# In Plain Sight
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## The CORNER PIECES of Today's Presentation:
- The FRAME – Photography & VTS (Visual Thinking Strategies)
- The BIG PICTURE – Mixing in Some Genealogy
- The DETAIL PIECES – Skills Practice
- The CHALLENGES – Curveballs & Lifelines

## THE FRAME: PHOTOGRAPHY & VTS

### KEY ADVANCES IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Note: Dates vary widely for these advancements.  The information below came from Robert Pols, *Dating Old Photographs* and Maureen Taylor's introduction to *More Dating Old Photographs 1840-1929*. (See citations.)

| TYPE OF ADVANCEMENT: PHOTO (P), CAMERAS (C), FILM (F), DEVELOPING (D), OTHER (O) | | |
|---|---|---|
| DATE(S) | TYPE | DESCRIPTION |
| 1827 | C | Joseph Niepce – 1st to capture a fixed (landscape) picture using a camera obscura. |
| 1839-1860 | P | Louis Daguerre – the **DAGUERREOTYPE**.  Introduced to the world in 1839, these photographs – the 1st commercially successful photographs – used silver-coated copper plates treated with (yes, toxic) mercury vapors to capture an image which was then covered in glass then encased to protect the image.  Technically a negative image, daguerreotypes appear positive if viewed at the right angle. |
| 1841-1860s | D | William Henry Fox Talbot – the **CALOTYPE**.  This process was the 1st to use treated paper to produce a negative from which positive copies could be made. |
| 1851 | D | Frederick Scott Archer – 1st to introduce a wet-collodion process which was used on glass negatives to produce paper prints, greatly reducing exposure time. Most albumen (egg-white) prints, popular from 1850-1890, used this process which had to be developed while wet, causing a rise in portable darkrooms. |
| 1854-1865 | P | Frederick Scott Archer – the **AMBROTYPE**.  While technically a negative, these glass-plate, collodion photos displayed a positive image when backed with a dark material.  Typically encased to protect the glass, ambrotypes were less expensive than daguerreotypes. |
| 1854-1900 | P | Andre Adolphe-Eugene Disderi – the **CARTE DE VISITE**.  Printed 8 per slide, these 2.5 x 4" albumen prints were mounted to a cardboard back which often contained stylistic elements that can be used to help date the photo. |
| 1856-1930+ | P | Hamilton Smith **–** the **TINTYPE.**  Also called FERROTYPES (they're made of treated iron), tintype photos were popular due to their affordability and the quick, 2-3 minute development process.   Popular with Civil War soldiers, tintypes lasted well into the 1900s as a novelty item at carnivals, fairs, etc. |
| 1863-1920 | P | F.R. Windsor and Bridge Photography – the **CABINET CARD.**  Most commonly mounted on 4.25 x 6.6" cardboard, the mounts and backs of these cards often contain considerable information of use to family genealogists. |

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| 1885-1890 | F. C | George Eastman – 1st portable paper-backed roll film (1885), 1st portable roll-film camera (1889), and 1st celluloid film (1890) |
| 1900 | C, P | George Eastman – **The $1 KODAK BOX BROWNIE.** Available and affordable, this camera issued in the era of home photography, providing the means for everyday people to capture and photographically preserve their family's special moments. |
| 1903-1930 | P | **REAL PHOTO POSTCARDS.** The negative size of Kodak's 1903 model gave home photographers the option of having their film printed to a USPS-approved postcard back. Notable = the change to a split-back postcard design in 1907. |
| 1927 | O | General Electric – Flash bulbs |
| 1930s | O | SLR (single-lens reflex) cameras capture what is "seen" through the viewfinder |
| 1948 | C | Edwin Land – Self-developing Polaroid 95™ Instamatic |
| 1978 | O | Konica – "Point and Shoot" autofocus cameras |
| 1984 | C | Canon – Digital electronic still camera |

- Many photo types/processes overlap, and the END dates on the table above signify a decrease in commercial use for each type of photo. Family historians, however, need to be more concerned with the START date of each process which establishes a beginning date for each photo. Think of it this way-- the carte de visite you're holding can't predate 1854 which was the year that type of photo first hit the market!

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| Sites & Sources | ❧ Pols, Robert. *Dating Old Photographs.* 2nd ed*., Countryside Books,* 1993. pp. 6-15 |
| | ❧ Taylor, Maureen. *"Unlocking the Secrets of Your Family Photographs." Family Chronicle's More Dating Old Photographs 1840-1929,* 1 Mar. 2011, pp. 5-16. (Known as "The Photo Detective", Taylor's books – too many to note – are all informative and well-researched.) |
| | ❧ Clark, Gary W. *19th Century Card Photos KwikGuide a Step-by-step Guide to Identifying and Dating Cartes De Visite and Cabinet Cards*. 1st ed., *PhotoTree.Com*, 2013. (Clark also has books on cased images and tintypes, real photo postcards, and 20th century photos.) |
| | ❧ Bellis, Mary. *"History of Photography Timeline." ThoughtCo,* 17 Aug. 2024, www.thoughtco.com/photography-timeline-1992306 . Accessed 15 Mar. 2025. |
| | ❧ Image Permanence Institute – http://www.graphicsatlas.org/identification |
| | ❧ Craig's Daguerreian Registry – https://craigcamera.com/dag/ |
| | ❧ NARA – www.archives.gov/research/still-pictures |
| | ❧ PhotoTree – www.phototree.com/identify.htm |
| | ❧ Cyndi's List "Photographs and Memories" – www.cyndislist.com/photos/ |

