

# Leaving a Legacy Through Your Possessions

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By Mary Warner

Sorting for History: Leaving a Legacy Through Your Possessions  
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Layout, design & photos by Mary Warner

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Published by the  
Morrison County Historical Society  
Little Falls, Minnesota  
2017



# Sorting for History

Human beings are fond of classifying all manner of things in the world, naming and sorting items in infinite ways. Everything in our environment is ripe for sorting. We can't help ourselves; we must sort.

However, there are times when getting your personal effects in order is overwhelming. What should you save? Who's going to take care of your stuff after you're gone? What is important to save from the standpoint of history? What can you get rid of without guilt?

Museums deal with these questions on a daily basis. This guide will show you how museums sort for history and assist you in getting your personal collections in order for future generations.

## Types of Collections Donors

Having worked in the museum field for over 20 years, I've encountered many people seeking to donate items to museum collections. Would-be donors fall into a few broad categories. There are those who want to ensure their legacy is saved and displayed for all eternity; those who are cleaning out a relative's house and don't want to see his/her belongings taken to the dump, but don't know what else to do with them; and those who sift through their personal collections with a museum's specific mission in mind, calling ahead to see if something will be accepted.

Items make it into the Morrison County Historical Society's collections from all these categories of donors, but the museum's work of sorting for history is made easier by those who understand the mission and hand-select items based on that mission. Often these donors provide us good provenance on the items they give.

## What is provenance?

Provenance is a fancy term for the story behind an artifact. In the museum field, an artifact can be anything, from a book to a dress to

a photo to a pike pole to a boat to a document to an arrow point to a rock to pressed flowers, that becomes part of a museum collection. The provenance explains the context and importance of the artifact, creating a tie between the former owner and the museum's mission. Ideally, each artifact is capable of telling multiple stories through the provenance of date, owner, place of use, purpose, and other content contained on or within the artifact.

For example, if a business owner donates a wooden ruler with the name of the business that used to reside within her business building, a museum can build multiple stories from this one unassuming item. It could place the ruler on an exhibit of office-related items, feature it in a history of the business building, or use it to illustrate an article about the past business. The museum could even do a survey of wooden tools in its collection to show the variety of practical forms wood can take.

You may be familiar with provenance in relation to art. Provenance in the art world starts with the artist as the creator of a particular work and runs through all the owners of the piece.

When donating an artifact to a museum, staff will ask for the provenance prior to formally accepting it because they have to determine whether it meets the mission of the institution. At the Morrison County Historical Society, our mission is to preserve and share the history of Morrison County, so donated items must have some connection to the geographic entity that is Morrison County, Minnesota. We consider artifacts from this geographic location prior to the legal formation of the county as being part of the history as well, so the 2,000+-year-old copper spear point found in Morrison County meets our mission.

The best way to keep the provenance of an artifact is to WRITE IT DOWN. This can't be stressed enough. While there are cultures that pass along history via an oral tradition, they have a formal and repeated process for ensuring stories are accurately transmitted through generations. The general American culture has never developed this tradition, so don't count on someone precisely remembering the provenance of your item, even if you've told the story too many times to count.

Items without provenance have a certain intrinsic value for what they are, but they cannot convey the personal legacy of those who owned and cherished them. (This is a sad state of affairs for museums, which is why many museums will not accept items of uncertain provenance.)

## **Letting Go, Leaving a Legacy**

Strong emotions can be involved when dealing with personal and family possessions or the idea of leaving a legacy. You are coming face-to-face with your mortality, after all, and that's scary for most of us.

A museum colleague of long acquaintance has told me more than once that museum workers ought to be trained in grief counseling. We spend lots of time listening to people's family tales, probing for details on their attachments to personal items, helping them process their emotions.

Because of these attachments, it can be difficult for people to even begin sorting their belongings with an eye on leaving a legacy. Sorting can feel like the first step in letting go, of admitting that you won't always be around. Procrastinating on the sorting process is understandable, but if you don't do it while you are physically and mentally able, you'll be relinquishing the legacy of your possessions to someone else. Not only will those left to deal with your belongings feel the weight of this responsibility, they won't have the full provenance of your stuff and may not know your intent for passing along specific items.

In order to move beyond the fear of letting go and jump-start the sorting process, think about what kind of legacy you want to leave. This will help you focus on where to put your sorting energies.

If you're an author, you might be concerned with sorting through the books and articles you've published. Likely, you've got stacks of notebooks you've been keeping and want to get them in some logical order.

If you want to memorialize your parents or grandparents, you might want to concentrate on the proper packing of their favorite outfit (jeans and t-shirts count for their historic value as much as the wedding and military clothing do) and find someone in the family willing to be the guardians of these items when you no longer can.

If your passion is photographs, you might be keen to get your boxes and envelopes of family photos labeled and in accessible storage. Perhaps you want to tackle arranging and backing up your digital photos.

If you're a business owner, sorting the advertising memorabilia and catalogs from your products might be a priority.

If you're a collector of specialty items, say, melamine dishes, maybe you've already got them nicely arranged, but you need documentation (photos and a written list) for insurance purposes.

Only you can decide which of your personal items will best capture your legacy. Concentrate on sorting the things you love the most, the belongings that express who you are at the core.

Trust me, future generations will be able to feel your presence in your artifacts long after you're gone, especially if you provide provenance. As a museum worker, I sense the personalities of past owners in our collections on a daily basis.

