

# HOW TO LIVE FOREVER: Documents and Photos TIPS AND RESOURCES

Compiled by Robbie Terman, Director, Leonard N. Simons Jewish Community Archives  
terman@jfmd.org; 248-203-1491

## Supplies

- Acid-free boxes and folders are two of the most important supplies you can get. Be careful of items simply listed as “archival.” When it comes to paper-based supplies, like boxes and folders, look for words like “acid-free” and “lignin-free” and/or a PH above 7.
- Avoid plastic and PVC. When it comes to supplies like photo and document sleeves, look for ones made of polyester, polypropylene, or polyethylene. Look for words like “PVC Free” or “inert and stable.”
- Make sure you have pencils and at least one extra-fine point sharpie (a Micron works as well).
- Some companies that specialize in archival supplies are:  
Hollinger Metal Edge – [hollingermetaledge.com](http://hollingermetaledge.com)  
Gaylord Archival – [gaylord.com](http://gaylord.com)
- Supplies you should avoid are pens, glue, tape, metal staples and paper clips, and rubber bands.

## Storage

- Do not store your archival materials in basements, attics, or garages. They should be stored in an environment with stable temperature and humidity, and with the least risk of damage from leaks, flooding, pests, and mold.

## Conservation

- If you have a fragile or torn item, do not use tape or glue to put it back together. Keep the pieces together in an appropriate sleeve and consider scanning the item. Do not do any work on the item that cannot be reversed. Do not laminate! If you find mold on an item, it must be addressed. Mold is hazardous to humans and pets and can spread to other documents.
- For more information about conservation, visit the Northeast Document Conservation Center at [nedcc.com](http://nedcc.com).

## Organizational Methods

Every collection is different. The materials you have should dictate which method of organization you use. Here are some examples:

- **Document “type”**  
For example: Letters, Speeches, Genealogy Documents, Invitations, etc.  
Invitations – Birthday Parties, 1990-1993  
Invitations – Weddings, 2000-2018  
Speeches, 1995, undated

- **Topics/Subjects (Documents)**  
For example: Work, Philanthropy, Vacations, Family, etc.  
Vacations – Bermuda, 2009  
Vacations – Italy, 2012  
WLCJ – Award, 2002  
WLCJ – Writings, 2000-2002
- **Topics/Subjects (Photos)**  
Bat Mitzvah – Party, 3 May 1988  
Bat Mitzvah – Service, 3 May 1988  
Michigan State University – Dorm Room, 1993  
Michigan State University – Friends, 1993-1997  
Michigan State University – Graduation, 29 Apr 1997
- **Family Member**  
Jones, Bob – naturalization records, 1923  
Jones, Bob – vital Records, 1900-1975
- **Family groups**  
Jones Family – Unknown Portraits, undated  
Jones Family – Jones, Bob – Elementary School, 1965  
Jones Family – Jones, Bob – Photos with Wife Sarah, 1985 – 1997  
Singer Family – Singer, Rose – Childhood in Poland, 1909 – 1915  
Singer Family – Singer, Rose – Photos alone, 1920-1927  
Singer Family – Singer, Rose – Photos with Family, 1925 – 1940  
Singer Family – Singer, Rose – Photos with Friends, 1918 – 1932  
Singer Family – Singer, Tom – Military Service, 1941-1944
- **Chronological**  
1998 – letters  
1999 – letters  
2000 – letters

### **Labeling and Guide**

- Be sure to label the back of photographs with names, dates, and location/events. Only write in pencil, unless the photo is glossy-backed, in which case you can lightly use an extra-fine point sharpie (never use a ball-point pen).
- Folders should be labeled according to the organizational method (see above for examples). When you have finished the entire project, number the folders.
- Once complete, write a guide (finding aid) to the collection. This is a document or spreadsheet that lists each box and folder headings so you can easily locate items for which you are searching.

### **Photos**

- Photo albums can be used to store photos (as opposed to folders in boxes). Make sure the album you purchase is acid-free. Do not adhere photos using tape or glue; instead, use photo corners. Do not use a sticky-back album, which causes deterioration to the photo over time. Avoid albums with plastic/PVC between pages.
- It is fine to make albums using online sources like Shutterfly and Snap Fish. They can be great way to create an album that can be shared by many family members. But original photographs should not be discarded.
- If you have photos that can't be identified, don't necessarily discard them. Check with other family members, particularly ones who are older, and see if they can help you identify. But just because you can't identify now doesn't mean you won't be able to in the future. In the meantime, you can store those photographs in a folder titled "People (or Family) Unidentified."
- **Photo Restoration:** There are many photo restorers available. Here is one that that has been used: <https://www.yourcustomphoto.com/home.html>

### **Weeding Collections**

- If you aren't sure what to keep and what to discard, ask yourself why the item is important to you or your family. Does it tell you who your ancestor was? Where they came from? How they lived their lives? And do the same thing for yourself. If the item gives no insight into your life or the life of your ancestors, it may be something to consider discarding. Also ask yourself what would be meaningful for you to have of your ancestors. Your descendants will probably value the same type of materials.

### **Donating to an Archive**

- All archival repositories have missions and collection policies. If you are interested in donating your collection to an archive, it should be one that specializes in the type of materials that you have. It might be geographical, religious, professional, or life event (for instance, a war veteran). It will take a little research to find the right collection. I suggest starting locally. An archivist who works in your area will likely know local repositories and their collections.

### **Final Tips**

- Try not to get overwhelmed! Start with just one item type (for example, vacation photos, genealogy documents, correspondence, etc.) and complete that before starting on the next type. This is a marathon, not a sprint!
- Don't eat, drink, or smoke around your archival documents. You want to keep your work area clean.
- Do not put on lotion or nail polish before working on your archives. Gloves are not necessary. Clean, lotion-free bare hands are preferable.
- If you decide to digitize your collection, do not throw away the originals (with the exception of newspaper clippings or moldy items).
- Any digitized items should be backed up in multiple places.

- Remember, the digital lifespan is small. It is much harder to manage digital content than paper content.