

Organizing Your Family History



Do you have a pile of old letters, photos, and other memorabilia that you're not sure what to do with? Most people have a variety of family-history-related items and organizing them is worthwhile whether or not you are interested in genealogy.

In this article I'll tell you why and how to get started!

Fun Fact: Did you know that genealogy is the #2 hobby in America?

Do you know what the #1 hobby is? Keep reading to find out!

Family history items can include:

- Keepsakes & Memorabilia: scrapbooks, letters, journals, artwork, etc.
- Photos: paper, digital, slides, videos, etc.
- Genealogy documentation: vital records (birth, marriage and death certificates), census records, research notes, historical and biographical documents and books, maps, family bibles, pedigree chart (family tree), etc.

Large items, like furniture, and smaller sentimental items, such as jewelry and clothing, can also be part of your family history. Please don't keep any of it out of guilt! If these items are important to you, though, please do document their stories for your family.

Why organize your family history?

How many of these benefits sound good to you?

- You can easily find what you are looking for when you want to read it, use it, admire it, display it, share it with others, or reminisce.
- You are prepared for happy family occasions such as wanting to create a slide show for a graduation or



retirement party, or sad occasions such as having to write an obituary. (Tip: Save your family the grief and write your own while you're at it!)

- You are prepared in the case of a natural disaster -- your files are backed up, and your most precious items are ready to "grab and go".
- Someone else (in the event you are no longer available) can make sense of your memorabilia and your research. Don't let your treasures be overlooked, and your hard work go to waste!
- Your space, mind, and computer aren't cluttered with so many important things that none of them ends up being important.
- You have simplified your life and created more space in your home.
- You have downsized and are now ready to move into a smaller space.
- You've made it easier for your loved ones to deal with your stuff when you are gone.
- You have told (or gathered) the stories of your most important ancestors, living relatives, and/or possessions.

- You have left an organized family history legacy for future generations.

How to start organizing your family history:

First, ask yourself these questions, and write down the answers. Envision what your life will be like when you have finished the project. Whenever you get stuck, remind yourself of why you are doing this.

- What is your goal? (Are you the family historian?)
- What is your situation? (How many items are there? How much space do you have to work with? Are your records and photos mostly paper, or mostly digital?)
- Who else needs to be able to understand your organizing system?
- What will be easier, or nicer, or less worrisome as a result?

I organize my family history materials the same way I organize everything else -- using Julie Morgenstern's S.P.A.C.E. formula. Don't worry, though...there is no right or wrong way to do it! There is only the way that works for YOU.

Sort

Separate thin, flat items (like papers and photos) from 3-D items (such as books, framed photos, and other objects). Put them into categories that make sense to you -- by family tree branch (surname)? By era (before kids, after kids)? By occasion (wedding, vacation)? Don't forget to sort your digital files, too!

Purge

Not all memorabilia, photos, and records are equally important. What you keep will depend on what you've got, what you value, what you want to do with it, and how much space you want to devote to it. As you go through your papers and files, delete or toss duplicates and anything that you realize now has no value to you. Ask your family members what they want. Donate historical items to institutions, if applicable.

Assign a home:

Where will you keep everything? Will you display the memorabilia? Use the keepsakes? Make photo albums? If you are doing genealogy research, keep records that you use most often closest to your workstation. The rest can be stored farther away. Digital files should also have "homes" where you can be assured of finding them later. Store objects such as jewelry and framed photos with other similar items when not being used.

Containerize:

For paper-based records, decide whether you want to use binders or files. I have both, contained in a lateral file cabinet next to my home office desk. My less frequently used genealogy reference materials -- books, maps, etc -- are contained on a bookshelf in another room.



Digital files are “contained” in computer folders. They can also be tagged and assigned metadata keywords. There is no right or wrong way to name a file as long as you are consistent and can find what you want when you want it. That said, here are two common naming conventions: For photos: YYYY-MM-DD-location-event-who-sequence number. For genealogy records, Who-What-When-Where.

Original paper photos and documents should be contained in photo-safe boxes or albums. One way to back up paper photos is to scan them. Conversely, one way to back up digital photos is to print the ones that are special to you!

Equalize:

Decide how much of everything you want to keep, and don’t let your containers overflow! Equalizing (maintaining the equilibrium of) an organizing system means having a home for everything, being able to put things away easily, and being mindful of what we add to the collection so as to prevent future clutter buildup. Remember, any organizing system, no matter how well it works, needs to be reviewed periodically and tweaked as necessary.

Are you ready to begin?

What types of family history items do YOU have? Are they organized? What steps can you take today towards making them more accessible to you and your family? What stories are inside you and your loved ones that need to be told?

Don’t forget to ask for help if you need it! Ask a friend or a professional [NAPO](#) or [APPO](#) organizer near you!

Please share your family history organizing tips and intentions in the comments below.

Oh, and – did you guess? -- the #1 hobby in America is gardening.

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