

A photograph of a cluttered attic with a wooden floor and a vaulted wooden ceiling. The room is filled with various items: a large stack of books, a wooden crate labeled 'LOVE BRAND', a small house-shaped box, a baseball glove, a suitcase, and a large metal container. The lighting is warm and natural, coming from a window on the left.

# What do I do with all This Stuff?

By Nancy Mann  
Jackson

When her mother moved to a skilled nursing facility, Nancy Richardson, a member of the Governor Nelson Dewey DAR Chapter, Maple Bluff, Wis., was tasked with cleaning out the house where her mother and late father had lived for decades. The house was filled with heirlooms that had been in the family for generations and had belonged to Richardson's parents, grandparents, other family members and close family friends.

“I was paralyzed by the sheer volume of possessions as well as the difficulty of the task,” Ms. Richardson says. “Further complicating the matter was the fact that I’m a history buff and a genealogist,

so I naturally wanted to keep as much as I could, or at least keep it in the family for posterity.” Ms. Richardson says she was finally able to move forward when she realized that by hanging onto everything, she was doing a disservice to the original owners. Instead, she focused on placing each item with “the person who was next in line to love it,” rather than on her desire to keep everything nearby.

### Getting Through the Heaps

While history buffs may want to spend time documenting and cataloging every item, sometimes that’s not possible. Thomas MacEntee, founder of High-Definition Genealogy, has learned that firsthand through cleaning out the homes of relatives who lived a long distance from his current home. “When the goal is to get the house sold or rented and cleaned out quickly, I recommend a triage method, and try to avoid making any important decisions on the spot,” he says.

That triage method involves setting up a system, such as designating a room for charity donations, a room for items to keep and a room for items to sell. Take pictures using a smart

phone or digital camera, in case you need to show items to family members who are not nearby. MacEntee also recommends keeping a log of each item and what you are doing with it. His logs have helped solve family disagreements years later.

Even if you need to complete the job quickly, remember to look everywhere, MacEntee says, especially if the owner of the home suffered from Alzheimer’s or dementia. “This means go through books to look for money or jewelry,” he says. “My mother used her gold bracelets as bookmarks. Every wadded up tissue might hold a treasure.”

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### Deciding What to Keep

While you may initially feel like you can’t part with certain items, eventually “the realization comes that you can’t save everything,” says Noreen Alexander Manzella, a member of the Mary Clap Wooster DAR Chapter, New Haven, Conn., who cleaned out her sister’s house after her death last year. “Take a photo of any of the possessions that you feel you must let go but that still have meaning. Make a photo book of those items so that they can be viewed forever.”

For many descendants, decisions about what to keep are based more on sentiment than value. Ms. Richardson says she limited herself to just a few “truly precious” items that had meaning for her, such as her mother’s charm bracelet and her parents’ wedding rings. Mrs. Manzella, whose sister was a knitter, cross-stitcher and needlepointer, kept all of her

sister's handmade pieces, as well as a collection of Christmas ornaments family members made for each other.

For items that are not sentimental, consider hiring an appraiser. "Just because something is old does not make it valuable," says Helaine Fendelman, owner of New York appraisal firm Helaine Fendelman & Associates. However, she says, "It's better not to throw anything away until one knows the value."

### Keeping It in the Family

For items you are unable or unwilling to keep, make them available to other family members first. "People should find homes for items like Grandma's collection of letters and photographs," says Debbie Boe, owner of Debbie's Historical and Genealogical Services in Chaska, Minn. "And when it comes to family heirlooms that have a known financial value, other family members should be notified when the items might be put up for sale."

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For instance, Sandy Johansen, a longtime genealogist and member of the Denver DAR Chapter, Denver, Colo., used Facebook to keep the extended family up to date on her mother's estate, posting pictures of items that needed good homes. Rather than selling collectibles for rock-bottom prices in a struggling economy, Ms. Johansen ended up giving many items to younger family members who were just starting their own households, she says.

### Finding New Homes for Treasured Items

After offering items to family members, Ms. Richardson made efforts to give individual pieces to people for whom they had meaning. For instance, she gave her father's hunting knife to a neighbor who had previously hunted with her dad and now hunts with his own sons. She gave her father's set of antique farm tools, which had originally belonged to an elderly neighbor, to a local museum, accompanied by a history of the neighbor's family, which had been in the area for generations. She gave her mother's china, which had been in the family for at least two generations, "to a cousin who loves dishes as much as my mother did," she says.

