

Save Your Family Treasures



Documents & Papers



With a little patience, prompt action, and professional tips, saving cherished photographs, letters, and other irreplaceable objects is possible. These salvage tips will help you stabilize your valuable documents and papers and buy you time to make an educated decision on further treatment and handling.

Personal safety is important when working with objects retrieved from contaminated water. Wear the personal protective equipment noted below. Wash your hands often with soap and clean water or use an alcohol-based hand-cleaning gel if soap and clean water are not available.

Supplies List



To protect yourself from contaminated water and mold:

- Disposable vinyl or nitrile gloves
- Safety goggles
- Protective clothing – apron, long-sleeve shirt, long pants, sturdy shoes or boots
- N95 mask or face covering (if mold is present)



To rinse documents or papers:

- Disposable aluminum pan(s) – 3 are ideal, at least 9” x 13”
- Water – distilled water is preferable because tap water contains additional chemicals, but tap water will suffice
- Soft-bristle paint brush
- Fiberglass porch or window screen – cut to fit the length of the pan and with plenty of overhang on the pan’s long sides to allow you to lift the screen out with both hands
- Unprinted paper towels or other absorbent paper



To freeze documents or papers:

- Freezer paper or wax paper
- Freezer-safe tape (exterior blue painter’s tape recommended)

Follow These Steps



If you have a few wet documents or papers:

1. Place fiberglass screen in an aluminum pan and fill pan about halfway with cool, clean water.
 - If possible, use 2–3 aluminum pans for a progressive cleaning, moving document(s) from one pan to the next so the last rinse is the cleanest.
2. Rinse document(s) by gently swaying the screen in the water.
 - Do not unfold or separate individual wet sheets – they’re too fragile!
 - Do not re-wet document if already dry or just damp.
3. Use a soft, clean paint brush to gently remove stuck-on dirt while document is submerged in water.
4. Air dry flat as individual sheets (if already separate) or in small piles up to a quarter inch.

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If you have too many items for air drying:

1. Carefully separate the stack of documents into quarter-inch piles.
2. Insert a sheet of freezer or wax paper between each small pile and restack into one pile.
3. Wrap the pile in freezer paper as you would wrap a present, being careful not to bend or fold corners and edges.
 - Use freezer-safe tape, such as exterior blue painter's tape, which can withstand freezing.
4. Place the package in a freezer, preferably with a frost-free setting.
 - Set freezer to the lowest possible temperature.
 - Expect this drying process to take from several weeks to several months, depending on the freezer temperature and how wet the documents are.
5. Check the documents after several weeks. Carefully try to separate them while keeping them as flat as possible.
 - If the documents separate easily when you start pulling them apart, lay them flat on a table or clean surface covered with absorbent paper to dry thoroughly.
 - If the documents resist separation, they are not yet ready to thaw. Rewrap them, replace them in the freezer, and keep checking until they separate easily. Then lay them on a table or clean surface covered with absorbent paper to dry thoroughly.
 - If the documents continue to resist separation, consult a professional conservator. You can find a conservator here: <https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-conservation/find-a-conservator>



For more information, visit the Heritage Emergency National Task Force website <https://culturalrescue.si.edu/who-we-are/hentf>, email FEMA-HENTF@fema.dhs.gov.

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