STEADLEAF PRESS

QUIET PRACTICAL GUIDES · FREE EDITION

One Box, *Better Kept*

A free, practical field guide to making family paper keepsakes findable without risky repairs

> **A smaller, safer first step.**
> Identify up to six ordinary items, protect what you should not touch, and leave a clear record someone else can follow.

A visual decision route · A linked-item map · Five reusable field sheets
No purchase, email sign-up or special equipment required.
For ordinary household keepsakes, not professional treatment or restoration.

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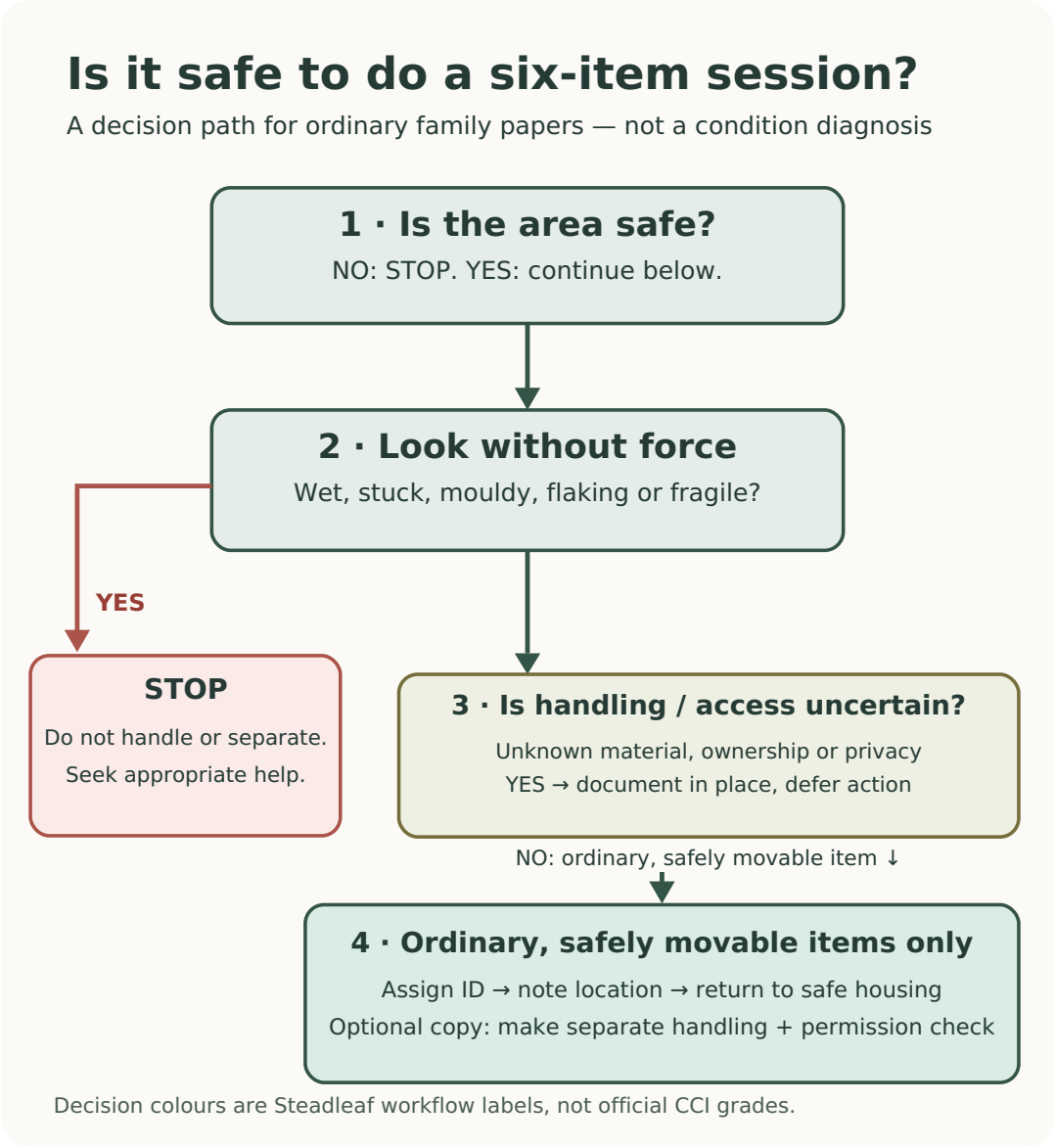
Read the first two chapters before moving any originals. Worksheets at the back are reusable; you can print just those pages.

Start here — one careful session, one findable result

This is a complete, free field guide. You can follow it privately using just paper and a pencil; no account, cloud service, scanning device, conservation chemical or purchase is required.

You do **not** need to rescue every photograph or solve a family dispute. In an hour or less, aim to leave the box with *up to six ordinary items identified*, a clear record of things you deliberately did **not** touch, and a location another trusted person could follow. If the space or item is unsafe, a **STOP** decision is a completed safe outcome.



Use the picture this way: If the *room* is hazardous, do not approach. If an *item* is newly wet, stuck, mouldy, flaking, or too fragile, stop physical handling and obtain appropriate advice. If its material, ownership, legal significance or sharing permission is uncertain, describe what can be observed without forcing and defer that action. Only then select ordinary, safely movable material to inventory. These are our household work lanes, not professional condition grades. Chapters 1–2 explain the precautions and cite CCI.

Set out: a clean dry table, pencil, a plain sheet for the index, an ordinary empty folder for robust papers if suitable, and a place to store the box away from hazards. You do not need a scanner, cloud account, preservation chemicals or a paid organizing product. If you can safely do only one item, that is enough.

Chapter 1 — Begin with six things, not six generations

The box isn't a problem because it's old. It's a problem because nobody remembers what's inside, and every attempt to organize it turns into an afternoon of difficult decisions. There is a child's drawing folded around a birthday card. An old envelope contains a letter; two more are empty. A concert program belongs to someone no longer living. You pick up one item, then another, then stop because you aren't sure whether doing anything might damage them.

Today's job is smaller: **make six items findable without trying to repair, beautify or discard them**.

Place the box on a stable, clean and dry table. Keep food and drink away. Wash and dry your hands before handling ordinary documents; severely fragile or contaminated material warrants specialist advice. Avoid exposing the contents to unnecessary bright light, and don't remove stubborn tape, flatten brittle folds, scrub surfaces, or pull apart stuck materials. The Canadian Conservation Institute warns that careless handling, moisture, light and certain storage materials can damage original documents [P1].

Before handling any item individually, take one quick photograph of the open box for a record of the starting arrangement. Then choose **six ordinary, safely movable items**. If one seems brittle, mouldy, stuck together, historically important, or sensitive because it contains private information, leave it in place and record that it needs special handling. Skipping an item is good judgment, not failure.

