

Time Capsules

In 1795, when Samuel Adams and Paul Revere placed a brass box filled with artifacts inside the cornerstone of the Massachusetts State House, they set in motion a particularly American way of sending messages to the future: time capsules have been popular projects for historical societies, religious and civic organizations, school children and scientists ever since.

But the popular notion that burying newspapers and coins will preserve them for future generations is mistaken. In fact, burying artifacts and documents almost guarantees their loss or destruction. This time capsule discovered 116 years after it was placed in the cornerstone of a state hospital is typical of many:



Artifacts from Allentown State Hospital time capsule

The contents, carefully chosen by historically-minded people, had been ravaged by water, heat and pests. Very little survived.

Time capsules can be exciting messages to the future, but careful planning is needed to produce a stable time capsule that preserves interesting and useful artifacts for the generations to come. As you plan, think about the following:

Potential Hazards

Water. The greatest hazard to any time capsule and its contents is water. Whether the capsule is buried or laid inside a cornerstone, water is a tenacious invader and will almost certainly find a way to enter the capsule. Time capsules are best preserved in a cool, dry environment. The best way to achieve this is to “bury” the capsule high above the ground: inset it into an interior wall of your building behind a prominently labeled, locked door, for instance; place it in a glass-covered museum-type vitrine, perhaps in the lobby of your building where visitors can see it and excitement can mount as the opening day approaches.

No matter where you put the capsule, make sure the container is well-suited to the task:

- A container that closes tightly, will keep out light, dust, and water.
- If using plastic, certain types are better, such as uncoated polyethylene or polypropylene.
- Glass, aluminum or stainless-steel cans with screw top lids work well.
- If not near water and with paper materials, a lignin- and acid-free box with a tight lid may be used.

Location. The second greatest hazard to time capsules is that their location is often lost. One hundred years is a long time to keep track of where you put something. Some of the suggestions, above, about preventing water damage are also excellent suggestions for keeping track of your time capsule. Some institutions have inset their time capsule in an interior wall framed with glass so that the existence of the capsule and its location remain obvious. While digging a time capsule out of the ground evokes images of uncovering buried treasure, what could be more exciting than seeing the time capsule day after day locked behind a window as the clock slowly ticks down to its opening day?



A time capsule embedded in the wall of a church lobby and labeled with a plaque.

No matter where you put your time capsule, you should find a way to mark its location to prevent loss. Increasingly, websites are keeping track of time capsules. The International Time Capsule Registry is a good place to register your time capsule: <https://www.itcsoc.org/register-a-time-capsule>. Another place to register a time capsule is with the Not Forgotten Digital Preservation Library: <https://libraryrecords.not-forgotten.com/>.

Once you've taken care to ensure that the time capsule will not be destroyed or forgotten, make sure its contents do not prove to be a disappointment.

What to include

Think carefully about what to include in a time capsule. Consider what will inform and delight the people who eventually open it. Many time capsules include copies of newspapers or coins that were in use at the time the capsule was created. These are likely to be of interest in the future, but assuming that the capsule is to be sealed for 100 years it is unlikely that the newspapers and coins of your day will have entirely disappeared during that time, so don't stop with those alone; try to include other things that are unlikely to survive that long. Something that will certainly disappear

over a 100 year period or more, are the thoughts of the people who are alive today—their aspirations and fears; their memories of family and community; their life experiences; favorite recipes or descriptions of how people spend a typical day. Can you capture these on a durable medium that won't require special equipment to read—for example, on paper (see below)? If so, you will send a message to the future that might otherwise be lost for all time.

Consider adding a wide variety of voices and experiences to your time capsule unless the purpose of the capsule is very specific to one group. Make an effort to include the thoughts and experiences of the underrepresented people in your time capsule; it is very easy to represent only the history of people who look and think like the people creating the capsule. And try to include contributions from people of different age groups—the messages that young people send to the future will differ from those sent by older or middle-aged adults.

DO:

- Use a sturdy, water-resistant container (see information below)
- Use pencil to label items; inks may run.
- Use acid-free paper whenever possible, with carbon-based inks.
- Include black and white photographs in addition to any color prints (they survive better).
- Include materials that have a long life: ceramics, glass, stone objects.
- Place coins and metal objects in polyethylene/polypropylene containers to extend life.

DON'T:

- Include food items, plants or living things. Pressed flower/plants may be preserved if freeze-dried and placed in a Polyethylene bag.
- Use newsprint (it degrades quickly)
- Seal anything with adhesive tapes.
- Avoid PVC (polyvinyl chloride), vinyl or polyurethane items, which can deteriorate over time. Often dolls and other toys are made from these materials.
- Avoid cloths can off-gas sulfur and will decay rapidly, such as wool, silk and nylon.
- *Do not assume that electronic media--* jump drives, video or cassette tapes and CD-ROMS—*will be readable in 100 years.* A time capsule created as recently as the 1970s—just 50 years ago—might easily have included examples of the following storage media in use at the time: floppy disks that were 8-inch; cassette data storage tapes; and by the mid-1980s that capsule might have added a data disk, a compact floppy, and a microcassette, as well as countless other media that came and went as rapidly as the hardware and software could develop. You could, of course, include the equipment required to read such media in your time capsule, but that is no guarantee that it will work by the time the capsule is opened.

Where to find time capsule supplies

- **University Products, Inc.** has archival supplies for both paper and three dimensional objects. <https://www.universityproducts.com>
- **Future Packaging & Preservation** sells time capsules made of stainless steel and preservation supplies and kits for safe archival long term storage of documents, photos, ephemera & artifacts. <https://www.futurepkg.com>.
- **Michaels** also has some acid-free boxes, papers and tissue that can be used in time capsules. <https://www.michaels.com/>
- **Heritage Time Capsules** has many types of capsules for storing items. <https://www.heritagetimecapsules.com/collections/all?gclid=Clqas72woMQCFYY8gQodS7YAN>

Need more help?

Contact ra-staterrecordsmgmt@pa.gov or www.PAStateArchives.org