

*Charlotte Stories*



Our COLLECTIONS, Your TREASURES

Documenting  
Your  
Treasures

*A guide to documenting your  
collection of treasures*

# Getting Started

## **Why would you need documentation of what you own?**

- To determine insurance value of your household goods
- To document what you have should it be damaged, destroyed, or stolen
- To serve as an inventory of your estate
- To let your descendants know which items have been handed down in your family

## **What kinds of information would you need to know about your belongings?**

- Brands, models, and serial numbers if applicable
- Where purchased and amount paid
- Receipts
- Photographs
- Descriptions
- Condition
- Updated appraisals of valuable items
- Sources, materials, ages, and who owned items handed down in the family or given to you
- People and stories connected with family items

## **How would you go about inventorying and documenting your belongings?**

Establish basic categories based on your needs, such as:

- Type of item - furniture, appliances, electronics, photographs, artwork
- Materials items are made of - wood, metal, paper, textiles
- Location - living room, basement, attic
- Origin of item - purchase, inheritance, gift

Determine how you want to keep track of your information:

- Computer spreadsheet or database
- Written list
- File cards
- Loose-leaf album or notebook

Determine how to preserve and secure your information:

- Multiple hard copies, some left with family/friends or kept in a safe deposit box
- Copies kept on a computer, with backups
- Digital copies such as compact discs, DVDs, or other external storage

*Be sure members of your family know which of your belongings are the real treasures, whether because of their actual value or because they are an important part of your family's history.*

# Tools of the Trade

**Here are some of the tools you might need to examine one of your treasures:**

**Paper and pencil, unless you are typing directly into a laptop computer**

- Always use pencil when you are working with a precious object or document. Pencil can be removed easily from most surfaces, whereas most types of ink can't. Pencil is also permanent, waterproof and lightfast, whereas most other writing media are not.

**Measuring tape**

- Use a cloth measuring tape or plastic ruler rather than a metal tape or ruler to avoid damaging objects.
- Measure maximum height, width, depth, and diameter.
- Measure significant details, such as sizes of drawers or length and width of a handle.
- Use either English or metric measurements, but be consistent and always indicate whether a dimension is in inches and feet or centimeters and meters.

**Soft brush and bamboo skewers**

- Use a brush to gently remove dust and debris
- Cloths can catch on wood grain, small details, and damaged surfaces.
- Use a bamboo skewer to gently probe crevices or scrape deposits.
- Metal or plastic tools can easily damage fragile surfaces
- If there is flaking paint or other easily damaged areas, leave them alone.

**Magnifying glass and/or loupe**

- A 3X magnifying glass works well for most purposes.
- A loupe that magnifies 8X or 10X helps with tiny details.

**Light source**

- For photography, a good glare-free light such as a fluorescent lamp or two, placed above and to one or both sides of the object, will illuminate details.
- Photographic hot lights raise the temperature of objects very quickly and therefore are not a good choice for examining or photographing treasures.
- A bright LED flashlight is good for illuminating details.
- A small gooseneck craft lamp with a daylight fluorescent bulb is another good choice for examination and photography.

**Camera and/or Scanner**

- Use a digital camera with a macro setting that allows you to take close-ups of details and damage.
- A camera with 5 or more megapixels will record sufficient detail to make good prints of 4" x 6" or larger
- Use a camera that will allow you to shoot without the flash, and experiment with and without the flash to see what works best for each object.
- Shoot the largest files practical for the amount of memory you have.
- TIFF files, which are uncompressed, are the best format for archiving images.
- Use a photo editing program to crop out extraneous backgrounds and manipulate your images to bring out details or correct colors.

# What To Look For

**Examining and documenting an artifact is rather like a detective investigation. You have to provide an eyewitness description that answers the following questions:**

## **Description**

- What is this object called?
- How big is it?
- What shape is it?
- What materials is it made of?
- What are its colors and textures?
- Does it have distinct parts? Are any of them supposed to move or work in some way?
- Is it finished, decorated, or embellished in any way? If so, what is the medium and appearance of the finish or decoration?
- Are there any labels or other markings? What are they made of and what do they say?