On a piece of paper or in the inventory sheet, write one line per safe item:

ID: BOX1-001
What: Drawing of a blue house with two trees
Who: Child's name if known, otherwise “unknown”
When: Approximate, marked *estimated* when uncertain
Condition: Folded at the corner; no change attempted
Location: Box 1 / paper folder A
Story: “We found it inside Grandmother's birthday card.”
Permission: Household record; ask family before sharing an image publicly

This is a safety-and-retrieval method, not a promise to finish six objects. One carefully recorded item—or a reason to stop—is a complete successful session. The purpose of the ID isn't to make your family archive look like a museum. It means that next year, when someone remembers the blue house drawing, they can find BOX1-001 even if nobody remembers the date. Meaning is part of the index; physical location is another part.

Next, label a temporary paper folder with a plain descriptive name. If the document can safely be placed in it, do so without folding it further. For high-value keepsakes intended for long storage, choose **material-appropriate** stable enclosures and sturdy boxes, not adhesive labels attached to originals. Acid-free paper or board often helps, but buffered and unbuffered materials are **not** interchangeable for every type of document or image; defer uncertain cases (Chapter 2). Don't assume a product's marketing word “archival” is proof of permanence; check documented material properties. CCI recommends protecting documents from light, dust, moisture, insects, and inappropriate materials [P1].

Your sixth item completes the session. Leave yourself one question—*Which six things do I want to understand next?*—but do not open a second box today. This modest limit creates a habit that is sustainable when the archive is emotional, not merely untidy.

Try it: six-item inventory

Item ID	Short description	Date known or estimated	Condition, do not repair	Safe location	Person/story to ask
BOX1-001					
BOX1-002					
BOX1-003					
BOX1-004					
BOX1-005					
BOX1-006					

Using the full companion sheet: The six-column grid is a quick first-pass index, not the final handling record. The reproducible **Six-Item Inventory & Decision Sheet** in Appendix C1 keeps the same `BOX1-001–BOX1-006` IDs and adds a dated **GREEN / AMBER / RED handling lane**, a next action, a group/event key and a precise storage location. You do not need to squeeze all those details into this small grid. Use **UNKNOWN** or **NOT OBSERVED** when something could not be checked safely; an empty fact is better than a confident guess.

One filled example, not an extra item to inventory: `BOX1-001 — drawing of a blue house; date estimated; folded corner seen, reverse not inspected; found inside Grandmother’s birthday card (observed, not proof of authorship); Shelf 2 / Box 1 / Folder A; ask before sharing.` On the companion sheet, add the handling lane and next action **only after** Chapter 2's risk check. If the paper proves friable or stuck, do not move it to fill a form. This example illustrates a record, not proof that the fictional drawing was safe to handle.

Stop points

Do not give generic handling advice for actively mouldy documents, badly water-damaged papers, legal/financial originals whose retention requirements you don't know, photographs stuck to glass, or fragile antique material. Record where the item is, protect it from further disturbance if safe, and seek fit-for-purpose specialist or official guidance. Do not paste private family letters into public AI transcription websites or share them through unrestricted public links. Check consent and private access before making or sharing any copy.

Chapter 2 — Give each item a handling decision before a keeping decision

A paper keepsake invites an emotional question first: *Is this worth keeping?* There is a safer question to ask first: **Can this item be handled by an ordinary household today?** It does not matter how tidy your system is if sorting tears an irreplaceable letter or exposes you to a mould hazard.

The three-lane table

Make three headings on a separate sheet, not on the keepsakes themselves:

GREEN — ordinary and safely movable. Examples might include a recent school program or sturdy modern greeting card that has no visible damage and can be moved without forcing a fold. You may write an inventory line, take a restrained reference photo if appropriate, and place it in a suitable protective folder. A green label means *safe to catalogue today*, not *safe to throw away*.

AMBER — protect in place; decide later. Examples include a brittle newspaper clipping, an old folded letter that resists opening, delicate chalk or pastel on a child's drawing, a paper item attached to something else, photographs of unfamiliar type, and papers whose ownership or sensitivity is uncertain. Record a brief description of the item **without changing its condition**. Do not press, unfold, brush, scan through a feeder, detach, laminate or flatten it to make the inventory more complete. If uncertain, use amber rather than green. For photographs attached to albums or glass, see Appendix A before any handling decision. The category is intentionally cautious, not a professional condition assessment.

RED — stop ordinary household handling and seek appropriate help. Examples include visible mould or suspected active infestation, newly wet materials, powdery/flaking media, dangerously fragile items, and objects stuck firmly to other objects. Do not put a red item through a home repair or digitization routine. If mould is present, avoid handling or disturbing it, keep other people and unaffected material away, and obtain conservator advice; CCI specifically advises against treating mouldy documents yourself [P1]. In addition, set aside legal or financial originals whose retention or ownership rules are uncertain. Their *administrative* status—not paper condition—makes disposal or uploading inappropriate without separate authoritative advice.

Treat these as **workflow decisions**, not a claim that a home guide can diagnose mould, authenticity, market value or conservation needs. If the contents include anything unusual, consult the appropriate qualified person before intervening.

Example: a mixed bundle

You find a 1998 festival ticket clipped to a program, a postcard with an ink note, and a brittle clipping. The ticket and program look sturdy, but the metal clip might catch the paper. Resist the urge to remove hardware just for neatness; record the pair together and defer any difficult removal. The postcard can be given its own ID if it is safely movable. The clipping is amber: make a description and leave it supported where it is. **You have progressed even if you did not sort all three physically.**

CCI identifies light, moisture, poor handling, adhesives and unsuitable storage as common deterioration factors. It recommends clean, dry hands or careful glove use, adequate support for vulnerable material, separation into suitable enclosures, and professional care for cleaning and repairs [P1, P2]. The colour lanes and examples are Steadleaf's *household decision device*, not an official CCI triage system.

Material-specific enclosure caution. Even an ordinary household box may contain material that should **not** go into the same type of sleeve as a routine letter. CCI notes that some photographic processes and paper objects are sensitive to alkaline-buffered enclosures; unbuffered, acid-free materials may be more appropriate for them. Fragile pastel, chalk or charcoal images should not be pressed into a smooth plastic sleeve, because surface particles may be disturbed. If you cannot identify the paper, image medium or safe enclosure type, use **AMBER**: describe what you see without touching the image surface, then seek advice rather than guessing. “Acid-free” and “archival” are not interchangeable promises of universal suitability [P2, P5].

