

Family Photo Preservation Cheat Sheet

Scan, Identify, Organize and Protect Your Family Photos Before the Names Are Gone

Save Your Photos Day is celebrated annually on the last Saturday of September. Start today. A scan preserves an image. A conversation can preserve the names, places and stories that give it meaning.

ACCESS LEGEND

 FREE online View from home, usually no charge. A free account may be required.	 Mixed / library Coverage or access varies by collection, library, location, or image restriction.	 Fee / subscription Paid database, membership, order fee, copy fee, or retail book. Verify current price.
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TIP: Your first win

Choose ten photos. Contact the person who can explain them. Record their answers, capture both sides and make a second copy of the files. You can finish a useful batch before the whole collection is organized.

1. Why family photos cannot wait

Photo preservation is often the job a family historian least wants to start. Every box demands decisions: what matters, who is pictured, how to scan it and where to put it. Digital collections add duplicates, old devices and unnamed files. Grief and family disagreements can make the work harder.

Make this your most time-sensitive family history task. The person who recognizes a face gets older. Memory can fade, opportunities to talk can shrink and eventually that person will die. An unidentified photo may survive for decades while its story disappears. The deadline is the next lost opportunity to ask.

What holds you back	A practical way forward
The collection feels endless	Work in ten-photo batches. Finish the names, source notes and backups for one batch before adding another.
You want perfect equipment	Use a careful temporary phone copy to support the conversation. Schedule better capture without postponing the interview.
You fear making a mistake	Keep originals and unchanged files. Put uncertain names in the log as claims to investigate.
Sorting brings up feelings	Choose a comfortable session length. Invite a relative to help. Pause when needed and agree on the next session.
Nobody knows everything	Ask several people, including younger relatives who heard the stories. Record who supplied each detail.

Triage by what could disappear first

Put photos with living identifiers at the front of your interview queue. Put damaged originals in a separate preservation queue. Rescue files from aging devices and accounts you may lose access to. A safety problem, such as wet or moldy material, needs specialist advice before routine sorting.

TIP: A meaningful measure of progress

Count photos with an attributed identification and recoverable copies. A thousand anonymous scans can still leave the next generation with a thousand unanswered questions.

2. A repeatable photo-saving action plan

Use a small batch all the way through this sequence. A completed batch is easier to repeat than a room full of half-sorted piles.

Step	Action and result
1. Choose a question	Select ten photos and one question, such as who attended a particular wedding. Identify the best person to ask.
2. Preserve the context	Photograph the box, envelope or album arrangement before moving anything. Record the owner and how the collection reached you.
3. Assign an ID	Give each item a permanent collection-and-item number. Link the front, back, original location and interview to that number.
4. Ask and record	Arrange a short conversation. Obtain permission to record. Capture exact names, how the informant knows them and any uncertainty.
5. Capture both sides	Make an unaltered master scan or photograph of the front and back. Include mounts, borders and inscriptions.
6. Describe and test	Enter the caption, source and identification claims in metadata and a separate log. Compare clues with independent records.
7. Protect and copy	Rehouse safely. Make working, local-backup and offsite copies. Open files from the backups to test them.
8. Share and hand off	Give a relative a labeled copy and the log. Explain where originals are stored. Write the next question before closing the session.

TIP: A 30-minute start

Spend five minutes choosing the batch, fifteen minutes asking about it and ten minutes saving the recording and notes in two places. Full-resolution scanning and archival rehousing can follow. This is a suggested session plan; adapt it to the person and collection.

Keep the queue simple

Use five statuses: waiting for interview, waiting for capture, captured, documented and backed up. Add a separate urgent-care flag for unstable originals. Keep disputed identifications visible rather than treating a scan as a completed research task.

3. Interview the person who knows

Start with the most knowledgeable available person. Send a few numbered copies ahead of time. Use a quiet setting, comfortable viewing size and a recorder only with permission. Say the photo ID aloud whenever you change images.

