"Picturing" Your Family: Finding, Procuring, and Preserving Family Images

Believe it or not, you have a unique archive in your house right now, something which almost none of your family has or know about, your family photos! Genealogists tend to focus on official records: birth, marriage, death, repeat. But images are important genealogical research material, too—and maybe even more so than that marriage record (blasphemy, I know!). Images can make your ancestors, and the times they lived in, come "alive." And that one special photo can tell you more about your ancestor's personality than a million vital records.

From drawings, to cut-paper silhouettes, to the images made on glass or scraps of lead, to slides and negatives, to today's digital media, images are regularly lost, damaged, forgotten, or simply fade away. At best, a family might label them and tuck them away in a shoe-box. At worst, they languish so long that no one remembers the people in the photos and they end up in a garage sale. The ephemera of history is a dwindling inventory of artifacts—and unless someone cares enough to save them, most will be lost forever.

Luckily, not only is it easier than every to make high-quality copies of your family's images, the price for doing so is a fraction of what it was only five or ten years ago. Additionally, volunteers and groups are using social media to reconnect photos with families. Images are the cutting-edge of genealogical research!

So, how can you best preserve and share the photos you have—and if you don't have many, where can you look? Let's dive into some ideas.

1. Finding Images

When searching for family images, options may arise. Are you looking for a specific person, and would a near relation be of value? Would an image of the time and community be of interest? Did the person have a hobby or a job was important to them? All of these are valid lines of inquiry—and in the absence of finding an image of a specific individual, you may need to get creative.

Thankfully, more and more institutions are posting their collections and inventories online. Unfortunately, many of the systems don't "talk" very well with search engines and some local resources do not yet have online catalogs. Some places to start include:

- **National Repositories**
  - **Archive Grid**—Many repositories have linked their collections database into ArchiveGrid, a beta project which allows you to search across multiple institutions from one site (https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid)
  - **Library of Congress**—excellent online image collections (loc.gov) as well as Historic American Buildings Survey collection (loc.gov/pictures/collection/hh)
  - **National Archives II**—Located in College Park, MD, Archives II contains an extensive photographic collection, most of which is not indexed online. The collection includes aerial surveys, maps, government photographs, and an extensive collection of images of soldiers taken during WWI, WWII, and other conflicts.
  - **Rumsey Map Collection**—Incredible maps and free high-resolution downloadable scans (davidrumsey.com). But pay attention to copyright and terms of use!
  - **Historic Aerial Imagery**—After WWI many former airman founded companies to map land parcels from the air (the 1920s equivalent of Google Maps). Images are scattered among a few major for-profit companies (historicaerials.com) but Archives II also has their own set of aerial surveys (only available on-site).
- **State, County, and Local Genealogical and Historical Societies**—Include local photo collections, family files, research publications, miscellaneous donated family papers. Local libraries and societies have wonderful papers and images in their collections but many remain unidentified or are in small online collections. Explore these!
- **State, County, and Local Libraries, Archives, and Museums**—To get the most out of these collections you need to think about what your ancestors did. Were they involved in their Church? A veteran's club? The 4-H Club? Think about yearbooks (school, clubs, churches, veterans); newspapers (engagements, weddings, anniversaries, etc.); local histories (limited run sometimes one-off, pamphlets); scrapbooks; newsletters (companies, churches, clubs); etc.

  Many major institutions have image collections online:
  - **New York Public Library**—Easy to find public domain images at digitalcollections.nypl.org
  - **New Jersey State Archives / Library**
  - **Museums**—Brooklyn Museum, Met Museum, New-York Historical Society, etc.
  - **National Archives' Library Information Center**—NARA's list of notable collections and sites archives.gov/research/alic/reference/photography.html