## VISUAL THINKING STRATEGIES (VTS)

Created over 30 years ago by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine, VTS is a classroom tool for teaching visual literacy, collaboration, thinking, and communication skills. While designed for use with works of art, genealogists can use this process to extract information and possible stories from our family photos.

VTS utilizes these 3 questions:
1. What is going on in this (photograph)?
2. What do you see that makes you say that?
3. What more can we find?

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| Sites & Sources | ❧ Visual Thinking Strategies- https://vtshome.org/ |
| | ❧ Yenawine, Philip. *Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines*. 1st ed., *Harvard Education Press*, 2013. |

# THE BIG PICTURE: MIXING IN SOME GENEALOGY

## STEP #1 – CONSIDER THE PHOTO'S PROVENANCE
- How did the photo come to you?  Was it passed down through your **dad or mom's side** of the family?
- Was it **part of a collection** of photos that might offer additional information about the subject?

Establishing the photo's history helps narrow the choices of the **who**, **where**, and **when** of the photo, offering context that might also explain **why** the photo was taken.  It can also suggest leads to additional information.
- Do I have relatives on **that side** of the family who might be able to identify elements (people, places, events) in the photo, adding to the story of the photo?
- Is there someone else along that family line – cousins, aunts, uncles, etc. – who might also have a copy of the same image – maybe one with additional notes/annotations on the back?

## STEP #2 – LOOK BEYOND THE IMAGE
Many family photos – especially cabinet cards – have clues hidden "in plain sight" on the photo's frame or its mount which can be used with your existing family research to identify image elements.
- TYPE of PHOTO.  Use to establish a start date for your photo's possible time frame.
- TYPE and STYLE of MOUNT. Like clothing styles, professional photographers changed the style of their card mounts to draw customers to their studios.  Watch for dateable changes like gilded and serrated trim, embossing and art deco "additions" to the card mount/frame.
- STUDIO INFORMATION.  Some early photographers displayed their studio's name and address on the mat, mount or photo.  Cabinet cards often included printed advertisements on the back of the cards.
- DEVELOPER DATE STAMPS. Look for date stamps, added during development, on the borders and backs of the prints of home photographers.
- POSTMARKS & STAMPS.  If mailed, REAL PHOTO POSTCARDS may retain a postmark or dateable postage stamp to use along with handwritten family news to date an image.  A city directory can be used with the name and address of the recipient (and sender, if provided) to lock down a date range for the photo.

## STEP #3 – CONNECT DOTS
Connect known photo elements to your existing genealogy research, taking the VTS process from its ART-assessment origins to its new use as a GENEALOGY tool.  Here's a recap/checklist for the future....

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## THE DETAILS: THE PROCESS

_____ Step 1 – Reflect on the photo's **PROVENANCE** – how the photo came to be in your possession

_____ Step 2 – Identify the **TYPE** of photo and note all info found ON the photo's mount, back, etc. to establish a "start and style dates" for the photo

_____ Step 3 – Review **PRIOR GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH** for info about the subject(s) of the photo (if known)

_____ Step 4 – Use **VTS** to extract additional information from the photo and to find the photo's story
1. What is going on in this (photograph)?
2. What do you see that makes you say that?
3. What more can we find? (See next.)

## SEEING "MORE"

Seeing "more" involves looking beyond the subject(s) of the image for additional photo elements that can provide context for the photo and/or information about its setting (time and place). Start by looking for:

- SIGNAGE – movie marquees, gas/grocery prices, advertisements on buildings – or wagons! Use city directories and local newspapers to home in on dates of operation for companies and products.
- VEHICLES – cars, airplanes, trains (including gauge) boats, bicycles, and roller skates? Things that move us about are dateable with a little research – or a friend with a passion for such things.
- SCENERY & STRUCTURES – mountains, monuments, a front porch with a house number? Identifying the "where" can often lead to the "when" if a family's travels were recorded or retold.
- FAMILY PETS – pets offer clues about time and place while adding personal touches to our family's stories that are not found in formal records and documents.
- SEASONAL ITEMS – holiday decorations, items indicating a specific family celebration, funny costumes, and even swimwear or winter gear help us lock in on the setting of our photos.
- TOYS & "NEW TECH" – According to *Newsweek* ([www.newsweek.com/barbie-60th-birthday-real-name-1357397](www.newsweek.com/barbie-60th-birthday-real-name-1357397)), Barbie ™ was first introduced to the public on 9 Mar 1959 at the New York Toy Fair, establishing that a photo of a child hugging/lugging a Barbie™ doll was not taken prior to that date in 1959. But, be forewarned! A dateable object like Barbie™ only helps us establish a "start date" for your photo as your family may not have jumped on the bandwagon for that toy or tech (electric lights, transistor radio, etc.) when it first hit the market!

