

How to Preserve Your Family Artifacts

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How-To Guides

Physical things are a bridge across time and culture. Our tangible connection to the past often comes through the old things we can see, hold, or experience. Our objects contain memories, stories, and emotions that are valuable and important to us beyond even their physical form. We often have the urge to save or preserve old objects because these tangible things help us ascribe value and meaning, as well as help us understand the world around us.

What is an artifact?

Physical things are often called artifacts or objects in the professional history world. An artifact is generally a human-made object with historical or cultural value. In this How-To guide, we'll use the terms artifact and object interchangeably. Artifacts make up what historians call more broadly "material culture": the relationship between people and our things, and how those material objects impact our culture.

Why does it matter to save artifacts? Why are there so few African American historical artifacts saved today?

We care about preserving artifacts because they tell us important stories about the past in a tangible way that the written or spoken word cannot. They are an important puzzle piece to our past and can help make history feel more real.

African American historical artifacts were not preserved or saved in collections at nearly the same rate as white artifacts. This is due to individual, cultural, and institutional racism, which valued African American objects (and by extension, African American history), as insignificant and unsubstantial. There has also been the prejudiced argument that Black folks didn't have many artifacts to save – which is only true if we define artifacts as limited to what white people saved.

We know that African American history and culture is rich in artifacts that tell an important story, from the tools used by enslaved people to farm and build, the textile traditions brought from Africa, sweetgrass baskets and weaving, the symbolism and significance of quilt making, the pins and pamphlets of the Civil Rights Movement, to the protest posters of the Black Lives Matter movement today. These objects tell a story of resistance, resilience, and so many other things that only they can tell. In order to acknowledge this truth, and to

acknowledge how our African American communities understand preservation in a broad way, we think it is important to include a guide on preserving family artifacts as a part of the Preservation Toolkit.

Having a conversation with your family

1. Talk to elders and relatives

1. link to Oral History How To

- Ask them if they have saved anything from when they were growing up or when their parents were growing up – from small to large objects, documents, clothing, photos, and more.
- Stories and memories are also important – ask them what they remember
- It's also worthwhile to talk to different branches of the family (cousins, aunts/uncles, etc) and family friends or close community members. We often save things about the people who were important to us too, not just immediate family. Especially if our grandparents or elders have already passed, it can be helpful to connect to the people close to them, who might still have objects/artifacts and/or memories.
- Do you have a family historian who has done some genealogy work or is really interested in your family's story? This is always a good person to ask about if there are any artifacts and who might have them.

What kinds of artifacts could you ask your family about?

1. Documents: newspaper clippings, photographs, albums, family trees, marriage records, death certificates, obituaries, military service records, birth certificates, education diplomas or degrees, diaries or journals, day planners, ID cards
2. Small Objects: Jewelry, watches, chains, pocketbooks, wallets, dog tags.
3. Midsize Objects
 - Clothing – eg: a best Sunday suit, wedding dress, etc Accessories – eg: hats, gloves, shoes
 - Jewelry boxes
 - Cooking tools – eg: maybe your grandmother's seasoned cast iron pan holds memories of her cornbread
 - Handmade pieces – eg: quilts
 - Art
4. Large Objects
 - Furniture – eg: antique sewing machines, tables, cabinets, chairs, sofas, handmade pieces

Knowing what is worth preserving

1. What is worth preserving is a personal question, and will shift from family to family and even within families. It will depend on you and your family's goals. It's important to spend some time thinking about what is important to you and why that might be, considering how it might differ from your other family members.

Are you preserving artifacts because it's something a family member wants you to do or thinks you should do? Are you preserving something because it has personal meaning and importance to you? Answering might help give some clarity to your approach

2. If it means something significant and special to you, or tells future generations something about that era/time period that nothing else can, this might be a sign you could consider keeping it.

3. You can't save everything.

There are many items that hold significance but for multiple reasons may not make sense to hold on to. Remember that it is not the quantity of things you save that makes family artifacts meaningful. Curators of collections edit and curate their collections to ensure everything tells a meaningful story together – curate your collection the same way! Just because something is old does not mean you are required to save it, if it doesn't help you tell your family's story.

4. Some questions to help guide you in deciding what your family artifacts are from Dr. Ramon Jackson, Curator of African American Culture at the SC State Museum:

- Does the artifact truly strengthen your family history?
- Do you have enough storage space?
- Can the item be easily identified, transported, protected, and maintained?
- Will another family member be willing to take ownership in the event of an unfortunate event?
- Answering these questions will help you determine what needs to be saved.