- **Photo Sharing Sites**—FamilySearch (FamilySearch.org/photos) has a wonderful photo feature that accepts high-resolution images and allows you to link the people in them to people in your tree! Other sites (DeadFred.com, AncientFaces.com) post "orphan" photos online in the hopes that the community can help identify them.
- **Facebook Groups**—Facebook groups dedicated to repatriating family snapshots with descendants are a fun and growing community. Two groups I like are Random Acts of Genealogical Kindness (RAOGK), which also has multiple sub-groups, and Genealogy Lost and Found.
- **Auction Houses, Estate Sales, Antique Shops, eBay**—Great for finding postcards of places and local ephemera. Even if you don't purchase an item, make sure to download a picture of the item of interest! Additionally, you can ask an auction house for a copy of the high-resolution image—just do not pretend to be a buyer! Let them know up front that you want the image for personal research purposes only. Many auctioneers are historians, too, and appreciate if you are up-front with them.
- **Online Genealogical Communities**—Including message boards, and trees on Ancestry.com.
- **Ask Your OWN FAMILY about Images**—Many people forget to ask what others have in their shoe-boxes and many are happy to have someone help them scan them, make copies, and/or share with other family members. A lot of great family stories can come from talking about images!

And "give back" to communities by sharing what you have or find. The more images you share, the more connections you may make with others!

2. Procuring Images

Sharing images on the web has created a serious challenge to our existing copyright protection system. If you've ever uploaded an image to Ancestry, downloaded an image from Facebook, watched a TV show on YouTube, or shared an image through e-mail, you've most likely violated someone's copyright—whether you've known it or not. Luckily, the copyright police aren't at your door, but if you decide to publish a book using an image that is not yours, you might be sued. So, let's learn some basics.

COPYRIGHT BASICS

There are two actors in copyright law—those who own the copyright, and those who use copyrighted works.

Copyright Owners

- **US Copyrights**—Under US copyright law, the rights to use an image is owned by the person who created the image. Whether that image is a sketch on a piece of paper or a photo snapped with a smartphone, the person who drew the line or pressed the shutter is the copyright owner.

  The exclusive rights to an image is granted to the creator for their lifetime, PLUS 70 years after his/her death. During this time the creator or their heirs, may license, sell and transfer, distribute, or use his/her creation any way they wish. They can also put restrictions on how the work is used by others.

  There are few, *very* narrow, exceptions for educational institutions but no one but the copyright holder can derive any profit from the work without express permission.
- **Works Created before 1 January 1923**—Works made prior to this date are not covered by modern copyright laws and are considered public domain—free to use by anyone in any way.

  Most materials on GoogleBooks and in online image collections are pre-1923, but always check the rights and credits. Some institutions may charge fees or put restrictions on the use of the digitized image—asserting copyright over the digital file and restricting commercial use.
- **Government Projects**—Most works created by government projects, which are supported by taxes, are public domain regardless of date. Always check the usage terms.

Those Using Copyrighted Works

- **Uploading Images to a Website**—You may not have realized it but, if you've ever uploaded an image to a genealogy website or Facebook, you have agreed that by uploading it, that YOU are the copyright owner and have waived all legal rights to the image. (You've probably broken the copyright law five times this month!) This agreement in the standard terms of use indemnifies the hosting company against all claims from copyright owners for damages—putting the liability completely on the person who uploads it.
- **Google Images are Not Free Images**—Just because it comes up on Google doesn't mean that it's yours to use. Search engines crawl many sites, paid and free, to return results—delivering images from free sites alongside those from commercial ones. Always check the source of the image.

COPYRIGHT IS ABOUT DATES!

Remember that a copyright is owned by a person—when the photo was taken or who is in it has no effect on copyright. In my picnic photo, whether the photo was taken in 1925 or 1926 or who is shown in the image does not matter.

What does matter, is the death date of the person who snapped the shutter. In this case, the photographer (my grandfather) died in 1948. The copyright then passed to his heirs—first to my grandmother, then (upon her death) to my aunt, then (upon my aunt's death) to my mother.

If you add 70 years to the date the photographer died, this image only became public domain in 2018! (And, if my grandfather had lived longer it would still be in copyright today!)