## How Do Museums Sort?

There many resources available explaining methods for decluttering your life. One popular method of sorting involves going room-by-room with several boxes; a box for items to keep, a box for items to give away or donate, and a box for items to throw away.



**Boxes and ledgers in the Morrison County Historical Society's archive at The Charles A. Weyerhaeuser Memorial Museum. 2017.**

Currently (2017), Marie Kondo's KonMari method is all the rage. The method is laid out in Kondo's books, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* and *Spark Joy*.

In the KonMari method, you start with all the clothing you own in your home and put it in a big pile. You go through each piece and decide which ones bring you joy. If a piece does not "spark joy," it goes into a pile to discard. Next, you move on to books and sort in the same fashion. Then you deal with media-related items, like movies and magazines. Next, you tackle papers, then miscellaneous household items (cosmetics, hobby items, dishes, etc.), and, finally, you sort senti-

mental items, which includes photos.

The KonMari method is particularly well-known for the specialized folding procedures used on clothing. Socks and other items are rolled like sushi or folded like origami, which allows for maximizing storage space.

When a museum receives a collection of varied items from one donor, staff first determine whether all the items in the collection meet



the organization's mission. We do this by asking for provenance. We make it clear that once items are signed over (with the donor signing an official donation form) to the museum, we have legal ownership, so they need to be sure they want to transfer ownership.

This is our first level of sorting.

When a collection comes in, we examine it to see if it has already



**Metal box housing important family papers. If a box comes to you like this, keep the items inside in their original order until you have a chance to determine whether this order is important to understanding the collection. 2017.**

been arranged by the donor or collector. If there is an intrinsic order that is important to our knowledge of the collection, we work to maintain that order. If the collection is in no particular order, we move forward with the large-scale sort.

Remember this when you inherit a collection. If it's in order when

you get it, try to preserve the order if it tells you something about the collection or the person who sorted it.

## The Large-Scale Sort

If there are many assorted items in a collection, we follow a method similar to KonMari, sorting by type, so all the photos are grouped together, all the books together, all the papers together, all the clothing together, and etc. Other three-dimensional artifacts are a little trickier because they are often so different in size, shape, and type. Below is the Morrison County Historical Society's method for the large-scale sort when first handling a collection.

In a personal collection with many different types of items, start with larger three-dimensional artifacts first and work down to the document level.

When sorting, if a document describes an artifact or photo, leave the descriptive document with the item it describes.

- 1) Sort out the following items first:
  - 1) Three-dimensional artifacts
  - 2) Cassette tapes / Phonographs / Compact Disks / Digital Media
  - 3) Photographs / Slides / Photo albums
  - 4) Books
  - 5) Magazines
  - 6) Newspapers
  - 7) Scrapbooks
  - 8) Ledgers
  - 9) Maps, posters, charts & other large documents

After sorting out these items, there should be personal papers and ephemera left.

2) Next, sort the ephemera (booklets, brochures, cards, business cards, calendars, newspaper clippings, etc.) by type.

- 3) Finally, sort the personal papers into the following categories:
  - 1) Personal writings (diaries, journals, notebooks, letters, etc.)
  - 2) Financial, business & legal documents
  - 3) Genealogical materials (obits, pedigree charts, notes, funeral cards, etc.)
  - 4) Health-related documents
  - 5) Military records
  - 6) School records
  - 7) Church & cemetery records
  - 8) Government and/or organizational records
  - 9) Recipes & household management documents
  - 10) Special topics (hobbies/interests)
  - 11) Miscellaneous – anything that doesn't fit the other categories

Do not linger over items at this stage of sorting. The process should go fairly fast if the collection isn't too large (say, an entire household). Once a large-scale sort is complete, you'll want to return to your goals for leaving a legacy through your possessions. Of all these categories of items, which are most important to you? Start there for the medium-scale sort.

Before moving on to the next level of sorting, let's discuss storage materials.

## **Common Items for Archivally Sensitive Storage**

- ~ Cardboard boxes lined with aluminum foil (dull side out) or Tyvek
- ~ Manila file folders - many of these are acid-free
- ~ White copy paper
- ~ White cotton sheets - use instead of acid-free tissue to support folds in clothing & other fibers
- ~ Unbleached cotton muslin – same use as sheets - wash to remove sizing
- ~ Padded hangers – for storing clothing
- ~ Garment bags – for storing clothing – ideally these should be made of fabric or a mix of fabric and plastic, not 100% plastic
- ~ Cotton twill tape - good for tying around old books with broken bindings or bundling letters - find in fabric stores or sewing section of department stores
- ~ Envelopes (check pH values) – for photos and documents
- ~ Sheet protectors - good for arranging and protecting documents & photos
- ~ 3-ring binders - to hold sheet protectors
- ~ #2 Graphite pencils – for labeling photos & file folders
- ~ Black Stabilo pencils or Micron pens – for photo labeling
- ~ Clear plastic storage bins
- ~ Plastic-coated paper clips – for keeping documents together – don't use metal paper clips because they will rust
- ~ Polyester fiberfill - for padded hangers & padded supports

## **Storage Materials & Environment**

Museums purchase a number of specialized storage materials in order to preserve collections items. Because our goal is to preserve artifacts in perpetuity (forever!), we use storage materials that are acid-free, lignin-free, and pH neutral. Acid-free tissue and boxes are expensive, with a box for a wedding dress costing anywhere from \$25-\$50 and boxes for document storage running \$5-\$15 each. If you only need one box, the cost may be bearable, but if several are needed, they quickly become spendy.

