

NATIONAL MUSEUM of AMERICAN HISTORY & CULTURE

• Smithsonian



FOR INDIVIDUALS

Hometown Treasures

TOOLKIT





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FOR INDIVIDUALS

To date, the National Museum of African American History and Culture has collected over 36,000 artifacts which have been carefully documented and stored. For individuals and families, it is equally important to identify and preserve items in your homes, communities, and personal collections. The items you choose can exist in many forms (i.e., historical documents, photographs, letters, textiles, objects, and ephemera).

This Family Treasures Toolkit will provide resources to assist you in understanding how to preserve your family treasures so that they are available for generations to come.



Family Treasures

We offer you many ideas to help preserve the personal treasures that can enrich your sense of family and community history. Treasures are objects that hold special meaning and tell stories about the experiences of your family. These items may have been passed down, newly acquired, forgotten, and some are slowly deteriorating because of improper care.

As you discover items, turn to this guide for tips on how to preserve your family heirlooms and treasures. This toolkit offers simple, low-cost, minimal time preservation tips.



To assist in considering which items to keep and preserve, ask yourself the following questions:

What Is a Treasure?

A treasure is any item or possession that is highly valued or prized. As an individual or family, you may value an item based on memories and connections to people, places, or things.

What Is an Heirloom?

An heirloom is a family possession that is passed down from generation to generation. It has meaning and historical significance valued by you and or your family. It is an item that you and your family treasure.

How do I determine what is valuable?

Here is a simple rule: What is valued by you is valuable. Value is not always monetary. You are discovering something about yourself and those who came before you each time you find or identify an item. And by caring for family items, you are leaving a remarkable legacy of information for those that follow you. Like any journey of personal discovery, let curiosity be your guide.

Is the item unique?

Consider the item's significance and meaning to you and your family. Is the item one of a kind or rare? Are you able to replace the item? What is the item's origin? How did you acquire the treasure? How old is the treasure? If it is unique and irreplaceable you should consider preserving the object choosing techniques and materials that will prevent damage and deterioration.

What is the item's condition?

Consider the overall condition and size to determine if and how best to preserve your treasure. Is the item damaged or in need of repair? Can it be properly preserved? Should you contact a professional conservator to assist in treatment?

Record the History and Significance of Your Treasure

Once you identify items that illuminate your family or community story, record the history and significance. We encourage you to talk to people about their memories and listen to their stories. Pull out photos and heirlooms then sit back with family and reminisce. The items that are part of our life today may seem ordinary. Take a moment to find out to whom they belonged, how they were acquired, and why they were important. This background information is called, **provenance**.



WE RECOMMEND – Using the Family Treasures Notes form to document information about your object or stories in the words and voices of the people who lived them for the generations to follow.

Preserve Your Family Treasures

It is our hope that you will begin to view select objects through a new lens. You will begin to hear the narratives of history, where perhaps once you might have heard only well-worn family tales. Hopefully, you will find yourself listening more attentively and intentionally preserving family treasures so that your history does not disappear.

To preserve an item is to protect a thing or a group of things from everyday hazards that cause deterioration, destruction, and even loss or theft. To assist in basic preservation, we offer **The 5 Basic Tips**.



The 5 Basic Tips

The first thing to know about caring for your treasures is this: Do no harm. If you read no further than this page, you will know five simple actions to help preserve your treasures:



1. Avoid bright or direct light.

Light is Enemy Number 1 for sensitive materials. Color photographs are especially vulnerable to fading when they are exposed to light of any type. Do not store films, prints, or fabrics in direct sunlight. Avoid storing items near exterior, south-facing walls or other locations that receive direct sunlight. Fading cannot be reversed.



2. Maintain a consistent temperature.

If you choose the right setting for your storage, you have won half the battle in preserving your treasure. A rule of thumb is to store items where a person would feel comfortable year-round. Do not store objects in attics, where the temperature varies by season and where, in the summer, it is far too hot and humid. Also avoid placing treasures near heaters, radiators, chimneys, vents, electrical sources, and open windows.



