

25 Tips for “Do It Yourself” Family Photo Scanning

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One of the biggest challenges when it comes to family history is how to handle years of photos, slides, and negatives. These are valuable assets for genealogy research and preserving family stories. Organizing and preserving family photos can be so daunting that I throw up my hands and tell myself: “I will get to it sometime.” That sometime is NOW!



Take Inventory

- Prepare a workspace.** Wash your hands, prepare a clean area on a table to work, and have supplies available such as file folders, envelopes, storage containers, archival gloves, etc.
- Check the condition.** Use archive-safe containers for seriously damaged items. Retain the original order; use your mobile device to photograph the album pages first. After digitizing, you can remount the originals in an album with acid-free pages.
- Deal with duplicates and bad photos.** Set aside duplicate images. Don't scan blurry images or damaged images that can't be corrected digitally.
- Take Inventory.** Create a list of items to scan including photos, slides, negatives, movies etc. List photo sizes and media formats; slides and negatives come in different sizes!
- Sort and organize in like groups.** Group by size or type. Use 3x5 index cards or sheets of paper folded in half to write down the group name. Be careful not to damage items when using rubber bands or plastic clips.
- Use a slide or negative viewer.** Determine image content and quality for slides and negatives with a low-cost viewer.

Scanning

- Are you sure you're doing it right?** With all the new technology available, how do you know if you are using the right tools or scanning at the correct DPI? Join the Technology for Genealogy group on Facebook.
- Clean your scanner.** Follow scanner directions. Don't use alcohol or window cleaner. Clean with a microfiber cleaning cloth. Remove dust, lint and fingerprints to achieve the clearest possible scans.
- Go for high resolution scans.** Scan in TIFF format at a 300 dpi (“dots per inch”) minimum if possible. A lossless JPG format will work too.
- Scan multiple items in one pass.** Become more productive by placing four or five small photos on the flatbed scanner and scan in one pass. Use photo editing software later to split the digital file into individual files.
- Triage your scanning.** Prioritize items to be scanned: URGENT for deteriorating/fragile items, MEDIUM for most items, and LOW for items that are not important. Group items for flatbed scanning vs. smartphone.
- Use archival gloves.** Oils on your fingers can damage the coating on many photos, slides, and negatives. Use cotton archival gloves when handling these items.
- Scan both sides of a photo!** Don't forget there is often valuable information on the reverse side of photographs!
- Don't tamper with magnetic albums!** Unless you think there is valuable information on the back of the photos, don't remove them from magnetic albums. Scan a page and split the digital image into individual files.

Build a Photo Scanning Toolbox

You will likely need a variety of tools and supplies to assist you. Here is what's in my photo scanning toolbox:

- Archival gloves
- Acid-free envelopes, folders, photo holders
- An archival spatula (to remove staples)
- Unwaxed dental floss (to remove photos from magnetic albums)
- Plastic paper clips
- Rubber bands
- Microfiber cleaning cloth
- 3x5 index cards
- Rechargeable batteries
- SD cards (for storing scanned images)
- USB flash drive

File Naming and Management

- Rename the digital file.** Scanners use "IMG001" or some variation for file names. Right after scanning, use a file name that makes sense. Your goal is to know about the image file **BEFORE** you click it. Example: AUSTIN John Ralph b1896 Coney Island, NY Summer 1917.
- Consider using metadata.** Metadata is digital information such as names of people in a photo, location, date, etc. that can be added for purposes of organizing image files. It can also be used for copyright and source citations.
- Create original and working images.** Create a digital folders labeled ORIGINAL and WORKING. Add "ORIGINAL" to the TIFF image file names. Create a working copy of each image file in JPG format; edit the file name prefix changing ORIGINAL to WORKING.
- Backup your scans!** Use the **3-2-1 Backup Plan**: **3** different backups, **2** different media, and **1** backup in the cloud or offsite. Don't lose all your scanning efforts by not backing up!

Storing Digital Image Files

- Store scanned images in a cloud program.** Platforms like Amazon Photos and Google Photos offer free or inexpensive ways to store and organize your digital images.
- How is Metadata handled?** Many platforms strip out metadata that you worked hard to add. As a test, upload a digital image with metadata, download it and review the results. Is your metadata still there?
- Have an Exit Strategy.** For any platform used to store digital images, know how to export all your images. Some platforms give 30 days or less notice when they are shutting down or merging with another platform.
- Review the Terms and Conditions.** What is the platform doing with your images (like using it in marketing campaigns or selling it to stock photography companies?)
- Facebook and Ancestry are NOT Storage Platforms!** Facebook compresses images, degrades image quality and strips out metadata. Ancestry let's you add images to a tree. but it is not the ideal storage platform.

Miscellaneous Tips and Tricks

- Digitizing can bring up lots of emotions.** Tears and memories are often involved. That's why you want photos for years to come, right? With a photo scanning plan, you can manage your scanning project, stay "on track" and not get distracted.
- Recycle your equipment.** Donate items such as slide scanners to your local genealogical society or public library. Many set up "do it yourself" scanning stations for patrons.