Because many museums run on shoestring budgets, we have discovered less expensive, but archivally appropriate, storage alternatives that are readily available.

If you've got a cardboard box that isn't acid-free or lignin-free, you can line it with aluminum foil (dull side facing out), which will create a barrier between the box and the artifacts inside. Acid and lignin, found in wood fibers, will leach into artifacts over time, causing deterioration and discoloration.

Museums use acid-free paper to keep documents separated within folders and boxes. We call this "interleaving." Many brands of standard copy paper are acid-free and can be used for interleaving or to create simple envelopes for photos.

See the list of common items that can be used for archivally sensitive storage on the previous page.

When picking storage materials, the idea is to use those that are reversible and will cause no damage to your artifacts.

In the past, it was the fashion to laminate newspaper articles or Social Security cards. Lamination bonds items permanently to two pieces of plastic. Over time, the lamination causes whatever is between the plastic to become transparent, making this technique both damaging and irreversible. Magnetic photo albums, with adhesive on each page so that photos could be affixed in place, also used to be popular. This adhesive was either too sticky or not sticky enough, with photos being stuck permanently or falling out. At least the non-sticky adhesive allows people to remove photos from magnetic albums, which is recommended for preservation.



**Clear plastic storage bins can be used for archival storage. Be sure to open the box periodically to let in fresh air. 2017.**

When it comes to using plastic storage bins, choose clear ones over colored ones in order to avoid any potential for the color to bleed on the items inside. Plastic bins create micro-climates inside because there

typically isn't enough airflow. Be sure to open your plastic bins a few times a year to provide fresh air for what's inside, or leave the lids loose.

## PLASTICS IDENTIFICATION

Certain types of plastics are considered archivally safe for storing important keepsakes and papers. When purchasing plastic boxes for storage, just look for the recycling number. It will tell you the type of plastic used to make the box. Following is a list of the recycling numbers and the corresponding plastics that are safe for archival storage:

- 1 - PETE - Polyester**
- 2 - HDPE - High Density Polyethylene**
- 4 - LDPE - Low Density Polyethylene**
- 5 - PP - Polypropylene**
- 6 - PS - Polystyrene (Don't use pink!)**

The best of these plastics for archival purposes is HDPE, or High Density Polyethylene. Many commercially available storage boxes are made of this plastic, which is labeled with a number 2. When storing anything in plastic, remember to periodically let your items breathe. Open the cover and let some fresh air into the box. Make sure that the items you are storing are not damp, as the liquid that gets trapped in the box may ruin what you are trying to preserve.

The following two types of plastic (with their recycling numbers) should never be used for archival storage:

- 3 - V - Vinyl or Polyvinyl Chloride (a.k.a. PVC)**
- 7 - Other**

Speaking of climate, your mementos prefer to live in spaces that are not too wet, not too dry, not too hot, and not too humid. Most artifacts like cooler temperatures than people do, down to around 50 degrees Fahrenheit, but keep them in places that don't suffer from extreme fluctuations in temperature and humidity. Avoid attics, basements and exterior sheds or garages if they have no form of temperature control. Also, watch out for potential sources of water leakage or flooding. Keep your storage containers raised above floor level in places that are prone to flooding.

Another environmental factor to avoid is direct sunlight or other types of bright lighting. It takes very little time for artwork, clothing, and papers to fade when exposed to intense light.

Pests, like insects or mice, can also severely damage your treasures, so avoid places where critters like to hang out.

## **The Medium-Scale Sort**

Have you decided which category you'd like to work with from your large-scale sort? Now it's time for the next level of organization, the medium-scale sort.

The goal of this level of sorting is to bring enough order and provenance to this portion of your collection that you could hand it off to someone else and they would understand its importance. This does not mean that every photo and document has to be fully labeled and in perfect order. That will be saved for the fine-scale sort.

The easiest way to explain the medium-scale sort is to provide examples, so here goes ....

### **Photographs**

If, like many families, you have a large collection of photos that contain pictures of you and your immediate family, plus extended family, plus friends, plus inherited photos, and your collection contains a mix of photo albums, loose photos, and photos still in their photo developing envelopes, conduct the medium-scale sort in this way:

Set the photo albums aside. Because someone has already taken the time to arrange these, there will be an internal logic to them that might not be apparent on first glance (unless you are the one who put them together).

Sort the loose photos into the following categories:

- 1) You and your immediate family (spouse, children)
- 2) Extended family (grandparents, parents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, etc.)
- 3) Friends
- 4) Inherited photos containing people you don't know

Depending on how many photos are in each category, place them in a box, folder or large envelope, with a separate category in each container.

If you prefer to sort all of your photos by date, you can do that, too. There's really no wrong way to sort as long as you are consistent and logical.