What is it? Do some research

1. Research online to see what it is

- EBay, Etsy, other resale sites have vintage items for sale that might be similar to your item and can help you determine what it is, who manufactured it, its age, etc.
- Use a reverse google image search to find out what something might be that you don't know the name of.
- Search for the manufacturer and style – this can lead you to how old something might be

- Consult an expert

You can find material objects experts to help you determine what an object might be or old it is. Appraisers might be one such expert. There are also museum curators and collections experts who have knowledge about specific objects, who may be able to help. Experts specialize by the type of object and the time period, so search for experts using those applicable terms – eg: modern art, mid century furniture, 1960s/1970s dress/jewelry, etc.

Define your goal in saving these artifacts?

1. Do you want to save the object because it has personal significance and meaning for you?
2. Do you want to save the object because it means something important for a particular historical time period?
3. Do you want to keep these artifacts passed down in your family? Or do you want them to go to a museum/archive/repository? (More on museums below)

Questions to ask yourself and your family

1. Do you want to preserve the condition of the artifact?
2. Is this object fragile?
3. Is this object monetarily valuable?
4. Do you want to keep this object in the family, passed down to generations?

Will younger generations have interest in this object? Just because it means something to you, doesn't mean it will have the same significance to someone else who doesn't have your life story and memories.

- Do you want this object to be preserved professionally or do you want to preserve it yourself at home?
- Do you want this object to go to a museum/archive/repository?
 - If so, are you ok with donating this object? Is everyone in your family ok with donating this object?
 - Can you loan this object for a specific exhibit or a long-term loan and still retain ownership of it?

Key concepts for preserving your artifacts yourself at home:

1.

1. Condition of the artifact:

- Is it still intact? Does it have damage?
- Generally, it is best to handle an object the least amount possible. If the damage is not something that will worsen (like a tear in a document), preserve it as best you can (more below) and move/touch it as little as possible.
- If it is something invasive or that will continue to worsen (eg: insects or mold) and if it is severely damaged, you can identify the type of damage and look up specific preservation procedures for that type of object or material. If it requires significant work, it is better to take it to a professional.

2. 3 Key Storage Conditions:

- 3 key conditions that affect objects:
 1. light
 2. temperature
 3. moisture/humidity
- Variations between these conditions are damaging to materials and accelerate aging – you want to keep objects in a place that is regulated, where these 3 things are not changing drastically between seasons (not in an attic or basement).

3. Label your artifacts

- Include a label or small card (acid-free) with each artifact with details: what it is, the manufacturer, the style or model, the date or age, who in your family owned it, and its value (if it's been appraised).
- You could also keep a document that lists your family artifacts with this information and include a written recollection of who owned the artifact, how they used it, why it's important to your family story, etc. This can help when family members pass on and prevent you from losing valuable items.
- Do not use adhesive, glue, or tape to affix the labels to the artifacts. These compounds compromise materials. Place them in the box or folder with the artifacts, tuck into a pocket, place in a drawer, etc.
- Remember to also clearly label the boxes and folders that artifacts are stored in.

4. Some simple things you can do at home to preserve the life of your objects:
- You can even buy archival quality acid-free products that archives use online for yourself (look at the brand Gaylord Archival).
 - Stuff shoes, hats, other accessories with acid free tissue to retain their shape.
 - Don't use moth balls or chemicals – these chemicals can affect preservation of fabrics.
 - Store documents flat – not folded, rolled, bent, or on their side
 - Remove all paper clips, staples, pins, rubberbands etc.
 - Store documents in individual acid free folders, or if that is too much, make small groups of related documents and place them in acid free folders (don't just stuff a lot of documents in one folder).
 - Store jewelry pieces in soft individual bags and store flat.
 - Move boxes of items or bigger items out of non-temperature regulated places – move out of the basement, garage, or attic.
 - Buy acid-free paper, folders, boxes, and tissue paper.
 - Store photographs in acid free folders, with pieces of acid free tissue separating them.
 - Store clothing and accessories in flat boxes, with layers of acid free tissue between layers or folds – try to fold as little as possible and do not hang
 - Store quilts or blankets with as least folds as possible with acid-free tissue in between in flat boxes or if very fragile, store them gently hung over a well-padded thick wooden rod

Advice on preserving specific types of artifacts (from Dr. Ramon Jackson, Curator of African American Culture at SC State Museum, see the blog post [here](#))

