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Georgia Archives

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Guidelines for the Careful Handling of Photographs

Summary: *Whenever materials are handled, they become vulnerable to damage. By alerting the user to the potential harm caused by carelessness or unsound handling techniques, damage can be minimized. A number of simple guidelines are outlined below.*

HANDLING:

Always place photographs on a solid surface that completely supports the image.

- Avoid handling images unsupported or in mid-air.
- Images should not be carried by fragile edges or brittle backings; support with a rigid piece of card stock before transporting.

Handle photographic images gently when removing them from their folders, boxes, or other original housing.

- Fragile prints and negatives may tear or flake from scraping against the edge of an enclosure.

Always handle film and photographic materials by their edges while wearing nitrile gloves.

- Touching the surface of film or photographic images can leave marks and stains.

Keep your work-space clear.

- Food and drink in close proximity to images or work area can cause damage and attract insects and pests.
- Avoid extraneous materials and clutter in your work area.

Keep a safe distance (three inches) between the edges of an image and the edge of your work surface.

- Ensure that the photograph is entirely supported.
- Be careful to avoid placing elbows on an image or allow an image to hang over the edge of the work surface.

STORAGE:

Write identifying information on a paper enclosure. If information must be placed directly on the image, use a soft #2 pencil to identify images in the margins on the back of the photograph.

- Inks from pens and markers may penetrate through the paper to the emulsion, creating indentations that will mar the photographic image. Also, inks run and bleed when exposed to water.
- Rubber bands, stickers, adhesive labels, or self-stick (e.g., Post-It® type) notes placed on photographic images can cause permanent damage.

House similar sizes and formats together.

- Separate images of different sizes and formats together.
- Prints and negatives should be stored separately.

Separate color and black and white photographs.

- Some black and white processes (cyanotypes, albumens) and most color processes can fade if stored in alkaline- buffered enclosures when exposed to elevated relative humidity.

Replace damaged storage enclosures or other containers that do not provide adequate support.

- Do not attempt to unroll or flatten tightly rolled panoramic prints or other oversized images.
- Contact a conservator to have the photograph humidified and flattened for safe storage.

Create “use copies” for frequently consulted or vulnerable images.

- “Use copies” can be copy prints, photocopies, or scanned images.
- Do not feed a photographic image through a photocopier or scanner.

Use photo-corners or other devices (e.g., polyester sleeves) that do not adhere to an image when placing photo-graphs in albums.

- Avoid albums with “magnetic pages”, lamination, or any other irreversible adhesive method for mounting original photographic images.
- Choose albums with inert plastic pockets or paper pages.

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Use stable plastics and papers adhering to the Photographic Activity Test (PAT); a world-wide standard for enclosures for storing or black and white photographic materials.

- Avoid plastics such as polyvinyl chloride (PVC), or even stable plastics that contain additives.
- Stable plastics include polyester, polypropylene, and polyethylene.

STABILIZATION:

Identify items in fragile condition or in need of conservation attention.

- Avoid commercial cleaning products—they can contain image-damaging ingredients.

Always consider the consequences of remedial action.

- Attempting repairs without sufficient training may cause long-term damage or accelerate deterioration.

Always favor preventive measures.

- The preservation of photographs depends on careful handling, use of non-damaging enclosures, and storage in a climate controlled environment (e.g. 60-72° F, 30-50% R.H).

If in the course of your work you are unsure what to do, contact a preservation or conservation professional for assistance.

Resources and Referrals:

- American Institute for Conservation (AIC) – www.culturalheritage.org
- National Archives, Preservation – www.archives.gov/preservation
- Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) – www.nedcc.org
- Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts (CCAHA) – www.ccaha.org
- Southeast Regional Conservation Association (SERCA) – www.sercaconservation.org

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