

STORING YOUR MEMORABILIA

*How to preserve your family's photographs, documents,
recordings and memories for future generations*

2026 EDITION

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**“The answer is not to find one perfect storage medium.
The answer is to preserve our memories in several ways.”**

Introduction

On December 25, 1994, near the village of Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, in the Ardèche gorges in southern France, explorers Jean-Marie Chauvet, Éliette Brunel-Deschamps and Christian Hillaire discovered an exceptionally important gallery of Paleolithic rock art.

Grotto Chauvet had been hidden and perfectly preserved because a prehistoric landslide had covered the entrance thousands of years earlier.

Initially, the explorers noticed a draft of air in the minor cave they were surveying. After clearing a narrow passageway, they made their way down a shaft and into a vast network of galleries and rooms, several hundred metres in length.

They found numerous wall paintings and engravings, together with the remains of cave bears. More than 300 paintings and engravings have since been documented. Carbon dating established that some of the works were created around 32,000 years ago.

They had survived for thousands of years because the cave had provided an exceptionally stable environment.

It may have been one of the earliest examples of humans deliberately leaving memories for future generations.

Another remarkable example is the Gospel of Judas, of which only one ancient copy is known to have survived. Hidden for centuries in the Egyptian desert, it eventually found its way into the antiquities trade. At one stage the fragile papyrus was abandoned in a bank vault for many years. By the time it reached conservators, it was deteriorating into fragments. Fortunately, its contents were able to be recovered.

These examples demonstrate something important.

Preserving memories for future generations has never been easy.

We don't all have a secret cave in which to store our family history. And unlike the people who created the Chauvet paintings, we have vastly more information to preserve.

Today we may have thousands of photographs, hours of family video, voice recordings, letters, documents, emails and other digital information.

And this creates a new problem.

Our ancestors used stone, parchment and paper. We use computers, smartphones, cloud storage, hard drives, memory cards and countless different digital file formats.

The technology is enormously more convenient, but it can also be surprisingly fragile.

A photograph stored on a device may disappear because the device fails. A collection of files may become inaccessible because the software needed to open them no longer exists. A cloud account may become inaccessible because nobody knows the password.

And a perfectly preserved file is of little use if future generations don't know what it contains or who the people in the photographs are.

This paper looks at the ways we can preserve our family memories and, importantly, how we can make those memories accessible to future generations.

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1. What are we trying to preserve?

Type of memory	Examples
Written material	Letters, diaries, recipes, certificates, family histories
Photographs	Printed photographs, negatives, slides and digital photographs
Documents	Newspaper articles, school reports, certificates, awards
Sound	Cassette tapes, voice recordings, music and interviews
Video	VHS, Video8, MiniDV, DVDs and digital video
Digital information	Computer files, emails and scanned documents
Personal objects	Family heirlooms, medals, jewellery and other objects

The important point is that no single storage method is suitable for everything. A handwritten letter should not necessarily be treated in the same way as a digital photograph, and an old VHS tape clearly requires a different approach from a modern smartphone video.

2. The great change since I first wrote this article

When I first wrote this paper, CDs and DVDs were still commonly used for storing digital memories. External hard drives were expensive, USB storage capacities were relatively small and cloud storage was in its infancy. - Much has changed.

Today, a person can carry thousands of photographs on a smartphone and store enormous quantities of information on an inexpensive external drive.

Cloud storage allows another copy to be kept hundreds or thousands of kilometres away.

But there is an important lesson in all of this:

The problem has changed from finding a storage medium that will last forever to finding a method of storage that can survive technological change.

There is no realistic way to guarantee that a particular digital storage device or file format will remain usable for 100 years.

Even if the data itself survives, the equipment required to read it may not.

We have already seen this happen with:

- 5¼-inch floppy disks
- 3½-inch floppy disks
- Zip disks
- magnetic tape formats
- MiniDisc
- some video formats
- obsolete computer storage systems
- CDs and DVDs

The lesson is clear:

Don't expect today's technology to still be available to your great-grandchildren.

Instead, build an archive that can be moved to new technology when necessary.

3. Printed photographs – still one of the best choices

Despite all the advances in digital technology, a properly produced and stored photographic print remains an excellent way of preserving a family memory.

A printed photograph requires no computer, operating system, password, app or internet connection.

A photograph sitting in an album can be picked up and viewed by anyone.

That simplicity is a major advantage.

How long will a photograph last?

The answer depends on the printing process, paper, ink, exposure to light, temperature, humidity and how the photograph is stored.

