



Managing Photograph Collections: A Practical Guide

PRESERVATION STRATEGY

Managing an archival photograph collection is a significant undertaking, especially for parish and school staff and volunteers who may be coming to it without specialized training – and often without much time or budget either. When time and resources are limited, the priority is always on **organization** and **physical stability**. This guide includes the full range of archival best practices – but do not let those steps overwhelm the core mission: getting the photos into a logical order and into safe, acid-free storage. The other steps can follow as time and budget allow.

Remember: this is not an all-or-nothing venture, and any progress is better than none. Focus first on photographs that are the most vulnerable or that carry the most meaning for your community: a founding pastor, a school's early years, or an important tradition. You know your parish or school better than any manual can, so trust that knowledge when deciding where to begin.

1. ARRANGEMENT (SORTING)

Photographs should be organized into logical "series" based on how staff or parishioners are likely to search for them. Grouping items by topic provides immediate context and makes finding specific images much easier.

- **Common Series Examples:** Buildings & Grounds, Parishioners, Clergy, Parish Events, Liturgical Celebrations, and School
- **The "General" Folder:** If you come across a photo that does not fit a specific category, do not let it stall your progress. Put it in a "General" or "Unidentified" folder and come back to it later as more context emerges.
- **Keep Original Order (When Possible):** If you find photos already grouped in an envelope with a handwritten note (e.g., *1974 Fall Festival*), keep those items together. That note is a valuable piece of evidence that shouldn't be lost.

2. REHOUSING (PHYSICAL PRESERVATION)

Once the photos have been organized, the next step is moving them into long-term, protective housing. Photos are highly susceptible to acid migration from regular office supplies. If budget is an issue, prioritize supplies that directly touch the photo first.

- **Interleaving:** Inserting a sheet of [Southworth 100% Cotton Résumé Paper](#) between photos creates a buffer that prevents them from sticking together or transferring acid to one another. Cotton paper is naturally acid free and a budget-friendly alternative to specialized archival tissue.
- **Folders:** Place interleaved photos into [1 inch Tab Acid Free Folders](#). These reinforced archival folders provide ample space for detailed content descriptions and resist yellowing over time.
- **Document Boxes:** It is recommended to store folders in a flip-top [Hollinger Box](#). This is the preservation standard because it keeps photos upright to avoid curling and is easier to carry than a heavy banker's box. Hollinger boxes can be a significant investment for larger collections though; a budget-friendly alternative is to store the folders in acid free [Hanging File Folders](#) within a steel filing cabinet.
- **Flat Storage:** For oversized prints, albums or artwork, consider acid free [Drop Front Flat Storage Boxes](#). This design allows items to slide out without being forced or bent.
- **Avoid Plastic.** While plastic sleeves seem protective, most common varieties are unsafe for long-term storage. Plastics to avoid include PVC/vinyl, magnetic album pages, cellulose acetate, and frosted or matte plastics. These materials off-gas, yellow, scratch, or chemically degrade photos over time. When in doubt, avoid any plastic that isn't labeled as archival-safe polyester (Mylar) or polypropylene.
- **Photo albums** require an additional decision before rehousing – keeping intact or disassembling.
 - **Keep intact if** the album has archival value as an object (decorative cover, handwritten captions, or a page order that tells a story). Also keep it together if photos are glued or pasted down; peeling them up risks tearing.
 - **Consider disassembling if** photos are in plastic pockets, behind plastic fly leaves, are in magnetic (sticky-page) albums – or if the binding is broken and pages are falling out.
 - **If leaving photos in the album,** interleave 100% cotton paper between every page to prevent sticking and ghosting (where an image transfers or imprints onto the facing page).

3. NUMBERING (IDENTIFICATION)

Assigning a unique ID to every item is the most effective way to maintain control over your collection. A clear numbering system allows you to find specific photos quickly and ensures that if a print ever gets

separated from its folder, the ID tells you exactly where it belongs. It also links each photograph to its corresponding description in an inventory spreadsheet.

