

HOW TO HANDLE HISTORIC ITEMS



Historical materials, such as documents, photographs, paintings, objects, and diaries, need to be handled with extreme care. Many old materials are one-of-a-kind, rare, and/or extremely fragile. It is a special privilege to be able to handle these items from an historical organization's collections. These items are of great value to future researchers, historians, and students. Taking excellent care of the items and following the historical organization's procedures are extremely important and will help prevent damage to them.

Maine Historical Society recommends the following guidelines to use when handling historical materials:

- **Before handling items, prepare your workspace.** Remove all food, liquid, and extraneous items like bags and coats from your work area.
- **Know exactly where you're going to put the item.** The less you have to pick up and put down the item, the better.
- **Use a pencil,** never ink, when writing around historical materials.
- **Know and understand the historical organization's policy about handling their materials.** Dirt and oil from your hands can permanently damage items. Some organizations require you to wash and dry your hands before handling materials to help remove natural oils and dirt that could permanently damage the items. Most historical organizations require you to wear white cotton gloves when you're handling items. Most of the time, whether you wear gloves or not depends on what type of item you're working with. Working with paper, glass, or fabric, for example, all require different techniques. Follow the directions of the historical organization and ask questions if you're not sure.
- **Pick up, carry, and work with only one item at a time.** Use two hands when moving any item.
- **When moving documents and photographs,** support them from their center to avoid damage to the edges.
- **When moving large objects,** be sure to have enough people to help lift and hold the object securely.

- **Do not stand paper items on their edge.** Paper, especially from the 19th century, is extremely brittle and can crumble at a touch.
- **Keep the item over your work surface** or table as much as possible so that if it does drop, it doesn't have as far to fall.
- **Do not press on books**, such as diaries and journals. If the binding of the book seems tight, it may crack if placed on a scanner. You might consider putting a dark fabric over the scanner to block extra light, or you may want to take a digital photograph instead of scanning the book.
- **Your arms, clothing, bags, laptops, and books have dirt and oil on them** that can damage the items.
- **Do not stack anything on top of historical materials.**
- **Immediately report any damages made to an item.** Although it may be embarrassing, it's often easier to correct or prevent more damage to an item if the accident is reported immediately.

MORE INFORMATION

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