3. Keep objects clean and clean them with care.

Dust can actually scratch delicate surfaces such as photographs and textiles. When dusting, use a soft, lint-free cloth and avoid rubbing. Always clean gently and avoid harsh commercial cleansers or cleaning solvents.



4. Guard against insects and pests.

Keep the area around your treasures clean and food-free. If you are concerned about bugs, consider using pest traps to alert you to their presence.



5. Avoid excess moisture.

Do not store items in areas that may experience water damage, such as near plumbing pipes, sprinklers, open windows, vents, or sinks. Avoid storing items in the basement—or anywhere in your house where humidity and mold are common and where flooding might occur.



General Preservation Strategies by Object Type

General preservation strategies provided by the Smithsonian's Museum Conservation Institute (MCI) will guide you in preserving your family treasures. Use the tips that follow to assist in preserving and preventing damage to your family heirlooms and related memories so that they will be available for future generations.

Paper Documents

- Protect paper from light by placing it in museum quality or archival acid-free folders and boxes
- Make a copy to use for research or display and keep the original in proper storage
- Avoid extreme fluctuations in heat and humidity
- Keep liquids away to prevent spills and stains

- Keep hands clean to avoid stains
- Do not use staples, paperclips, tape, or glue
- Do not store in wooden drawers or cardboard boxes
- Store documents flat, do not roll or fold
- Make sure documents are supported from underneath when handling
- Avoid laminating documents or any other process that is not easily reversible
- Separate acidic papers such as newspaper from other documents
- Keep storage areas clean to avoid attracting insects and rodents

Photographs

- Protect photos from light by placing them in museum quality or archival acid-free folders, sleeves, and boxes



- Make a copy to use for research or display and keep the original in proper storage
- Avoid laminated photo albums. Be aware that many commercially available photo albums contain acidic paper, harmful plastics, and adhesives
- Avoid buffered tissue and plastic sleeves that contain polyvinylchloride (PVC)

- Store photos flat not rolled or folded
- Do not store in wooden drawers or cardboard boxes
- Keep liquids away to prevent spills and stains
- Keep hands clean to avoid stains
- Do not use staples, paperclips, tape, or glue
- Keep storage areas clean to avoid attracting insects and rodents



Books

- Do not pull a book out by its spine as this can cause damage. Instead pull a book out by pressing on either side or by pushing out from behind
- Store books standing up and not on their sides
- Be careful when opening or photocopying a book. Support the spine and try to open only as wide as necessary

- Do not use staples, paperclips, tape, or glue
- Keep away from light
- Avoid extreme fluctuations in heat and humidity
- Keep storage areas clean to avoid attracting insects and rodents

Clothing & Textiles

- Handle with clean hands
- Avoid using lotions and oils on your hands.
- Before handling remove bracelets, necklaces, rings, tags, or anything that could catch or cling to a textile or its surface
- Remove textiles (wedding dress, family quilt, etc.) from the hanger
- Protect it from light by placing it in a museum quality or archival acid-free box
- Inside the box, it is important to use unbuffered museum quality or archival acid-free tissue, as well. Place rolls of tissue between the folds of the textile for support
- Do not use plastic for storage
- Do not store textiles in an attic or basement. Instead store in a cool, dry area that is not susceptible to extremes in temperature and humidity and that is free from pests and dust
- In areas of high humidity, you may store in unbleached muslin or cotton fabric (i.e., sheets, pillowcases) which have been washed and rinsed multiple times to remove added finishes. Do not use scented detergent or fabric softeners



Furniture

- Avoid extreme fluctuations in heat and humidity
- When possible, protect from light, such as direct sunlight from a window
- Protect from liquids and heat (on tables, use coasters and insulated trivets)
- Use care when moving furniture. Maintain a firm grip and do not wear gloves
- Hold and carry the piece at its strongest part—hold a chair by the seat rail (not its back or by the handrail) and hold a table by its apron (not its top or legs)
- Use a soft damp or dry cloth only to remove dust instead of furniture polish and feather dusters
- May cover with unbleached muslin, which has been washed and rinsed multiple times to remove finishes added to fabrics. Do not use scented detergent or fabric softeners

Objects (includes numerous items: lamps, tools, metal, wood, pottery, baskets, sculptures, toys etc.)