- 1. Preserving Family Letters and Documents:** Documents, letters, and other family papers can last a long time when properly cared for. When preserving paper, be sure to unfold, remove all rubber bands and paperclips, take them out of envelopes, and lay them flat. Store papers in acid-free folders and boxes in a cool (below 75 degrees), dry place. This will slow decay and reduce the chances of mold and infestation. *Minimize handling by digitizing your documents. You can easily share and store digital files and build detailed family trees on Ancestry, FamilySearch, and other genealogical websites.* If you must handle the original, be sure to wash and dry your hands first. Also, avoid eating, drinking, or smoking around valuable family papers.
- 2. Displaying Family Letters and Documents:** It is difficult to resist the urge to hang an attractive, old family document on the wall. Consider framing a copy and storing the original. This will decrease exposure to light, which causes documents to fade.
- 3. Preserving Books:** Family Bibles, scrapbooks, atlases, recipe books, and other manuscripts are treasured possessions in most families. While these bound books are like documents, they also present a host of their own unique problems and solutions. Store books in clean, dry places. Avoid garages, attics, or basements unless they are temperature regulated or located in dry environments. Books should be stored flat in archival quality boxes to protect them from dust, sunlight, and the stress caused by upright storage. Unfold page corners, remove rubber bands, paperclips, and bookmarks. Be careful when opening old books. Try to avoid opening them all the way flat, which can damage the spine and binding. Always grip the middle of the book if you are pulling it from the shelf, instead of yanking from the binding.
- 4. Preserving Scrapbooks:** Most older family scrapbooks are a preservation nightmare! They were often made of poor-quality, acidic paper that deteriorates rapidly and damages photos or other objects attached to it. Scrapbook pages were often arranged using adhesives (tape, glue, and rubber cement) which damaged photos, papers, and other items on the pages. These books also have poor binding, due to badges, dried flowers, love letters, brochures, and other fun extras. Don't pull your hair out trying to disassemble and preserve each page! Place thin, archival quality paper between each page and store the scrapbook flat in an archival safe container.

5. **Preserving Electronic Information:** In this modern age, the biggest threat to the safety of our family history information is likely the possibility of our computer crashing or our toddler throwing our phone into the bathtub or pool. Nearly everyone keeps important family information such as photos, documents, family tree charts, and other files on their computers, digital cameras, cell phones, and tablets. Ironically, electronic files are just as fragile as documents and photos! *Always follow this simple rule: Organize and back up your information.* Be sure to centralize your files on your computer or external hard drive, label everything, and get rid of excess materials. For every important electronic file, make sure that you follow the *3-2-1 rule: Keep three copies of it in two types of media storage in at least one location other than your house.* Possibilities include your computer's hard drive, external hard drives, thumb drives, or "the cloud" (Google Drive, Dropbox, Evernote, OneDrive, etc.). Make sure trusted relatives and friends know about the existence and location of these important electronic files. Revisit your backups at least once a year to make sure everything is current and transfer files, if necessary.
6. **Preserving Audio/Visual Material:** Audio and visual recordings give us intimate glimpses into the past and help us to recall precious moments with our loved ones. Many families keep stashes of cassette tape interviews of older relatives or home videos of family reunions. It is important to store cassette tapes, videos, and other electronic media in a cool, clean, and dry place. Minimize handling and avoid playing damaged tapes. As time passes, playback equipment may become obsolete, making it difficult to access your recordings. When in doubt, contact an expert who can convert the content to digital files. Digitizing electronic media requires more skill and equipment than you may have readily available. Oral histories should be transcribed! Doing so will provide you with a backup and an easy-to-use reference when writing or presenting your family's story.
7. **Preserving Textiles and Jewelry:** When using or displaying textiles, be sure to clean and dry your hands. Store textiles flat in a cool, dry place with minimal light (avoid sunlight). If you decide to hang clothing, use preservation-safe hangers. Consult a professional conservator to assist with cleaning delicate textiles. Jewelry should be treated in a similar manner; defer to jewelers to clean valuable items. Store diamonds separately from other jewelry pieces to avoid scratching softer stones. Wrap stones with archival tissue. Silver should be wrapped in a silver cloth. Store all jewelry in acid free boxes.

