



## Rescuing Water Damaged Photos

Suddenly, the inconceivable happens: The perfect moments you've captured in photographs are damaged as a result of a spill, a broken water pipe or a flood. Panic strikes—can these photos be saved?

Take a deep breath...there is hope, but you have to act fast. It is possible to stop the damage to your prints and minimize your losses if you act immediately and not allow your photos to deteriorate further. Photos that are wet more than 2-3 days can become blurry, grow mold and disintegrate. Stacks of photos will stick together.

Don't give up! You have some alternatives. You can clean, dry and scan your paper-based, water-damaged prints immediately using a Flip-Pal mobile scanner. Or, if your time is limited, you can rinse your prints, blot the excess water and scan them (being careful to wipe you scanner glass between each use). Then, using wax paper as separators, place them in freezer bags, store them in the freezer and dry them in the future. A little known fact: freezing delays damage.

Based on our recent involvement with the recovery of over 20,000 damaged photos as a result of Superstorm Sandy, here are some tips and resources to help you rescue your paper-based, water-damaged photos. In addition, there are several ways to prevent the likelihood of being plagued with wet photos again.

***Floods are the  
#1 most common  
natural disaster in  
the United States.***

Source: National Flood  
Insurance Program (USA)

### **Prioritize and Organize**

- **Check for duplicate copies first.** Do you have a relative or friend who has duplicates of the damaged photos that you can copy? Do you have undamaged negatives of the photos? Have you previously scanned the images and stored them on a flash drive or on DVD/CD in a safe place? For damaged photos that are one of a kind, select your most important photos to recover and restore first.
- **Get professional help.** Consider contacting a professional conservator for immediate assistance via the American Institute of Conservation (AIC) (<http://www.conservation-us.org>). Important irreplaceable historic photos, ambrotypes, daguerreotypes and tintypes require special handling; our directions are for paper-based prints only. Also check your homeowner's insurance policy for coverage on photo restoration.

## Practice Safety

Before starting the photo cleaning process:

- **Protect yourself.** Use a surgical mask, disposable gloves and wear old clothing to protect against bacteria and molds when cleaning and handling wet, dirty photos.
- **Use good ventilation.** Open windows and set up a fan for circulation in both the flood cleanup area and the work area where you will be cleaning and drying photos.

## General Cleaning

- **Try less invasive recovery methods first.** Minor spills can be removed by applying uniform pressure with blotting paper, un-printed newsprint, or non-textured, plain paper towels.
- **If necessary, place your dirty, wet photos in a tub of clean, cold water.** Distilled or purified spring water is safest and preferred. Tap water can be used; the chlorine in it may prevent the growth of mold and fungus. *Note: if the water that damaged your photos contained any chemicals or salt, it may react to the chlorine in tap water and further damage the photo. Test a photo of lesser importance to see how it reacts to the cleaning process.* Avoid running water directly on the photos, since doing so can damage any photographic emulsions used to develop the print.

If stacks of photos are stuck together, do not try to pull them apart immediately. Place the entire stack in water.

- **Photos in plastic sleeves or albums present several options.** Remove the protective sleeves and treat each photo separately. Commercial adhesive solvents are available for prints that cannot be easily removed from pages.

***Note:** If photos are adhered to the protective sleeves, use a Flip-Pal mobile scanner to scan over the top of the sleeve and capture your images. Contact a professional conservator for more direction on how to salvage these photos.*

You may also try to treat the whole page by rinsing it, gently cleaning the images and then freezing the page for future treatment. For album pages that have important information on them, consider cutting the pages from the album with the photos removed and air dry them for future reference when you remount your prints on a fresh album page.

- **Clean photos gently while in the water.** Very gently agitate the photos to remove dirt from both sides—do not rub them! If needed, brush off dirt, mud and debris using a soft bristle brush, foam craft brush, a cotton ball, or soft cotton cloth. Be careful not to brush off the image. *Note: If photos are*



*In December 2012  
Flip-Pal mobile  
scanner created  
“Flip-Pal Cares” to  
help with photo  
restoration efforts  
in the wake of  
Hurricane Sandy  
relief efforts in New  
Jersey. [Click here](#) for  
more information.*

*deteriorating, do not attempt to remove dirt.* Refresh the water as you clean. Place cleaned photos in another tank of clean cold water for final rinsing.

- **Gently separate photos stuck together.** Gently separate as many photos as you can while they are submerged, then return them to another water tub for more soaking. Repeat the separate/soak process as needed. You may find that the top and bottom prints in the stack are damaged, but the photos in-between will be fine. If some photos are still stuck together, you can freeze the stack and work on separating them another time.

For extended soaking, change water frequently. Keep water cold by using ice or placing the container in the refrigerator to reduce further softening. Remember to refresh the water daily. Check the prints often to see how they are responding. The less time they spend in water the better to avoid further deterioration.

- **Remove cleaned, rinsed photos from the rinsing tub.** Plan to remove and air-dry the photos as soon as possible. Otherwise, plan on placing them in freezer bags to dry them in the future. Touching only the photo edges or using film-developing tongs, allow excess water to drip off and get ready to freeze them or begin the drying process.

#### **Freezing**

- **Use wax paper as separators and freezer bags for storage.** Place prints in a container in your freezer for 24 hours or more; they can remain in the freezer indefinitely. If you have decided to try to freeze album pages, place them in a container with wax paper or butcher paper in-between pages and stand them vertically on their spine so that they freeze upright. Best results occur when removing pictures from pages, but you can freeze almost any document or book to delay damage.

