



## Heirloom, Documentation or Junk: What to Keep or Toss

---

Presented by Janet Hovorka

[www.familychartmasters.com](http://www.familychartmasters.com))  
([www.thechartchick.blogspot.com](http://www.thechartchick.blogspot.com))  
([www.zapthegrandmagap.com](http://www.zapthegrandmagap.com))  
[janet@familychartmasters.com](mailto:janet@familychartmasters.com)

Somewhere in the continuum between hoarder and compulsive purger is a happy medium for your family history. When a genealogist keeps everything, the next generation can be overwhelmed and decide to toss it all, just to save their sanity. But one person's junk could be another's family history treasure. How will the everyday stuff, the documents, and the heirlooms be passed down in your family? What can you do now to make sure the important stories are protected so that they can inspire future generations? How do you preserve the personalities of those who came before?

With a few simple steps, you can determine what is most valuable and how to best preserve it. Identify your physical treasures so that they will be valued, and decide on the best digital archive and create a digital will so that your history will last into the next generations. The intersection between the digital and the physical world is changing drastically in this generation. You can learn how to work with your family member's current interests and then project into the future to determine what to keep and what to toss.

### **QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:**

***Why do you want future generations to keep this?*** Focus on three to four generations from now. What is the legacy you are trying to preserve? Explain your heirloom with notations, photos, stories and context. Invest current family members in historical items by teaching them about their history now. If something is more important to you than it will be to future generations you can keep them in a "To throw or give when I pass" box to make things easier when the time comes. Be prepared for strong emotions when sorting through your family's treasures.

***What preserves the personality of the person?*** "External facts about a life can be researched generations later, but the inner life is irrevocably lost unless written during one's lifetime." – Nan Phifer *Memoirs of the Soul*. When deciding what to keep or toss, look at items that preserve a personality and how to capture it best. Favorite clothes, colors, collections, perfume, music etc may be more effectively preserved with photos and stories rather than the actual item. What will you lose if this item is discarded?

***Who is the correct person to inherit this?*** Photos, documents and heirlooms relating to siblings, cousins or friends are better passed down to their descendants. In three or four generations, will their direct descendants care more about the item than your own descendants? Distribute those items now to the correct family lines.

***What can I organize and explain now?*** A well-organized history with notations, photos, stories and context is more likely to be preserved and valued than otherwise. Most family members will preserve scrapbooks over a box of loose, unidentified photos. Have you explained the item that you want to preserve? How can you ensure that the story stays with the item?

***What is a digestible scope and size of the history I want passed down?*** Make sure the items you organize are appropriate for future generations. Older heirlooms, documents and photos are often valuable to us now because they are rare. Our great-great grandparents created photos for special occasions at great cost. That's why they are so valuable to us today. Curate your own most valuable items over the information overload of the mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

***Who will best preserve my history?*** Are there particular family members (even distant) who would appreciate it best? Are there family members with particular interests who will resonate with a certain aspect of your history? Are there other well-established entities that will preserve your history for later generations to find such as libraries, museums, archives, or genealogy websites? Publishing your history or contributing to a digital archive will allow it to be found by distant relatives and descendants later.

### **PHYSICAL MATERIALS:**

Physical items can only be passed down to one line of the family. As such, physical items become rarer as the generations pass. One family, may have preserved many physical heirlooms, but in four generations, only select members of the family will have something precious from great, great, great, grandmother. Carefully think about how you can preserve your history in a way that the current generations aren't burdened with it now, but there is enough for later generations to enjoy.

***Heirlooms*** are specific items that will be valuable as a reminder of those who came before. Any heirloom is only as valuable as the story that comes with it. Names, dates, photos and context are critical to preserving the history of any item. Always store heirlooms with notations about the history of the item and consider distributing heirlooms to interested family members sooner rather than later. Be sure to consult with family members about what they consider important. Although it is hard to predict what future family members will value, take into consideration current family interests to determine what to preserve.

***Documentation*** are papers and photos of genealogical value that explain and document a life. These items are best preserved digitally and/or processed into book format. Documentation can include photos, journals, address books, recipe books, calendars, yearbooks, scrapbooks, letters and etc. Choose the most important items to preserve as original heirlooms and keep them safe with protective archival storage materials. Maureen Taylor advises, "Take a good look at your pictures from the mid-twentieth century to the present. Delete digital images that are poor quality. Remember the days of double prints? Pass on those duplicates to other family members if they want them or discard the copies. You can scan the originals as a preservation copy." (see reference below.)

