



The attic storage space of the Georgian Museum. Photo courtesy of the Fairfield Heritage Association.

# Housing Heirlooms

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Family heirlooms play a significant role in preserving and understanding your community's history. These treasured items often require extra care. One of the most important things to consider when caring for these objects is their storage environment. Improper storage spaces and materials can cause damage that is oftentimes irreversible. Providing appropriate housing for these objects in your collection is essential to their long-term preservation and should be a top priority.

When scouting for storage locations in your buildings, there are a few areas that you will want to avoid whenever possible. Steer clear of areas under pipes and directly on the floor to prevent potential water damage from leaks and floods. Wooden shelves and drawers should also be avoided because wood is acidic and can tarnish metals and cause fabrics to yellow. If wood is your only option, line your drawers and shelves with aluminum foil. The foil will act as a barrier and prevent acids and other harmful substances emitted by wood from migrating to items and causing discoloration.

Once you have found an appropriate space, determine the type of housing needed for each object. Many people do not realize that everyday items can threaten the survival of their objects. For example, traditional file folders, tissue paper, and cardboard boxes you may be using to store old photographs, documents, or textiles can cause a great deal of damage over time. These commonly used materials are highly

acidic and will hasten the deterioration of your items. Ideally, storage materials should be of archival quality, which means that they are chemically stable and are known to be safe for long-term storage.

When shopping for storage materials for your artifacts, look for terms such as acid-free, buffered, or lignin-free. Buffered materials contain calcium carbonate, which helps to neutralize acids released by items such as paper. Lignin is an acidic component of wood that can damage certain materials. If you have a penchant for plastic storage containers, choose items made of polyester, polyethylene, and polypropylene. These plastics can be identified by their recycle symbols (4 or PP for polypropylene, 5 or PE for polyethylene). If you are in doubt about whether a material is safe or not and are having difficulty with identification, a simple smell test can help. Most harmful materials release odors when they off-gas, or release damaging volatiles. A good example of this is the smell when you open new shower curtains.

Be sure to keep in mind that some archival materials can be harmful to certain items. For example, if you have artwork containing charcoal or pastels, avoid storing them in any kind of plastic container. The static electricity from the plastic can lift the images from their surfaces. This vanishing act is sure to leave you both mystified and irritated by the loss of your art. You should also avoid storing textiles in any plastic film or container because this can cause

moisture condensation and encourage mold growth. Instead, textiles can be stored using acid free boxes and tissue. For documents that are handled frequently, consider storing them in polyester sleeves, which will prevent damage caused by fingerprints and will keep dirt and pests at bay. Placing a sheet of buffered paper behind the document will neutralize acids being released from the paper and prevent further damage. Additionally, before storing paper documents, remove materials like paper clips, which can rust and stain paper, and rubber bands, which crumble as they deteriorate.

Remember, organization is key. If you have a large number of objects, be sure to organize your items by weight, size, and material. Labeling boxes will prevent the need for rifling through materials. Taking these simple steps will ensure that your collection's heirlooms are around for years to come. ■