Now it's time to provide provenance. For the photos of you and your



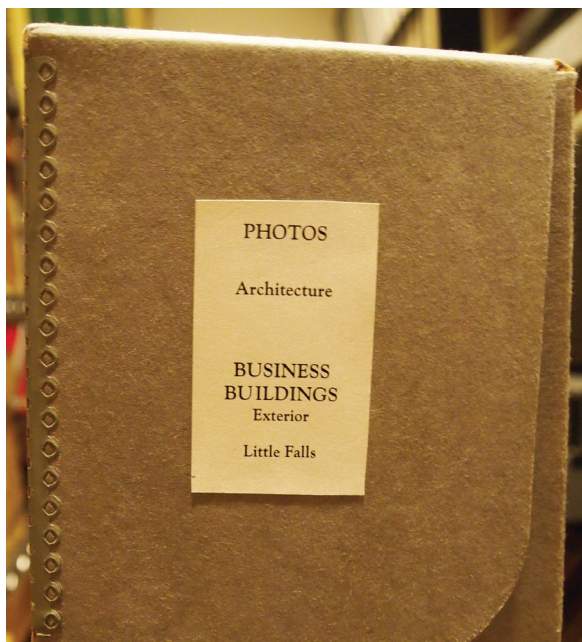
immediate family, make a list of each family member, along with birth date. Also, write down places you have lived and approximate dates of residence. Pick one or two photos from this category, ideally ones showing everyone in the family, and fully label the back with everyone's names and the date of the photo. Place these photos and the provenance sheet in the box or container. The medium-scale sort is finished for this box.

Move on to the extended family box and do the same. This will be a bit more complicated depending on how many extended families you are dealing with. If you'd like, you can sort these photos by each extended family represented and put each in its own container. On the provenance sheet, write down the primary last name for the family and the names of each person you can identify. Dates and places are also helpful.

Don't worry if you can't identify everyone. Just write what you know, labeling one or two group shots as references if you are able. It will also help future generations if you note your relationship to the family. For example, write "[Last name of family]: [Your name] Father's mother's family." (Example: "Johnson Family: Ed Melquist's mother's family.") Any bit of information will help in keeping the historic record.

Once this is done for the extended family, place the provenance with the extended family photos and move on to the photos of friends. With friend photos, if you don't want to spend time labeling each person at this point, divide the photos into friends from different areas of your life (high school friends, work friends, college friends, etc.) and put them in envelopes labeled with these categories.

Finally, you've come to the photos you've inherited that contain people you don't know. The provenance



**Label your boxes with enough detail to help you identify what's inside without opening the box. 2017.**

from these is going to be dicier, but hopefully you'll know who you inherited them from. Write down the name of the person they came from and whatever else you know about the person (birth date, death date, relationship to you, places lived) and place this with the photo collection.

At this point, move on to packets of photos. Sort these into the same categories above, but before adding them to each storage container, check each packet to see if there is a theme to the photos inside. Perhaps it's a packet of vacation or birthday party photos. Write the provenance directly on the packet (being careful not to damage the photos or negatives inside), for example, "Eugene Boser's third birthday, 2014, Hillman, Minnesota." Most of these packets will likely belong in the immediate and extended family storage containers.

Turn your attention back to the photo albums. If you created any of them, write a provenance for each and add them to the appropriate categories. If you inherited any of them, provide a label similar to what you created for the loose inherited photos. By the time you add photo albums to each category of photos, you may have to switch to larger storage containers (probably boxes). Place all related loose photos, photo albums, and photo packets carefully in a box and label the exterior of the box. To make this easier, take a photocopy of the provenance sheet and tape it to the box.

You have completed the medium-scale sort of your photos. If you want to continue working with your photo collection, move on to the fine-scale sort.

## **A Business Collection**

You've got ten years' worth of papers and artifacts collected from operating a business and want to get them in order to celebrate the upcoming anniversary. It is rare for museums to see highly organized business documentation come in the door, particularly for small local businesses. A business collection that's undergone a medium-scale sort is a dream come true for museums, but it will serve the business even better.

If you've completed the large-scale sort for your business, you should have separate piles of financial documents, promotional materials, legal documents, documents related to your business assets (building, equipment, and etc.), and employee documentation.

All of these might prove helpful in creating a business history, but let's start with the promotional materials, the business cards, brochures, annual reports, catalogs, press releases (including news clippings and articles about your business), and advertising. It is through these means that you communicate the purpose, products, brand, and history of your



### **Basic Info for Collecting Business History**

Name of business

Web address

Legal designation of business: Corporation, LLC, S-corp,  
Sole proprietor, Other (provide designation)

Type of business: Retail, Service, Manufacturing, Other  
(provide type)

What does the business do? What is its purpose or  
mission?

Dates of operation

Current location(s) of business

Were there previous locations for the business? Yes, No –  
If so, where?

Who are the current owners?

If applicable, list any past owners.

Is this a continuation or expansion of another business?  
Yes, No

Has this business had another name? Yes, No – If so,  
what?

business to the public.

For the medium-scale sort, put each of these types of items into their own folders (business cards together, news clippings together, etc.). The fine-scale sort will have you put them in date order in each folder, but you can do it now if that makes sense to you. Label each folder with the type of promotional material inside. If you have more than one folder of, say, catalogs, label the folder with “Folder 1 of X,” with X being the total number of folders you have. If you’ve put your catalogs in date order, you can put the date ranges on the folders instead.

You did remember to date your catalogs, didn’t you? At museums, we often find promotional items, maps, and other forms of documentation without dates, so we’re left to guess as to when these items were produced. If there are no dates within the layout, add them as best you remember when they were produced. Even an approximate date, for

example, “circa 1980s,” is better than no date at all. You can add a date directly to a piece on an interior page or on the back side.

Go through each of your folders of promotional materials and date whatever isn’t dated, at the very least grouping items by decade. Label folders appropriately.

