



How to Date Old Photographs

Dating a photograph is not an exact science; there are numerous variables in play. For example, when looking at a photo of a bride in a “vintage” wedding gown, it can be challenging to determine whether that bride, dress, and photo were from the past or if the photo captures a modern bride with a “something borrowed” dress from Mom or Great Aunt Mildred.

With this in mind, the goal of today’s presentation is to identify elements in old photos that can – when used in tandem with your OTHER research – be used to establish a date range of 5-10 years for photographs in your family’s photo archives.

Where to Begin? Start with what you already know (Part 1).

- How did you come by the photo? Who gave it to you – maternal or paternal relatives?
- Can you identify any people, places, or things in the photo?
 - People: Who is in the photo? What have you learned from previous research about their dates of birth/marriage/death and various residences?
 - Places: Where was the photo taken? Was it set at the home of someone in the family, and if so, when did the family live at that address?
 - Things: Does anything in the photo – landmarks, vehicles, etc. – indicate a date for the photo? For example, if the photo features a family going up in the (St. Louis) Gateway Arch, the photo was not taken before its completion in 1965.

Next Steps? Analyze the T, G, I, & F of the photo.

- **T = TYPE.** Identify the **type** of photograph and/or the film processing methods.
Note: Landmark dates in photography vary from resource to resource. The dates below were taken from *Camera Clues* by Joe Nickell, ©1994.
 - Daguerreotype (1839 – 1860) – “Mirror with a Memory”
 - First commercially viable photographs
 - Image shifts from positive to negative; best viewed at an angle
 - Copper plate coated with silver and other chemicals, typically matted and housed in a protective case
 - Studio list on Craig’s Daguerreian Registry <https://craigcamera.com/dag/>
 - Ambrotypes (1855 – 1865)
 - Almost always portraits, viewable from any angle
 - Glass coated with collodion (gluey liquid) then light-sensitive chemicals

- Images always appear in negative, so they are backed with something dark to make the image visible, and then encased for protection.
 - Less expensive than daguerreotypes, more available to the masses
 - Tintypes / Ferrotypes (1856 – 1945)
 - Blackened iron coated with collodion then light-sensitive chemicals, sealed in varnish to protect the image
 - Less fragile than earlier photo types, protective cases not needed
 - Over time, camera technology advanced to the point that tintypes could be developed within the camera, making them available as impulse buys in non-studio locations such as battlefields, beaches, fairgrounds, etc.
 - Carte de Visite (1854 – 1925)
 - Small, (salted) albumen-coated paper, mounted on a 2.5” x 4” card
 - Mostly portraits, sometimes landmarks & famous people
 - 8 images per plate, allowing photographers to create “duplicate” images
 - Corners initially squared-off, but after 1870, more styles available
 - Cabinet Prints (1866 – 1930)
 - Larger than Carte de Visite with higher quality images
 - Early cabinet cards = albumen prints; black/white print option after 1890
 - Studio name/location often on the front with advertisements on the back
 - Photographic Postcards (1902 – 1940)
 - Photographed image developed onto cardstock then imprinted with a USPS-approved postcard back
 - Before 1902, senders could only write an address on the back of the postcard; after 1907, the split-back design was the standard.
 - Date the image with message content, cost of the stamp and postmark.
 - Photography for the Masses (1900+)
 - George Eastman’s roll film (1885+) and inexpensive \$1 Box Brownie (1900) usher in the era of home photography.
 - 1900s bring dramatic changes in camera technology (lenses, film, etc.), including digital photography (1975+). Camera phones arrive in 2000.
- **G = GATHERING.** Does this photo commemorate any special **gathering** or family event?
 - Holidays, reunions, vacations, birthdays, *breechings*, graduations, and deaths
 - Look for seasonal apparel & décor, landmarks, architecture, props, etc.
 - Weddings
 - Look for rings, ceremonial items -- chuppah, broom, veils, flowers, etc.
 - Wedding apparel may be influenced by religion, culture, and fashion.
 - Work “in committee” with other family members to create a timeline of family events to help date photos of special gatherings.

