

Dating Old Photographs

Presented by Karen Wallace Steely

Tools of the Trade

- Flat plastic ruler with inches and centimeters
- Nitrile gloves and a suction cup for cased photos
- Photo-safe pens and pencils
- Magnifying glass & calipers
- Scanner or digital camera
- Photo-enhancement software



Step-by-Step Photo Analysis

- Carefully examine the photo – front and back
- Date the method, type, and details – then date the setting, clothing, & hairstyles
- Identify people, relationships, & occasion
- Use a worksheet to document:
 - Physical characteristics of the photo
 - Markings or writing on the photo
 - Photographer information
 - Identification possibilities

Photographic Methods



Dating Daguerreotypes (1840 to 1860) and Ambrotypes (1854 to 1881)

- **Type of Case**
 - Leather 1840-1850
 - Gutta Percha 1850-1860
- **Mat Style**
 - Earliest are paper
 - Plain brass mats 1840s
 - Ornate brass mats 1850s
- **Photographer's mark**
 - Research dates photographer was in business

Dating Tintypes (1855 to 1940s)

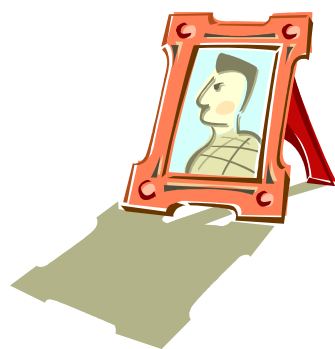
- **Early Tintypes**
 - Thick and heavy - usually have a photographer's mark
- **Gem size**
 - 1" X 1" or smaller after 1863
- **Later Tintypes**
 - Chocolate colored after 1880
- **Plate sizes**
 - Full plate 6-1/2 x 8-1/2
 - 1/2 plate 4-1/4 X 5-1/2
 - 1/4 plate 3-1/4 x 4-1/4
 - 1/6 plate 2-3/4 x 3-1/4
 - 1/9 plate 2 x 2-1/2

© Copyright 2024 by The Past Matters®, a registered service mark of The Past Matters LLC.

All rights reserved.

Dating Cartes de Visite (CDVs) (1859 to 1905)

- **Thickness of Card Stock**
 - 0.01" – 0.02" 1858-1869
 - 0.02" – 0.03" 1869-1887
 - 0.03" – 0.04" 1880-1900
- **Card Corners**
 - Mostly square before 1870
 - Mostly rounded after 1870
- **Border Lines**
 - None 1860-1863
 - 1 or 2 thin lines 1863-1869
 - 1 wide & 1 thin 1863-1869
 - Wide lines 1874-1880



Dating Cabinet Cards (1869 to 1914)

- **Type of Photo**
 - Albumen print 1869-1890
 - Gelatin silver after 1890
- **Thickness of Card Stock**
 - Early cabinet cards are thinner - later cabinet cards are thicker
- **Color of Card Stock**
 - Cream, sepia, white or off white most common in early cabs
 - Black, red, green or dark grey mount most common after 1880
- **Photographer's imprint**
 - Middle-era cabs are much more ornate (1880-1895)

Dating RPPCs (Real Photo Post Cards) (1901 – 1960)

- The ability for private individuals to create post cards was granted on 24 December 1901
- Are genuine photographs, not printed, and most are gelatin-silver prints
- Divided back cards appear after 1 March 1907 and white borders appear about 1915

Dating Candid / Amateur photos (roll film cameras) (1888 to the Present)

- Earliest are Eastman's roll film and are circular, 2.5" in diameter
- Kodak "Brownie" introduced in 1900
- Required natural light, so are usually outdoors
- Poses are more amateurish and frequently show a more everyday-life view
- Common Print Sizes:
 - 1920s – photos generally rectangular
 - 1950s – photos generally square

Websites

- Langdon's List of 19th & Early 20th Century Photographers <https://www.langdonroad.com/>
- Dating Old Family Photos <https://blog.billiongraves.com/how-to-date-old-family-photos-find-gravestones/>
- Craig's Daguerreian Registry <https://craigcamera.com/dag/>
- 19th Century Photography <http://plaza.ufl.edu/ahardin/cgs3066/proj2/hist.html>
- Date an Old Photograph www.cartes.freeuk.com/time/date.htm
- How to Identify and Date Real Photo Vintage Postcards www.playle.com/realphoto/

© Copyright 2024 by The Past Matters®, a registered service mark of The Past Matters LLC.