Put these folders into as many boxes as are comfortably needed and label the boxes with your business name and “Promotional Materials.” There are numerous ways to arrange items, with no correct method, so you could group all promotional materials from a single year or a span of years together in one box, or you can file all of one type of material in the same box. For example, all catalogs could reside in one box or a series of boxes. If you have only one type of promotional material in a box, label the box with your business name, “Promotional Materials” and the specific material inside (“Catalogs,” “Brochures,” etc.).

Most business owners are too busy operating their businesses to write a history of the nature of their businesses. The Morrison County Historical Society developed a form requesting basic information in order to help local businesses get started. (See box on previous page.) This will also assist those who follow you in business in understanding how it began and give necessary information for any museums or archives that take on your business collection.

The Morrison County Historical Society’s business history form concludes with: *If available, please submit a few samples of promotional materials (i.e. business histories, brochures, business cards, etc.) and photographs (interior and exterior) of the business.*

Note that in compiling and arranging the promotional materials for your business, you’ve actually already completed most of this. If you don’t have any photos of your business, take a few reference shots to add to your collection. Don’t forget interior shots. If the photo collections of the Morrison County Historical Society are any indication, people were much better at taking exterior photos of buildings than interiors, but both are important to understanding your business.

One final task and the medium-scale sort of your business’s promotional materials will be complete. If your business has a website, take a print-out of the most critical pages. Start with the About page and any page or blog post that contains the history or philosophy of the business. If you have an online catalog with photos, print some of the pages as samples. Add these printed pages to your boxes of promotional materials.

If you want to go further, you may move on to the fine-scale sort, or pick another category of business documents and complete a medium-scale sort on them.

## A Collection of Artifacts

You've inherited a miscellaneous collection of artifacts from your Aunt Martha and want to keep the collection together because you were very fond of Aunt Martha, but you're not sure how best to store this assortment of items. Welcome to the daily life of a museum!

Aunt Martha's collection includes around 100 knickknacks of various shapes and sizes, her wedding dress, a gown she wore to a function where she met the governor, her favorite house dress, about 15 hats, her doll collection, a crazy quilt, Uncle Isadore's military uniform, and a packet of letters written between Martha and Isadore.

If you've done the large-scale sort, each of these collections within the larger collection is already sorted by type, so the hats are together, the clothing is together, the knickknacks are together, and etc.

When it comes to the medium-scale sort on such a collection, you'll want to concentrate first on safely packing everything by type. In order to feel as though you are accomplishing this quickly, start with the collection that has the least number of items or is somehow regular in size, shape, or type.

From this example, the letters, quilt, and clothing will be the quickest to manage. For museums, the letters will likely contain the deepest historical information, so we'd prioritize these in terms of proper storage.

## Letter Storage

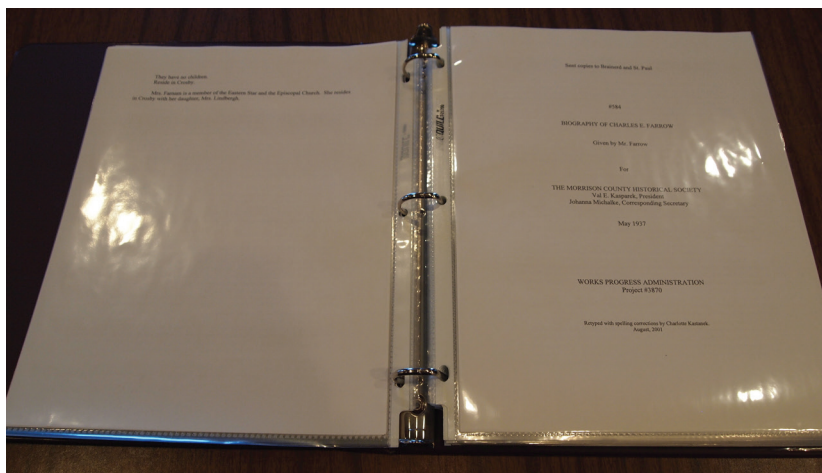
There are several ways to store the letters. If they are all grouped together and you don't have time to separate them and store them individually, leave them in a group and put them into an acid-free, lignin-free box (regular box lined with aluminum foil) as is.

It is very likely that your Aunt Martha has arranged them with a system based on her own internal logic. At this point, DO NOT rearrange them! Keep them in the order you received them until you have time to examine the arrangement more carefully. If you want to ensure they stay in this order, gently tie the bundle(s) with cotton twill tape or cotton string length-wise and width-wise until you are ready to come back to them. Store them tied in the box. Write a quick provenance of the letters and add it to the box. Label the box.

If you are feeling ambitious and want to complete a more thorough medium-scale sort, take each letter out of its envelope, carefully flatten the letters, and place them and the envelopes in file folders. Remember to keep the envelopes with their letters and preserve the order in which Aunt Martha arranged them. You can place each letter in its own file folder, or, in order to save on file folders, fold a ledger-sized (11" x 17")

piece of paper in half and put a letter inside the resulting “folder.” This is the interleaving process museums use to separate documents from one another. Put several of these interleaved letters into a file folder and place the folders into a box. Add the provenance to the collection and label the box.