Write the decision in the inventory

Use the **same Item ID** as Chapter 1 on the actual Six-Item Inventory & Decision Sheet in Appendix C1; it already has columns for the two decisions below. If you are using only the book's quick grid, write a short separate note keyed to that ID rather than guessing a missing value:

- **Handling lane (date):** GREEN / AMBER / RED — a dated household workflow judgment, not a condition certification.
- **Next action:** “catalogue,” “leave supported; ask conservator,” “check whose document this is,” or another concrete non-invasive action.

Example: `BOX1-001 | AMBER (19 Oct) | reverse NOT OBSERVED; ask about powdery marks before moving.` That entry does not alter the original item's location or imply its condition improved. If new evidence changes the decision, date a new observation instead of overwriting the earlier one. Never make a document look better merely to improve the inventory photograph.

Small exercise (10 minutes). Without opening or moving any difficult item, mark the six selected items green, amber or red and assign a next action. For a red item, a correct result is **stop**.

Chapter 3 — Sort by the story you will look for, not only by paper type

Putting every letter together and every card together sounds orderly, but it may break up the reason the contents matter. A travel postcard, a train ticket and a note may record one journey. A child's drawing inside a birthday card may belong to one family event. Separating them by paper type can sever an association that nobody will remember later.

Use **two labels, not two physical reorganizations**: one for the meaningful group and one for the item format. That lets you retrieve the material by occasion *or* by document type without pulling a fragile bundle apart.

Invent a simple group key

Give the collection a stable collection ID such as **BOX1**. Give each safely identified item a unique ID that does not depend on date or sorting order. Give related items an optional group key, such as **FAM-TRIP-2009** or **GRANDMA-BDAY-01**. These are local household labels; they do not imply an archival standard. If the event is uncertain, use **UNKNOWN-EVENT** and record *possible link* rather than certainty.

Item ID	Group key	Format	Why they may belong together	Confidence
BOX1-001	GRANDMA-BDAY-01	Child drawing	Found folded inside the card	Observed relationship
BOX1-002	GRANDMA-BDAY-01	Greeting card	Held BOX1-001 when opened	Observed relationship
BOX1-003	TRIP-UNKNOWN	Postcard	Same handwriting as a trip note	Hypothesis only

An item can have more than one search tag—for example, **birthday; grandmother; drawing**—but only one permanent physical home. The inventory tells you where it is. Duplicate digital index entries if useful; don't keep moving an original around to fit new ideas.

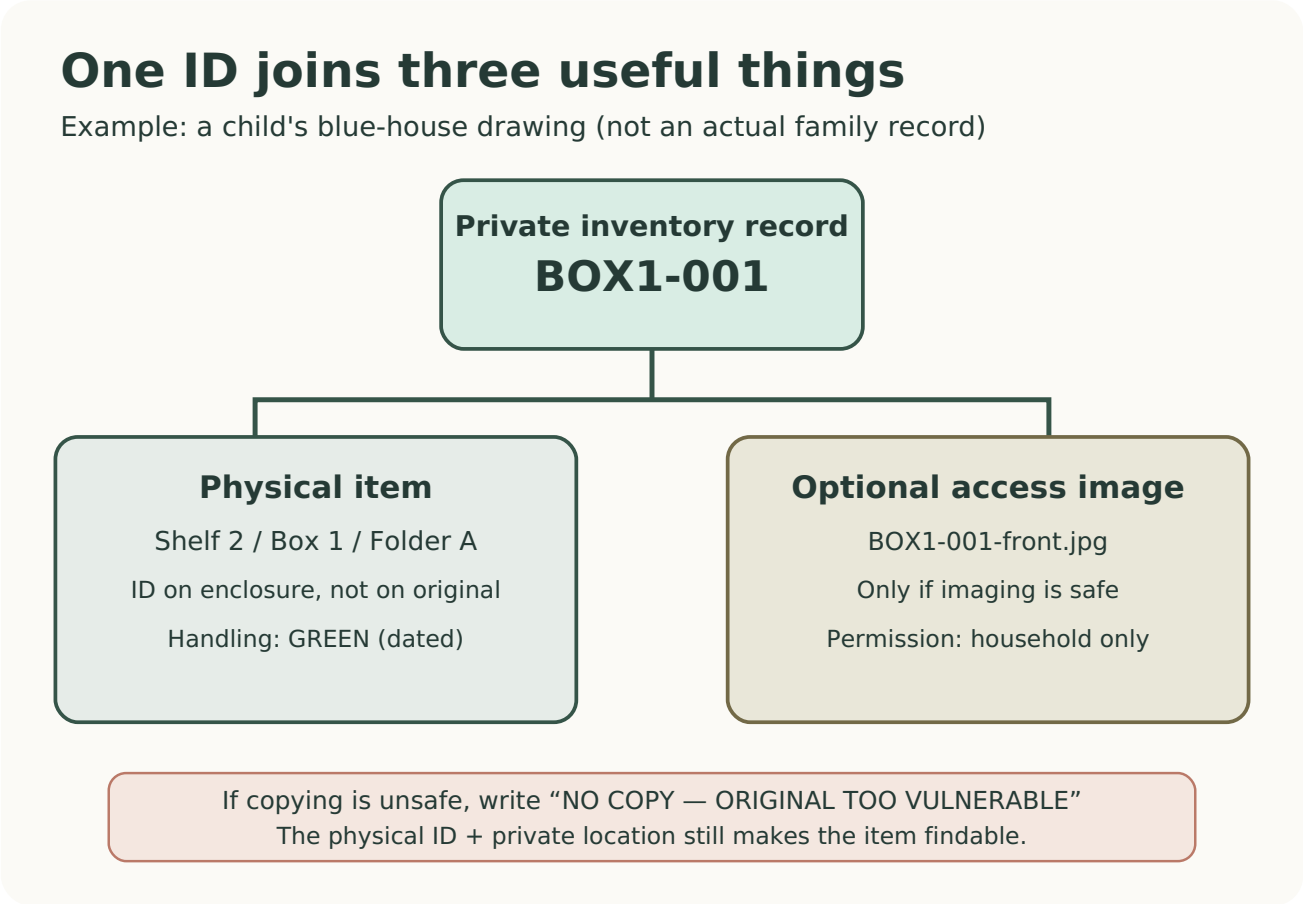
Five descriptions that actually help retrieval

For each green item, write these in plain language. Leave unknowns explicitly unknown:

1. **What it is:** “Four-page handwritten letter,” not merely “paper.”
2. **Visible identifying clue:** “Blue envelope with a small sailboat stamp.” No need to unfold damaged papers just to obtain a clue.
3. **People or event:** “Possibly sent by Aunt May” is more honest than stating it as fact.
4. **Relationship to neighbours:** “Found directly beneath BOX1-006” or “inside the birthday card.” Record the original arrangement before shifting it.
5. **Where to retrieve it:** “Shelf 2 / Box 1 / Folder A / item 3,” not “the archive.”