- Avoid extreme fluctuations in heat and humidity
- Keep liquids away to prevent spills and stains
- Keep hands clean to avoid stains
- Do not use string, metal wire, or glue to repair

- Avoid buffered tissue and plastic that contain polyvinylchloride (PVC)
- Keep storage areas clean to avoid attracting insects and rodents

Jewelry

- Avoid extreme fluctuations in heat and humidity
- Do not use string, metal wire, or glue to repair
- Keep liquids away to prevent spills and stains
- Keep hands clean to avoid stains
- Do not use liquid jewelry cleaners
- Avoid buffered tissue and plastic that contains polyvinylchloride (PVC)
- Loosely wrap in unbleached muslin, which has been washed and rinsed multiple times to remove finishes often added to fabrics. Do not use scented detergent or fabric softeners
- Keep storage areas clean to avoid attracting insects and rodents



Media, Recordings & Playback Machines (CDs, Tapes, 8-Track, Cassettes, Blue-Ray, USBs, Computer Disks)

- Avoid extreme fluctuations in heat and humidity
- Protect from light
- Store in their packaging in dark or shaded areas
- Keep liquids away to prevent spills and stains
- Keep hands clean to avoid stains
- Shelf recordings vertically not horizontally – do not pile things on top
- Use a soft dry cloth only to remove dust from covers
- Keep storage areas clean to avoid attracting insects and rodents

General Preservation Supplies and Archival Materials

Carefully choose materials designed to preserve your family treasures for future generations. Choose items that are pH neutral, acid- and lignin-free to assist in properly storing and maintaining your heirlooms. Review the General Preservation Supplies list to learn about basic materials needed to preserve your family treasures. General preservation and archival supplies can be found at many retailers to include archival supply and craft stores.



WE RECOMMEND – Visiting your local library or bookstore to learn more about [Family Archives and Preservation](#)

Should You Hire A Professional?

Conservators are trained professionals who save our cultural heritage physically. Seek out the services of a conservator if you want a professional to assist in preserving your family heirlooms. They are unique in the wider preservation field for the expert hands-on technical and decision-making skills they bring to preserving and caring for our tangible history. All conservators have extensive training in art history, science, studio art, and related fields and adhere to a strict code of professional ethics. The American Institute of Conservation provides a wealth of information to assist you in determining if you need to hire a conservator and if so how to locate a conservator in your area.



WE RECOMMEND – Exploring AIC resources to include the [Guide to Hire A Conservator](#).

Host Your Own Family Treasures Activity

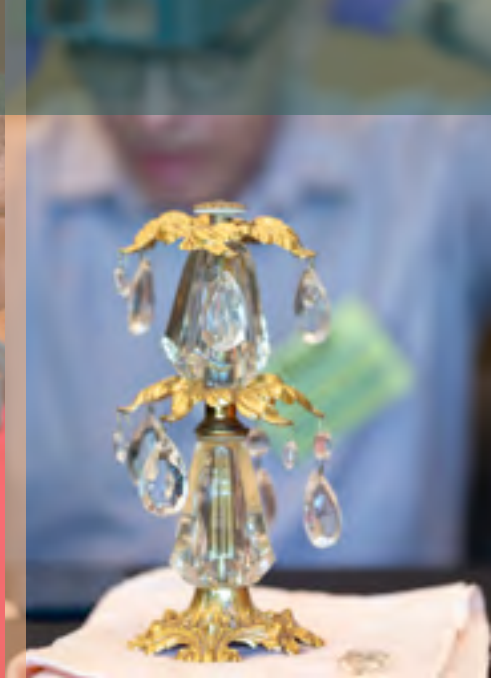
Here are some additional ideas to assist you in finding treasures in your life and discovering the stories behind them. Try some of these activities:

- Interview a grandparent or older relative. Use a photograph or object to prompt memories and conversation. Record the interview or write down the story for them to read to you.
- Hunt for treasures throughout the house with your family then sit and share stories associated with the object.
- Set up a virtual gathering of family members or friends. Have everyone bring a treasured object and a story about their item.
- Ask a sibling, parent, or other family member to tell you a family story. See if you can find any objects around the house that are connected to the story.
- Organize a mystery table at the next family reunion or virtual gathering – maybe someone will be able to tell the story of an unlabeled photograph or a mysterious object. Sharing these treasures will link you to each other and to the past.
- Search images from the [NMAAHC Collection](#) to locate and learn about objects similar to your family treasure.
- Create a family treasures time capsule.
- Incorporate preservation strategies in all of your planned Family Treasures activities.



