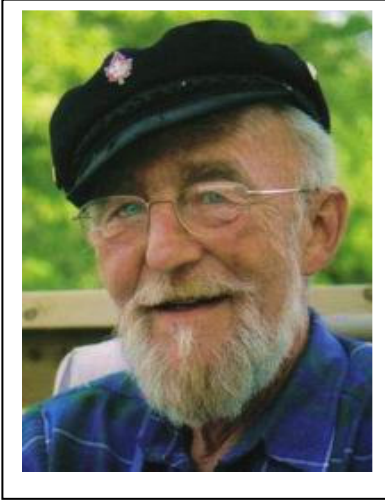


Caring for Paper Documents



Family historians handle and many possess old paper documents and must be aware that, like people, paper gets more fragile as it ages. A safe environment is the key to ensuring the longevity of our documents

Good quality file folders (acid-free if you can get them) in archival storage boxes or a filing cabinet are a good start. Perhaps your local archivist can help you because sometimes these are hard to buy in small quantities. This will protect them from the ultraviolet rays in light from the sun and fluorescent lamps, which can cause fading of inks and photo-chemical deterioration of paper. Just leave a newspaper on a southern windowsill for a few days then compare it to a new one. Photographs are very susceptible as well.

Organic material like paper should be stored away from the outer limits of a building (walls, attic, basement) which are more exposed to extremes in temperature and relative humidity (high and low) and especially rapid changes between them which can cause a lot of damage. High temperature accelerates chemical processes in the

paper and low temperature raises the relative humidity, which attracts moulds and fungi. Quick fluctuations cause dimensional change that can weaken or break the fibres in the paper. The ideals are 55-65% relative humidity and 13°-18°C. These are beyond real human comfort levels and impossible for the home but storing documents away from sources of light, heater vents, and excessive moisture will help greatly.

Your storage arrangements will also protect them from dust, which contains aerial pollutants which are highly acidic. Paper is very sensitive to them so we should try to store them where they will be protected. Dusting the paper or using a vacuum cleaner on it is too violent and will damage the paper. A very soft brush directing the dust toward a vacuum cleaner is a better alternative.

Inexpensive file folders and storage boxes are highly acidic and the acid will migrate from them to the documents stored in them. Some archives provide cheap cotton gloves for their patrons and they would usually be happy to let you keep a pair or two. These are useful because the acidic grease from our fingers will permanently disfigure photographs and damage paper.

Many old documents have been stored folded for many years. Unfold these slowly and carefully without trying to smooth out the fold because it has actually placed a serious strain on the fibres at the fold and they can easily break. Even with new paper if you fold and unfold it repeatedly it will break the fibres.

If you want to see paper conservators go ballistic just tell them that you have picked up some paper clips, staples and scotch tape to repair some old documents. These marvellous products should be kept away from old documents and, in fact, repairing them at all is dangerous. Speak to your local archivist if you have a problem or contact Terry Quinlan the conservation professor in the Applied Museum Studies Program at Algonquin College (613) 7727-4723 ext. 5060.

Other Languages

Occasionally I have come across church documents written in Latin and I have some German ancestors and many of the records from Quebec are in French. I know other who have to deal with Polish and a variety of other languages.

Unless we are multi-lingual this can become a bit of a problem. Dictionaries for translating these languages into English are useful but limited by the fact that many languages change the word form for gender, tense, number, and a variety of other reasons. Furthermore, many forms use abbreviations and archaic words.

The Mormons (LDS) have developed Genealogical Word Lists for most languages you could think of with English translations. To find these lists, go to their website at: www.familysearch.org and select the 'Search' tab. Then click on 'Research Helps' and, in the left hand menu, select 'Sorted by Subject'. When the alphabet appears, select 'L' and scroll down to the 'Language and Languages' section. Here you will find the links to each language's word list.