- **I = INFORMATION.** What information is found ON the photo itself?
 - Name and location of studio and/or photographer
 - Use city directories to create a timeline for the studio/photographer.
 - Photo finishes
 - Note the style of the card – color, type of corners/borders, letter styles – and research when that style was popular.
 - Ex. – Rounded corners = after 1870, scalloped edges = 1890s+
 - Ex. – Gold, beveled edges = 1885-early 1890s, embossed = 1890s+
 - Civil War stamp?
 - From 30 Jun 1864 – 1 Aug 1866, a revenue tax on photographic images required that a stamp – relative to the cost of the photograph – be affixed to back of each photo and cancelled/dated by the photographer.

- **F = FASHION.** What do the fashion trends in and on the photo tell about its date?
 - Remember to factor in societal norms, geography/location and economics.
 - Victorian Age (1837-1901) = time of dignity, respectability
 - Edwardian Age (1901-1910) = women’s clothing emphasize curves with hair piled high on the head, men pick up new hat styles
 - 1910-1920 = first appearance of women’s V-necks & trousers
 - 1920s = fashion “Roars”, nearly anything goes
 - 1930s = return to conventions, longer hemlines and longer hair for women, wider jacket lapels and built-in shirt collars for men
 - Clothing, hair, & accessories to watch
 - Women – length & cut of skirt, bodice, and sleeve, trimmings, jewelry, gloves, bags, hair (Bangs? No bangs?)
 - Men – length & cut of jackets, shirt collars, facial hair, neckties, hats, etc.
 - Military – uniform & cover styles, accessories, insignia
 - Children – clothing approached the ground as boys and girls aged (shorts → trousers, short dresses/skirts → longer dresses/skirts)
 - Architecture, furnishings & vehicles
 - Building and furniture styles (ex. Art Deco), bicycles/streetcars/CARS!
 - Studio props, poses & backdrops
 - Props often hint at the reason for the photo or provide information about items of significance to the person in the photo.
 - Poses & backdrops also had styles that can be used to date a photo.
 - 1860s – Plain backdrops, simple props, poses mostly full-length
 - 1870s – Fringed décor, half-length poses
 - 1880s – Outdoorsy backdrops
 - 1890s – Studios go for the “at home” look, close-ups possible due to improved camera lenses/equipment

Now what? Start with what is already known (Part 2).

- Search online & print resources for previously-dated photos with similar fashions/styles
 - Match elements IN your photo (clothing, buildings, vehicles, backdrops, props) – and ON your photo (finishes, corners/borders, embellishments) to elements in other photos that have been dated by reliable sources such as the following:
 - Library of Congress Photo Collection – www.loc.gov/pictures
 - National Archives - <https://www.archives.gov/research/still-pictures>
 - Flickr Daguerreotypes - <https://www.flickr.com/groups/dags/pool/>
 - State Digital Archives - <https://sites.google.com/site/statearchives/home>
 - Fashion Institute of Technology's *Fashion History Timeline* - <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/category/decade-overview/>
 - Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Military_uniforms
 - Army: https://history.army.mil/html/museums/uniforms/survey_uwa.pdf
 - *Dating Old Photographs 1840-1929*, Family Chronicle, ©2000
- “Shop” vintage
 - Search on-site and online for similar “vintage” fashions, furnishings, and vehicles dated by professionals in fashion, antique, auction, and restoration industries.

Ready to learn more? Try these resources for photography, fashion, & family photos.

- Photography
 - PhotoTree.com “History” and “Identification” – www.phototree.com/
 - Rochester Institute of Technology's “Graphics Atlas” – <http://www.graphicsatlas.org/identification/>
- Fashion
 - *Historic Dress in America*, Elisabeth McClellan, ©1990,
 - *Shirts & Men's Haberdashery: 1840s to 1920s*, R. L. Shep, ©1999
 - *The Child in Fashion 1750 to 1920*, Kristina Seleshanko, ©1999
 - *Fashionable Folks: Hairstyles 1840-1900*, Maureen Taylor, ©2009
 - *Military Photographs & How to Date Them*, Neil Storey, ©2009
- Photos & Genealogy
 - *Family Photo Detective: Learn How to Find Genealogy Clues in Old Photos and Solve Family Photo Mysteries*, Maureen Taylor, ©2013
 - *Unlocking the Secrets in Old Photographs*, Karen Frisch, ©1991
 - *Tracing Your Ancestors through Family Photographs : a Complete Guide for Family and Local Historians*, Jayne Shrimpton, ©2014
 - *Dating Twentieth Century Photographs*, Robert Pols, ©2005