Ask this	Capture this in your notes
Who do you recognize?	Names in the viewer's left-to-right order. Include maiden names or nicknames when the person supplies them.
How do you know?	Firsthand memory, recognition from another labeled photo, or a story repeated by someone else. Name that earlier source when known.
Where and when was it taken?	The place, event and date or date range. Ask what connects the image to that occasion.
Who took or kept the picture?	Photographer, original owner, later custodians and how the photo reached the current collection.
Who is missing, and why?	Possible relatives or circumstances to research. Preserve the response as that person's account.
What else does this bring to mind?	Let the story develop. A tangent about a neighbor, car or wedding can supply the clue you need.

CAUTION: Do not lead the witness

Ask "Who is on the left?" before proposing a name. Record "I think" and "I am not sure" exactly. When two relatives disagree, keep both statements with the informant, interview date and photo ID. Agreement alone does not establish that memories are independent.

Finish with a record you can find

Save the audio and a written summary. Record the informant's full name, relationship to the people pictured, interview date, interviewer, recording filename and relevant time marks. Read back key names and spellings. Ask whether the recording and photos may be shared, and with whom.

TIP: A follow-up that pays off

Ask, "Who else might know?" Then arrange that conversation. One relative may recognize people while another knows the house, workplace or military unit.

4. Choose a safe digitizing method

Start with the condition and format of the original. The best method captures useful detail without forcing the item into equipment that could damage it.

Material or situation	Suitable capture route
Sound, flat loose print	Use a flatbed scanner large enough for the entire print and mount. Support it while positioning. Check that the lid will not crush or bend it.
Bound album or large item	Use a camera or overhead capture setup with support. Keep the camera parallel to the page and use even lighting. Do not force an album flat.
Slides and film negatives	Use equipment intended for transmitted-light film capture, or an experienced service. Ordinary reflective print scanning is unsuitable. Resolution requirements differ from paper prints.
Fragile, cracked or flaking photo	Pause and seek a photographic conservator. A feeder, pressure plate, cleaning attempt or repeated handling can make damage worse.
Only a phone is available	Make a well-lit, steady, highest-quality copy with the entire object visible. Check focus and glare. Treat it as a temporary capture when important detail remains unreadable.
Already digital	Copy the original file from the device or account when possible. Keep its original format and metadata. A screenshot or messaging-app copy may have less detail.

Before the first capture

Prepare a clean, dry work area. Handle the housing or edges, keeping fingers off the image. Clean the equipment according to its instructions while the photograph is safely elsewhere. Assign the item ID, record its original location and keep the front and back together.

TIP: Keep the whole object

Capture the back even when it appears blank. Preserve the mount, handwritten notes, photographer imprint and album context. Make any tightly cropped sharing copy afterward.

5. Scan settings and quality checks

Setting or decision	A useful starting point
Print resolution	Follow the companion article's 600 dpi or higher starting point for paper prints. Scanners often label pixels per inch as dpi. Use genuine optical detail; an enlarged or interpolated file does not recover missing detail.
Small prints and film	Increase capture resolution when the original is small or the details require it. Film needs substantially higher sampling than a same-size paper print. Test results before committing the whole batch.
Color mode	Use RGB color, including for black-and-white and sepia prints. A practical baseline is 24-bit RGB. Preserve the tones of paper, ink and the photographic image.
Master and sharing formats	Save a high-quality, unaltered TIFF master when your workflow supports it. Use uncompressed or lossless TIFF. Create JPEG sharing copies separately. Retain born-digital JPEG or RAW originals as received.
Automatic changes	Turn off cosmetic repair, generative restoration, aggressive sharpening and filters for the master. Save any later edit under a different name and document the changes.
Front and back pairing	Use one item ID with front and back suffixes. Confirm both files exist, even when software scans both sides automatically.

