

Conservation at Home:

Things you can do to keep heirlooms looking their best

BRANT
HISTORICAL
—SOCIETY—

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Introduction

Many people have family heirlooms or old family photos lying around their house but may not have the knowledge of how-to best care for them. People in this scenario might decide to donate these items to their local museum; however, museums may not be able to take these items in for many reasons.

The good news is, there are things you can easily do at home to help conserve these heirlooms and photographs, so that they can continue to be passed down. These will be detailed in this booklet the Brant Historical Society has created for Heritage Week 2026. We will also briefly touch on how to digitize items at home.

This booklet won't cover absolutely everything that you can do to take care of heirlooms/antiques. You can find information online - if you do this, be sure to read two or more sources before using any advice you find, to ensure that it's known to work.

General Tips

- Keep things on shelves, or up high/above floor level, to help avoid water damage if they are stored in a basement
- Keep things covered or in containers to help avoid dust and pest damage
- Dust anything on display in your home a few times a year - dust is abrasive and can cause damage over time
- To prevent fading, keep objects away from windows/direct lighting
- If you're going to stack objects for storage, place something between them, like newspaper or fabric, to avoid any damage from rubbing and banging together
- Some heirlooms/antiques can be handled without gloves. These include:
 - Letters
 - Books
 - Porcelain
 - Glass
- If you're dealing with objects where you don't need gloves, wash your hands first, to help remove any dust, dirt, and oils that could damage the object
- To help avoid moisture damage to items, moisture eaters can be purchased at the dollar store
- Dryer sheets can help to keep pests away, so keep them on shelves, but not touching the items
- Make sure to check your items for pests periodically – if they are present, clean the area, leave out traps, and move the items until the pest problem is solved

Photographs

If you grew up in the 60s or 70s, chances are that you have photo albums of childhood photos that are sticky pages with a clear cover over them. This type of photo album isn't good for your photos - glue can lead to deterioration of photos over time. There are things you can do to help your photos last longer. Step one would be removing them from these albums ASAP!

Try not to touch the photo on the shiny side right on with your hands, as fingerprints and oils can stay and wreck photos - you can buy nitrile gloves to use when moving the photos/handling them.

Any old photos you have should be put into an album that is acid, lignin, and PVC free if possible - these types of photo albums are available from Michaels. If you can't get this type of album, there are other things that you can do to store photos to keep them safe.

You can keep photographs in a paper envelope and store them upright in a box so that they are not laying one on top of another. The pressure from that could cause damage to the photos over time.

Keep photographs in a dry, cool place when not looking at them.

Many people like to write down names, dates, and places on the backs of photographs so that they, and others, can remember/know what the photo shows. The best way to do this is to write it in pencil, and not to push down too hard with the pencil, to avoid causing indents in the actual image. To help avoid over-handling photos, you can write this information out as captions underneath or beside photos in albums.

Porcelain

Lots of people have things like sets of dishes, tea sets, display plates, or vases such as heirlooms or collectables. These can be quite easy to take care of, especially if they are on display in something like a China cabinet. Displaying them means that they aren't being handled very often, which helps mitigate the possibility of things falling and breaking.

You don't really need gloves to handle porcelain items, as cloth gloves would increase the chance of it slipping and falling. You should wash your hands before handling porcelain items. The best way to keep your porcelain looking good is to dust it - dust is abrasive and can cause damage over time. If your porcelain objects have pictures on them, it's a good idea to keep them out of direct sunlight, since it can lead to paint fading. If you have delicate items, it's a good idea to only have them on display to avoid damaging them with use.

If you are storing antique porcelain in boxes, make sure to use newspaper, bubble wrap, or cloth as buffers between the items. This will help to mitigate breakages and dust damage. The best place to store these boxes is somewhere cool and dry. When placing individual items of porcelain on shelves, make sure they aren't too close to the edge.

Paper Items

Paper items can include books, journals, cookbooks, and letters. Much like porcelain, you don't really need gloves to deal with these items - just clean hands. Gloves can make it tricky to flip through pages.

If you have individual sheets of paper, like letters, you can store them in acid-free files/plastic sleeves. Store them lying flat in a box or binder. Antique books can be stored on a shelf the same way modern books are, or in a box in a cool, dry place.

If you are going to open an antique/heirloom book, make sure to support the spine. Only lay the book completely flat if the book naturally wants to lay flat. This helps to avoid breaking the spine, which can lead to lost pages. If you're dealing with a paper item that is folded, make sure that you're always re-folding along the lines to avoid creating new stress and/or rips in the page.

Silverware

If you have any heirloom or vintage silverware that you're not using and are just for display, there are a few things you can do to help them continue looking good.

There are oils from our skin that can damage silverware, such as imprints of our fingerprints. A good way to help mitigate this damage, and/or not create more, is to wear nitrile or cloth gloves when moving them. These can be easily bought from Amazon and other retailers.

Cleaning antique silverware can be a bit tricky - there are some online resources that can help people with this. The methods used in museums aren't always viable for people to do at home, beyond using distilled water and anionic and nonionic detergents ([What's are Anionic and Nonionic Surfactants? – Safe Household Cleaning](#)). The most important thing to remember when you try to clean silver wear is to be very gentle and not press or scrub too hard, and to wear gloves to avoid skin irritation. If you're worried more damage could be caused by cleaning, then don't worry about cleaning them. Just have them as display or storage pieces.

The best way to keep these items clean is to only have them in storage or on display. If you're going to stack them, make sure you have a barrier between each item. They can then be stored in a cool, dry place.

Textiles

Textiles can include:

- Clothes
- Linen
- Blankets

It's best to keep these items flat in storage. For items that are on hangers, use padded hangers to avoid causing damage from metal ones (which can include holes or rust). For items that are folded, always fold them along preexisting fold lines. Creating new ones can create stress on the item, leading to weakening and damage. If you are using antique/heirloom linens, make sure you hand-wash them with weak detergents, and air-dry them.

Wooden Items

These items can include:

- Frames
- Chairs
- Tables
- China cabinets

These items can still be used if they aren't damaged or weakened in any way. The most common type of damage to wooden items is pest damage. This can be seen by something called "frass," which is a fine wood chip pile/mess, spotted in a pile, near a small hole. Clean up the frass and deal with pests. Remove the item from the area so that the pest can't get it again, and so that chemicals used for pest removal can't damage it.

Digitizing at Home

Lots of people have photos and/or documents they want to digitize, whether to send to someone or for genealogy. The easiest way to do this is by scanning. Many household printers have scanners built into them – many newer phones can also scan from the camera app, or with a scanning app.

To scan a book, it is recommended to use a phone or tablet with scanning capabilities, especially for older and/or larger books. This is because laying it completely flat on a scanner could lead to a broken or damaged spine, which isn't good. It might be a bit trickier to have the book/pages lay flat, but it's worth it to avoid damaging the spine.

Photos and paper documents can be scanned with a scanner or a device with an app. The only worry is that photos or smaller paper items could shift on the scanner, leading to having to scan things more than once. An important thing to keep in mind is to scan the back of photographs if anything is written on them, since this information is important to keep!

The best way to name these digital files is to call them what the book/document is called/about, what the photo shows, and then to number each scan to correspond to each page/side of the photo. Once you've scanned each page/side, make sure to save all the files into a folder so that they're all together and easier to find.