After sharing with family and friends, Ms. Richardson decided to sell the rest of her parents' items, but she worked to ensure that they landed in the right hands. "I trusted that the right people, meaning those who would love the items as much as my parents, would simply show up," she says.

For instance, she listed a complete set of discontinued Oneida flatware for sale online. A man from Joliet,



Ill., contacted her because the set was the same pattern as the first set of flatware he and his wife bought when they married. She told him the set had belonged to her mother, Kathryn. When they met in person and he bought the flatware, "he told me that his wife's original intention was to buy the set to replace pieces that were missing from their set but, after hearing my story, they decided to save the entire set of flatware for their daughter, also named Kathryn, when she becomes an adult in honor of my mom," Ms. Richardson says. "I'm still touched by their gesture."

Ms. Richardson also sold a set of children's books online that she and her siblings had read over the years. "The right person showed up in the form of a woman who had enjoyed these same books as a child, but was having difficulty finding them for her grandson because they are no longer in print," she says. "The grandson's birthday was coming up, and she wanted to give him the books as a gift. I sold her the books, and she sent me a photo of him with the books at his birthday party."

While her method of seeking people who would enjoy and cherish each item was time-consuming, "the reward has been huge," Ms. Richardson says. "I know that I honored my parents and my ancestors to the best of my ability by sharing their stories and items with the people who seem to be the next caretakers of their possessions."

If you don't have the time or inclination to hand-pick buyers for individual items, Boe recommends finding a local

# Hidden History

**When cleaning out** the homes of parents or other relatives, keep in mind that you're likely to find documents that can offer clues to the family's past. "Papers, letters, cards—all can have value," says Helaine Fendelman, owner of New York appraisal firm Helaine Fendelman & Associates. "They may be sentimental for the family and historical for the town, village, state or country."

For instance, when Sandy Johansen, a longtime genealogist, cleaned out her mother's home in Massachusetts, she and her sister uncovered "a number of wonderful breakthroughs in our family history," she says. "While we did not find priceless family heirlooms, we did find a treasure of information buried in records."

One item, a funeral guest book, eventually provided the link between previously unrecognized surnames and narrowed the dates of death of many ancestors. A box of old photographs led to the discovery that a Swedish ancestor became a member of the U.S. Navy and served in Honolulu at the time of the Hawaiian revolution. Behind the top photographs in broken picture frames in the attic, Ms. Johansen found a tintype and an officer's photograph of her great-great-grandfather, Gideon Parker Simmons, who served as regimental quartermaster of the 92nd Colored Infantry from Connecticut. "The house was eventually cleaned out in December 2010, but the wealth of materials I gathered and saved continue to provide more and more information as I have time to research and catalog them," Ms. Johansen says.

Avoid discarding such important historical items by keeping "original documents pertaining to life events, and any similar items pertaining to your ancestors, such as Grandma's collection of letters or photographs," says Debbie Boe, owner of Debbie's Historical and Genealogical Services in Chaska, Minn. "If you aren't interested in the letters or photographs, you should check around to see if other family members might want them or be willing to take them until a new caretaker is found.

Some things just need to stay in the family for the next generation."

If your ancestor held political office or some other prominent role in the community, check with the local or state libraries or historical groups to see if they are interested in old letters, campaign signs, brochures or collections of newspaper clippings, Boe says.

auctioneer you trust to hold an estate sale. "Work with a dealer you trust, but arm yourself with information first so you don't get rooked," she says. "The person who appraises should never be the buyer." (See *American Spirit's* January/February 2012 issue for an article on ensuring a successful appraisal process.)

To clean out his aunt's house in Chicago, MacEntee used a service that did the work, priced items and sold them for 40 percent of the final proceeds. "They cleaned out a two-bedroom home, held an estate sale, acquired all permits, did the advertising, hired a trash hauling service, donated items that didn't sell to charity, and within 30 days we had a clean home ready to sell," he says. "It was well worth the 40 percent cut."

For items you don't want to sell or for which there is little market, consider donating them to a worthy cause. MacEntee recommends giving household items, toys and unwanted furniture to shelters for women and children. You also can donate items to a church or library for their own rummage sales. 📧

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Nancy Mann Jackson's story about the significance of the 1940 Census records appeared in the May/June 2012 issue.