If personal information is visible, **do not make the description more revealing than necessary**. “Private letter, sender restricted” may be enough in a shared household index. Do not use a public cloud AI tool to transcribe identifiable family correspondence without appropriate consent and data-handling safeguards.

Follow one ID from paper to index to optional copy



This is the most useful diagram in the book. **The item ID stays the same even if its folder later changes.** Update the private location field instead of renaming or repeatedly handling the physical object. A readable access copy is a *different* object with its own sharing rules; making one is optional and needs the Chapter 4 check. If no safe image can be made, write **NO COPY — ORIGINAL TOO VULNERABLE**. The item remains findable by its ID and physical location.

Choose a label and storage location without altering the original

Write an ID on the **outside of a suitable folder or enclosure**, never on a valuable original. Record a specific shelf, box and folder identifier. Use clean, supportive housing that does not cause new bends or pressure. For meaningful originals, CCI recommends acid-free paper in contact with documents and sturdy suitable boxes; it warns that “archival” marketing alone does not verify a product's stability [P1]. Not every material suits every format or media, so stop short of prescribing a single universal sleeve.

Do not force fragile sheets upright. Avoid overstuffing. Locate the protected box in a stable indoor area away from light, water and extreme dampness. CCI advises against attics, basements and garages for important papers and notes that boxes should not sit directly on a flood-prone floor [P1]. Practical location labels should never be shared publicly when they reveal valuable or private items.

A realistic 60-minute one-box route

This is a **maximum-session template**, not a promise that a difficult box can be fully processed in one hour. The right stopping point always takes priority.

Minutes	Action	Good-enough outcome
0–10	Set up a dry table; photograph the box arrangement once if appropriate; identify privacy and red-lane concerns without disturbing them.	One overview record; hazards left alone.
10–20	Pick up to six green items, using the three-lane decision from Chapter 2.	Six or fewer safe candidates; red items not handled.
20–40	Assign IDs, describe each item, note who/when/where and any observed relationships.	Findable lines, not perfect histories.
40–50	Add an optional meaningful group key; put approved items into appropriate protective folders without changing old attachments or folds.	Folder IDs and physical locations match the index.
50–60	Photograph or scan only robust items if genuinely helpful; verify the index against the box; note one next session.	A useful exit record and a safe stopping point.

You may finish after six minutes with a complete record of one item. That is a success when the alternative is leaving a fragile object damaged. The method scales through repeated short sessions, not through racing to empty a box.

The one-minute retrieval test

Put the box away. Ask someone else in the household (with suitable access) to find “the drawing of a blue house.” Can they identify **BOX1-001** and locate its folder using the index *without searching through all the paper*? If not, improve the **location field**, not the handling of the document.

Small exercise (15 minutes). Add a group key and a precise physical location to each safely inventoried item. Test one lookup. Keep disputed histories as notes, never as unquestioned facts.

Chapter 4 — Make an access copy without putting the original at risk

A photograph of a letter can be wonderfully useful: someone can read it without repeatedly opening the old paper. But copying is **optional**, not the next compulsory step in the inventory. The physical object comes first. A badly creased, fragile, bound, oversized, stuck or flaking item should not be pressed flat, fed through a scanner, or forced open for the sake of a better image. The U.S. National Archives warns against automatic-feed scanning for fragile or valuable papers, against

closing a flatbed lid on an oversize sheet, and against forcing bindings flat [P3]. The Canadian Conservation Institute also notes that repeated scanning or photographic light exposures can damage originals [P1].

A four-question copying decision

1. Would access reduce handling? If nobody needs the image, skip the copy today. If the family often asks to read the same letter, a single carefully made access copy may help preserve the original by reducing repeated retrieval [P1, P3].

2. Is the original robust enough? Apply Chapter 2's handling lanes before setting up a camera or scanner. Green only means you may *consider* copying; it does not make every scanning method safe. Amber means stop and evaluate specialist options. Red means do not attempt ordinary household digitization.

3. Can the whole item be copied without pressure? For an ordinary flat, sturdy page that fits, a suitable flatbed may be an option, provided the lid does not crush it. For a sturdy but bound item, use a supported overhead photograph rather than flattening the spine. If safe support cannot be arranged, document its existence in the inventory instead of making the image [P3].

4. Who can see the copy? A useful family-access image is not necessarily appropriate for a public family group or shared online folder. A living person's address, medical history, disputed family story or private letter may warrant restricted access or no upload at all. Record the decision before sending a file; if permission is unclear, keep it private.

The item ID travels into the filename

Suppose BOX1-001 is a safely copied child drawing. Keep the file named in a way that connects it with the paper inventory, such as **BOX1-001-front.jpg**. If the drawing has an important reverse side, use **BOX1-001-back.jpg** rather than pretending there is only one side. A one-line entry in the inventory might say: *Copy: BOX1-001-front.jpg; access: household only; original: Shelf 2 / Box 1 / Folder A.*

Do not silently replace a source image with a cropped, cleaned-up or annotated version. If you make an enlarged reading copy, keep it separately as **BOX1-001-reading.jpg** and mark it as a derivative. What matters is that a descendant can tell the original paper, the first captured image and any edited reading copy apart. Filename and metadata practices here are simplified household adaptations; the National Archives recommends descriptive identifiers and basic who/what/where/when metadata [P3].

A seven-minute copy audit

Select **one** already-safe green item, never the most fragile item. If copying can be done without pressure or unnecessary movement, make one image. Open the saved file and confirm that edges, text and any visible reverse-side content have not been accidentally omitted. Link its filename to the correct item ID; keep the physical original. If a cropped preview is shared with family, label it as an access copy and do not overwrite the retained capture. If copying is unsafe, enter **NO COPY — ORIGINAL TOO VULNERABLE** in the inventory. That is the correct outcome.

Boundary: This is not a specification for preservation-grade scanning, colour calibration, institutional digitization, permissions law or imaging valuable artifacts. CCI and the National Archives provide the underlying handling cautions [P1, P3]; the household four-question card and file naming examples are Steadleaf originals.

Chapter 5 — Give digital copies a home, not a promise

A family archive fails if the originals are protected but the only digital images live on an old phone that no longer turns on. Digital files have their own risks. The U.S. National Archives advises keeping paper originals even after digitizing them and recommends **three copies on two types of media, including one off-site** for important digital files [P3]. The Library of Congress recommends descriptive names, a simple folder description, separated copies and periodic checks that files can still be read [P4].

