

Preserving Old Photographs and Documents

Archivists have discovered the hard way that using ordinary lamination plastic for old documents, newspapers, photos, etc., does not preserve them. The best way to preserve them is to store them in a dark place after placing in acid-free Mylar film (not laminated). Ordinary lamination material still permits light rays to pass through it and to cause a chemical reaction to the acid that most modern paper and modern dyes contain, and that ALL old documents photos contain. This causes deterioration of paper and fading of the paper and print. The heat and pressure of most lamination processes also damages documents.

The key to preserving your paper documents and photos is to keep them in an acid-free, humidity-controlled environment. Your paper documents and photos need protection from a variety of elements which contribute to their deterioration - namely: light; heat; humidity; acids in papers, plastics, and adhesives; pollutants; and pests.

You can store and preserve your paper documents in a few different ways. You can organize and file them in acid-free folders, and keep them in an acid-free box. Or you could place your documents in archival-safe, acid-free plastic sleeves and keep them in an album or binder. Another popular alternative is to encapsulate a document between two sheets of polyester (Mylar) film.

Regardless of how you choose to store your documents, **never store them in an attic or basement**. Extreme temperature and humidity changes cause rapid deterioration. Store your items in a room that is comfortable to you, with stable temperature and humidity.

Plastic enclosures are safe for documents ONLY if they are made of polyester, polypropylene, or polyethylene. Other plastics are not chemically stable and will release damaging acids over time. Especially dangerous is PVC (polyvinyl chloride) plastic commonly found in "store-bought" binders; it emits hydrochloric acid over time.

Lamination of a document is **NOT** considered a safe conservation technique because the process may potentially damage a document due to high heat and pressure during application. Moreover, the laminating materials themselves may be chemically unstable and contribute even more to the deterioration of the document. Lamination also violates a cardinal rule of conservation, and that is to only apply treatments that do not alter the item, and which can be reversed. Lamination cannot be reversed.

Temperature and humidity affect photographs and documents more than any other element. Best conditions are under 70° F, with the relative humidity under 50%. High humidity is most harmful, and high temperatures accelerate the deterioration. Cyclic conditions (high heat and humidity followed by cold and dry weather, followed by high heat, etc.) are very bad for film emulsion and may cause cracking and separation of the emulsion from the support.

The **best places to store important photographs or documents** are in a safe deposit box at your bank. They are usually climate controlled and kept dark to provide almost ideal storage conditions. The ideal storage conditions are 68°F ± 2°F and humidity of 50% ± 5%.