

Tips for Salvaging Water Damaged Family Photographs

Summary: *Tips on salvaging family or historic photographs damaged by water such as in after a flood.*

Whether from a natural or man-made disaster, flooding is the most common cause of damage to family photographs. It is devastating to walk into a damaged home and see priceless wet, damaged, and/or moldy family photographs. Your instinct may be to toss them out with the wet carpet and insulation but wait - these important family treasures are more resilient than you think. Photographs are fragile when wet, but they can be dried, and stains can be reduced. Below are some tips on recovery of water damaged photographs and links to websites with more details on drying and preserving your family treasures.

Most photos, negatives and color slides (except historic photographs and negatives) can be cleaned and air-dried using the following steps:

- Carefully lift the photos from the mud and dirty water. Remove photos from water-logged albums and separate any that are stacked together, being careful not to rub, blot, or touch the wet emulsion of the photo surface.
- Photos in frames need to be saved when they are still soaking wet, otherwise the photo surface will stick to the glass as it dries, and you will not be able to separate them without damaging the photo emulsion. To remove a wet photo stuck in a picture frame, keep the glass and photo together and submerge in cold water - up to 48 hours for color photos, 72 hours for black and white - until the photo separates from the glass.
- Keep photographs from touching adjacent surfaces or each other. Never stack with image sides facing each other.
- If dirty, gently rinse both sides of the photo in a bucket or sink of clean, cold water. Don't rub the photos and be sure to change the water frequently. If you have time and space right away, lay each wet photo face up on any clean blotting paper, such as a paper towel. Don't use newspapers or printed paper towels, as the ink may transfer to your wet photos. Change the blotting paper every hour or two until the photos dry. Do not submerge historic photographs mounted on cardboard.
- If you don't have time right away to dry your damaged photos, just rinse them to remove any mud and debris. Carefully stack the wet photos between sheets of wax paper. If possible, freeze the photos in a Ziploc type plastic bag

to inhibit damage. This way photos can be defrosted, separated and air-dried later when you have the time to do it properly. Do not freeze glass plate negatives or positives.

- Slides should be removed from mounts, rinsed, air-dried, and re-mounted.
- Negatives and prints may be hung from a clothesline with plastic clothes pins. The clothespins should not touch the image or emulsion area.

Priorities for Water Damaged Photographs

Immediately salvage:

- Cased photos (daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes)
- Glass based negatives and positives
- Dye transfer prints

Order of salvage for modern images:

- Begin with photographs for which there are no negatives, or for which the negatives are also waterdamaged
- Color prints
- Black and white prints negatives and transparencies

Historical Photographs

It is important to note that some historical photographs are very sensitive to water damage and may not be recoverable. Older photographic material such as card mounted photos and cased photographs, should not be submerged. Glass negatives and positive should never be frozen. It will be necessary to send damaged heirloom photos to a professional photo conservator after drying. To find a conservator, go to the American Institute for Conservation website, at www.culturalheritage.org.

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