- **Series-Based:** Use a "hundreds" block (e.g., **100** for Buildings, **200** for Events), followed by a period and the sequential number of the photo in that series (e.g. *100.01*, *100.02*)
- **Album-Based:** Use the Album ID as the base (e.g. **A1** for Album 1) to keep photos persistently linked if they are removed from the album (e.g. *A1.1*, *A1.2*)

Labeling Instructions

- Always write the number on the back of the print in the upper right corner. This makes it easy to flip through quickly and identify items without having to remove them from a folder.
- Apply as little pressure as possible. Pressing too hard causes "embossing," where the number becomes visible as a raised mark on the front (emulsion side) of the photo.
- When applying numbers to resin coated photographs, use archival quality pens such as the [Sakura Pigma Micron](#). These ensure numbers will not bleed through or fade, and they dry quickly to prevent smudging.
- For vintage photos with a matte or "bare" paper backing, use a soft-lead pencil (like a 6B). Pencil is stable and non-bleeding.
- Never use ballpoint pens. The ink is acidic and can eventually damage the paper. Also, the sharp point will probably leave a permanent indentation on the image.

4. INVENTORY & DESCRIPTION

The inventory is the "master key" to the collection. By creating a simple spreadsheet, you ensure that anyone can find a specific image without having to physically handle every photo in the box. This protects the originals from unnecessary wear and tear. It also tells you about the scope of the collection at a glance.

Choosing the Level of Detail

You do not have to describe every individual photograph in the inventory, especially when starting a large project. Depending on your time and the nature of the photos, you can choose between two methods:

- **Item-Level (Best Practice):** Record a unique ID and description for every single photo (e.g., *100.45: Fr. Smith at the 1960 Groundbreaking*).
- **Folder-Level (Efficiency First):** If a folder contains many similar images, it is enough to record the folder title and the total number of photos inside (e.g., *Folder 4: Parish Picnic 1985, 42 prints*). This helps you locate the correct folder quickly, even if you haven't indexed every specific shot yet.

What to Record:

For item-level entries, include these three columns. For folder-level entries, the folder title, photo count, and location are sufficient.

- **Unique ID** (e.g., 100.45) – must match the number on the back of the print
- **Description** – briefly state what is visible; include names and dates if known (e.g., *Front of rectory, circa 1950*)
- **Location** (e.g., Box 1, Folder 4) – identifies which physical container to pull from the shelf

Note: If a photo is unidentified, simply describe the subject (e.g., *Three priests standing outside church*). You can always update the description later if someone is able to provide more information.

5. STORAGE ENVIRONMENT

The best climate for photos is **cool, dry, and stable** (ideally 65°F–70°F with 30–40% humidity). Large shifts in temperature cause a photo's emulsion layer to expand and contract, leading to cracks, fading, and buckling.

The Rule of Thumb: If a space is uncomfortable for a person to stay in for long periods because it is too hot, too damp, or too drafty, it is also uncomfortable for a photo collection.

Where to Avoid:

- **Basements and Attics:** These areas suffer from the most extreme temperature swings and are prone to dampness.
- **Near Hazards:** Keep boxes away from boiler rooms, exterior walls (which can sweat), and areas directly under water pipes.
- **Off the Floor:** Never store archival boxes directly on the floor. Always use shelving to protect them from potential flooding or cleaning equipment.

6. HANDLING PHOTOGRAPHS

Preventative care starts the moment a photo is touched. While environmental factors like heat cause damage over time, improper handling can cause serious damage in seconds. Establishing a "clean-hands" culture and using the right physical supports avoids many common forms of physical deterioration before they begin.

Best Practices:

- Before touching any photographic materials, make sure hands are freshly washed and thoroughly dried. Avoid lotions or sanitizers, which can leave chemical residues on the prints.

- Non-latex medical gloves (such as nitrile) are recommended whenever you are working with the collection. This prevents the transfer of natural skin oils and salts, which can cause permanent fingerprints and chemical degradation over time.
- Even with gloves, always handle photos by their edges or corners to minimize contact with the image surface.
- Support fragile or oversized items with both hands. For particularly brittle prints, use a rigid piece of cardstock as a "tray" to move them without risking cracks or tears.
- Never use paper clips, staples, or rubber bands directly on photos. These cause mechanical damage, rust stains, and permanent indentations.
- Keep the workspace clear of food, drinks, and cluttered office supplies. A clean, flat surface prevents accidental spills or snags.