

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

We all have unique ways to make a difference, and sometimes, it's hiding in our closet (or attic, basement, and shed). If you have records, diaries, and photographs of your recent and distant ancestors, they could be valuable to history as well as known and unknown descendants. You may not have family records, but offering to help people who do is another way to make some ripples. They may need help organizing, preserving, and digitizing their collection.

Keeping records may help historians to better understand the past and rely less on oral histories and accounts of famous people. Most of us aren't related to someone famous; we descend from lesser-known folks, and preserving their records can help balance the historical narrative to include more people from marginalized groups. Family record-keeping helps adopted children find out about their biological family and any medical issues they might have inherited, especially in this age of genetic testing kits now being used to locate family members people never knew they had. Knowing our roots helps us understand the many triumphs and tragedies our ancestors endured to make it possible for today's generations to be born (and hopefully, provides lessons in what not to do if we want future generations to be born). None of this can happen if the records are destroyed!

There are two main considerations, one of which is mostly neglected: preserving old records and digitally preserving the information on those records. Preserving originals is useful because it slows down the decomposition process and protects against damage. If donated to a museum or institution, these physical records can be made available to anyone who can physically come to their location as long as the records last and haven't become illegible yet. It is often possible to charge a small fee to distant people interested in receiving mailed photocopies of select records.

The downside, of course, is that if we only preserve physical records, they are vulnerable to fire, floods, natural decomposition, mice, deliberate destruction from those interested in rewriting history, and inconsiderate people inheriting the collection and tossing it out. Another drawback is access. Most people (even known and unknown family members who may be included in the records) can't see what's inside the boxes in your attic. And a disorganized collection may as well be a nonexistent collection if nobody can find anything. Even if you donate the materials, the donation may not be accepted – many places have requirements for donations. It may take several years to be processed by under-funded or incompetent staff and the donations may become lost for decades only to be “rediscovered” later and finally presented to the public, sometimes with a news announcement if the collection is particularly exciting. You may have to repeatedly check back to ensure your donations are accessible. If they're not, you may not have any power to make them available to future generations.

However, there is another consideration often overlooked: digital preservation. Protecting the original document is great, but doing more is better. This route is insurance against the aforementioned numerous ways your archive can meet its demise. Options abound: you can use a camera or phone to take pictures, or scan them into a computer (there are various types of

scanners). You can make backups (copies) on devices like flash drives and external hard drives, and back them up online (private or public). Despite technology being unpredictable and unreliable (as evident when my laptop crashed while writing this) it's possible to avoid losing information (I didn't lose anything because everything written is instantly backed up using One Drive). Not everything online is public, and not everything online is a website, but consider privacy if you upload records in a public fashion.

If you want things to be truly public, some people now create simple family websites so that relatives, friends, and the general public can see the records. This makes viewing free so even people who can't pay fees can access records. Make sure multiple people can maintain the website so that it doesn't die with its creator. When scanning or photographing items, record any information written on the backs of photographs and add what you know about each item. Future people won't recognize grandma or know where she lived! Also note when you're recording a story you heard vs something you know to be true from a record like a marriage license.

To maximize the chances that your records survive, it might be best to digitally record everything in high resolution, make several varieties of backups (both on and offline), then donate the collection to a reputable organization and follow up to ensure it's being processed. If you don't know how to digitally preserve your records, ask a family member or friend for help.

For those wishing to learn preservation methods for family papers and pictures, the Fayetteville Public Library is hosting a free class (registration required) taught by Lori Birrell with the University of Arkansas Special Collections. "Becoming History Keepers: Organizing and Storing the Records of Your Family, Organization, or Yourself" is being held on Wednesday, August 21 from 6 – 7:30pm in the Walker Community Room. This is a great start to make a difference for your family, past and future.

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