HOW TO DATE OLD PHOTOGRAPHS

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Where to begin?

Start with what you already know!

- ✓ Consider the source of the photo. Who gave it to you? Who owned it before you?
- ✓ Use previous research -- census data, birth/death dates, family documents, wills, Bible records, and newspapers, etc. -- to frame your investigation

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Next? Analyze the Photo Elements

- What **T**ype of photo is this? What film processes were used to create it?
- Is this a special **G**athering or family event?
- Is there any **I**nformation on the photo that would tell the name of the photographer, studio, or time period?
- Do the **F**ashions -- costumes, hair, accessories, props & backdrops, etc. -- indicate a particular time period?

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A Timeline of Early Photography

Source: Nickell, Joe. *Camera Clues.* Lexington, KY. University Press of Kentucky, ©1994.

1839 – 1860	Daguerreotypes
1855 – 1865	Ambrotypes
1856 – 1945	Tintypes
1854 – 1925	Carte de Visite
1866 – 1930	Cabinet Prints
1902 – 1940	Postcards
1885 +	Roll-film (1889 -1st Portable Camera)
1991 +	Digital photography goes public

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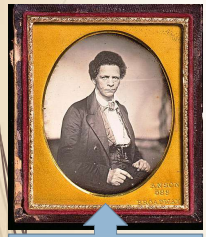
Earliest Types of Photos/Processes

DAGUERREOTYPE (1839-1860)



Rufus P. Anson – NYC
589 Broadway, 1853+

- Copper plate coated with silver and other chemicals
- Mirror-like surface, best viewed at an angle
- Glass, brass mat, & velvet pad, framed in a case
- Use city directories or Craig's Daguerreian Registry to date ← studio (*craigcamera.com/dag*)

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AMBROTYPES (1855-1865+)

- Encased glass, coated in a glue-like liquid then treated with light-sensitive chemicals like silver nitrate to bring up the image
- Often backed with dark varnish or cloth

TINTYPES (1856-1945)

- Processed like ambrotypes on a thin sheet of iron, sealed with varnish
- Could be encased, but not essential
- Popular at battlefields, carnivals, beaches, etc.

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CARTE DE VISITE (1854-1925)

- Small, albumen-coated paper photo, mounted on a 2.5" x 4" card
- 8 images/duplicates per glass plate

CABINET CARDS (1866-1930)

- 4.25" x 6.5" card-mounted, paper photos often with decorative edges
- Larger size = higher quality images
- Between 1886 and 1895, it was popular to include the name and/or location of the photographer's studio

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POSTCARDS (About 1900 – 1925)

- Photo image developed onto cardstock then imprinted with a postcard back
- Pre-1902, USPS allowed only an address on the back of card
- Look for postmark and the postage value to help date the photo!

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THE AGE OF ROLL FILM & BEYOND

CHANGES IN…		
1885	1889	1900
Film →	Cameras → (esp. Kodak)	$1 "Box Brownie" - photography now available to the masses

- Commercial (professional) product is still best, but …
- Personal photography improving
  - 1920s – 35 mm lens
  - 1930s – Single-lens reflex /SLR lenses
  - 1936 – 35 mm color film
  - 1948 – The Polaroid 95 (instant) camera
  - 1975 (1981 to the public) – Digital photography

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Gatherings & Special Events

- Work "in committee"
- Look closely for elements – clothing, seasonal decor, landmarks, etc. – for clues that indicate the location and type of event

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Photo Detective #1

Analyzing Gatherings & Events

What events might be captured in these photos?

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A Word about Weddings

- Look for tell-tale accessories & props
  - Rings, veils, flowers, bows, tiaras (~ 1901)
  - "Jumping the Broom", chuppahs, etc.
- Colors: White dresses (1840+)
  - New trends, like brown (1870s & 1880s)
  - Blue = fidelity
  - Purple = in honor of Civil War dead

- One-time wear dresses were impractical. Solutions? Alter and recycle or hand down through the generations.

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Hidden in Plain Sight:

Information on the Photo

- Name of studio or photographer
  - Follow-up with a city directory or simple Internet search
- Type of finish
  - Color of card
  - Style of corners, photo borders, and lettering
- Civil War tax stamp (1864-66)
  - Usually cancelled with the photographer's initials & a date

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Finally Fashion:

Costumes, Hair, & More

WOMEN	
Dress	Length & cut of skirt, bodice, and sleeve
Hair	Up? Down? Curls? Bangs?
Accessories	Jewelry, gloves, bags

MEN	
Jacket	Length, cut (especial lapel), and trim
Shirt Collars	Folded over? Standing up?
Hair	Facial hair (more than hair cut)
Accessories	Neckties, hats, pocket squares

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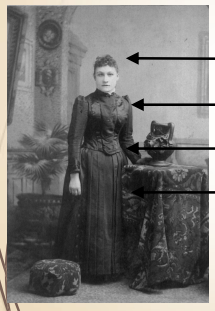
19th Century Fashion: Women



- Hair – up/down, curls
- Style of sleeve
- Bodice style
- Style and cut of skirt

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19th Century Fashion: Men

- Hair style (including absence or style of facial hair)
- Style of collar
- Neck tie style
- Jacket type
- Lapel

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Early 20th Century Fashion

	WOMEN	MEN
Early 1900s	Emphasis on curves, tight waists, and hems to the ground. Big hair, big hats.	High, starched collars
WWI	Fuller shorter skirts, and trousers on the scene	Hats rule the scene
1920s	Optimistic, fun for all. It's all about the accessories!	
1930s	Less flamboyant, very feminine styles	Trouser legs remain wide through the 1930s
1940s	Things REALLY begin to change!	

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Dating Military Photos

- Analyze the style of the uniform, covers, and other accessories
- Does the uniform indicate a specific branch of service or military rank?
- Check the background for identifiable landmarks

See Slide 23 for websites featuring illustrations of military uniforms.

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Photo Detective #2:

Children's Photos

How many boys are in this top photo?

What other information can we use to date these photos?

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Props, Poses & Backdrops

Props (and vehicles!):
1870s "Penny-farthing" bicycle →
What prop do you see in the woman's photo below?

Poses:
Full-length (1860s), head-and-shoulders (1890s), over the shoulder (1920s)

Backdrop Timeline:

1860	1870	1880	1890
Plain	Elaborate	Outdoorsy	Home-like

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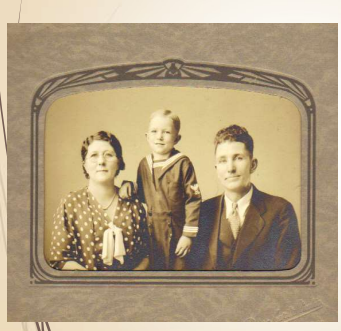
Internet Images & the Sailor Suit



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Recap & Reminders

- **T = TYPE.** Remember that different photo processes were in vogue at the same time.
- **G = GATHERING.** Allow research & resources – both print & online – to guide the dating process whenever possible.
- **I = INFO.** Don't overlook clues hiding in plain sight.
- **F = FASHION.** Remember that – like clothing and hair – photos themselves had a datable "style".

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Next Steps

It's a Match! Use published photo collections and websites like those shown below to search for professionally dated images with elements that match those in your photos.

- www.loc.gov/pictures
- https://history.army.mil/html/museums/uniforms/survey_uwa.pdf
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Military_uniforms

Keep learning! Check your library's collection of how-to books and take advantage of magazine articles, webinars, and other online resources like:

- www.phototree.com/
- Rochester Institute of Technology's http://www.graphicsatlas.org/identification/

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