

## Digitizing Family Photographs

Digitizing your family photographs is a great way to preserve your family's story. It's an opportunity to help younger generations connect with their roots and pass on memories. Digitizing will also allow your family to view, share, and reprint images without handling the originals, which can cause damage to fragile photographs. We've all seen older photographs with nicks, scratches, or tears. Often this damage is the result of cumulative effects rather than rough handling just one time. This shows just how important careful handling is. Remember to always keep your originals after you digitize them. Digital files have their own preservation risks and can still be lost. Besides, the original copies will always be precious and unique.

### Before Scanning

1. Get access to a flatbed scanner, whether it's your own, that of a family member, or at a local library. Flatbed scanners are the safest way to digitize your photographs. Automatic feed scanners can ruin photographs if they get jammed.
2. Before digitizing make sure that the photographs completely fit on the surface of the scanner. If not, the lid of the scanner can crush or crease the original.
3. Identify what you have before you start and decide on what you'll be scanning. This tutorial will help you with photographic prints, but there are different procedures for other formats like negatives or slides. So, you'll need to know how much and what you have before you start.
4. You'll also want to gather as much information about the images as you can. Ask family members at home or snap a photo and send it in a text if you need to ask someone who isn't there. This will help later on in the process.
5. Prepare a clean and large work surface with enough space to spread out. Don't use chemical cleaners on the surface. Water and elbow grease are enough, and make sure it's completely dry before you place your materials on it.
6. DON'T:
  - a. Rest or lean on your photographs
  - b. Make notes on paper laid on top of the photographs
  - c. Use sticky notes on your photographs
  - d. Touch or rub the image side of the photograph with your fingers
  - e. Remove older photographs from frames. Some framing techniques (especially for oval images) involved steaming and removing them can lead to irreversible damage. Consult an expert for older framed photographs, especially from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
7. DO:
  - a. Be careful when moving photographs. It's easy to bump into something or trip and drop your photos on the floor where they can land in something sticky or drop heavy frames, which can break.
  - b. Ask for help if a box is heavy lifting.
  - c. Place the image (emulsion) face up when setting it aside.
  - d. Use nitrile gloves if you have them. Latex will leave a residue.
  - e. Or if you can't get nitrile gloves, handle the photograph by holding the sides.

### **Scanning...**

1. Place your photographs face down on the flatbed scanner and make sure it's as straight as possible.
2. The exact settings will depend on the scanner and/or software you are using, but generally you want to scan using these settings:
  - a. Reflective document type for prints
  - b. 48-bit color
  - c. At least 300 DPI at the original size. You can do 600 DPI if you'd like to print larger versions of the photograph, but keep in mind this will take longer.
  - d. Image format: TIFF is an archival-quality file format, but it's a much larger file. JPEGs will be enough, especially if you are concerned about file size.
3. Most scanners will have a preview option that will allow to make sure your photograph is straight and select the exact area you'll be scanning. For photographs that have a border around the actual image or are mounted, be sure to include that in the scan. This can make editing the image at a later date easier than cropping too closely during scanning.
4. Scan and select the folder to which you'll be saving. Try to keep all the scans in one central folder for now.
5. Carefully handling the photograph, place it back in the box or album it was in or in new safe housing. Sometimes it can be better to put photographs in a new album or box that will better preserve them. More on this later...

### **After Scanning Don't Forget To...**

Digitizing is not just scanning. What you do with the files after scanning is just as important.

1. Name your files. Use only letters and avoid spaces, punctuation or symbols. Use hyphens and underscores instead of spaces.
2. Add basic metadata to your files. Think Who, What, Where, and When. This will help you or other family members find and identify files at a later time.
  - a. You can include this metadata in the filename itself. For example:
    - i. You have a photograph of your grandma at her annual Valentines Day party. You know it was at her home in Saugus, California, and you're lucky because the photograph has the date 1963 on the back. So, the filename could look like: 015\_MemawVDayParty\_SaugusCA\_1963
    - ii. You can use the same format for each photograph. In this example, we have a unique number, followed by a short title, the location, and a date. You won't always have all the details you'd like, but file naming is a great way to ensure this information gets saved and follows the image file around wherever it goes.
  - b. You can include much more detailed metadata by editing the image in programs such as Photoshop or Gimp. By opening the file in these programs you can also resize the image, change the file format to a .jpg for smaller files, or embed metadata in the file info. You can enter more detailed descriptions of the image, copyright, or the name of the photographer if this is something you'd like to note. You may also want to attach keywords in cases where your

family photographs are related to historical events or topics, such as WWII, the Depression, or the 1969 Moon Landing.

- c. It can also be helpful to create a basic inventory of the photographs you have. This can be a word document or an excel spreadsheet that contains information about each photograph, such as a unique number for each image file, date, title, description, location, people in the photograph, or folder names. You can customize what information you want to keep for each photograph based on what's important to you and your family. When creating metadata try to keep in mind that this inventory or family archive may be used by a later generation who may or may not be able to ask you if something is unclear. So, try to be as clear as possible.
3. **Back Up your Files.** Follow the 3-2-1 Rule if you can. This means 3 copies, stored on 2 different media, and 1 copy located off-site.
    - a. You can opt for cloud storage, a thumb drive, a hard drive, or writing them to a disc. However, the most important thing to keep in mind is how easy it will be to transfer the files to another format or medium in the future. Digital files will always need to be moved to a new format as digital technologies are constantly changing and evolving. For cloud storage, it's important to ask how easy it will be to take your files back or download them and if there is a fee for doing so.
    - b. Consider using popular software such as Picasa, Adobe's Element, or iPhoto to manage your photographs.

Remember when we mentioned putting photographs in new housing? This is optional, but worth considering. You may want to prepare new storage for the physical copies beforehand so you can put them away in new housing as you scan them. You want your precious memories to last as long as possible and the best way to do that is make sure the physical copies are stored safely. Often the original boxes or albums in which photographs are stored are deteriorating and this can lead to further damage to photographs. In most cases, the original box will be what we call acidic, meaning the material is not ph neutral and over time will cause photos to yellow and become brittle. Archival quality materials are ph neutral.

1. If possible, look for acid-free or acid neutral boxes and folders. You can find these at big box stores such as Staples or OfficeMax, as well as specialty archival suppliers such as Gaylord, Hollinger, or Talas.
2. If possible, use mylar sleeves to protect the surfaces of photographs. This also makes handling less risky. Staples and OfficeMax sell sleeve protectors that will do, but mylar sleeves are your best bet. You can also use paper envelopes to put photographs in.
3. Either label the mylar sleeve, write on acid-free paper placed behind the photograph, or write on a paper envelope. Avoid marking the photograph and use only a No. 2 pencil when writing on paper or backing. It's much easier to undo pencil markings than pen.
4. Whatever you do, DO NOT paste, tape, or staple the photograph to a mount, backing paper or album. Adhesives will slowly break down and discolor your photographs

and staples will damage the photograph itself and risk further damage if the staple gets pulled out.

5. If you would like to, archival suppliers such as Gaylord and Hollinger do sell pre-packaged kits that contain archival quality supplies and albums specifically designed for preserving family photographs.

If you'd like to learn more about digitizing, rules for other formats, or the guidelines used by archivists themselves, the links below are a good place to start.

Sources:

National Archives

<https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives/digitizing>

Preservation Equipment

<https://www.preservationequipment.com/Blog/Blog-Posts/Handling-photographs-best-practice-guide>

Federal Agencies Digital Guidelines Initiative

<http://www.digitizationguidelines.gov/guidelines/digitize-technical.html>