**Junk** is anything that your family won't value. According to Denise Levenick, the ten least wanted heirlooms are currently 1) Brown furniture, 2) China, 3) Crystal, 4) Silver-plate serveware, 5) Table Linens, 6) Collectible figurines, 7) Collectible tea sets, 8) Chafing dishes and large serving ware 9) Pianos and 10) Grandfather Clocks. (see reference below) Your family may not adhere to these current trends—be sure to talk with them about what they consider an heirloom. Lifestyles and homes are changing in this generation with diminished formality and reduced materialism. Usually, everyday household items age and become less useful to future generations. However anything can be an heirloom to a future descendant with an interest in the item.

### **DIGITAL MATERIALS: (Sometimes more fragile than physical materials)**

Digital items can be less of a burden to physically house and care for but they can still be a burden when unorganized and not planned for. And digital items are easily lost or destroyed when a subscription runs out or a bill is not paid. To avoid a digital dark age in the history of this generation, we must ensure that our digital records are accessible and useable for the future. Digital records are subject to constant change so the way we manage the records we create has to keep pace with our digital record creation. With attention and a plan, you can make a difference in your family with a digital legacy that is well preserved.

A Digital Will is a great way to organize the information you want to ensure is passed down to future generations. Digital information that is passed down can include:

- Social media, journals, blogs, email and other sources of genealogical and personal history data.
- Archives, Google Drive, Backblaze, Carbonite, hard disks and other areas where your files are stored, especially photos and genealogy information.
- Online genealogy repositories such as Ancestry and MyHeritage where the information is stays in a complete collection and can be accessed by others. DNA data that can be connected to other people.
- Family Websites (making sure the hosting service maintains the site can be critical)

Other digital information that may be less valuable genealogically but can have monetary value can include intellectual property, loyalty cards and rewards programs, audio and video collections, etc.

Email account access can be critical to resetting passwords and gaining access to other accounts.

Digital information can and should be disseminated among family members now for additional preservation whenever possible.

Digital wills should include:

1. Appointment of a Digital Executor. Your digital will can be part of your estate planning.
2. A list of digital assets with logins and passwords. Without login information, many sites do not allow access to family members. Be sure to include passwords and pin numbers for computers, phones, voicemail, bank accounts, medical ids, subscriptions, websites, encrypted

files or software and etc. Consider privacy issues such as browsing history and medical information.

3. Instructions for how digital assets are handled now and what you would like to be done for the future. Include contracts and payments that need to be made in order to prevent loss of data.
4. Consideration of the service providers privacy policies and local and federal laws. Some service providers assert that the dead have a right to post-mortem privacy citing cases of identity theft after death. Privacy laws and unauthorized access laws in some locations may trump service provider agreements. Consult a lawyer who understands what the laws are in your area and can create a plan for your digital assets.

Some current popular website policies include:

1. Google: designate an Inactive Account Manager at <https://support.google.com/accounts/answer/3036546>
2. Facebook: designate a Legacy Contact at <https://www.facebook.com/help/1568013990080948>
3. Twitter: without a password, executors can only delete an account.
4. Amazon and Apple: only allow assets to be used by the original account holder.
5. Ancestry: a first degree relative can request to take over as site manager.
6. MyHeritage: a first degree relative can request to take over as site manager.

Finally, in my opinion, the most important thing you can do now to preserve your family history is to teach your family about their past and invest them in preserving it with you. When your family cares about their history, they will make good decisions for the coming generations. Make it fun and interesting, make it part of your lifestyle today and your legacy will be well preserved.

Further Reading:

- <http://www.loc.gov/preserv/familytreasures>
- “Heirloom Handout” by Denise May Levenick Family Tree Magazine May/June 2018 issue available at <https://www.familytreemagazine.com/store/family-tree-magazine-may-june-2018-print-edition>
- “Shredding the Joy: What we Lose When De-Cluttering Goes Too Far” by Maureen Taylor, Saturday Dec 1, 2018 archived at <https://virtualgenealogy.org> See also <https://maurentaylor.com/shredding-the-joy>
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital\\_inheritance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_inheritance)

*Janet Carpenter Hovorka* received a B.A. in History and a Master's in Library and Information Science from BYU. She and her husband Kim own [Family ChartMasters](#) the official printers for every major genealogy software and database company. As such, every day she saves people all over the world from taping charts together and helps them design beautiful art pieces to show off their research. Janet is also the author of the [Zap The Grandma Gap](#) book and workbooks to help people connect with their family by connecting them to their family history. Janet shares her passion for the nutrition family history brings to the soul on her two blogs and has written for numerous genealogy publications. She is a past President of the Utah Genealogical Association and teaches library science, business and genealogy courses at [Salt Lake Community College](#).