#### **Drying Newly Cleaned or Frozen Photos**

- **Prepare your work area.** Make sure that your work area for drying photos has a clean surface, good ventilation and does not invite dust. Run a dehumidifier when your prints are thawing and drying. Use a fan to circulate the air. Keep the room below 68°F to reduce mold growth.
- **Hang photos to dry.** Dry your photos by hanging them on a clothesline with plastic clothespins, or clip them on rubber bands looped on a clothes-drying rack. Pick a safe corner of the photo border to secure to the drying location. The Superstorm Sandy photo recovery team in Union Beach, New Jersey used binder clips on the spokes of bicycles to dry pictures and clipped several pictures to shoes laces hung vertically from hangers. Magnets were also used to dry photos on the exterior of cars.

- **Dry photos using window screens.** Photos can also dry by placing them face up and flat on plastic or aluminum window screens, or on screening material mounted on a frame or between sawhorses. As well, you can dry photos on flat surfaces by laying them on photo blotting paper or unprinted newsprint that should be changed as it gets wet, or on plain, non-textured paper towels at least one inch larger than the photo.
- **How to prevent curling.** There are two recommended methods:
  1. Use a moist sponge to dampen the backside (not the picture side) of the photo, then place the photo between two pieces of acid-free paper, or use photo blotters and put it under a flat, heavy object for a few days.
  2. Dampen the back of the photo and place weights on the corner edges.
- **Drying takes time.** Air drying time may range from a few hours to a week depending on the paper quality. Because of the large volume of damaged photos, the Superstorm Sandy photo rescue team loosely placed small groups of dried photos standing vertically in buckets or shallow trays until they could be scanned.

## Scanning and Other Prevention Measures

- **Scan photos now, not later!** Scan your dry, flattened photos with a Flip-Pal mobile scanner. You'll have digital images that you can copy to a flash drive, portable hard drive, or DVD/CD and then place in a safe deposit box or other safe location. Don't forget to take advantage of the many free online photo storage websites.
- **Future-proof your digital images.** Some storage media begins to degrade within 5-15 years. You may need to transfer your digital images to new storage devices every 3-5 years, though some types of DVD's such as M-DISC™ will not suffer data degradation for several centuries.
- **Safeguard duplicate photos and negatives.** Even with proper digital storage, you should store duplicates of your favorite originals and other photos in a windowless, interior closet away from pipes. Place photo-safe, waterproof containers in a cabinet on high shelves. Avoid storing in places like basements, attics and garages, or any location with fluctuating temperatures.
- **Use photo-friendly storage containers.** The Image Permanence Institute recommends that photographs be kept in containers conforming to ISO Standard 18902 that will not chemically react with photos when wet. Check your containers for standards like 'acid-free,' 'lignin-free,' or PAT-Passed (ISO 14523).

The tips above are suggestions only. Your success in salvaging your photos will depend on how long they were initially wet, the content of the water they were exposed to, the type of photographic paper involved, the extent of damage and how they are scanned and stored.

This e-guide was developed by various team members at Couragent, Inc., makers of the Flip-Pal mobile scanner, who are passionate about preserving family photos and documents.

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*While every precaution has been taken in the preparation of this e-guide, the publisher and authors assume no responsibility for errors or omissions, or for damages resulting from the use of the information contained herein.*

## Resources

- **5 Tips to Help your One-of-a-Kind Family Photographs**  
<http://practicalarchivist.com/top-5-tips-preserve-photos/>
- **A Basic Guide to Caring for Your Vintage Photos – Water Damage? Don't Panic**  
<http://www.hollywoodfotofix.com/handbook/waterdamage.php>
- **A Consumer Guide for the Recovery of Water Damaged Traditional and Digital Prints** (pdf file)  
[https://www.imagepermanenceinstitute.org/webfm\\_send/314](https://www.imagepermanenceinstitute.org/webfm_send/314)
- **American Institute of Conservation (AIC)**  
<http://www.conservation-us.org>
- **Documented Legacy**  
<http://www.documentedlegacy.com>
- **Emergency Salvage of Flood Damaged Family Papers**  
<http://www.archives.gov/preservation/conservation/flood-damage.html>
- **Flood Damaged Photographs**  
<http://www.kodak.com/global/en/service/faqs/faq0700.shtml>
- **M-DISC™ 1,000 year storage solution**  
<http://www.mdisc.com/>
- **Science of Scrapbooking: Preventing and Responding to Water Damage** (pdf file)  
[http://www.imagepermanenceinstitute.org/webfm\\_send/384](http://www.imagepermanenceinstitute.org/webfm_send/384)
- **Tips for Salvaging Flood Damaged Photos, Papers and Books**  
[http://genealogy.about.com/od/photos/a/water\\_damage.htm](http://genealogy.about.com/od/photos/a/water_damage.htm)
- **Tips for Salvaging Water Damaged Photographs**  
[http://www.yesteryearmemories.com/water\\_damaged\\_photos.asp](http://www.yesteryearmemories.com/water_damaged_photos.asp)
- **What Archival Really Means**  
<http://practicalarchivist.com/what-archival-really-means.html>
- **Preserving Your Family Photographs by Maureen Taylor**  
<https://www.createspace.com/3428940>