Check every item before putting it away

Open both sides at full size. Confirm sharp detail, readable writing, complete edges, accurate orientation and no glare or missing shadows. Check the file dimensions and save location. A 4 x 6 inch print scanned at 600 pixels per inch produces 2400 x 3600 pixels before cropping.

CAUTION: A bigger file is not a better photograph

Changing a resolution label or using AI upscaling does not add authentic historical detail. Check the actual capture, keep the original and label enhanced derivatives.

6. Preserve the original photographs

Digitization reduces handling. It does not remove the need to care for the original. Match storage to the photographic material and its condition.

Priority	What to do
A stable location	Choose a cool, dry, stable interior area. Avoid attics, damp basements, garages, direct sun and nearby pipes or heating vents. Keep boxes off the floor.
Photo-safe enclosures	Choose suitable acid-free, lignin-free paper or stable plastic enclosures. Look for the Photographic Activity Test (PAT); a generic "archival" label is insufficient. Avoid PVC.
Support and separation	Use properly sized sleeves or folders and supportive boxes. Avoid overfilling and slumping. Store oversized or brittle mounted prints flat with support.
Safe labeling	Label the enclosure first. Keep IDs linked to the log. Avoid sticky notes, self-adhesive labels, tape, rubber bands and paper clips on the photograph.
Albums and display	Preserve album order and captions. Copy pages before considering removal. Display a reproduction where possible; limit light on originals and keep the image away from glazing.
Special materials	Glass, metal, cased images and deteriorating film need format-specific care. Do not use ordinary print-storage advice for every object.

CAUTION: Stop before a home repair

Do not peel stuck photos apart, remove firmly attached prints, apply solvents, scrub an image or flatten a brittle mount. Keep moldy, wet, flaking or deteriorating material out of a routine scanning session and contact a conservator. Do not seal damp photos in plastic.

Ask for specialist help early

Use R12 to locate a professional with photographic-materials expertise. Describe the format, condition and urgency before transporting anything. Request an assessment and cost estimate. Treatment should preserve the object and its evidence, including inscriptions and mounts.

7. Date and interpret without guessing

Begin with what the original actually shows. Keep observations, family statements and interpretations in separate fields. Several independent clues can narrow a date range; an attractive single clue can still be wrong.

Clue	How to test it
Writing on the back	Transcribe literally, including uncertain letters. Identify the handwriting when possible. A later caption may contain an error or refer to the wrong person.
Photographic process	Compare support, surface and image characteristics with Graphics Atlas (R08). A process gives a period of use; it rarely establishes a precise year.
Studio name and address	Search contemporary city or business directories and advertisements. Compare dates at that exact address. A studio imprint may help date the print or mount rather than the original exposure.
Clothing and objects	Use documented period images for comparison. Clothing can be reused, regional or ceremonial. Cars, buildings and signs can suggest the earliest possible date to investigate.
Family timeline	Compare the proposed date and place with sourced births, marriages, residences, occupations and travel. Test every plausible person rather than choosing a familiar name.
Album neighbors	Record the page sequence and neighboring captions. Physical proximity is context; it does not by itself establish kinship or that photos were made together.

CAUTION: Watch for copies and reversed images

A later reprint can show an earlier scene. Some photographic processes and reproductions can reverse the view. Separate the date of the scene, the date of the physical print and the date of digitization.

Write a conclusion with limits

Use a documented date range and explain its basis. "Possibly" and "probably" belong in captions when certainty is limited. Record contradictory clues and the next source needed. A resemblance, an AI suggestion or a repeated online caption cannot establish a person's identity by itself.

8. Make names and sources travel together

Use a permanent ID that stays the same when an identification changes. Keep the physical location, digital files, metadata and research log connected to that ID.