Action	Stated Copyright	
Download	Public Domain	Free to use by anyone for any reason.
Download	Copyright prior to 1923	Public domain, see above.
Download	Above but "with restrictions"	Contact the website owner. Sometimes, a repository will claim rights to the scan of an otherwise public domain image. Always best to ask about your specific usage needs and if there are fees. (Sometimes institutions charge a fee to support their digitization program.)
Upload	Clicking "I am the owner of this image or have permission to upload"	By uploading image to sharing or social sites, you are releasing your claim to copyright for that image. This agreement is a blanket agreement by websites to indemnify themselves against lawsuits. Remember that the person who pressed the shutter button is the copyright owner—not the people in the photo! Also, if a photo is taken on private land, additional permission to use it may be needed from the land-owner. One an image is "released" onto a social media or genealogy website, it is nearly impossible to reclaim the copyright.

A comprehensive "deep-dive" guide to copyrights: copyright.cornell.edu/publicdomain

When in Doubt, Ask for Permission!

In most cases, researchers using images for personal research don't come under fire from copyright owners. But what if you were to publish a book or provide the image to someone who is paying you for your research?

Even the sniff of a profit can change everything and sour relationships between friends and family. It's best to keep careful notes about where the images in your research came from, and cite them properly.

And, when in doubt about the copyright status, always ask permission of the copyright holder.

TOOLS TO (HOPEFULLY) TRACK DOWN WHERE AN IMAGE CAME FROM

When you find an image online, it can seem impossible to figure out where it came from. Most image and genealogy sites will erase the name of the file when uploaded, replacing it with a new, unique file name of just numbers. This doesn't help researchers at all and is used to avoid file conflicts on the website's servers. Unfortunately, randomly renaming the file erases any clues found in the file name and may even scrub some of the embedded metadata in the file. And, if an image is separated, for example, from the link in the associated tree, it may be impossible to find out where it belonged. What's to be done?

Google Reverse Image Search

You can use Google to search for images by more than just the name. A "reverse image search" will compare the pixels in that image and suggest others that have the same, or similar, structure. And artificial intelligence is always learning about what is shown in the image and may suggest other similar images. To do a reverse image search with Google:

- **Chrome Browser—**Right-click an online image and select "Search Google for this Image"
- **Other Browsers / Image Not Online:**
  - Go to https://images.google.com
  - Click on the camera icon
  - Select "Upload an Image," and upload the image you want to search for
  - Results will show images that match or are similar to the image you are looking for—you may find more information about the image or even a better copy of it!

Limitations on Google Image Searches

Unfortunately, there are some important limitations:

- **Google image results will come from public sites only—** Images on subscription sites (such as Ancestry) or institutions with their own databases (such as NYPL) and archives (NARA) will not show in the Google Image results. This is because many databases do not "speak" well to each other or Google. Note that you may need to conduct a separate search at each online repository.
- **Some companies claim domain over images they do not own—**A growing number of companies have discovered that they can download public domain images, put their logo on them, and then re-sell the images. Companies like Shorpy (https://www.shorpy.com) retouch and repair public domain images, which could be a legitimate new claim, and then offer prints for sale. Other, more nefarious companies such as Alamy, they just claim them as their own.

  Nine times out of ten, when I see an image on either of these sites, I can easily find it at the Library of Congress and download a copy—without paying anyone a cent.

3. Preserving Images

You are the caretaker of your family's photos and heirlooms. Under your watch, will be decided whether these fragile images and artifacts pass to the next generation, and in what condition. Do your best to protect them by following some simple rules.

STABILIZING AND PROTECTING

Images, letters, artwork, jewelry, and other family artifacts come in all shapes and sizes. Step one in any family archive should be to protect items from accidental damage and exposure to extreme heat and light:

- PAT PASSED — Put photos, slide, and negatives into archival sleeves to protect them from being damaged by other chemicals or abrasions. Note that terms such as "archival safe" or "archival friendly" are meaningless. Buy only products that are "PAT Passed"—which may appear in the description or bear a logo like the one shown.
- Letters, and documents should be stored in acid-free folders.
- Change regular photo frame glass for UV light-blocking glass or plexiglass and regular mats for archival mat board.
- Archival boxes provide a stable, light-free environment for contents but are expensive. If you wrap photos in sleeves and/or documents in acid-free folders, you may be able to use regular boxes. Label everything clearly so the family knows what is important.
- Consider fire-and flood-proof boxes for the most important family photos and documents.
- Many chain stores (Container Store) and photo (B&H Photo) and art supply (Blick) stores sell archival materials. You can also find many products on Amazon. Ask your family for gift cards to help offset costs!
- For advice about storing your heirlooms **CALL** specialty archival suppliers such as:
  - **Talas (Brooklyn, NY)**—talasonline.com
  - **Gaylord Archival**—gaylord.com
  - **University Products**—universityproducts.com

SCANNING AND SAVING

Whether to scan an image, exposing it to a short period of intense, but relatively safe, light has been a point of debate for some time. My own opinion on the subject is:

1) Artifacts Will Continue to Age—Whether you Scan Them or Not. Everything ages. Even a photo in an archival sleeve and light-proof box will continue to fade. Archival materials help protect items, but aging never stops—and your family photos will never be as strong and as vibrant as they are right now.

2) Scan it Once and Make it Count. Make the absolute best scan you can, at the highest resolution, and save it in the most stable digital format.

- **Scanners—**All scanners are **not** the same. A stand-alone flatbed scanner (with or without the light in the lid to scan negatives and slides) is a much better scanner than the type that comes attached to printer models. There are amazing, quality scanners for a few hundred dollars—a fraction of what they cost even five years ago.
- **Input Resolution—**You can (almost) never have too much resolution. **Scan documents at a minimum of 300ppi (pixels per inch) and images at a minimum of 600ppi.**

  But, remember that the smaller the original image is, the higher the input scanning resolution should be. This will allow you to increase the physical size of the reproduction and still get a quality print.

  For example, if your original photo is 4x5" and you wish to print it at 8x10" (double the size of the original photo), scan the original at double the input resolution = 1,200ppi (600ppi x2) so you do not lose quality when it is blown up.

All-In-One Scanners

- Made for general office use, NOT photos
- High-resolution settings do not have the depth or detail of dedicated scanners (pretty horrible, actually)
- Feeder prone to jamming and damaging originals

Sheet Scanners (not for items)

- High-speed scanners made for documents and non-fragile images
- Can scan both sides of the paper at once
- Can scan index cards
- Much better resolution and quality than all-in-one scanners

Flatbed Scanners

- High-quality scanners made for photos—what the "pros use"
- To scan slides and negatives, buy one with a light in the lid (about extra $100)
- No moving parts to damage originals
- Many archives now allow scanners
- Choose one with excellent reviews and highest PPI resolution

- **Edges and Backs—**When you scan an image, always include the edges of the photo as well as the back if there are markings on it. Edges can tell an expert a lot about the type of image it is, and there are experts that can tell the type and date of the camera from the size of the white borders! In a photo program, you can combine the front and the back scans into one image file (such as the photo of the cabin), so they stay together.
- **File Format—**Save scans as TIF instead of JPG. The TIF file format is larger than its JPG equivalent, but it is very stable and is considered "archival." JPG format compresses files which will degrade the quality of the scanned image.
- **File Naming—**When it comes to naming files, common sense is better than codes. Use "real language" to name your images—so that others can better understand what they are about and where they come from.

  Oh, and ditch the underscores. Modern naming convention allows long file names and prefers hyphens over underscores!
- **File Notes—**Most photo programs allow you to extend the boundaries of a digital scan so you can add notes about the image. If I am unsure of who a person is in a photo, I add notes about who I think they are right into the picture.
- **Protect and Share—**Protect and share your digital files, as you would the originals. At the very least, connect an inexpensive back-up drive to your computer and turn on the built-in software. You can also easily connect an inexpensive online backup plan that will save a copy "in the cloud"—protecting all your scanned images should catastrophe strike. You can also use cloud backups to share photos with family!

RIGHT: An image of "The Couple," where I am still working on identifying the sitters. Instead of keeping separate notes, I extend the image area and write notes right into the image file—so the notes do not get separated from the picture!

WEDGED FILE NAMING STRUCTURE

Specific "Common Sense" Naming = Easier sorting, searching, and finding.