For photographs intended to be kept for generations:

- Use a reputable photographic printing service.
- Use good-quality photographic paper.
- Keep important photographs away from direct sunlight.
- Avoid excessive heat and humidity.
- Store photographs in archival-quality albums or sleeves.
- Avoid cheap plastic materials that may damage photographs.
- Do not store important photographs in garages, sheds or other areas subject to temperature and humidity extremes.

For your most important family photographs, keep both a digital copy and a printed copy.

The two methods protect against different types of failure. A digital photograph can be copied easily but depends on technology. A printed photograph is immediately accessible but can be destroyed by fire, flood or physical deterioration. Having both provides considerably greater protection.

4. Photographic albums

I remain a strong supporter of professionally printed photographic albums.

Books printed many decades ago are still readily readable today. A properly produced photographic book therefore has an important advantage over many electronic storage systems.

A family album can also tell a story.

Rather than simply placing hundreds of photographs into a book, consider arranging them chronologically:

Grandparents → Parents → Childhood → School → Holidays → Weddings → Children → Grandchildren

Add names, dates and locations.

A photograph becomes far more valuable to a future generation when the people and circumstances are identified.

Instead of: "Holiday 1987"

write: "December 1987 – John and Mary at Bright, Victoria, with their children Peter and Susan. Bill was Peter's school friend and spent Christmas with the family."

That small amount of information may be invaluable to somebody 50 or 100 years from now.

5. Old photographs, negatives and slides

Many families still possess photographs taken before digital photography became commonplace.

These may include:

- Black-and-white photographs
- Colour prints
- Negatives
- 35mm slides
- Instamatic film
- Super 8 film
- Other photographic formats

These originals should not simply be thrown away after digitising them.

Where practical, retain the original.

A digital copy is extremely useful, but the original may contain information that was not captured during scanning.

Digitise important material

Old photographs, negatives and slides can now be scanned to create digital copies. For particularly valuable material, professional scanning is worth considering.

Once digitised, the digital files can be incorporated into your normal family archive.

Digitising an original does not mean the original has become unnecessary.

If it is historically or personally significant, keep it.

6. Old video and sound recordings

This is an area where action is particularly important.

Many families have old:

- VHS tapes
- VHS-C tapes
- Video8 or Hi8 tapes
- MiniDV tapes
- audio cassettes
- reel-to-reel recordings
- old DVDs containing home movies

The difficulty is not necessarily that the tape will suddenly stop working. The greater problem is that the equipment required to play it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain.

If you have irreplaceable family recordings, don't wait until the equipment fails before transferring them.

Consider having important recordings digitised. Keep the original tape or recording where practical, but also create a modern digital copy.

For digital preservation, widely supported formats are preferable to obscure formats that depend upon a particular manufacturer's software.

7. Digital photographs

Today, most family photographs are probably created digitally.

They may come from:

- Smartphones
- Digital cameras
- Tablets
- Computers
- Social media

Digital photography has enormous advantages. A single device can contain thousands of photographs and each photograph can be copied without losing quality.

But there is a trap.

Having photographs on your phone does not mean they are safely archived.

If the phone is lost, damaged or stolen, the photographs may disappear with it unless another copy exists.

The same applies to a computer. A computer's internal storage should be regarded as a working copy, not the complete family archive.

8. The 3-2-1 rule

This is probably the single most important recommendation in this updated edition.

The National Archives of Australia recommends the 3-2-1 approach for personal digital archives.

3 – Keep three copies

There should be three copies of important digital information.

2 – Use two different types of storage

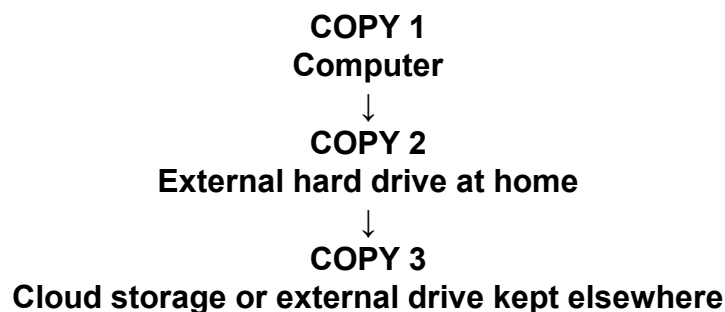
For example:

- Computer + external hard drive
- External hard drive + cloud storage

1 – Keep one copy somewhere else

If your house burns down, is flooded or is burgled, three copies sitting in the same house are not much protection. The third copy should therefore be somewhere physically separate.

For example:



This is a remarkably simple system, and for most families it provides an excellent level of protection.

