



CONSERVATION LEAFLET

October 2007 (revised June 2014)

CARE AND HANDLING OF PHOTOGRAPHS

HANDLING

Pick up photographs by their edges, and wear cotton or nitrile gloves when handling them.

Never touch the image surface. Oil in the skin leaves stains.

IDENTIFICATION

Identify your photographs: **who, where,** and **when**. Use a soft lead pencil and write on the back near the bottom of the photograph. For slick-backed photos, use a graphite pencil from an art supply store.

Never label photographs with a pen—the ink will bleed through onto the image.

STORAGE

If using albums, select books with acid-free paper, and attach photographs to the pages with acid-free photo corners. Photographs can also be stored in individual sleeves made of polyester, polyethylene, or polypropylene. Store photographs in acid-free boxes in a safe, dark, and dry place.

Do not place photographs in self-adhesive or magnetic albums. Never use adhesive tape, glue, metal paper clips, thumb tacks, or rubber bands on photographs—all can cause damage. Never store photographs in wooden or metal boxes, or in areas with extreme changes in temperature and humidity (such as attics or outbuildings).

DISPLAY

Use a window mat of acid-free museum board to prevent the photo from sticking to the glass. Use acid-free backing materials for framing.

Do not place glass directly on a photograph when framing it. Never display photographs in direct sunlight or fluorescent lighting—both cause fading and discoloration. Color photographs are especially susceptible to light damage (though they also fade in the dark).

DUPLICATION

Use proper handling procedures when digitizing or photocopying a photograph. When possible, make high-quality reproductions to reduce handling and wear of originals.

Never use the automatic sheet feeder to photocopy photographs. Avoid repeated exposure to the intense lights of copiers and scanners.

Glossary of Photograph Types

The following information may be useful in identifying the types of historic photographs in your collection, but it can only be used to approximate the dates of the photographs. The use of these processes varied by location and by the specific photographer. While some were eager to try new processes, others continued with the existing processes until a new process had fully proven itself. Other photographers were content to continue to use the process they were most familiar with even when a new process had proven itself. If a stock of materials for a particular process were on hand, these would generally be used before the photographer switched processes. For additional information, see the resources provided with this leaflet.

Albumen Print (1850-1895): An emulsion of egg white mixed with sodium or ammonium chloride coating on extremely thin paper which produced a brown-colored print after being sensitized in a solution of silver nitrate, exposed to light, and toned in gold chloride. Early albumen prints had a dull sheen; after the 1880s the albumen prints were likely to have a high gloss. Most commonly, however, albumen prints will have a yellowish tinge, caused by deterioration.

Ambrotype (1855-1860s): A wet collodion plate process in which the emulsion was coated on a glass plate. The negative image produced was visible as a positive image when the glass was backed with a dark material (paper, paint, cloth). Often put into cases like those used for daguerreotypes, each image was unique—one-of-a-kind—because it was a negative. NOTE: Often an ambrotype is mistaken for a tintype, or vice versa.

Card Photographs (1870s-circa 1905): When interest in the cartes-de-visite waned, studio photographers produced mounted photographs in larger sizes. Common were the cabinet (4 ½ by 6 ¼ inches), victoria (3 ¼ by 5 inches), promenade (4 by 7 inches), and boudoir (5 ¼ by 8 ½ inches). The cards were often decorated and included the photographer's name and address.

Cartes-de-Visite (1860s): A small albumen portrait about the size of a calling or present day business card (4 ¼ by 2 ½ inches), often collected in albums. They were very popular and inexpensive, and thousands were printed daily. Often the name of the photographer was printed on the card.

Cyanotype (circa 1885-circa 1910): The cyanotype is characterized by its bright blue color. Its popularity was restricted because many people objected to the blue tones, particularly for portraits.

Daguerreotype (1839-circa 1855): The first practical photographic process was invented in 1839 by a Frenchman named Louis J. M. Daguerre. The process produced a positive image formed by exposing a silver-coated copper plate to iodine vapors and then to mercury vapors. Usually sealed with a pane of glass in a hinged case made of wood with a leather or paper covering, or in a case made of gutta percha, a substance that resembles modern-day plastic. Each daguerreotype was a unique image and appeared as a mirror when held at a particular angle.

Gelatin Silver Print (1893 to present): The most common black-and-white photograph. During the 1890s it took the place of the albumen print. In 1910 the discovery that prints could be developed through a chemical process (rather than through exposure to light) launched black-and-white photography; it soon came to dominate the photographic market.

Snapshot (1888 to present): Snapshot photography arrived with George Eastman's Kodak camera in 1888. For the first time, a wide range of people could make their own pictures. In addition, the film was faster, which allowed the camera to capture people in informal poses.

Stereograph (1851-1935): Stereographs (or stereo cards) were a format, not a technical process. They were a pair of photographs of the same scene, placed side by side on cards measuring approximately 4 ½ by 7 inches. When viewed through a hand-held stereoscope, the single picture looked three-dimensional.

Tintype (1856-circa 1900): Like ambrotypes, tintypes were created by a collodion wet plate process in which the emulsion was coated onto a dark painted metal plate (usually black or dark brown). The direct positive image was laterally reversed. Durable and cheaper than glass photographs, tintype could be found in paper holders, in cases (often being mistaken for ambrotypes), or in photo albums. Sometimes they were hand-colored.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books:

- Baldwin, George. *Looking at Photographs: A Guide to Technical Terms*. Malibu, Calif.: J. Paul Getty Museum in association with the British Museum, 1991.
- Reilly, James. M. *Photographic Prints of the Nineteenth Century: Care and Identification*. Rochester, N. Y.: Eastman Kodak Company, ca. 1986.
- Ritzenthaler, Mary Lynn. *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2010.
- Ritzenthaler, Mary Lynn, and Diane Vogt-O'Connor. *Photographs: Archival Care and Management*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006.
- Weinstein, Robert A. and Larry Booth. *Collection, Use, and Care of Historical Photographs*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, ca. 1977.

Websites:

- Northeast Document Conservation Center: <http://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/overview>
- Conservation On-line: <http://cool.conservation-us.org/>

Archival Supplies:

- Hollinger Metal Edge: www.metaledgeinc.com
- Light Impressions: www.lightimpressionsdirect.com
- University Products: www.universityproducts.com

Alabama Department of Archives and History
P.O. Box 300100
Montgomery, AL 36130-0100
<http://www.archives.alabama.gov>