Attribute in common → Unique attribute

Who is this about? - What is this about? - What is the source/reference? - Anything else?

DEMAREST FAMILY-Foreclosure (1 June 1844)-New York NY Tribune (1843-1844)-Page 01.jpg

Demarest, David-1930 US Census-NARA-Ancestry ED201 Page 12A-4660853_00028.jpg

DEMAREST, REV JOHN-1829 NYC Mortgage Partnership-NYC Records L247 B296-298-OCR.pdf

BERDAN (BRAEN), NELLIE + Unknown-X-Tintype-Original Michelle Novak Coll-1200ppi.tif

BERDAN (BRAEN), NELLIE + Unknown-X-Tintype-Original Michelle Novak Coll-300ppi.tif

BERDAN (BRAEN), NELLIE + Unknown-X-Tintype-Original Michelle Novak Coll-072ppi.jpg

Sometimes, it may help to list the date first so the files stay in chronological order

1781-BERDAN, JACOB-State vs Blanchard-Appeal-NJSA Court Docket 34000-Transcription.docx

1787-BERDAN, JACOB vs Merselles, Edo-Trespass-NJSA Court Docket 24325-Page 001.tif

1787-BERDAN, JACOB vs Merselles, Edo-Trespass-NJSA Court Docket 24325-Page 002.tif

Scanning resolution cheat-sheet

The Golden Rule = Scan original, unique materials with the highest-resolution and best quality. You can always "save as" to a lesser-resolution, smaller versions of the scan.

Facsimiles, Photocopies, and Laser Prints = Scan for Readability (OCR as well as your eyes)

Type of Item to be Scanned	Resolution	Scan Mode	Why?
Copies of Documents, Microfilm Prints, Books or Magazine Articles, etc.	150 (Minimum)–300 ppi (Baseline)	Grayscale, RGB, or Text Mode—whichever works best for your particular document	Scans from microfilm need only to be as legible as original. Microfilm is at least five generations removed from the original material (Original > Microfilm Master > Microfilm Copy > Laser Print > Your Scan). Shoot for a legible scan. But, if the scan has printed text, scanning it at a higher resolution may help an OCR image-to-text conversion be more accurate. Shoot for 300 ppi or higher.

Original Documents, Images, and Objects = Scan as High and as Best as Possible

Original artifacts should be exposed to as little light as possible to best preserve them. If you are going to scan them, make sure to make it count by scanning them in the highest-resolution and quality as possible. In general, if an object is small, scan it in the highest resolution possible.

Type of Item to be Scanned	Resolution	Scan Mode	Why?
Family Documents (Letters, invitations, report cards, marriage certificates, etc.)	300-600 ppi (Note that 600 ppi is standard at most Archives)	RGB Color	RGB will preserve the widest tonality of the original. You can always adjust later to make letters more legible or separate ink that has bled through a piece of paper from the writing on the other side.
Photographs The smaller the original, the larger the scan resolution.	600-1,200 ppi (or higher, some scanners go to 2-3x)	RGB Color (recommended) or Grayscale	In order to preserve the full-spectrum of tonality, black and white photographs can be scanned in RGB mode—which gives more tonal range (3-levels, red-green-blue) over Grayscale scanning (1-level, gray).
Slides and Transparencies, Print Negatives, Movie Film The smaller the original, the larger the scan resolution.	1,200 ppi, minimum; set scanner at maximum resolution—you'll need all the resolution you can when you blow the image up	RGB Color	Many flatbed scanners are able to scan slides and transparencies. Scan slides at highest possible resolution as you will need to blow them up considerably. Print negatives can be scanned like slides and the tonality digitally reversed to make the image positive. Alternately, slides and movies can be projected and new photos or video taken of the projection.
Dimensional Objects (Needlework, badges, jewelry, etc.)	300–1,200 ppi	RGB Color	Some dimension objects may fit on a flatbed scanner or FlipPal scanner. Other can be photographed with a god quality digital camera. Some photographers will include a penny or dime in the frame to show scale of the object.