9. External hard drives

External hard disk drives (HDDs) remain an inexpensive way of storing large amounts of information.

A modern external drive can store an enormous family collection of photographs and videos.

An external hard drive is a backup device, not a permanent archive.

Hard drives can fail. They can be dropped, damaged by water, stolen or simply become unreliable with age.

Therefore, don't put your only copy of your family history on an external drive and place it in a cupboard. Use it as one part of the 3-2-1 system.

A useful practice

Every year or two, check that the drive can still be read and that important files can actually be opened.

When the drive becomes old, replace it with a new drive and copy the archive across. The old drive can then be retained temporarily if desired.

10. Solid-state drives, USB sticks and memory cards

Solid-state storage has no moving parts and is extremely convenient.

Examples include:

- USB memory sticks
- SD cards
- microSD cards
- SSDs

They are excellent for transferring and working with information. However, they should not be regarded as a magic permanent storage medium.

A USB stick sitting untouched in a drawer for decades is not a reliable substitute for a properly managed archive.

Memory cards in particular should never be considered a permanent storage location for precious photographs.

Use them to transfer photographs from a camera or other device, then copy the photographs to your archive.

11. Cloud storage

Cloud storage has become one of the most useful developments for preserving family memories.

Services such as:

- iCloud
- Google Drive and Google Photos
- Microsoft OneDrive
- Dropbox

allow photographs and documents to be stored remotely.

The major advantage is that the copy is physically somewhere else. If your computer and external drive are destroyed in a house fire, the cloud copy may remain safe.

Cloud storage is not a complete answer

Cloud services are businesses. They can change their pricing, services and terms. Accounts can become inaccessible, and passwords can be forgotten.

A cloud service should therefore be regarded as one part of your backup system rather than the entire archive.

12. What about CDs and DVDs?

This is one section of my original article that needs a major change.

When I first wrote it, archival-quality CDs and DVDs appeared to offer an attractive solution for long-term digital storage.

Today, I would not recommend CDs or DVDs as the primary method for preserving your family digital archive.

There are two separate issues.

First, the discs themselves can deteriorate.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, computers increasingly no longer contain optical disc drives.

Even if the information remains perfectly readable, finding a suitable drive in several decades may become increasingly difficult.

If you already have important memories stored on CDs or DVDs, don't throw them away. Instead, copy the information onto modern storage and incorporate it into your current archive.

13. File formats matter

There is another problem that is easy to overlook.

A digital file is not necessarily useful simply because it still exists.

It must also be possible to open it.

Over the years we have seen many proprietary file formats disappear or become difficult to use.

The National Archives of Australia points out that digital formats can become obsolete because they depend upon particular software or hardware. It therefore recommends formats that are widely adopted, well documented, stable and supported.

For ordinary family use, the best advice is relatively simple:

Prefer common, widely supported formats.

Type	Suitable common formats
Photographs	JPEG, PNG; TIFF for high-quality archival scans
Documents	PDF/PDF-A, DOCX, TXT
Audio	WAV, MP3
Video	MP4 and other widely supported formats

For documents that are particularly important for long-term preservation, PDF/A is worth considering. It is specifically designed for long-term preservation.

You don't need to convert everything you own into an archival format. The important point is to avoid relying entirely on obscure or proprietary formats.

14. Don't continually edit your original photographs

There is another useful rule for digital photographs:

Keep the original.

If you edit a photograph, make a copy first.

Original	Edited version
Grandma_1956.jpg	Grandma_1956_restored.jpg

The original should be retained. This is particularly important when restoring old photographs. Future technology may be able to restore or enhance the original far better than today's software.

Your original digital photograph is therefore itself an important piece of family history.

15. Don't forget the information behind the photograph

This may be one of the most valuable things you can do.

A photograph without any identification gradually loses much of its value.

Imagine your great-grandchild finding this photograph:

[PHOTOGRAPH OF UNIDENTIFIED PEOPLE]

Who are these people? Where was it taken? When? Why were they there? What was happening?

Now compare it with:

"Christmas Day 1968 – taken at Grandma and Grandpa's house in Launceston. From left: Peter Pask, Margaret Pask, Colin Pask and David Smith. David was Peter's school friend and spent Christmas with the family."

Suddenly, the photograph tells a story.

When possible, record:

- Names
- Dates
- Locations
- Events
- Relationships
- Interesting circumstances
- The story behind the photograph

This information can be stored in a document alongside the photographs.

16. Family history documents

Don't restrict your archive to photographs.