WE RECOMMEND – Creating special memories as you explore and preserve your family treasures.





FAQs

Where can I find archival materials and supplies?

NMAAHC is unable to endorse any specific vendor. However, archival quality supplies can be located at many retailers along with craft and specialty stores.

How can I determine the monetary value of my family treasure?

NMAAHC does not provide appraisals. We recommend reviewing the [Smithsonian Museum Conservation Institute's Guide to Artifact Appraisals](#).

Can I donate my treasure to a museum or heritage organization?

Choosing to donate a family treasure is a personal and complex decision. Many museums and heritage organizations accept donations to expand their collections if the item assist in telling their story. We recommend contacting local museums and/or heritage centers that may have an interest in your item. Museums often have online portals that will enable you to share details about your treasure and inquire about the donation process. Be sure to learn about each institution's procedures for donations and understand if your donation is accepted you are no longer the owner.

Is NMAAHC interested in my family treasure?

The purpose of the Family Treasures Toolkit is to assist families in preserving their history. If you have an item that you want NMAAHC to consider, [visit our online donation portal](#). Please note that if the portal is unavailable at the time of your visit, it means the museum is not actively collecting material.

Resources

Explore these online resources to learn more about family preservation.

American Institute of Conservation –
Find A Conservator

<https://www.culturalheritage.org/>

National Museum of African American History and
Culture – Save Our African American Treasures
Initiative

<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/initiatives/african-american-treasures>

Smithsonian Museum Conservation Institute –
Taking Care

https://www.si.edu/mci/english/learn_more/taking_care/index.html

Cover Images and Photo Credits

Unless otherwise noted, all images are of objects from the collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

On the Cover

Top

Ticket for World Heavyweight Championship fight of Sonny Liston vs. Cassius Clay, February 25, 1964. 2012.173.2.2

Baseball from the 1992 World Series autographed by Joe Carter. 2016.50.

1969 Topps Ernie Banks Chicago Cubs #20 Baseball Card. Image provided by Quatrefoil.

Photographic print of eight unidentified people in front of a building, 1904-18. Gift of Princetta R. Newman. 2014.75.91

Vintage men's ring. Image provided by Quatrefoil.

Postcard of a praline seller in New Orleans, ca. 1910. 2015.36.2

Bottom

Blue Star Flag, or Service Flag, a symbol of a family member in military service, 1917-45. Gift of Alan Laird. 2017.111.6

Identification button used to identify enslaved persons belonging to Thomas Porter II, ca. 1820. 2009.32.4

World War I Gold Star Mothers Pilgrimage Medal issued to Mrs. Margaret A. Neal, 1930. 2019.16ab

Antique earrings. Image provided by Quatrefoil.

The Birth of the Blues, 1947. Program for the Boston Symphony Hall featuring Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday. 2013.46.29.100

Placard with "STOP RACISM NOW" message commissioned by the National Organization for Women, late 20th century. 2013.46.14

Explore More! View and reuse thousands of digital items from the [NMAAHC's collections](#).

Photography

Photographs from past Save Our African American Treasures programs are contained throughout courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Photos by Michael Barnes; Mignonette D. Johnson; Leah L. Jones; and Robert J. Stewart. Building photography by Alan Karchmer.

Disclaimer

It is the policy of the Smithsonian Institution not to provide monetary values for artifacts. Moreover, it is difficult to place a value on items that contain personal value. The Smithsonian Museum Conservation Institute (MCI) states that the appraisal of heirlooms and collectibles is determined by multiple variables to include interests, demand, and market trends. MCI offers resources to assist individuals interested in learning more about [Artifact Appraisals](#).

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