



Finding Heirs for Your Family History

Marian B. Wood looks at how to prepare a succession plan for your valuable genealogical items

AS GENEALOGY ENTHUSIASTS, WE'RE ACCUSTOMED TO THINKING about people and places in our family's past. Yet we also need to look ahead if we're going to keep family history safe for the sake of future generations. Now is the time to plan for what to do with our genealogical materials and family items in the years to come – now, before we join our ancestors.

The goal is to be sure items that had meaning to previous generations, plus genealogical documents and photos collected over the years, aren't sold for pennies in a yard sale or dumped into the trash. You may be fortunate enough to have heirs for all or most of your collection. But even if you have no obvious heirs, you can take steps to focus your collection and find new homes for some of your ancestors' photos, documents, and keepsakes.

Prepping Your Collection

Getting a collection ready for the future means making decisions about what has value to the family or to the wider world, and what can be discarded. Ask relatives whether they're interested in particular artifacts, and make it a priority to provide identifications and ancestral

stories along with anything you give away or share with relatives. Captioned images keep ancestors alive for future generations, not just faces, but also dates, relationships, and family lore.

My father-in-law left envelopes of old black-and-white prints and negatives as well as trays of 35mm color slides that captured decades of family vacations, holiday gatherings, school events, and more. After reviewing alongside my husband, I held onto good-quality images of people and places from the family's past, such as ancestors, the old homestead, and special occasions. With hubby's agreement, I gave away duplicates to relatives and to descendants of those in the photos, while tossing out-of-focus and poor-quality photos.

Next, I requested help from relatives as I wrote captions for the saved images, asking who (full names and relationships), what, when, where, and why. They recalled family anecdotes that gave me important context, but also raised new questions to be researched. Still, I'm on my way to putting the photos in order for future heirs. For more information about handling and preserving old family photos, see this U.S. Library of Congress page (www.loc.gov/preservation/about/faqs/photographs.html).



Sorting slides? Save those with recognizable people and places from family history, but consider tossing touristy slides without people. (Image courtesy of the author)