Important documents might include:

- Birth certificates
- Marriage certificates
- School records
- Letters
- Diaries
- Military records

- Newspaper cuttings
- Awards
- Family recipes
- Handwritten notes
- Family trees
- Personal stories

Where appropriate, scan important documents. For particularly significant documents, retain the original as well as the digital copy.

A handwritten letter from a grandparent may have far more emotional value than a perfectly reproduced scan.

17. Write down the stories while you can

Technology isn't the only thing that disappears.

People do too.

One of the most valuable things you can leave your family is not simply photographs of people but their stories.

Consider recording:

- Where you grew up
- Your parents and grandparents
- Your first job
- Your school days
- How you met your spouse
- Where you lived
- Family holidays
- Important events
- Stories about relatives
- What life was like when you were young

These stories can be written down or recorded as audio or video.

A five-minute recording of a grandparent telling a story in their own voice may one day be more valuable than hundreds of photographs.

18. Digital legacy – make sure someone can find everything

There is little point in creating a magnificent digital archive if nobody knows it exists.

Imagine your family discovering your computer after you have gone.

They may find:

- thousands of photographs
- several external hard drives
- cloud accounts
- USB drives
- documents
- old computers

But how will they know what is important?

A simple document called "My Family Archive – Where Everything Is" could solve the problem.

It might say:

Family photographs are stored on the computer under Pictures/Family Archive.

A second copy is on the external hard drive labelled FAMILY ARCHIVE.

A third copy is stored in the cloud.

Important printed photographs are in the blue archival albums.

Old slides have been digitised and are stored in the folder "Grandparents".

The old negatives are stored in the archival box in the study.

The document should also explain how to access the digital archive.

Do not put passwords into an ordinary document if that creates a security risk. Instead, make sure your family knows where your password manager, recovery information or other appropriate access arrangements can be found.

19. Store the physical material properly

The environment in which memorabilia is stored is extremely important.

Avoid:

- Garages
- Sheds
- Roof spaces
- Damp cupboards
- Areas exposed to sunlight
- Areas subject to large temperature changes

Prefer:

- A cool environment
- Low humidity
- Darkness
- Stable temperature
- Protection from water
- Protection from insects
- Archival-quality storage materials

For irreplaceable physical material, consider an appropriate fire- and water-resistant storage solution.

A fireproof safe protects physical objects. It does not automatically protect your digital archive.

Your digital archive should still follow the 3-2-1 principle.

20. A practical family archive for 2026

So, what would I actually recommend for an ordinary family today?

It need not be complicated.

STEP 1 – Gather everything

Find digital photographs, old photographs, negatives and slides, videos, audio recordings, important documents and family stories.

STEP 2 – Digitise the important old material

Scan photographs, slides and negatives. Have important video and audio recordings transferred to modern digital files.

STEP 3 – Organise everything

Create sensible folders such as Family History → Grandparents → Parents → Childhood → School → Holidays → Family → Documents → Video → Audio.

STEP 4 – Identify the photographs

Add names, dates and locations wherever possible.

STEP 5 – Keep the originals

Don't throw away important negatives, photographs, letters or recordings simply because you have digitised them.

STEP 6 – Make three copies

Use the 3-2-1 rule: Copy 1 – Computer; Copy 2 – External hard drive; Copy 3 – Cloud storage or another drive kept elsewhere.

STEP 7 – Keep important photographs in print

Create a good-quality family album containing the photographs you particularly want future generations to see.

STEP 8 – Tell someone where everything is

Leave clear instructions.

STEP 9 – Review the archive

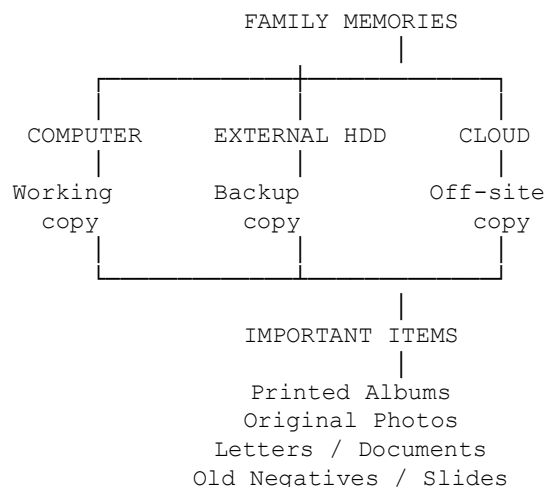
At least once a year, check that the backups are working, important files can be opened, the external drive is accessible, cloud access is working and new photographs have been backed up.

STEP 10 – Migrate when technology changes

Don't wait until a storage device becomes obsolete. When new technology becomes established, copy the archive to the new system.