File or folder	Example and purpose
Capture master	FAM01_0001_front.tif and FAM01_0001_back.tif. These examples pair the two sides without assuming a name or date.
Sharing derivative	FAM01_0001_share.jpg. Put the caption and source in supported metadata and send the log entry with it.
Edited derivative	FAM01_0001_edited.jpg. Describe the edits and retain the untouched capture. Label AI-generated changes visibly.
Interview and log	FAM01_interview_2026-09-26.wav and FAM01_photo_log.csv are example names. Keep the recorder's original format; converting to WAV does not restore lost audio detail.

Minimum description for each photograph

Record the item ID; people and their positions; place; event; date or range; photographer if known; exact back inscription; current owner; provenance; original storage location; capture date; and any sharing restrictions. Attribute each identification to a named informant or record.

IPTC Description/Caption is a useful place for a readable summary. Add keywords and structured person or location fields when supported. Keep an independent spreadsheet or CSV log too. Do not force an uncertain historical date into an exact camera timestamp.

CAUTION: Test what survives export

Send one test file through your sharing method, download it and check the caption and metadata. Some services or export settings remove metadata. Preserve an independent log and the original files so the names survive even when embedded fields do not.

A reusable source-note pattern

[Collection owner], [collection name], photo [ID], [physical format and size], front/back inscription; held at [location]. Digital capture by [name], [date]. Identification supplied by [informant and basis], interview [date], [audio filename and time mark]. [Research sources and unresolved conflicts].

9. Back up, share and arrange a handoff

Use the 3-2-1 principle: three copies, on two different types of storage, with one copy offsite. Count recoverable copies, including the original digital set. A synchronized folder can transmit an accidental deletion, so check its recovery and version-history features.

Copy or task	A practical family setup
Working collection	Keep the master captures, original digital files, audio and log together on your computer or primary storage.
Local backup	Make a separate backup to an external drive. Protect it from accidental deletion and disconnect it when it is not needed, where your workflow permits.
Offsite copy	Use independent cloud backup or suitable storage held in another location. Confirm what is copied, retained, encrypted and recoverable.
A real recovery test	Restore a small batch to a different folder. Open images and audio, check the log and compare file counts. Repeat after a major change and on a regular schedule.
Ongoing maintenance	Review storage health and account access. Replace aging media and migrate formats or systems before they become unusable. Keep the inventory current.

CAUTION: Cloud storage needs an exit plan

Before adopting a photo site, test full-resolution download, metadata export and cancellation consequences. A sharing album alone is a weak preservation plan. Keep an independent set that you or your successor can open.

Give the next keeper a usable collection

Create a short README file explaining folder names, ID rules, original locations, uncertain identifications and backup locations. Name a willing successor and show that person how to restore a batch. Store access and recovery instructions securely, away from the public photo log.

Share small, labeled selections while relatives can still respond. Ask them to identify omissions or errors and record their replies as attributed claims. Keep living people's private information and interview restrictions out of public captions.

TIP: The preservation test

Could another person find one photo, explain the identification and recover its files without calling you? Try that test with a relative this month.

10. Online access versus a repository visit

A catalog entry proves that material is described. It does not guarantee that a full image is online, that the original can be handled or that reproduction is free.

Route	What to establish before you rely on it
Free online	Check whether the result includes the full image, only a thumbnail or only a description. Save the item record, identifier and permitted image together.
Mixed / library	Check collection restrictions, library eligibility and whether access works from home. Ask about unscanned photographs, finding aids and staff-assisted retrieval.
Fee / subscription	Confirm the exact collection or service, usable image quality, download rights, renewal terms and total cost. A paid plan may still exclude the item you need.
In person or by request	Contact the holding institution. Ask about appointments, registration, ID, retrieval lead time, photography rules, scan options and copy fees. This route is included under mixed access in the legend.

Make the search specific

Search a surname with a town, school, church, employer, studio, military unit or event. Browse collection descriptions and finding aids when individual people are not indexed. Local historical and genealogical societies may know donated albums or studio collections that a large database search misses.

