



Custodians for Future Generations, Part Two: Improper Storage

I recently bought an old-time collection. The collector died more than three decades ago. The collection passed to his son, then grandson. All are – or were – well-educated and successful men.

More than a decade ago, I wrote an article in these pages titled “Custodians for Future Generations” in which I revealed instances of valuable collections – collections worth six and seven figures – literally being thrown into dumpsters or put at the curb for trash pickup by indifferent or uninformed heirs. Objects in the trash included rare gold coins that anyone with a modicum of sense should know have intrinsic value, not even factoring in rarity. I also disclosed instances of valuable research and pertinent articles being separated from covers, another tragedy. This brings me to yet another sort of disaster – mishandled storage.

Most collectors understand they are custodians of the material they own for future generations of collectors. Hopefully, we have left proper written instructions for heirs and spoken to spouses. But do we properly care for our collections? Do our loved ones understand how important it is to properly house our stamps, covers and other treasures that translate into dollars and cents, as well as preservation for future generations? Do they even know where it all is?

I first saw photos of the stamps and covers in the collection for which I was negotiating. I gave the agent, a philatelic and numismatic appraiser, a range of what I thought I'd be able to pay, subject to personal examination. They then sent it to me, understandably hoping for the high end of the range.

I learned long ago that you can't judge condition solely from scans or photos. The most appalling example of this was a couple decades ago when, similar to this instance, I had seen photos and flew to examine and hopefully buy the collection. I was particularly enthusiastic after seeing that some of the covers were quite rare, commanding five-figure catalog valuations.



Superb corner margin block of twenty stamps, original gum and never hinged. **Figure 1.**

Imagine my total shock when I found they were mostly stuck to shoddy photo albums with double-sided adhesive tape! The rarer they were, the more likely they were to be affixed tightly by the offending tape. The inexpensive covers were not so “carefully” affixed.

Some predictably showed damage from the adhesive seeping through to the front of rare covers. I did buy the collection, but it was a lot of work – mostly for a conservationist, not to mention a strain on my wallet for restoration.

This more recent collection was almost as bad. The original collector bought from Caspary, Emerson, Dietz, Judd and others. He painstakingly enclosed the stamps and covers in what could be described as “philatelic baggies” with black backgrounds and adhesive covering the entire back to secure them to the album pages. All four sides were sealed, and many curled up at the edges. *[Editor’s Note: These notorious mounts were ironically known as “PM Protective Mounts” and, over time, these sealed items shrink significantly.]*

With permission before the attempt, I opened the mounts as best I could so I could properly evaluate the contents. This was not as easy as slitting open an envelope. The stamps and covers were mostly encased edge-to-edge of each item, making extraction incredibly difficult with the continual threat of damaging the contents.

Figure 1 shows a lower-left corner block of 20 of the Confederate 2¢ engraved Andrew Jackson “Red Jack” (Scott CSA 8) described on the album page as a superb corner block with original gum and never hinged. No more. You may be able to see the encasing plastic has curled at the edges on all four sides, producing a rumpled mess. The block was stuck fast to the backing, necessitating careful soaking.

Figure 2 is an example of another 2¢ Red Jack in this collection with glazed gum, caused by improper storage. Scanning does not show the problem and, even held to oblique light, it does not fully show the extent of the glazing, as shiny as a mirror.

In humid climes in summer months, stamp gum can liquify and stick tight to a stockbook or album page. With more modern mounts, the gum may not stick to the shiny back (such as Hawid™ – out of business in 2021), but the damage is still done. The liquified gum, when it dries, redistributes to an ultra-smooth glaze. Yes, it is worthless.

Confederate lithographed issues are almost routinely soaked to save them. Otherwise, the gum damages the stamps and, in some cases, they literally crack and fall apart if the gum is not removed. The cracking is more from age than glazed gum, but either way it is best to get rid of the gum on these stamps. So much for never hinged. Those looking for never-hinged Confederate lithographed issues are looking for regummed stamps. Don’t.

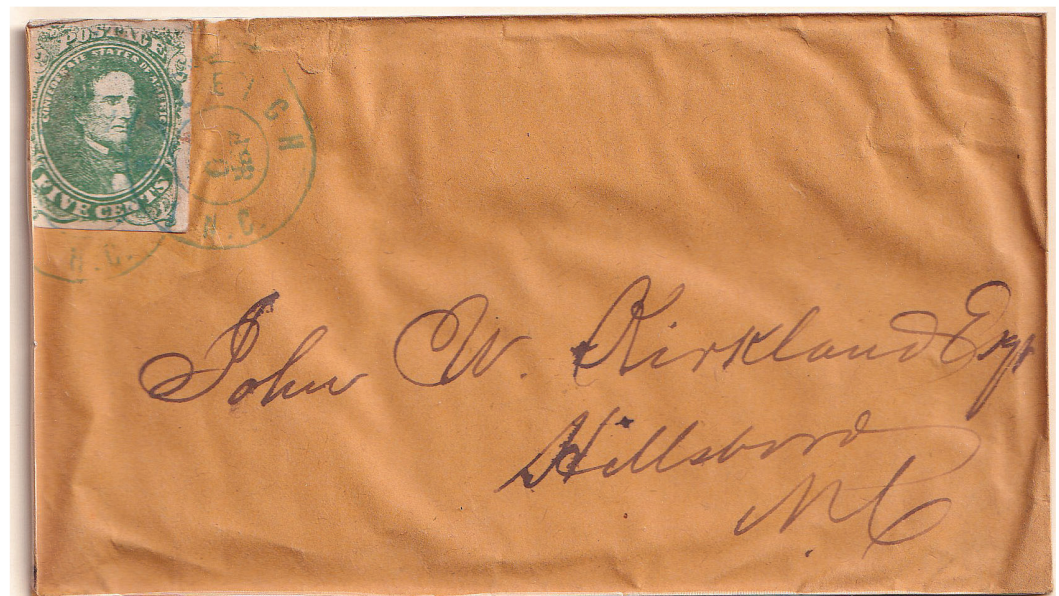
Figure 3 is described on the page as a superb 5¢ green



Figure 2.

