donor form signed in advance.**
- Select a recorder that plays standard size (2-1/2" x 4") cassettes; avoid microcassettes; choose high-quality tapes (either C-60 or C-90); for better sound quality, use an external microphone instead of relying on the microphone built into the recorder; use an external power cord instead of worrying about batteries running low (if batteries are necessary, be sure to have extras!)
- Set up and test all equipment before conducting the interview.

The interview process:

- Bring photographs, newspaper clippings or scrapbooks for the interviewee to look through as you set up your equipment. This will prompt memories and provide focus for the answers to your questions.
- Before beginning the interview, record a brief introduction stating who you are, who is being interviewed, the date, location and subject of the interview.
- During the interview, be attentive, courteous and responsive in a non-verbal way (such as nodding your head to let the interviewee know you are listening). Write down names or words you do not know so you can obtain correct spelling after the session. Allow the interviewee the opportunity to think; allow for periods of silence before rushing on to the next question. Remember, researchers want to hear the interviewee's viewpoint, not the interviewer's.
- Start questions with "who, when, where, how and why." Avoid questions which may result in a "yes" or "no" answer.
- Probe! Always ask for hows and whys; ask for opinions and feelings.
- Try to limit interview to 90 minutes or less; schedule additional interviews before you leave if you feel you didn't get all the information.
- Thank your interviewee for their time and participation.

After the interview:

- Carefully label the tape(s) with interviewee and interviewer names, date, and location.
- Punch out the small tabs on the cassette housing to avoid accidentally erasure.
- Prepare (or have prepared) a written transcript of the interviews.
- Prepare for proper storage and preservation of your tapes: as with all historical documents, recordings have long-term preservation needs which include good environmental conditions such as low relative humidity (40-50%); moderate, stable temperature (50-75 degrees F), good air quality and low light levels.

A few helpful hints:

- Know what questions you want to ask, but don't be afraid to let your interviewee go off on a tangent. He or she may touch on a subject about which you may have never thought to ask.
- Never turn off the recorder unless asked to. Not only does it break the conversation, it suggests you think the interviewee's remarks are not worth recording.
- Use a recorder which indicates it has reached the end of the tape when recording. Nothing is more frustrating than having the interviewee finish a wonderful story and realizing the tape ran out some time ago!
- Use props when possible. Documents, photos, and family heirlooms can stimulate memories.
- Be prepared for the fact that there may be some information you will not get. You may be the wrong sex or age, or a relative simply may not trust you with sensitive information. If you feel you must have the missing material, soliciting the assistance of another friend or relative to act as interviewer may help.
- Avoid becoming an interrogator. A low key approach in a natural setting should help relieve any discomfort your interviewee feels.
- Be an active listener without dominating the conversation.
- Finally, prepare some type of report or transcription copy for the family member as a tangible result of their participation.

Additional Resources

Caring for Your Family Documents: Tips in proper storage, handling and organization. Published by the CLRC DHP, September 2003.

Visit clrc.org and click on the Documentary Heritage Program link.

Documentary Heritage Program (DHP) of the New York State Archives

In Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, Wayne, and Wyoming counties, contact the Regional Archivist at the Rochester Regional Library Council at (585) 223-7570 or visit www.rrlc.org and click on the Documentary Heritage Program link.

For all other counties, contact the State Archives Documentary Heritage Program at (518) 474-6926 to find your Regional Archivist; or visit www.archives.nysed.gov, click on Services and then on Directories.

Society of American Archivists www.archivist.org or 312/922-0140

Oral History Association www.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha or 817/755-2764

UCLA Oral History Program www.library.edu/libraries/special/ohp/ohpindex.htm

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