TIP: Copy-and-adapt repository request

I am researching [person, place and date range]. Your catalog describes [collection, item and identifier]. Does it include photographs relevant to [specific question]? Are front, back and mount images available? Please advise on online access, appointments and permitted copying. Before paid work, send an estimate and delivery options. My approval limit is [amount and currency]. Please include the source identifier and any rights or attribution requirements.

Keep the reply, including an unsuccessful search or access restriction. Distinguish "not digitized," "not indexed," "not held" and "not available for consultation." Each result calls for a different next step.

11. Preservation guides for the originals

Use these free institutional guides before buying storage materials or handling an unfamiliar photographic format. Their advice concerns the original object, including its supports and surfaces.

Resource	What it offers / where to use it	Access tier
R01 National Archives: digitizing family materials	Online guide. Safe scanning, filenames and backups for family papers and photographs. Keep the physical originals after scanning.	● FREE online
https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives/digitizing		
R02 Library of Congress: photograph care	Online preservation guidance. Handling, light, environment and protective storage for family photographs. Follow format-specific cautions.	● FREE online
https://www.loc.gov/preservation/care/photo.html		
R03 NEDCC: photographic enclosures	Online technical leaflet. Explains paper and plastic enclosures, the Photographic Activity Test and material-specific storage choices.	● FREE online
https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/5.-photographs/5.5-storage-enclosures-for-photographic-materials		
R04 Canadian Conservation Institute	Online photograph-care guidance. Start here for deterioration, safe care and links covering different photographic materials. Seek specialist advice for damaged originals.	● FREE online
https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/care-objects/photographs.html		

TIP: Check the material before the supply order

A sleeve that suits a stable paper print may be unsuitable for flaking surfaces or deteriorating film. Ask what the photograph is made from and what condition it is in before choosing housing.

12. Capture, metadata and process resources

These references explain what a digital file needs to preserve and how the physical photograph can supply research clues. Use them to improve a tested workflow rather than delaying your first interview.

Resource	What it offers / where to use it	Access tier
R05 Smithsonian Institution Archives	Online digitization specifications. Documents its use of high-resolution capture, TIFF files and RGB color for both color and black-and-white images. Institutional targets exceed many home projects.	● FREE online
https://siarchives.si.edu/what-we-do/digitization		
R06 IPTC Photo Metadata User Guide	Online field definitions. Use descriptions, people, locations, dates and rights fields consistently. Your software may expose only some fields.	● FREE online
https://www.iptc.org/std/photometadata/documentation/userguide/		
R07 Library of Congress: digital photographs	Online personal-archiving checklist. Locate scattered files, organize the important images, store copies in separate places and check that files remain readable.	● FREE online
https://www.digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/photos.html		
R08 Graphics Atlas, Image Permanence Institute	Online identification and comparison tools for photographic and printing processes. Compare physical characteristics with documented examples. A process supplies a date range, not an identity.	● FREE online
https://www.graphicsatlas.org/		

TIP: Keep a small reference set

Select a few known, well-documented photographs from your own collection. Use them to test scan settings, metadata exports and naming rules before applying a process to hundreds of items.

13. Vendors, education and specialist help

Choose the service that matches the task: sorting, digital capture, storytelling or conservation. Prices, bundles and licenses can change. Verify the current total before buying.

Resource	What it offers / where to use it	Access tier
R09 The Photo Managers: Save Your Photos Month	Online September 2026 campaign with free educational resources and registration. Start with its photo-saving guidance. Check separate event terms before registering.	● FREE online
https://thephotomanagers.com/save-your-photos-month/		
R10 DIG YOUR PHOTOS!	Paid DIY printed-photo organizing kit with a sorting process, cards, video guidance and a family timeline. The manufacturer says its supplied box is not archival quality. Rehouse for long-term care. Verify current price.	● Fee / subscription
https://genealogybargains.com/dig-your-photos-review/ (affiliate link)		
R11 Vivid-Pix Memory Station	Paid software and scanner/software options for scanning, image adjustment, voice recording and story creation. Confirm the current edition, operating system, scanner compatibility, output formats and license. Verify current price.	● Fee / subscription
https://genealogybargains.com/vivid-pix-memory (affiliate link)		
R12 American Institute for Conservation	Free online professional locator; specialist consultation and treatment are quoted separately. Select Photographic Materials and your area. Agree on scope, cost and transport before sending originals.	● Mixed / library
https://www.culturalheritage.org/professional-membership/find-a-professional		