Working with a museum/archive/other repository

1. Understanding Acquisitions

- Museums, archives, and other repositories all have “acquisitions” and “accessions” policies and processes. Acquisition is simply the process of a repository legally acquiring an artifact or object. Accessions is the process of “accessioning” an object into their collection – the process of cataloging, preserving, and formally incorporating an object into the permanent collection. These policies and processes will vary greatly between organizations, depending on what the organization does and its collection or acquisition policy. Some organizations may be looking for specific types of objects in order to better meet their collections goals – for example, many museums/archives have a lack of objects associated with African American life and culture due to racist collecting practices, so they may be looking to add more Black history objects to their collection. But many museums/archives also have very limited storage space and have a strict acquisition policy about new objects.
- Do not assume that a museum/archive will want your family objects simply because they are valuable to you – they will need to meet a specific need or fill a specific gap in their collection in order to be acquisitioned by a museum/archive. Do your research on local museums, archives, county and city libraries, historical societies and other organizations first to determine if your object falls into the categories that they collect. Find an organization that specifically collects the type of artifact you have (find an archive that saves these types of documents, a museum that has a special collection in African American textiles, etc). Then reach out to those organizations specifically.
- Contact a curator or ask the organization who to contact about donating family artifacts. Have a conversation with the curator or appropriate person in charge of collections about what artifact(s) you have, their history and story, their condition, age, etc. All the details and research you did before on the artifact will be needed and useful information to the museum/archive.
- Understand that museums/archives will often not accept artifacts that are damaged and in very poor condition. They will almost never accept duplicates or an object if it is similar to an object they already have, or if it does not meet their mission or goals.
- If a museum/archive is interested in acquiring your object, it will likely go through an acquisitions committee or another such process where the organization will determine if the object belongs in their collection. This process may take awhile before you hear back.

- If the museum/archive is interested in acquiring your artifact, you will begin the acquisition process with them. You will need to sign a Deed of Gift, as well as other legal forms, in order to legally transfer title or ownership of the object to the museum/archive. It's important to understand that once you sign a Deed of Gift (one with no conditions or written and approved requests) you will no longer legally have the ability to decide anything about the object, such as how it is stored, where, how it is exhibited, etc. Some museums/archives, especially the organizations that are conscious of and working towards more equity and diversity in their collections, will allow and even work with you to establish certain conditions or requests that you might have about the artifact before you donate it, although there are limits to what a museum/archive can work with you on (for example, it is virtually impossible for you to ask the museum/archive to exhibit your artifact at all times). But there are still many organizations that see donors putting restrictions or conditions on an artifact as a disincentive to acquire that object, so just be aware of this. It is ultimately your right, particularly as an African American or person of color given the way stories and objects have been taken from us in the past, to decide what is right for your family artifact(s). If you feel uncomfortable or that an organization is not respectful of your history, don't go through with the deed of gift.
- Understand that once a museum/archive acquires your object, there can be a long wait time before your object is formally accessioned into the permanent collection (although this will have little bearing on you). Understand also that your artifact may not be exhibited or displayed soon or at all, as that is dependent on exhibition schedules and curatorial needs.
- Loans to a museum/archive/other repository
 - You don't have to fully deed ownership of a family artifact to a museum/archive or other repository in order to have your object displayed or utilized – you can loan your artifact to an organization that is interested in displaying it! Museums will often get loans of objects to display in a specific exhibit, particularly when they want to do an exhibit on a topic that their collections don't feature.
 - Short term loans – a short term loan of an artifact often occurs for a special exhibit that is exhibited for a specific period of time or is on a particular topic. Some archives might have you do a loan so that researchers can study your artifact or document. Short-term loans can also be obtained for traveling exhibits, in which an exhibit will travel to different museums and locations (although it is probably unlikely that your artifact would be featured in a traveling exhibit). Short-term loans can be anywhere from several months to a couple years.

- Long term loans – a long term loan of an artifact is typically done for an artifact that might be exhibited for many years, often in a permanent, semi-permanent, or regularly rotating exhibit. These loans can be anywhere from several years to several decades, depending on the loan agreements. Some donors choose to do long term loans of their artifacts until their death or until a set time, at which they will donate the artifact and sign a deed of gift. This is another option if you don't want to cede the legal title of the artifact right away.
- Each museum/archive will have their own loan agreements and stipulations on loans. Typically this will include some language on their part that they assure to keep your artifact safe, clean, without damage, etc, but cannot be held liable. If your artifact is valuable monetarily, get it appraised and ensure the museum acknowledges the appraisal amount. Depending on the situation and the value of the artifact, some museums might get insurance for the artifact as well for additional protection.

Explore Related Resources in the Toolkit

Need help researching & writing your nomination?

[Check out the Experts Database.](#)

Want to explore funding opportunities?

[Check out our Grants & Funding page.](#)

Want to pair your National Register Listing with a South Carolina Historical Marker?

[Check out our How-To Guide on How To Get a State Historical Marker.](#)