21. My recommended storage system

If I were setting up a family archive today, my basic system would look like this:



This is not complicated. It does not require expensive specialist equipment. And most importantly, it does not depend upon one particular technology surviving forever.

22. What I would NOT recommend

I would not rely solely upon:

- A computer's internal hard drive
- One external hard drive
- A USB memory stick
- An SD memory card
- A CD or DVD
- A single cloud service
- Facebook or another social-media service
- A smartphone
- An old computer
- Any single piece of technology

Each may have a useful role. None should be the only copy of your family's memories.

23. The most important lessons

- 1. Keep important memories in more than one form.** Digital and physical copies complement each other.
- 2. Never keep only one digital copy.** Devices fail.
- 3. Follow the 3-2-1 rule.** Three copies, two types of storage, one copy somewhere else.
- 4. Don't assume cloud storage is permanent.** It is a useful backup, not a guarantee of immortality.
- 5. Keep original photographs, negatives and documents where practical.** Digitising them does not necessarily make the originals obsolete.
- 6. Use common file formats.** The easier a file is to open, the better its chance of surviving technological change.
- 7. Record the stories.** A photograph without its story may eventually become just another unidentified face.
- 8. Tell your family where everything is.** An archive that nobody can find is effectively a lost archive.
- 9. Review your archive regularly.** Technology changes. Your archive must change with it.
- 10. Don't wait.** Old photographs, tapes, negatives and slides become harder to preserve as time passes.

Conclusion

When I first wrote this paper, I was concerned that the technology we were using to store our memories might not survive into the future.

That concern has proved to be justified.

Since the original paper was written, we have seen floppy disks disappear, optical discs decline, digital cameras largely replaced by smartphones, cloud storage become commonplace and enormous changes in computer technology.

Yet the fundamental problem remains exactly the same.

How do we leave something behind for the people who come after us?

The people who painted the walls of Chauvet Cave could never have imagined the world that would eventually discover their work.

They simply left something behind.

Thousands of years later, we can still see it.

We have an enormous technological advantage over those early artists. We can create thousands of photographs, record voices and video, write detailed histories and make perfect digital copies.

But we also face a new danger.

Our memories can disappear without leaving a physical trace.

A hard drive can fail. A password can be forgotten. A cloud account can disappear. A file format can become obsolete. A computer can become impossible to repair. A memory card can simply stop working.

The answer is not to find one perfect storage medium.

The answer is to preserve our memories in several ways and to keep moving them forward as technology changes.

- Print the photographs that really matter.
- Keep the originals.
- Digitise the old material.
- Keep several copies of the digital archive.
- Keep one copy somewhere else.
- Use common file formats.
- Record the names and stories behind the photographs.
- And, most importantly, make sure somebody in the future knows where everything is.

If we do these simple things, there is a reasonable chance that our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be able to look back at our lives and not simply see photographs of people they don't recognise, but understand who we were, where we lived, what we did and what mattered to us.

Perhaps that is the real purpose of preserving memorabilia.

Not simply to preserve objects.

But to preserve memories.

And hopefully, many years from now, when our descendants finally open the box, connect the computer or turn the pages of an old family album, they will discover a little piece of the people who came before them.

A final thought

Technology will continue to change.

We cannot predict what computers, storage devices or file formats will exist in 50 or 100 years.

But we can do something much more practical:

Keep several copies, keep the important things in more than one form, and every few years move the digital archive onto whatever technology has replaced today's technology.

That is probably the closest we can come to building our own modern-day Chauvet Cave.

Appendix – My Family Archive Checklist

Use this page as a simple annual check of your family archive.

- ☐ Important photographs are stored in at least three locations/copies.
- ☐ One backup is kept away from the house.
- ☐ Important old photographs, negatives and slides have been digitised.
- ☐ Important VHS, audio cassette and other old recordings have been digitised.
- ☐ Important original photographs, letters and documents have been retained.
- ☐ Important photographs have been printed and stored appropriately.
- ☐ Photographs have names, dates and locations recorded where possible.
- ☐ Original digital photographs have been retained before editing.
- ☐ Important documents use common, widely supported formats.
- ☐ The external backup drive can still be read.
- ☐ Important files can still be opened.
- ☐ Cloud storage is accessible.
- ☐ New photographs and documents have been backed up.
- ☐ Someone trusted knows where the family archive is stored.
- ☐ Instructions exist explaining how the archive can be accessed.
- ☐ Old technology is being replaced before it becomes impossible to use.

THE GOLDEN RULE

Never let a single device, disc, computer or cloud account become the only place where your family's memories exist.