Another way to store letters is to use plastic sheet protectors in 3-ring binders. Ideally, each page of a letter is stored in its own sheet protector, with the envelope in one, as well. This allows people to look through the letters in the 3-ring binder without directly handling them. If you don’t



**Sheet protectors in 3-ring binders make a convenient storage solution for letters and photographs. Use an extra sheet of copy paper in a sheet with each artifact in order to absorb any moisture that builds up inside the sheet protector. 2017.**

have many sheet protectors, try to place an entire letter, along with the envelope, in one sheet protector.

If you choose to use sheet protectors for storage of letters or photos, understand that because they are plastic, they create a microclimate that allows moisture to get trapped inside. To mitigate this affect, place a piece of acid-free copy paper (interleaving) inside the sheet protector with the item being stored. If you have 2 artifacts in the sheet protector, put the interleaving sheet between them. This will absorb moisture from inside the sheet protector.

Add the provenance to the 3-ring binder and you are finished with the medium-scale sort on Aunt Martha’s letters.

## Quilt, Fiber & Hat Storage

Handmade fiber arts, like Aunt Martha's crazy quilt, are filled with tradition, loads of labor, and history. They are especially associated with women's history. Fiber items such as quilts can be passed down through generations, so it is important to store them with preservation in mind. That means avoiding sharp folds and creases, which stress fabric and cause it to break.

Ideally, quilts should be rolled for storage. If you can find a long cardboard tube from an industrial roll of paper, that will give you a foundation on which to roll the quilt. Cover the tube first in aluminum foil or Tyvek in order to provide an acid-free, lignin-free barrier between the tube and the quilt.

You'll need a large, flat, clean surface on which to roll the quilt onto the tube. A bed works great for this, plus you won't be forced to bend as far as if you were using the floor. While the quilt is laid out upon the bed, take a picture of it.

Take a clean white cotton sheet or unbleached cotton muslin and spread it on the bed. You may have to sew two or three pieces of muslin together to make the piece wide enough to cover the quilt.

Gently shake out the quilt to remove dust and debris. Lay the quilt on top of the sheet or muslin on the bed. Put another sheet or piece of muslin on top of the quilt. (You can skip this second piece of muslin if your first one is long enough to provide a barrier between the layers as you roll the quilt.)

Place the cardboard tube at one end of the encased quilt and care-



**Muslin, cotton string, and cotton bias or twill tape (white or natural) are easy to find and are great for archival storage. 2017.**

fully roll the quilt around the tube. Once the quilt is rolled onto the tube, secure it by tying cotton twill tape in several places around the quilt. Don't tie the twill tape too tightly.

Write down the provenance of the quilt, including who it belonged to (Aunt Martha), the creator and date made, if known. Store the provenance with the quilt by punching a hole into an envelope, tying the envelope to the tube, and tucking the provenance into the envelope. Add a copy of the photo you took of the quilt to the envelope. This gives you a reference shot of the quilt without having to unroll it.

When packing Aunt Martha's and Uncle Isadore's clothing into



**Museums typically use acid-free tissue to support folds and creases when storing artifacts of fiber. White cotton sheets and muslin can be used for the same purpose and are easier to find. 2017.**

boxes, remember the principle of supporting folds using balled up sheets or muslin. Museums use acid-free tissue for this purpose, with each fold being held open slightly by the tissue. This prevents hard creases from forming. When clothing is folded into boxes, it's a good idea to take it out periodically (once or twice a year) and refold the clothing in a different way, avoiding the previous folds in order to give the fiber a chance to relax.

If more than one clothing item is stored in the same box, put a piece of cotton sheeting or muslin between each piece to keep them separated.





**Padded hangers and garment bags can be used to store clothing, particularly heavier items, like uniforms and coats. Try to find garment bags that are made at least partially of breathable fabric. 2017.**



It is recommended to store all the pieces of an ensemble together (for example, a christening gown with bonnet, socks, and booties).

You may also use padded hangers and garment bags to store clothing. They work well for heavier garments, such as winter coats and marching band uniforms. To make a padded hanger, take a standard hanger and wrap it in fiberfill (found in fabric stores). Sew a sleeve of white cotton material (a cotton knit works well) over the fiberfill. Try to find garment bags that are at least partially made of a breathable material. If the entire garment bag is made of plastic, the clothing inside will be in its own microclimate and prone to dampness.

Hats are often made of fiber, so we'll deal with them here. They have more structure than most other forms of clothing. In order to preserve that structure, something needs to be packed inside hats to support them. Acid-free tissue serves this purpose for museums, but this is not readily available to most consumers. You might be tempted to buy standard tissue paper, like the tissue you purchase for wrapping Christmas and birthday gifts. Please don't. Colored tissue may bleed on your artifacts and ruin them, and there's no guarantee that most

commercial tissue is acid-free.

Instead, if you can find Styrofoam heads, cover them with muslin and store your hats on them, one per aluminum foil-lined box.

You can also create a loosely stuffed pillow out of muslin to place inside the hats. Take two pieces of muslin and sew them together along three sides, leaving one end open to add polyester fiber fill. Don't pack it too tightly; keep the filling loose in order to allow the pillow to form to the hat. Sew the end shut. This does not have to be pretty. Place the pillow inside the hat and store the hat in a box.

Remember to add the provenance to each box containing clothing or hats and label the boxes.

## **Knickknacks, Dolls & Similar Artifacts**

At this point, you've managed a medium-scale sort on several parts of Aunt Martha's collection. What do you do with all the knickknacks and dolls?

