

Save Your Family Treasures

Photographs

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 precious photographs and buy you time to make an educated decision on further treatment and handling of your family mementos.

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 photos:

- 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



To dry photos:

- Clothesline
- Clothespins
- Unprinted paper towels or other nonprinted absorbent paper



To freeze photos:

- Freezer or wax paper
- Resealable plastic storage bags

Follow These Steps



If you have a few photographs:

1. Never pull apart wet photographs and negatives that are stuck together.
2. If time allows, take a photo of your photograph to save a digital copy of it.
3. Save or copy written names, notes, etc. on the back of the photo or in the photo album.
4. Carefully remove wet photographs from plastic/paper enclosures or frames.
 - It may be safer to slit and peel an enclosure away from the photo than to pull out the photo itself.

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5. Fill an aluminum pan about halfway with cool, clean water.
 - If possible, use 3 aluminum pans for a progressive cleaning, moving the photographs from one pan to the next so the last rinse is the cleanest.
6. Rinse the photographs by gently swaying them in the water. Do not touch or blot surfaces.
 - Use a soft, clean paint brush to gently remove stuck-on dirt while photographs are submerged in the water.
7. Air dry the photographs by placing them flat, face up, on unprinted paper towels. Or hang them on a clothesline, using a clothespin placed at the corner – or at 2 corners if the photo is large.
 - Keep photographs from touching each other.
 - If possible, open windows for natural air circulation, but do NOT attempt to speed up the process with a hair dryer or other heat source. Do not hang the photos in direct sunlight.



If you have many photographs, you can either:

1. Soak them in clean water until they separate, for no more than 48 hours, then air dry them.
 - Do not soak historical photographs (any photos taken before 1950).
2. Or freeze them.
 - Interleave each photo or small groups of photos with freezer or wax paper.
 - Insert the pile in a clean, resealable plastic storage bag and place in freezer.
 - Store them until you can consult a conservator about how to thaw them carefully. You can find a conservator here: <https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-conservation/find-a-conservator>
 - Do not freeze glass negatives or plates.



If your photograph is behind glass:

1. Remove it from its frame unless it appears stuck to the glass.
2. Air dry slowly, image side up with nothing touching the surface.
3. If the photograph is stuck to the glass, leave it in the frame and air dry glass-side down for future scanning or treatment by a conservator.



For more information, visit the Heritage Emergency National Task Force website, <https://s.si.edu/2WKgccS>, email HENTF@si.edu, or scan this QR code:



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