## FASHION

Clothing, hair, and accessories can also provide information about the setting of an image as can non-apparel "styles" like those found in architecture, furnishings, and even studio elements like backdrops and poses.

- WOMEN – Look at the cut of the skirt, bodice, and sleeves, and watch modesty levels. Women's accessories such as jewelry, handbags, hats, and eyeglasses were also style-driven as were hairstyles – long and pinned up v. short (bobbed), bangs v. no bangs, curly/wavy v. straight, color-processed options.
- MEN – Look for the cut of the jacket/lapels, trouser and tie width, and the type of shirt collar. Men's accessories include watches, eyewear, and hats, but hats don't always go OUT of style when the next style comes IN, and – aside from facial hair – men's hairstyles don't change significantly over time.
- CHILDREN – As a rule, dresses and trousers get longer as the child gets older, but children in large families would not have "moved in" to the next clothing size/style until an older sibling had "moved out" of those same clothes. Since very young children – female and male – wore dresses for up to a few years of age, one way to identify a young male child may be to look for a side-part in his hair, since traditionally, boys' hair was parted on the side while the hair of young girls was parted down the center.

Remember that styles, such as clothing, hair, and accessories, are subject to a number of factors including:

- LOCATION – Did the family live near a fashion center? Think coast vs. the Heartland?
- ECONOMICS – Was the family (of necessity or by upbringing) frugal? Would they have handed clothing down from child to child or repurposed outfits or portions of outfits?
- LOCAL, NATIONAL & WORLD EVENTS – To some extent, clothing trends reflect the world in which we live. For example, styles were "roaring" in the 1920s but much more subdued during the Depression.
- PERSONAL PREFERENCE – Bridal wear is an excellent example of a clothing choice that may have been made for sentimental reasons despite current style trends. Something borrowed….

## MATCHING FASHION

Even an advanced fashion degree won't guarantee you the knowledge required to date a photo based solely on the clothing worn by its subjects. However, we can establish **date ranges** for photos by comparing VTS observations of clothing, architecture, furnishings, etc. to professionally-dated images in:

- Published resources and websites covering specific fashion topics like clothing, hair, hats, uniforms, etc.
- Photos and advertisements in old magazines, newspapers, and catalogs
- Vintage, antique, and auction sites
- Museum, library, historical/genealogical society and college/university collections

Some examples of print resources and websites for matching fashion/styles are shown in the box below.

| Sites & Sources | ❁ *Family Chronicle's More Dating Old Photographs 1840-1929.* 3rd ed., *Moorshead Magazines Ltd*, 2011. <br> ❁ Gill, Stephen. *Dating By Design, 1840-1915.* Vol. 1, *Family History Partnership,* 2021. <br> ❁ Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division – www.loc.gov/pictures/ <br> ❁ Fashion-Era – https://fashion-era.com/ <br> ❁ Wikipedia: Military Uniforms- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Military_uniforms <br> ❁ Google Images- https://images.google.com/ |
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## THE CHALLENGES: CURVEBALLS & ADDITIONAL LIFELINES

### OLD SCHOOL REALITY CHECKS
The maxim that says, "Seeing is believing," may actually impede our goal with this project.  You may find that it works better to question what you see, asking instead, "Did that really happen?"  Possible misdirects include:
- Publicity photos designed to promote something "not real"
- Photos taken IN ANTICIPATION of an event –
   - ✓ Dewey defeats Truman? Betty White turns 100?
   - ✓ Portrait of a midshipman who never actually graduated from Annapolis?
- Staged photos taken AFTER an event happened such as a child photographed in death as a memorial
- "Tricks" implemented by a photographer to add to the aesthetics of the photograph
- Photos altered through some form of modern or old-school photoshopping methods

### ADDITIONAL LIFELINES
- FAMILY – Find your Aunt Pat!  Never discount the benefits of collaborating with family.
- OTHER RESEARCHERS – While it's never advisable to blindly accept the word of others on online trees, it certainly can't hurt to review what they've posted in their galleries along with the support documents.

Want to be nice to YOUR descendants?  Copy or scan old family photos and add names and related info to the back of the copy or digital file!

To learn more about caring for your photographic treasures, start with the Library of Congress's "Care, Handling and Storage of Photographs" at www.loc.gov/preservation/care/photos.html .  This site also references additional print and online references related to many topics covered in today's presentation.

Here's hoping that your ancestors' photos willingly reveal their secrets! Happy puzzling!

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