If, as is common with knickknacks, they are breakable, you'll want to pack them in a way that minimizes the potential for damage. Museums can order divided boxes that allow for storing many similar artifacts that need to stay separated. You could use liquor boxes with dividers to this end, although you'll want an aluminum foil barrier between the cardboard and the artifact. Wrap Aunt Martha's knickknacks in white copy paper (use legal or ledger-sized for bigger items), white cotton sheets, or



**Ordinary cardboard box lined with aluminum foil (dull side out) to create a barrier between the acidic box and the artifacts stored inside. 2017.**



muslin and place them carefully in the boxes. (The front cover of this book features a photo of packed knickknacks from the Morrison County Historical Society's collection. Note that we have used archival foam to separate the knickknacks.)

You can also use an ordinary, non-divided box and create your own dividers with aluminum foil-wrapped cardboard. This will allow you to curl the cardboard around knickknacks to give them additional protection and support.

For the doll collection, large flat boxes work well. Line with aluminum foil, place a piece of muslin or cotton sheet on the bottom, and lay out dolls next to each other, placing a barrier of muslin or sheeting between to prevent shifting. If you have more room in the box and additional dolls, place a layer of sheeting or muslin over the first row of dolls and place more dolls on top of this. With the last row of dolls, place one more layer of sheeting or muslin on top before putting on the cover.

At the risk of sounding repititious, write the basic provenance for each box and place it inside, making sure to label the outside of the boxes.

With your medium-scale sort finished, you can breathe a sigh of relief knowing you've provided enough context and description that, should you be incapable of doing more, whoever handles the collection next will grasp its history.

## **The Fine-Scale Sort**

If you're really ambitious, you can continue with the fine-scale sort. Be sure to choose a collection that is in keeping with the legacy you want to leave and that expresses your passion. You'll need the motivation of positive emotions to work through the tedium of a fine-scale sort.

The primary purpose of the fine-scale sort is to add written detail to your collection and to organize items more completely. That means labeling each photo, putting photos in acid-free envelopes and labeling the envelopes, writing a complete history for each artifact, putting documents in date order, providing more complete labels for file folders, finishing the arrangement of a letter collection, and photocopying and dating newspaper clippings. (Newspapers are printed on highly acidic paper and have a tendency to deteriorate rapidly. Photocopy clippings in order to have an archival backup.)

As you delve deeper into your collection through the fine-scale sort, you might be inspired to create something further based on the collection. If you own a business, this may lead you to writing an in-depth business history. Or you'll decide to scan your photos in order to put together a digital photo book. A museum colleague is creating



## Special Collections

Let's circle back to Aunt Martha's knickknacks and doll collection mentioned in the section on the medium-scale sort. These, along with collections of Viking glass, Star Wars memorabilia, baseball and Pokemon cards, record albums, Victorian teacups, Cathrineholm enameled plates, postage stamps, costume jewelry, and coins all fall into the realm of special collections.

Because so many of these items were mass-produced, the key connecting element from a historical perspective is the person who collected them. Passion, personal interest, and the individual's time and financial resources drive these collections.

While some special collections are merely valued for the sentiment to the collector, other special collections can have significant financial value. They may contain particularly rare items of exceptional quality.

If you inherit a special collection, it behooves you to have its value appraised by a certified appraiser. Don't ask a museum to give you a financial value. Most museums are run by nonprofit organizations and, because of Internal Revenue Service regulations, are not allowed to provide financial appraisals.

An ethical appraiser will charge you for the appraisal, but should not be offering to buy items from the collection. This represents a conflict of interest and the appraiser may give you a low-ball figure in order to score a good deal.

If you want to keep the special collection, you will need the appraisal in order to properly insure the collection. If you decide to sell the collection, take your time in finding the best venue for the items. Look for a reputable auctioneer or dealer, or you can choose to sell the items yourself.

## Digital Collections

Digital collections include anything created with digital technology (hardware and software) that resides on digital memory devices (computer hard drives, external hard drives, flash drives, memory cards, compact discs, floppy disks, tape drives, etc.). Examples of items in a digital collection are word processing documents, PDF files, digital photos, audio files, spreadsheets, videos, emails, websites, and social media content (blog posts, posts on Facebook, tweets on Twitter, and etc.).

An entire book could be written on preserving digital collections. With the constant change in file and media formats, preserving digital collections in their intended digital formats is a moving target, one that

museums are still getting a grip on. (Most small museums are too busy with their three-dimensional artifacts to take on more than the most cursory digital preservation projects.)

Because the scope of this topic is too big for this guide, here are a few general guidelines for preserving digital data.

### **1) Back up your data regularly.**

If you use digital technology long enough, it is inevitable that you'll lose a crucial file due to a technological glitch. This is a painful way to learn the importance of backing up data. Save your data regularly on your computer hard drive while you are working on it. Then save your files to an external hard drive and a flash drive. You can't have too many back-ups of critical files. There is nothing more frustrating than having your computer fail, inserting your flash drive into another computer and having that fail too. If your digital files live "in the cloud," don't count on the cloud service as your only back-up. Servers fail. Download a back-up copy to your computer's hard drive or an external hard drive. Be sure to label your external drives.

### **2) Make hard copies of important digital photos and files.**

Paper, if it is well cared for, is a stable technology that lasts generations. Print emails and documents. Have digital photos printed through photo developing services or create photo books from them. If you keep a blog, print the posts as you write them or at regular intervals. Perhaps you'll end up with enough posts to compile a book.