Jefferson Davis (Scott 1) on cover. It is squished in what I’m calling a baggie mount. My bet is it did not start out in the collection looking like this. Improper storage has rendered it a crumpled mess. The fully-enclosed mount shrank over time and crushed both stamps and covers.

Not only are the mounting bags offensive, but the collection had been stored flat with all the weight of the album pages compressing; clearly it was also exposed to heat and humidity.



Superb five cent green neatly tied by blue cancellation reading Raleigh, North Carolina. (Stamp is a bright green). Figure 3.

After I bought the collection, the agent told me that the owner had thrown away the moldy album covers. Fortunately, I did not see evidence of mold on the pages, but many covers and stamps were stuck to the mounts. Paper needs to breathe.

You may easily understand how gummed stamps could be stuck to the pages, but you may be wondering how or why covers would. Think about how envelopes are made. They have gum on the flaps to seal them. That gum, when compressed or in a hot and/or humid environment, can stain covers, stick to mountings and turn to foxing. With Confederates, covers were often turned inside out so there was gum on both sides of the envelope – an invitation to fuse to the mount.

What is foxing? It is an age-related process of deterioration that cause spots and browning. It is often seen on old books, documents, currency and other paper items. The name derives from the reddish-brown foxlike color of the stains. This comes from chemicals used in the papermaking process. It is unappealing and hurts the value.

Figure 4 is an example of foxing from the same collection.



Figure 4 (above).

Figure 5 (below).



Notice that the black mount has been cut along the top and sides to try to extract the block from the mount (these are seller photos). I was told in advance this block was stuck to the mount. The seller did not attempt to remove the other items, a perilous undertaking once this was encountered. Fortunately, this block had a bit of room along the edges to use tongs or a utility knife to attempt removal. Not all did.

The 1¢ orange John C. Calhoun typographed (letterpress) stamp (Scott 14), displayed in Figure 5 from the front, clearly reveals the black mount where it is stuck on the tissue-thin paper of this stamp. It is at top in the traditional hinging position. Letterpress Confederate issues were printed with fugitive ink, meaning the ink will run if soaked. If you dare, you can watch the stamp image disappear in front of your eyes or turn fuzzy if you soak it. Consequently, these issues are valued in catalogs at roughly half of those with original gum. Lithographed and engraved issues are valued the same with or without gum.

Handling Your Collection

Storage: Collections should be stored at a temperature less than 65 degrees Fahrenheit and a relative humidity of between 55% and 60%.

Albums: Whether stamps or covers, store your albums on end, not flat, where the weight of paper can compress and damage stamps and covers.

Light: The best lighting for your collection is none; complete darkness is best. Obviously, we can't work on our material in the dark, but bright lights should be kept to a minimum and sunlight avoided.

Plastics: Never use PVC, which can ooze plasticizers and form acid as it decomposes. Use polyester such as Mylar™ and Melinex®. This is what libraries and museums use. If you value your collection, use it. Yes, it is expensive. When you buy something from a dealer, transfer it to your own polyester mounts unless you know the mounts or cover pouches are polyester.

Gum: If stamp gum becomes too dry, and especially if thickly applied, it may crack and damage the paper of the stamp or cover. Removal of gum is in the best interest of certain stamp issues.

Tape: If you must repair a tear on a cover or file-fold splits, use document-repair tape such as Lineco™ that does not damage what you are repairing. Clear tape such as Scotch™ Brand is death for philatelic and other paper objects. Archival document tape is a transparent mending tissue that is pressure sensitive, non-yellowing and with a neutral pH.

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Paper: The paper of some of our treasures is acidic. The problem can be addressed by de-acidifying the item, but it is recommended that this be undertaken by a professional conservator. Send every cover you buy to a professional? No, but with very expensive and rare items, you might consider it.

Physical Damage: Always wash your hands before handling your collection. Our hands have oils that can be damaging to stamps and covers. Stamp tongs were invented for a reason. Libraries and museums use special gloves when handling documents. Avoid photo-type corners, which can hurt covers – polyester mounts are fine. Store your collection away from children, rodents, vermin or other potential sources of damage. Simply be careful. One of the most heart-wrenching stories I ever heard was from a collector who inadvertently shredded an expensive cover on his exhibit page. He thought it was the color photocopy. It wasn't.

In Conclusion

This article does not purport to instruct you in all the fine details of storing your collection, but it will give you some check points. More often than not, they are just common sense. The most important thing to remember is that, once you are satisfied you are properly caring for your collection, leave written instructions for your heirs. You may have told your spouse, but what if he or she doesn't sell that collection and it ends up with nieces and nephews or the bank? Be a good custodian for yourself, your family and future generations of collectors. ☐



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your stock online • remind them what
your specialties are • alert them to an upcoming
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