## **Condition**

- Where on the object do you see the damage?
- How big is it?
- How severe is it?

## **History and Stories**

- Where did you get the object?
- Do you know who had it before you? Before that?
- Can you find out anything about the maker? Sometimes the internet, antiques and collectibles books, and old catalogs can provide clues.
- Is the object connected to a historical or personal event, such as World War II or Grandma's high school graduation?
- Are there any traditions about the object, or how or when it was used?
- Is there anyplace people could look to find more information about the object?
- Is there anything interesting or important that you think future owners might like to know?



# Digitization

## a miracle and a curse

Being able to generate computerized records and to take and store digital photographs virtually instantly makes keeping records of your family's history and belongings easier than ever. With a spreadsheet or database program on your laptop and a digital camera, you can gather and store as much information in a few days as your grandfather would have been able to in a month. You can organize and sort it, print out hard copies for your parents, burn disks to keep in your safe deposit box, put backups online, and keep it on your computer for editing and ready reference. So what's the problem?

What will you do if your house blows down in a hurricane and seventeen counties are without power for three weeks? What if you put a CD in your computer three years from now and your information has become corrupted, or the computer no longer recognizes your file format? What will your great-great-granddaughter do if she finds a CD and hasn't a clue how to get the information off of it?

If you're serious about keeping your records safe and accessible, there are several steps you can take. First, if your information is all digital, do some research and buy the best quality storage media you can afford. Keep copies of portable media in several locations, at least one of which is not in or anywhere near your house.

Follow the manufacturer's recommendations for storage conditions – the trunk of your car is not an ideal spot. When technology changes, be prepared to migrate your information to the next generation of storage media, or pay someone to do it for you.

Hard copy seems so twentieth century, but consider how long papers are still readable. However, keep in mind a few limitations. The common and inexpensive inkjet printer makes beautiful copies of text and photographs in color, but most inkjet inks are not water resistant and they also fade. Laser and photocopier toner is a much longer-lasting medium. If you don't have a laser printer, take your CDs to a place that can laser print your files for you, or have your inkjet prints photocopied. If you want color copies of your photos, have them commercially printed. It's much less expensive than old-fashioned film processing, and the colors are much more fade-resistant.

Even with archival media, you have to consider storage conditions carefully. Invest in acid-free files or envelopes for your papers and put your photographs in archival sleeves and albums. You will find many more details about this type of storage in the companion booklet to this, *Historic Preservation Family Style*.

Finally, if you simply don't have the time to invest in keeping records of your stuff, here are a few tips:

- *A picture really is worth a thousand words.*
- *Prioritize – record the important stuff.*
- *Electronics, jewelry, and even houses can be replaced, family history cannot.*

# Artifact Processing Worksheet

## DESCRIPTION

## HISTORY AND STORIES

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## MEASUREMENTS

Height: \_\_\_\_\_ Length: \_\_\_\_\_

Width: \_\_\_\_\_ Depth: \_\_\_\_\_

Diameter: \_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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## CONDITION

- |                                       |  |                                       |
|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Break        | <input type="checkbox"/> Discoloration | <input type="checkbox"/> Flaking      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loss/Chip    | <input type="checkbox"/> Stain         | <input type="checkbox"/> Bulge/Warp   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Scratch      | <input type="checkbox"/> Soil/Grime    | <input type="checkbox"/> Wear         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tarnish      | <input type="checkbox"/> Mold          | <input type="checkbox"/> Tear         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fading       | <input type="checkbox"/> Mildew        | <input type="checkbox"/> Rust         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cracks       | <input type="checkbox"/> Insect Damage | <input type="checkbox"/> Water Damage |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loose Joints | <input type="checkbox"/> Pest Damage   | <input type="checkbox"/> Light Damage |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dent         | <input type="checkbox"/> Missing Part  | <input type="checkbox"/> Fraying      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Split        | <input type="checkbox"/> Shrinkage     | <input type="checkbox"/> Gouge/Hole   |

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**3500 SHAMROCK DRIVE  
CHARLOTTE, NC 28215**

**WWW.CHARLOTTEMUSEUM.ORG**

**P 704.568.1774**

**F 704.566.1817**