Build a small directory for the six items; do not migrate a lifetime's photographs tonight:

```
Family-Box-1/
   README-where-to-find-items.txt
   Inventory-BOX1-private.csv
   Access-copies/
       BOX1-001-front.jpg
       BOX1-002-front.jpg
   Working-copies/
       BOX1-001-reading.jpg
```

The *access-copies* folder holds the first usable images. The *working-copies* folder holds labelled edits intended to help someone read or share an image. The physical storage map and handling lane stay in the private inventory. If you use a spreadsheet, protect the version containing addresses and private family notes; do not assume a link-sharing setting is private just because the folder name says so.

The copy-location check

For each image you want to retain long-term, write **where the copies live**. Example: original capture on household computer, independent backup on external drive, and a separately managed off-site copy. This is an *example*, not an endorsement of any cloud provider. The 3-2-1 rule is a practical target from the National Archives, not a guarantee against loss [P3]. If you cannot reach that target immediately, explicitly record a backup gap and fix it before trusting the digital archive to a single device. Distinct folders on one hard drive are not separate disaster-resistant backups.

A backup is only useful if it can be opened. Choose one image at random from each copy location and open it. Check that its filename still matches an item ID. Set a yearly calendar note to spot-check the archive, and review aging storage media periodically. The Library of Congress advises checking file readability at least annually and refreshing media when needed [P4]. Do not publish passwords, private folder links or full addresses on a printed worksheet; record only the *custodian* and a safe retrieval instruction.

An example of the difference between keeping and finding

Five years later, someone asks to see a postcard without opening the paper box. The private index shows BOX1-004; it lists the original's shelf and folder, the access filename, a current copy location, and a permission note. That is enough to retrieve a viewable copy while leaving the postcard in appropriate storage. An image without its ID, story and access decision would be much less useful, even if the image itself were sharp.

Try it (15 minutes). Use the inventory's first safely digitized item. Record its filename and backup locations on the Appendix C2 *Copy and Access Card*. Open the file from a second copy location. Mark either **CHECKED** or **BACKUP GAP**. Never label an untested backup as verified.

Chapter 6 — Make the box understandable to the next custodian

Many households have a drawer that only one person understands. A label reading “Mom's papers” seems meaningful until the person who wrote it can no longer answer questions. A family system should allow the next custodian to understand **what the box contains, where it is, what not to do, and whom to ask** without reading every private letter.

Put a short, non-sensitive *custodian note* with the box's outer inventory, not taped to an original. The note can state the collection ID, current custodian, date last checked, approximate content and whether another person must be consulted before sharing. Do not print confidential access codes. If someone's wishes are uncertain, write “ask before sharing”; don't create a blanket permission by implication.

The three-person access test

Imagine that you are unavailable next week. Could one trusted relative, without taking the box apart, answer these three questions from the access note?

1. **Find:** Where is BOX1-001, the blue-house drawing?
2. **Understand:** Which story is directly observed, and which attribution is only a guess?
3. **Respect:** Is this record public, family-only, permission-required or restricted?

If the answer to any question is no, revise the index and access note instead of moving the original. For a sensitive family record, it is appropriate for the test participant to be unable to view the record itself. The goal is responsible custody, not unrestricted access.

A gentle revisit schedule

Once a year, without opening delicate enclosures unnecessarily, inspect the **storage area** for leaks, pests, changes in dampness and a box at risk of falling or being crushed. Review whether the custodian and private access instructions are still correct. Check digital copies for readability as in Chapter 5. A visible physical hazard, suspected mould or new water exposure is a stop point requiring suitable advice, not a reason to begin home restoration [P1, P4].

If the family later wants to donate, publish or dispose of a historically important or legally relevant document, move that question into an appropriate legal, ownership or professional review. **This guide does not decide who owns an object or who has publication rights.** The practical gift of one box is that the next person can make a careful decision from an intelligible record instead of an anonymous pile.

Before you close the lid

For your six test items, confirm the following, in order: an ID exists; uncertain information is labelled uncertain; the handling lane and reason are recorded; the original has a findable location; any copy is linked without replacing the original; and the sharing permission is stated. You do **not** have to empty the box, digitize everything or make a discard decision to finish. Leave an appointment with yourself to catalogue another six safe items when it suits the household. A sustainable system respects the material *and* the people whose memories it holds.

Appendix A — When the family photo album will not let go

An album can be both a collection of photographs and a historical object in its own right. Its handwritten captions, page order, and even empty spaces may tell a story that loose prints cannot. **Do not make removing every photograph a goal of your first one-box session.** This appendix is an original household *decision and documentation* route, not a treatment method. CCI explains that photographic materials differ in layers, supports, and responses to humidity and handling; adhesive mounts and bad storage can create further risks [P6]. The Library of Congress cautions against sticky "magnetic" albums as long-term storage and against forcing separation when damage is likely [P7, P8].

The ninety-second decision: look first, no separating

Place the closed album on a clean, dry, supported table. If it is heavy, cracked, fragile, smells strongly unusual, shows possible mould, feels damp, or cannot open freely, **stop physical handling**. Record where it is and seek appropriate help before proceeding. Do not spray, wipe, press, warm, chill, steam, freeze, bend, pull or insert a tool under a photograph. Household internet methods that use heat, solvents, blades, dental floss or microwaves are not part of this guide; an unsuccessful attempt may cause irreversible emulsion or paper loss. Visible changes or sticking do not identify the photographic process by themselves [P6–P8].

If it opens normally without strain, observe just the page that opens easily. Are the prints in paper corners or separate pockets? Are they under a clear plastic overlay? Does the page appear tacky, or does a print seem to cling to the cover, glass, or another print? **Describe appearances, not inferred chemistry.** An album labelled "magnetic" usually refers to adhesive-backed pages, not actual magnets, but a household owner should not assume every old album is the same material [P7].

Three paths; one respects the next person

Observation made without probing	Safe household next action	Inventory lane
Album opens freely; captions and prints are visible; nothing appears adhered unexpectedly	Photograph one *already open* spread from above if permitted and without flash pressure; keep album intact.	GREEN for documentation only, not automatic approval to remove prints.
Clear overlay, sticky-looking mount, resistance, unknown photo process, or vulnerable caption	Record album/page position, note "separation NOT attempted," and do not detach. Review storage conditions and ask a photo conservator before any treatment.	AMBER.
Suspected active mould, fresh water, prints sticking to glass, flaking image, unstable broken backing or physical danger	Stop and protect people and items from further disturbance; seek conservation or suitable safety advice.	RED — specialist triage.

These colour lanes are Steadleaf's **workflow choices**, not condition grades from CCI or the Library of Congress. A green documentation action does *not* mean the album is chemically stable or that its prints are removable.