CAUTION: Before handing over originals

For any scanning service, request a sample, front-and-back capture, output specifications, item tracking, shipping arrangements and return of every original. For software, confirm that untouched masters can be retained. Compare the delivered files with your inventory.

14. Photo management and sharing sites

Choose a manageable system with readable exports. Organization, collaboration and backup are different functions; confirm how your chosen combination handles each one.

Resource	What it offers / where to use it	Access tier
R13 FamilySearch Memories	Online albums and family-photo sharing with a free account. Add identifying descriptions and source information. Check each item's visibility and obtain permission before sharing living people's information.	 FREE online
https://www.familysearch.org/en/memories/		
R14 Google Photos	Online and app-based photo organization and sharing. A free storage allowance and paid upgrades are available. Original quality preserves uploaded resolution and quality; Storage saver can compress or resize. Keep independent masters.	 Mixed / library
https://photos.google.com/		
R15 Mylio Photos	Paid photo-management plans for organizing a collection across devices you control. Compare device, storage and protection options before selecting a plan. Keep a separate recovery copy. Verify current price.	 Fee / subscription
https://mylio.com/		
R16 digiKam	Free, open-source desktop photo manager for Windows, macOS and Linux. Offers albums, tags and metadata tools. Download online; store and manage the collection on your devices. It is not a cloud-storage subscription.	 FREE online
https://www.digikam.org/		

TIP: Keep privacy and recovery separate

A private album still needs a backup. A downloadable photo may lose some descriptions. Test visibility, download quality and metadata before uploading a whole family collection.

15. Archives and library image collections

Use these collections to find photographs and test context: an address, studio, uniform, workplace or event. Similar-looking images are comparison material, not proof that your family appears in them.

Resource	What it offers / where to use it	Access tier
R17 Library of Congress: Prints & Photographs	Online catalog and many digitized images. Useful for studios, streets, occupations and comparison photographs. Some originals and larger images require a reading-room route or request. Check the collection and rights statement.	● Mixed / library
https://www.loc.gov/pictures/		
R18 National Archives: Still Pictures	Online descriptions and selected digitized photographs, including military, government and community subjects. Unscanned holdings may require staff assistance or a research visit. Use series and item identifiers in requests.	● Mixed / library
https://www.archives.gov/research/still-pictures		
R19 Calisphere	Free online collections from California libraries, archives, museums and universities. Search towns, schools, businesses and events for visual context. Follow the contributing institution's description and reuse terms.	● FREE online
https://calisphere.org/		
R20 New York Public Library: Digital Collections	Online photographs, stereographs, fashion material and other historical images. Useful for places and visual comparisons beyond New York. Check the item record, date attribution and rights before reusing an image.	● FREE online
https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/		

TIP: Save the description with the image

Record the repository, collection, photographer when named, title, attributed date, item identifier, full item URL, access date and rights statement. Keep a repository's uncertain attribution uncertain.

16. Societies and local research help

A local organization may know a neighborhood photographer, a church anniversary album or a donor whose family lived on the same street. Begin with a specific question and a clearly sourced image.

