

Photograph Preservation

Photographs are one of the most enjoyable forms of documentary evidence of our lives and the lives and activities of friends and loved ones. The prevalence of photographs allows us to forget their potentially fragile composition.

The structure of photographs typically consist of the emulsion layer and the primary support. The emulsion layer is comprised of the final image material and the binder. The primary support is what the emulsion was applied to. The various materials and techniques utilized to create the photograph affect the rates at which the photograph deteriorates. Storage environment and handling of the photographic object also has a lasting effect on the longevity of the image.

Storage

Do not store photographs in attics or basements because humidity and changes in temperature may cause surfaces to crack or mold to form.

Best practices recommend storing materials in a climate of 65-68°F and 30-40% relative humidity.

Photographs and negatives should be individually stored in either stable, inert plastic or acid-free paper enclosures or folders, or in archival albums to provide physical support and protection. Once housed in appropriate folders, sleeves, or envelopes, photographs and negatives are usually best stored flat in archival quality boxes. Foldered and boxed prints should be separated with non-buffered paper to prevent sticking and transfer. Photographs of similar size should be stored together.

Plastic Enclosures

Select plastic enclosure materials made from polyester, polypropylene, or polyethylene.

Mylar is a common brand of polyester. Do not use polyvinylchloride, more commonly known as vinyl, because it is a highly unstable plastic. Clear plastic enclosures allow viewing of photographs and negatives without directly handling them.

Paper Enclosures

Envelopes, sleeves, and folders should be acid-free and either buffered or unbuffered depending on the photographs being housed. Paper enclosures provide a suitable surface for writing information about the photograph. The opaque nature of paper also protects photographs and negatives from light and other pollutants.

Albums

Select or create an album made with archival-quality paper and plastic. To secure the photographs, use paper or Mylar™ photo corners or pre-slotted pages to mount photos in albums or archival sleeves. Do not use tape or adhesives to attach photographs. Avoid albums made with colored papers and magnetic or no-stick pages because photographs will be damaged by these materials

Handling

When handling photographs carefully hold prints and negatives along the edges with thoroughly washed and dried hands or wear clean, white cotton gloves. The oils from human skin will cause permanent damage over time and be careful not to leave fingerprints on the emulsion layer of the photograph.



Photographs from the 2018-36 Bernick Photograph Album

Care & Cleaning

When repairing photographs do not use tape or other adhesives. Soiled photographs or negatives may be gently brushed with a clean, soft bristled brush. Work from the center of the photograph outward toward the edges. Do not clean with water- or solvent-based cleaners. If the photograph is badly damaged or need special attention, contact a conservator.

Creating a Record

Depending on which type of storage is selected, the photographs may be identified on the enclosure, album page or on the photo itself. When writing on the back of a photograph, write near the edges with soft lead pencils that will not bleed through or scratch the paper. Do not use ink pens or markers.

A well-organized and properly housed photograph and negative collection will ensure that photographs will be preserved for future generations.

The recommendations in this document are intended for guidance only.