Preserve the arrangement before you change anything

For a safe-to-open album, create a single **album ID**, such as `BOX1-ALB-01`. Without removing prints, capture (1) the cover, (2) the first freely available opening, and (3) any captions visible without forcing pages. Give each image a simple file name: `BOX1-ALB-01-cover.jpg`, `BOX1-ALB-01-spread-01.jpg`. If a page number is unknown, use `page unknown` rather than guessing. Write “camera record only; no treatment” in the inventory. Keep the digital copy separate from the physical album and respect the owner's privacy permissions from Chapter 5.

An original album caption may contradict a relative's memory. Record both without silently correcting either: `Caption reads “Maya, 1968”; family recollection suggests 1969 (unverified).` Do not erase marginal notes, rearrange photographs for visual balance, or discard the backing material as though it were disposable packaging. The album and the photograph may carry different kinds of evidence.

If removal seems desirable, make an informed handoff

Ask first **why** removal is proposed: access, a fragile cover, adhesive risk, an insurance or inheritance process, or space? Some goals can be met by safe documentation and improved surroundings rather than separation. The Library of Congress photograph FAQ gives limited removal suggestions for certain situations but also directs readers to a photograph conservator when release cannot occur without harm or the album itself matters [P8]. This guide intentionally does **not** generalize those methods to unknown family photographs.

The useful handoff is concrete: album ID; approximate size and count of pages; what the photographs seem attached to; whether both sides carry images or writing; what is visibly wrong (not a diagnosis); whether there is water/mould concern; whether previous removal was attempted; and the family's reason for seeking treatment. Do not send private images publicly without permission. An estimate from a conservator is a decision aid, not a commitment to treatment.

A worked example: one album, two different tasks

A 1970s family album contains eight accessible spreads, handwritten names beside several pictures, and two prints beneath a clear overlay that appear firmly attached. The family wants to share the birthday captions with cousins. **Task A** is access: the custodian records the cover and only the easily opened spreads by overhead photographs, marks both stuck prints as `NOT SEPARATED`, and shares copies only with approved relatives. **Task B** is preservation: the custodian notes the sticky mounting structure and consults a photographic conservator before any attempted extraction. Neither task requires peeling a print tonight. The goal is a retrievable family record with less avoidable damage, not a cosmetic rescue story.

A ten-minute album record

Use the Appendix C3 **Album Observation & Handoff Sheet** to capture one album's ID, location, surface observations, page order, permission, and a clear stop/consult decision. Leave the **treatment method** field blank unless a qualified professional later documents one. If the album cannot be safely opened, the record can consist of the closed-cover description and storage location alone; *an honest incomplete inventory beats a destroyed print.*

Appendix B — When water reaches the keepsake box

A leak does not arrive with a label that says which family papers can safely be moved. One corner of the cardboard box may be damp while a glossy photograph, letter, or inked drawing inside is still untouched. The first job is not restoration. It is to **protect people, identify what has actually become wet, prevent further exposure when safe, and preserve the information someone else will need to make the next decision**. This appendix is a small-household *observation and escalation* route, not a flood-salvage manual.

Doorway check: safety before keepsakes

Do not enter standing water, approach wet electrical equipment, disturb sewage-contaminated material, or work under an unsafe ceiling to rescue a box. Follow local emergency/building guidance and seek qualified help for water, electrical, structural or contamination hazards. Family papers are never worth an injury. If you cannot enter safely, write **ACCESS NOT SAFE** with the date, location, and who was contacted; no inventory activity is expected.

If the room is safe and you can reach the box without exposure, look before touching. Is there fresh dripping, an active leak overhead, wet shelving, a damp outer box, visible mould, or water at the bottom? Photograph the scene **only if safe and permitted**, without moving or opening valuable items merely for a picture. Move unrelated *dry, easily lifted* storage boxes away from further water only when this can be done without stress or hazard. Do not take fragile originals out of protective housings to prove they are dry. Professional collection-care guidance treats damp photographs and media as vulnerable because surfaces and inks may soften or stick [P9–P11].

A three-lane observation table, not a treatment instruction

Seen without force	Record or safe next decision	Stop boundary
Water nearby; a protected inner folder and contents appear dry without opening fragile housing	Record **NEAR WATER, DRY NOT VERIFIED** unless dryness was actually observed. Arrange safe correction of the leak/location, then recheck under safe conditions.	Do not describe the collection as undamaged without inspection.
Outer box or ordinary folder feels damp; contents unexamined	Record **DAMP ENCLOSURE, CONTENTS UNKNOWN**. Reduce continued water exposure only if safe and without lifting or separating fragile materials. Seek prompt conservation or records-care guidance if originals may have become wet.	Do not squeeze, iron, heat, wipe, seal damp paper in plastic, or brush possible mould.
Original letter/photo/album visibly wet, ink moving, pages adhering, mould suspected, unknown image process, or contaminated water	Stop household handling; prioritize competent safety and conservation advice promptly. Record only what is already visible.	**Do not peel photographs, unfold saturated sheets, separate stuck pages, freeze unidentified photographs, or improvise chemical/drying treatments.**

The labels above are Steadleaf's recording vocabulary, **not official CCI condition classes or a promise that home care is safe**. Photographic material can fuse to another surface after water exposure [P9]. The U.S. National Archives specifically identifies wet or pest-affected originals as

reasons to act promptly, and stuck materials or mould as reasons to consult a conservator [P10]. Specialist salvage publications distinguish media and condition; their advanced methods cannot be turned into a universal household instruction [P11–P12].

The five-minute record that makes a better handoff

Use a single new **incident ID**, for example `BOX1-WATER-20261017`. Do not replace the permanent item IDs from Chapter 1. From an already safe observation point, record: time discovered; likely source of water if actually known; whether entry is safe; box/shelf position; exactly which surfaces appear wet; material types visible; whether a photograph or paper has adhered; observed mould or odour without probing; any action taken by whom; and contact details for the next authorized caretaker or qualified professional. Mark unknown items as **NOT OBSERVED**, not “fine.”

If multiple relatives are helping, assign one recorder so a well-meant volunteer does not open the same vulnerable album repeatedly. Keep a simple change log: `06:40 — shelf photographed from doorway; 06:55 — landlord called; contents not opened`. Note whether photographs contain private faces or sensitive writing before circulating images. This is about maintaining an accurate decision trail, not making an insurance or legal determination.

Worked example: a wet shelf, an uncertain box

At 07:10, a family notices a small stain under a pipe. The shelf itself looks damp. A shallow box of letters is next to a photograph album with no visible water on its lid. A relative wants to open both immediately, remove the letters, and put everything in the sun. The record instead says `BOX1-WATER-20261017`, location `hall cupboard, shelf 2`, suspected source `pipe above; not confirmed`, `lower shelf damp`, `box exterior damp; letter interiors NOT OBSERVED`, `photo album lid looks dry; inside NOT OBSERVED`, `no items separated`, `plumber/building contact pending`.