Resource	What it offers / where to use it	Access tier
R21 National Genealogical Society: organization directory	Free online locator for genealogical societies and other organizations. Search a place and ask the relevant society about local photo collections, studio research, surname files and knowledgeable volunteers. Local services vary.	 FREE online
https://ngsmembers.ngsgenealogy.org/Societies-and-Organizations-Directory2		
R22 Historical Society of Pennsylvania	Online Discover catalog includes photographs, manuscripts and family collections. Selected material is digitized. For physical holdings, arrange a Philadelphia visit or ask about remote research and copy charges.	 Mixed / library
https://hsp.org/research/discover-our-online-catalog		

Ask for the collection behind the answer

Your question	Useful follow-up
Is this the old school building?	Which dated photograph, map or building record supports the identification?
Did this studio operate here?	Which directory, advertisement or studio collection lists the name and address?
Do you hold family photographs?	Is there a finding aid, donor file, photograph index or collection description beyond the online catalog?
Can a volunteer help?	What is the request scope, turnaround and copy policy? Confirm expenses before work begins.

TIP: Make donation arrangements in advance

Ask whether a repository accepts your collection and under what terms. Keep an inventory, names, provenance and rights information with any donation. Discuss originals, digital files and restrictions before delivering boxes.

17. Facebook groups and useful questions

CAUTION: Group activity needs a current check

Public sources establish these group names and addresses. Direct inspection encountered Facebook access restrictions. Current posts, approval rules and activity were not verified. Check the live group before relying on it for help.

Resource	What it offers / where to use it	Access tier
R23 The Organized Genealogist: Facebook group	A genealogy-organization community documented by its own administrators. Use for filing, naming and collection-management questions. Login or approval may apply. Current activity and rules require verification.	🌀 Mixed / library
https://www.facebook.com/groups/organizedgenealogist/		
R24 Technology for Genealogy: Facebook group	A technology-help community documented in Thomas MacEntee's Genealogy Do-Over materials. A lead for scanner and software questions. Login or approval may apply. Current activity and rules require verification.	🌀 Mixed / library
https://www.facebook.com/groups/techgen/		

A photo question others can investigate

TIP: Copy-and-adapt community post

I am researching photo [ID], held in [collection]. I have permission to share these front and back copies. The inscription reads [literal text, with uncertain words marked]. The known place/date evidence is [sources]. My question is [one specific question about a studio, place, object or date range]. I have checked [sources]. Please explain the evidence behind any suggestion and distinguish observation from a guess.

Read the rules before posting images or requests. Avoid exposing private information about living people. Retain the commenter's name, date, wording and source link when an answer matters. Test the proposed identification against the underlying evidence.

18. AI prompts: read and date with care

Use an assistant that can inspect your supplied image. Upload only material you have permission to share. Keep original captures unchanged. Save the tool name, date, prompt and response in your research notes.

Resource	What it offers / where to use it	Access tier
R25 Coalition for Responsible AI in Genealogy	Online principles covering accuracy, disclosure, privacy, education and compliance. Its historical-image statement explains how altered images can mislead research and how to label and cite them.	 FREE online
https://craigen.org/protecting-trust-in-historical-images/		

CAUTION: AI output is a lead to verify

Check every proposed reading, date, citation and URL. Ask for the evidence behind a suggestion. Generative restoration can invent facial features and objects. Label altered illustrations, cite the source and changes, and use the original for research.

AI PROMPT: 1. Transcribe the back without filling gaps

Inspect this photo-back image [ATTACH] and item ID [ID]. Transcribe only visible text. Preserve line breaks, spelling and punctuation. Mark unreadable text [illegible] and uncertain readings [?]. Separate the transcription from explanations. Do not invent names, dates or places. List areas where a better capture would help.

AI PROMPT: 2. Build a cautious date range

Inspect the unedited front and back [ATTACH]. Known provenance and sourced facts: [PASTE]. Make a table of visible non-facial clues, possible interpretations, alternatives and verification steps. Consider clothing, objects, buildings, studio imprint and photographic process. Separate scene date, print date and scan date. Propose a range only when supported; explain its limits. Do not identify people from faces or infer ethnicity, religion or health. Never invent a historical source or URL.