### **3) Save files in common, non-compressed file formats.**

If you've ever created a document using proprietary software, such as Adobe InDesign, you'll find that you can't share it with anyone unless they are using the same software. That's because these files are saved in a format that is proprietary to the specific software. What happens if the company alters the software or goes out of business a few years down the line and you want to access an old file? To avoid this unfortunate predicament, once you are finished creating your document, resave it in a more common format, such as Text (.txt), Rich Text Format (.rtf) or Portable Document Format (.pdf).

When it comes to digital photos, you'll want to avoid the compressible (lossy) JPEG format. Each time a JPEG photo is opened, it loses data, degrading considerably over time. Instead, use the TIFF format. If your camera produces photos in the JPEG format, the first time you open these

photos on your computer, resave them as TIFFs in order to minimize data loss.

#### **4) Assign access to your social media and other online accounts to someone you trust.**

Not so long ago, prior to the age of digital technology, figuring out how to access an account for someone who died was not even a thought in anyone's head. And then Facebook happened. And people who had Facebook accounts died and their loved ones couldn't access their accounts. Now Facebook has a procedure for memorializing accounts of the deceased. However, that doesn't guarantee your loved ones will be able to access your other online accounts when you've died, so make sure you plan for this contingency.

Name one or two people in your will and let your executor know where you keep your passwords. If you want something specific to happen with emails or social media accounts, whether you want them deleted or preserved, include these wishes in your will or leave instructions with family or friends.

### **Passing on Your Personal Artifacts**

And that makes a nice segue into discussing what to do with your personal artifacts after you are gone.

We frequently hear stories at the museum from people who inherited collections from relatives and they have no idea what to do with them. They'll say, "This is too good to throw away, but the kids don't want it." If what they bring in meets the museum's mission, we'll accept it for the collection, but often the provenance is incomplete.

If you've gotten through the medium-scale sort on most of your collections, providing a basic provenance with each, whoever receives your collection will have some sense of the context and importance of the collections.

Let's discuss who will receive your collections because this is part of your legacy. If you don't plan for this ahead of time, you can't be certain *who* that someone will be.

First, understand that taking care of your collections is a massive responsibility. We're aware of families where one person gets handed everything for safekeeping because this person is known as the family historian. Family historians often have houses full of their relatives' treasures, plus their own collections. When they pass on, it can be difficult to disperse their collections because of their volume.

In dividing your personal artifacts into separate collections, you

have an opportunity to pass them on to different people. Depending on the size of your overall collection, it is not likely to stay completely intact. Unless you set up your own well-endowed museum or archive, plan ahead for your collections to be scattered through several relatives, friends, or institutions.

While the natural tendency is to pass items on to spouses and children, consider grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and cousins as viable candidates in caring for pieces of your collection. It's not uncommon for children to be disinterested in their parents' "old stuff," but grandchildren may be thrilled to have this connection with you.

Cultivate relationships within your family and friend groups wherein you share the provenance of your collections. The conversations you have regarding your belongings will give an added emotional dimension to your collections for those who receive them.

If you have something particular in your collection that you would like to see go to a museum, call ahead to see if the institution will accept your item(s). Each museum has a specific mission and will limit the scope of donated items to those that fit the mission. If the museum won't accept your item, don't take it personally. It could be that the organization doesn't have enough space or has too many of the same item. Ask if the museum knows of another institution that would be interested in your item(s).

The museum should have you fill out and sign a formal donation form to accept the item into its collection. This gives the museum legal ownership of the item, which means you will not get it back once it is signed over. Your relatives will have no claim to it either.

Museums should not pressure you into donating your possessions. Your donation needs to happen on your timeline, when you are ready to let go. If you are hesitant, wait. Most museums plan to exist well into the future and will be ready when you are.

On the flip side, don't pressure museums to place your items on exhibit. The primary order of business for museums is to preserve their collections. Putting artifacts on continual exhibit stresses them, causing a greater potential for damage. Aside from this, museums typically have far more collections items than they have exhibit space. If every donor demanded that items be on display, museums would look more like junk shops and have trouble conveying a cohesive story. Museums use their collections in many different ways to share their provenance, including through publications, websites, and as research resources. If your artifacts are accepted by a museum, they will eventually be shared in some manner.

Once you've officially donated artifacts to a museum, consider becoming a member or giving a financial contribution to the



organization. It costs money in terms of storage boxes, museum operations, staff, and building maintenance to care for your items in perpetuity. Most museums are nonprofits and run on limited budgets. They will appreciate not only the items you've donated, but any financial support you can provide.

## Enjoying Your Stuff

By the time you've completed sorting your artifacts for history, you'll probably be exhausted by the task and the hard work of planning for your legacy. You might be tempted to hide your collections boxes in a dark closet (with good temperature and humidity control, please!) and not look at them for a very long time.

Take a break from your collections. You've earned it.

However, do come back to your collections in order to enjoy them. What's the point of keeping all this well-organized stuff if you never delve into your boxes? Use your collections to spark memories, inspire dreams, and honor those who have come before, even your past self.

History is a living entity. It's up to you to live it, save it, and share it.



**Ledger tied with cotton twill tape, labeled with an accession number, the museum's method of tracking individual artifacts. 2017.**

Morrison County Historical Society

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[www.morrisoncountyhistory.org](http://www.morrisoncountyhistory.org)