The responsible person handles the leak and entry hazard before anyone makes a materials decision. If safe access is established, a qualified adviser can prioritize which materials need prompt assessment. Neither a dry-looking lid nor a single successful phone photograph establishes that the original objects are undamaged. Avoid “sun drying” as a general remedy: strong light can harm photographs and paper, and forcing damp photographs apart can permanently damage an image [P9–P12].

The next-day decision: location, not miraculous repair

Once a safe response is arranged, ask three questions: **(1)** Is the water source actually controlled? **(2)** Who has been consulted about any originals that were wet or mouldy? **(3)** Where can *dry, safe-to-move* materials live away from leaks, humidity, exterior walls, and floors? NARA recommends raised shelf storage away from known flood and plumbing risks [P13]. Do not return materials to a possibly damp box or storage place merely because the surface looks clean.

If the event turns out to be an alarm rather than damage, the incident still produces value: an explicit check of storage location, a next-owner contact, and a plan for who is allowed to make a time-sensitive call. Keep the incident sheet with the inventory, **not taped to any original**. If treatment is needed, hand the observations to a conservator; do not assume a quick household intervention is equivalent to trained conservation.

Use the Appendix C4: Water-Near-the-Box Incident & Handoff Card

The Appendix C4 reproducible card has two jobs: a five-minute observation record and a next-person decision handoff. It intentionally contains **no recipe for freezing, washing, separating, mould removal, or restoring unknown originals**. A blank observation field remains blank until a real person can safely verify it. For serious loss or high-value material, contact an appropriate preservation professional or relevant institution promptly [P10–P12].

Pocket decision card: one box, one careful session

PRINTABLE QUICK REFERENCE: Print this card on an ordinary sheet and keep the *copy* beside your private inventory. Never tape it to a family original. STOP is a successful, safe decision.

1. **STOP?** Visible mould, new water damage, stuck material, flaking image, extremely brittle paper or a sensitive legal/financial original? Do not push forward; use the appropriate specialist or official route.

2. **SAFE TO HANDLE?** If yes, give it a persistent ID. If unsure, make an amber observation without disturbing it.

3. **WHAT DOES IT MEAN?** Record what it is, who may be connected, an observed story, and whether your identification is a fact or an estimate.

4. **WHERE WILL IT LIVE?** Note an enclosure and a shelf/box/folder location; don't tape labels to the original.

5. **CAN SOMEONE FIND IT?** Run a retrieval test. Stop after a few well-documented items.

Appendix C — The six-item field sheets (copy or print these pages)

These are the actual reusable forms promised in Chapters 1–6, not sample screenshots. Print or copy only what you need. Keep the filled versions with your **private** collection index, not loose among valuable originals. If an item is unsafe to handle, never move it merely to fill a box in a form. `UNKNOWN` and `NOT OBSERVED` are valid answers; a blank fact is better than an invented one. The boxes are intentionally simple so they also work with pencil.

C1. Six-Item Inventory & Decision Sheet — BOX ID: _____

Session date/time: _____ **Custodian:** _____ **Safe original location:** _____

Before beginning: Environment safe? YES / NO / UNKNOWN. If NO or UNKNOWN, stop. Any visible mould, leak, active insects, wet or adhered sheets? YES / NO / NOT OBSERVED. If YES or uncertain, do not disturb those objects. Note what you can observe from a safe position; obtain suitable advice. The GREEN / AMBER / RED terms below are *Steadleaf workflow labels*, not expert material-condition certifications.

Item ID	Observable description (do not open to identify)	Date / provenance (fact vs estimate)	Handling lane + reason + date	Exact physical location	Meaningful group key / next action
BOX1-001					
BOX1-002					
BOX1-003					
BOX1-004					
BOX1-005					
BOX1-006					

Privacy/sharing note: _____ **Unknowns or items left in place:** _____

Retrieval check: Ask a trusted person to locate item ID _____ using the *index*, not by riffling through papers. Found? YES / NO / NOT TESTED. If NO, clarify the location field. **Next session (optional):** _____

Worked example (fictional; not a handling approval): `BOX1-001 | folded drawing of blue house, reverse NOT OBSERVED | date ~1998 ESTIMATED; authorship UNKNOWN | AMBER 2026-10-20, chalk-like mark; do NOT unfold | Box 1, current original position | GRANDMA-BDAY-01 possible; ask conservator about media`. In this example, amber means leave the drawing in place; do not force a safer-looking storage transfer. A relative's story is a recollection until independently established.

C2. Optional Copy and Access Card — one card per copied item

Persistent item ID: _____ **Original location (private):** _____

Is making a copy safe and worthwhile today? YES / NO / UNCERTAIN. **Why?** _____

If NO/UNCERTAIN: `NO COPY — DO NOT FORCE ORIGINAL` may be the finished answer. Do not mark the remaining steps complete.

If YES and made without stress on the original:

Question	Record
File name with the same ID (e.g., BOX1-001-front.jpg)	
What is actually visible / omitted	
Date made / maker	
Access permission: private / family with consent / restricted / uncertain	
Primary file location (do not write a password)	
Independent backup location checked by opening the file	
Check date / result: CHECKED or BACKUP GAP	

A copied image does not transfer copyright, ownership, privacy rights, or consent. Do not publish an image of a private letter because relatives can see it. Keep the original even after digitization; an unchecked backup must not be described as secure [P3, P4].

C3. Album Observation & Handoff Sheet — no removal attempt

Album ID: _____ **Where stored:** _____ **Observer/date:** _____

Observation from safe position	Record or NOT OBSERVED
Can the album open comfortably without pressure? If not, STOP.	
Cover, labels, dates, visible page count (do not force open)	
Adhesive, stuck image, flaking surface, mould, active dampness?	
Page order / existing captions visible without disturbing	
Ownership, permission and privacy uncertainties	
Any already-available image copy or catalogue reference	
Safe next step / adviser or trusted custodian to consult	

Decision: OBSERVE ONLY / SAFE MINIMAL RECORD / STOP AND SEEK ADVICE. **Reason:** _____. **Treatment performed by household:** NONE. Do not fill an imagined professional treatment plan. Copying a handwritten caption does not prove it is correct. Old adhesive albums can be part of the family record; see Appendix A and references [P6–P8].

C4. Water-Near-the-Box Incident & Handoff Card — observations, not salvage instructions

Incident ID: _____ **Date/time/time zone:** _____ **Observer:** _____

Premises safe to enter? YES / NO / UNKNOWN. If NO or UNKNOWN, **DO NOT ENTER**; follow appropriate building/emergency advice. Do not handle contaminated water or electrically hazardous areas.