All rights reserved.

Bibliography of Photographic & Fashion History Sources

- Brown, Robert O. (Robert Oliver). *Collector's Guide to 19th Century U.S. Traveling Photographers*. Forest Grove, Ore.: Brown-Spath & Associates, 2002.
- _____. *Nineteenth Century Portland, Oregon Photographers: A Collector's Handbook*. Portland, Ore.: R.O. Brown, 1991.
- Chapman, Jeff. With assistance from Family Chronicle. *Dating Old Photographs, 1840-1929*. Toronto, Ontario and Lewiston, N.Y.: Family Chronicle, 2000.
- Clark, Gary W. *19th century photographs KwikGuide*. [Carlsbad, Calif.]: PhotoTree.com, 2013.
- _____. *20th century photographs KwikGuide*. [Carlsbad, Calif.]: PhotoTree.com, 2016.
- _____. *Cased images & tintypes*. [Carlsbad, Calif.]: PhotoTree.com, 2013.
- _____. *Real photo postcards KwikGuide*. [Carlsbad, Calif.]: PhotoTree.com, 2013.
- Family Chronicle and Maureen Alice Taylor. *More Dating Old Photographs*. Toronto, Ontario and Lewiston, N.Y.: Family Chronicle, 2004.
- Frisch-Ripley, Karen. *Unlocking the Secrets in Old Photographs*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Ancestry Publishing, 1991.
- Gernsheim, Alison. *Victorian & Edwardian Fashion: A Photographic Survey*. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Pub., 1981.
- Harris, Kristina. *Victorian Fashions in America: 264 Vintage Photographs*. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Pub., 2002.
- Mager, Alison. *Children's Fashions of the Past in Photographs: An Album with 165 Prints*. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Pub., 1978.
- Mautz, Carl. *Biographies of Western Photographers: A Reference Guide to Photographers Working in the 19th Century American West*. Nevada City, Calif.: Carl Mautz Pub., 2018.
- Newhall, Beaumont. *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present*. Completely revised and enlarged edition. New York: Bulfinch Press, 1982.
- Nickell, Joe. *Camera Clues: A Handbook for Photographic Investigation*. Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1994.
- Pols, Robert. *Family Photographs, 1860-1945*. Genealogist's Guides Series. Richmond, Surrey: Public Record Office, 2002.
- _____. *Looking at Old Photographs*. Bury, Lancashire, England: Federation of Family History Societies, 1998.
- _____. *Photography for Family Historians*. Bury, Lancashire, UK: Federation of Family History Societies, 1998.
- _____. *Understanding Old Photographs*. Witney, Oxfordshire: Robert Boyd Publications, 1995.
- Pols, Robert, and Federation of Family History Societies. *Dating Old Photographs*. 2nd edition. Newbury, Conn.: Countryside Books, 1993.
- Severa, Joan L., Nancy Rexford, and Claudia Brush Kidwell. *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion, 1840-1900*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997.
- Smith, Kenneth L. (Kenneth Lee). *Focus on the Past: A Genealogist's Guide to Photography*. Orting, Wash.: Heritage Quest, 1992.

© Copyright 2024 by The Past Matters®, a registered service mark of The Past Matters LLC.

All rights reserved.

Photo Identification Worksheet

1 Photo Medium	8 Type of Enclosure
2 Size of Photograph	9 Photographer's Imprint
3 Description of Photo	10 Photographer – Location & Dates of Operation
4 Subjects and Captions	11 Provenance
5 Clothing – Time Frame	12 Photo Medium – Time Frame
6 Clothing – Description	13 Occasion and Setting Description
7 Possible Subjects with Life Spans	14 Genealogical Records Used