19. AI prompts: organize and test claims

AI PROMPT: 3. Prepare an interview

I will discuss photos [IDS] with [RELATIONSHIP, WITHOUT PRIVATE DETAILS]. Known facts and unanswered questions: [PASTE]. Draft eight open-ended questions covering people, places, occasion, photographer, ownership and how each identification is known. Avoid suggesting the answer. Include a request for recording and sharing permission and a closing question about who else might know.

AI PROMPT: 4. Compare competing identifications

Using only these photo notes, interview statements and cited records [PASTE], compare candidates [A, B]. Build a table of claim, source, basis of knowledge, supporting evidence, conflict and next test. Preserve disagreements. Distinguish repeated family stories from independent evidence. Do not identify a person through facial resemblance. Leave the conclusion unresolved when the evidence is insufficient.

AI PROMPT: 5. Draft metadata and a portable log

Use only these notes [PASTE] for photo [ID]. Draft a readable IPTC Description/Caption and a CSV row with ID, people and positions, place, date range, event, inscription, owner, provenance, informant, interview date, source, uncertainty, rights and original location. Leave unknown fields blank. Keep scan date separate from historical date. Do not convert "about 1940" into an exact day. Do not overwrite files.

AI PROMPT: 6. Plan the next source search

My unresolved photo question is [QUESTION]. Known place, date range, studio or organization: [DETAILS]. Sources checked: [LIST]. Propose targeted catalog searches and repositories. If browsing is available, open official pages and report the full URL, date checked, access route and exactly what was verified. Otherwise label every holding and URL unverified. Never invent a collection, price, quotation or identifier.

Review the response before using it

Compare transcriptions with the image. Open every source that matters. Record which suggestions were verified, contradicted or left unresolved. Cite the actual record or informant for a genealogical claim; disclose material AI assistance separately.

20. Reusable family photo research log

Copy this page for each priority photograph. Keep the same item ID on the enclosure, image files, interview notes and metadata record.

Item and provenance	Your notes
Photo ID / current owner	_____ _____
Original location / format / size	_____ _____
How it reached this collection	_____ _____
Front / back / audio file names	_____ _____

Identification and evidence	Your notes
People / positions / place / event	_____ _____
Scene date range / basis	_____ _____
Literal inscription	_____ _____
Informant / interview date / basis	_____ _____
Other sources / conflicts	_____ _____

Completion and next action	Your notes
Capture / checks / backup test	_____
Rights / sharing permission	_____
Next question / person to ask	_____

21. Read the article. Save the story today.

Companion article: *Save Your Photos Day: Scanning and Identifying Family Photos Before the Memory Is Gone*

Resource	What it offers / where to use it	Access tier
R26 Companion article: Genealogy Bargains	Read Thomas MacEntee's Save Your Photos Day article, then schedule a photo-identification conversation with someone who knows your family.	 FREE online
https://genealogybargains.com/save-your-photos-day/		

TIP: Make the call this weekend

Work with the person who can name everyone in the photo, because they will not be here forever. Choose a manageable stack, capture both sides and record who supplied every identification. Preserve the image and the conversation together.

Affiliate Disclosure

Affiliate disclosure: Genealogy Bargains is an affiliate for the photo-organizing kit and Vivid-Pix Memory Station. Purchases through affiliate links may earn a commission.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I want to be transparent that this content, Family Photo Preservation Cheat Sheet, was created in part with the help of an artificial intelligence (AI) language model, ChatGPT Pro 6 and fact-checked using Google Gemini. The AI assisted in generating an early draft and in verifying that the listed organizations, URLs, and resources were current at the time of writing. Every paragraph was subsequently reviewed, edited, and refined by me. The final content is the result of extensive human curation and creativity. I am proud to present this work and assure readers that while AI was a tool in the process, the story, style, and substance have been carefully shaped by the author. Resources were verified as current as of September 25, 2026; organizations, access rules, and links can change, so confirm details before relying on them.