Visible fact, recorded without moving originals	Note, location, date/time, or NOT OBSERVED
Leak/rising water location; source controlled by whom?	
Which *outside* of box/shelf is visibly affected?	
Are paper, photos, albums actually wet? (Only if safely observed)	
Mould/odour, stuck materials or flaking media?	
Any action already taken by an authorized responder?	
Photos of scene made safely? Private file IDs only.	
Contacted building/safety person or conservator; advice/time	
Next responsible person, safe follow-up time	

Safe response stage: BUILDING SAFETY FIRST / PRESERVATION ADVICE REQUESTED / DRY STORAGE RELOCATION OF UNAFFECTED SAFE ITEMS ONLY / NOT YET SAFE TO ASSESS. **Do not freeze, peel, rinse, press, wipe or separate unidentified wet originals using this card.** Escalate promptly for wet/mouldy/high-value materials; see Appendix B and references [P9–P13]. An empty field documents uncertainty, not negligence.

C5. Custodian handoff and the one-minute findability test

Collection ID: _____ **Last index check:** _____ **Custodian contact method (private):** _____

Where the box is: _____ **Where this private index is:** _____

An item you can locate from the index: _____ **Specific shelf/box/folder:** _____

What to ask before disclosure: _____ **What remains physically untouched and why:** _____

Access-tested with a trusted person on: _____ **Result:** FOUND / NOT FOUND / NOT TESTED.

If NOT FOUND, repair the *index entry* before touching the item. If a family member's permission is uncertain, record an appropriate contact or “permission required,” not a blanket public-release decision. This is a custody aid, not a will or legal authorization.

Sources and editorial scope

[P1] Canadian Conservation Institute, *Basic care – Paper documents and newspaper clippings*, published 2018-11-14. https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/care-objects/paper-books/basic-care-documents-newspaper-clippings.html (rechecked 2026-10-14). Supports household paper-care risks, clean-hand handling and support, avoiding adhesives, suitable enclosures/boxes, light/moisture precautions, and conservative treatment of mould and repairs.

[P2] Canadian Conservation Institute, Sherry Guild, *Caring for paper objects* (Preventive conservation guidelines for collections). https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/preventive-conservation/guidelines-collections/paper-objects.html (rechecked 2026-10-14). Provides an expanded collection-care framework; this household guide does not reproduce its treatment guidance or professional methods.

[P3] U.S. National Archives, *Digitizing Family Papers and Photographs* (last reviewed 2021-05-26). https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives/digitizing (verified 2026-10-14). Supports copying cautions for fragile/oversize/bound originals, filename guidance, the 3-2-1 backup principle and retaining originals.

[P4] Library of Congress, *Keeping Personal Digital Records*, Personal Archiving. https://digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/records.html (verified 2026-10-14). Supports descriptive filenames, folder explanations, geographically separated copies, annual file readability checks and periodic media renewal.

[P5] Canadian Conservation Institute, *Making Enclosures for Books and Paper Objects* (Canadian Conservation Institute Notes 11/1, modern web edition). https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/conservation-preservation-publications/canadian-conservation-institute-notes/protective-enclosures-books-paper.html (checked 2026-10-15). Clarifies buffered vs unbuffered choices and why "archival" alone is inadequate. See also CCI, *Basic care – Works of art on paper*, https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/care-objects/paper-books/basic-care-art-paper.html (checked 2026-10-15) for cautions regarding friable dry media and plastic sleeves.

[P6] Canadian Conservation Institute, Greg Hill, *Caring for photographic materials* (Preventive conservation guidelines for collections). https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/preventive-conservation/guidelines-collections/photographic-materials.html (checked 2026-10-15). Explains composite photographic structures, handling vulnerabilities, sticking under high humidity and conservator referral.

[P7] Library of Congress, *Care, Handling and Storage of Photographs*. https://www.loc.gov/preservation/care/photo.html (checked 2026-10-15). Recommends supported dry handling and suitable housing; warns against sticky or "magnetic" albums, glue and fasteners.

[P8] Library of Congress, *Photographs — Frequently Asked Questions*, including stuck album pages and when to consult a conservator. https://www.loc.gov/preservation/about/faqs/photographs.html (checked 2026-10-15). Specialized advice is not treated here as a universal household removal procedure.

[P9] Canadian Conservation Institute, Greg Hill, *Caring for photographic materials* (Preventive conservation guidelines for collections), https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/preventive-conservation/guidelines-collections/photographic-materials.html (rechecked 2026-10-17). Explains wet photograph gelatin and image-layer adhesion risk.

[P10] U.S. National Archives, *Repairing Existing Damage to Family Papers and Photographs* (page reviewed 2023-07-11), https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives/repairing (rechecked 2026-10-17). Advises professional referral for stuck, mouldy or difficult-to-handle originals and prompt response to wet materials.

[P11] U.S. National Archives, *Emergency Salvage of Flood Damaged Family Papers* (1993 public guidance), https://www.archives.gov/preservation/conservation/flood-damage.html (rechecked 2026-10-17). Material-specific flood response guidance, including dangers to wet paper/photographs; this product does not generalize treatment procedures.

[P12] Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC), *Emergency Salvage of Wet Photographs* and *Emergency Salvage of Wet Books and Records*, https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/3.-emergency-management/3.7-emergency-salvage-of-wet-photographs and https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/3.-emergency-management/3.6-emergency-salvage-of-wet-books-and-records (rechecked 2026-10-17). Differentiates advanced professional methods by material and water damage; not a substitute for personal safety advice.

[P13] U.S. National Archives, *How to Preserve Family Archives (papers and photographs)*, https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives/storing (rechecked 2026-10-17). Recommends raised, dry storage away from flooding or leak sources.

Original visual aids: `HMK_Safe_Household_Decision_Route.svg` and `HMK_One_Item_Three_References.svg` are Steadleaf-original decision/record-link illustrations. They summarize the reader workflow and do not purport to be official CCI/NARA diagrams, conservation diagnoses, or proof of suitable photo treatment. Use the text alternatives above if an image cannot be viewed.

Editorial boundaries: The album observation triage, incident triage and accompanying records are Steadleaf-original household decision aids, not conservation or emergency treatment procedures. The six-item rule, three-lane table, group-key design, one-box timeline, copy decisions, handoff access tests, sample index and retrieval exercise are Steadleaf original instructional systems, not governmental recommendations. This is a general household starter for ordinary paper keepsakes, **not** professional conservation, historical authentication, legal retention guidance, mould remediation or advice for historic, high-value or unusually vulnerable objects. Do not advertise a fixed preservation lifetime or “damage-proof” outcomes.