

Preserving Your Ancestor's Textiles and Handmade Treasures

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Some of the most interesting items we have in our own family collections as well as in archives are items made of some sort of fabric. Things such as christening gowns, quilts, high school sweaters and doilies are just a few of the items some of us have as part of our family archive.

Preserving and storing these items can be a challenge and if not done properly could result in the destruction of these precious heirlooms.

A Dedicated Space

Archivists have worktables and work rooms dedicated to working on processing records, photographs, artifacts, and textiles. Genealogists should do their best to have the same, even if it is a small area in your home.

- A dedicated workspace allows you to only focus on the specific items in front of you.
- Keeps you from putting your items in danger or coming in contact with something that could damage what you are working on
- A place to have archival materials at the ready

Not All Textiles Are the Same

Many genealogists have different kinds of textiles they are trying to preserve. Just as with treasured letters and photographs, people pack away and save textiles that have special meaning, oftentimes because they were worn, made, or used by a family member.

Articles may be of a specific textile (cotton, linen, wool, silk, synthetic), or a composite of many, and can include threads, buttons, fasteners, and decorative attachments.

Many of us will still have textiles and handmade items that we have no idea who made them or how they came to belong to the family. It is then up to the genealogist to do the research necessary to find out this information if it can be found.

Handling Textiles

To avoid causing stress, especially on older textiles, handle all textiles gently with two hands. Large items, such as antique quilts, often cannot bear their own weight safely, so support them with a box or a support board if they must be lifted. The two-hands approach will help to keep items from becoming distorted and misshapen. Make sure your hands are clean. While unfolding items, stop if your actions seem to be causing damage.

It is not necessary to wear gloves when handling textiles. In fact, it is preferred that you do not wear gloves so that you can sense and feel how you are handling the textiles which will prevent you from causing any damage. Gloves causes us to not feel the tactile sensation in our fingers which helps us to feel what we are holding. Using clean, dry hands when handling our textiles is best and recommended.

Displaying Textiles

It is strongly recommended that textiles should never be on display. If you want to share the wonderful handmade textiles, keep them in storage and bring them out only when sharing them with friends and family. All types of light can damage textiles, with sunlight and fluorescent light being of major concern. Store textiles in the dark and limit long-term display. The size, weight, and structure of many textiles make them challenging to display safely.

If you already have your textiles on display, it is recommended that you take them down and safely store them. If you have antique quilts on beds or on display, it would be a good idea to store them away so they cannot get damaged or become dirty from being on exhibit.

Cleaning and Mending

Consider the value and condition of your textiles before undertaking any washing, mending, or dry cleaning. Antique or collectible textiles may have monetary value in addition to sentimental value. Washing and dry cleaning can have unintended consequences; colors may run or bleed, and agitation during the cleaning process can cause structural damage. Similarly, except for items of utilitarian value, it is best to leave items in their original state and to avoid mending or repairing them.

Housing Textiles

Many archival and preservation suppliers sell boxes designed specifically for storing textiles. Store antique textiles flat, with as few folds as possible. It large items must be folded for storage, minimize the number of folds, and make sure the folds do not become creases. Acid-free tissue paper can be folded and rolled into different shapes and placed within a fold to soften it. Objects such as hats and embroidered purses can be lightly stuffed with tissue paper to help them keep their shapes. Roll large flat textiles, such as quilts, around the outside of large-diameter acid-free cardboard tubes;

place rolls inside boxes or cover with muslin to protect them from dust and light. Do not hang antique garments; flat storage is best.

Storage and Climate Controls

Archives and archivists watch the climate controls in their facilities every day. Humidity and heat are the enemy to any archives, and it should be the case for all home archivists. It is true that not everyone can have the perfect climate in their homes for genealogical records, but we can try. Store textiles in cool, dry locations. Avoid using trunks or boxes in hot attics or in damp basements or garages. Damp conditions can encourage the growth of mold as well as attract insects. An environment comfortable for people is suitable for textiles.

Store textiles in the coolest part of the house, preferably where the temperature is between 35-65 F°, the colder the better. Be sure the storage area has a steady temperature and does not fluctuate by more than 5 degrees.

Store textiles where the humidity is between 30%-50%. Keeping textiles as close to the 30% humidity is preferred to slow the deterioration rate of the fibers.

Always keep away from sunlight. Sunlight can severely damage textiles.

Taking care of your textiles is as important as researching our ancestors. Protecting and preserving our family textiles for the next generation will hopefully ensure that our ancestors are not forgotten.

Consulting with a Conservator

If you do not feel comfortable taking care of your textiles or if they are damaged and need repairs you cannot do, contact a conservator. Professional conservators for textiles are available to help but they will charge a fee for their services. Contact your state archives to see if they have a conservator on staff or can direct you to one that does work locally. You can also find conservators at:

American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works
<http://www.conservation-us.org/>

Handmade Treasures

Many of us have our ancestor's handmade treasures that are not textile in nature. These could be items made of wood, paintings or just about anything. We should take the care necessary to protect and preserve these handmade treasures as well. Using the proper archival materials and adhering to the storage and climate controls will insure these items will also be preserved for future generations.

Archival Supply Stores

Gaylord Archival

<http://www.gaylord.com/>

Hollinger Metal Edge

<https://www.hollingermetaledge.com/>

University Products

<https://www.universityproducts.com/>

Light Impressions

<http://www.lightimpressionsdirect.com/>

Brodart

<http://www.brodart.com/>

Archival Methods

<https://www.archivalmethods.com/>

Print File Archival Storage

<https://www.printfile.com>

Keepfiling

<https://www.keepfiling.com/>