

Genealogy: Time dating your old photographs

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Do you have ancestors hiding in your attic? Sometimes you find them hiding in trunks, boxes or on the top shelf of a closet in the old family home. Their faces stare out at you in the most interesting photographs. Who, why, when and where did they come from? These portrait photographs come in different formats that can establish their time frame. Once you date the format and picture, you can then do a genealogical search of the person in the photograph.

The earliest commercially produced photographs are called Daguerreotypes. They can be identified by the mirror effect of the picture, the image may be viewed by holding the picture at an angle only. First produced in 1839, the daguerreotypes remained in use until 1855. They were fairly costly to produce, therefore not many daguerreotypes are in family collections today.

The Ambrotype photograph came on the market in 1852 and were extensively used until 1865. The identifying characteristic of the ambrotype photograph, is that you can view the image from any angle, and it does not reflect like a mirror. The format of the Daguerreotype and Ambrotype photographs were packaged in the same manner, encased with a mat, top glass and preserver, then placed in a decorative case. The mat is the flat brass inner frame around the picture and from 1860-65 became very ornate. The preserver, also brass, pushes into the case around the mat and glass, it became very intricate and delicate after 1860. By using the style of both the mat and preserver you can zero in on a more precise date of when these pictures were photographed. Early cases were leather-covered wood construction, but after 1856 a new composite made of saw dust and varnish was used. This case was called a thermoplastic case, it can be plain or embossed looking. As an example I have enclosed an Ambrotype picture in a Thermoplastic case, circa 1865, for your viewing.

The Tintype photograph first appeared in 1856 and was popular until 1880. Most Tintypes are formatted in either a paper sleeve or an envelope, and if a magnet attaches to them, they are definitely a Tintype. Embossed frames encased some Tintype photos from 1865 to 1870. The Tintype photo was the popular photograph used during the American Civil War. The attached photo of my great-grandfather, a Union soldier dated 1862 is a tintype formatted in a sleeve.

The Cartes de Visite (CDV) photographs introduced in 1860 were the first inexpensive photos produced. CDVs were the first to employ a glass negative, enabling numerous copy's to be made. The CDV image was developed on a thin sheet of paper and then glued to stiff card stock. You can identify a CDV photo by its size, 2 3/4 x 4 1/4 inches, its card thickness, square corners and a thick boarder was used from 1874-80.

The Cabinet Card photograph was introduced in the late 1860s in England, and became popular in America in 1875. It is a card mounted image 6 1/2 x 4 1/4 inches and eventually replaced the CDVs altogether. The two most prominent photo colors are sepia and pearl. By 1890 the Cabinet Card photo was found in most family albums, exhibiting excellent quality and wonderful composition. These Cabinet Cards have more useful information on the back of the photograph, giving the name of the company, address and city where the photograph was taken, and sometimes the name of the person is hand written on the back. Thus, you have identified the time period, the city, and the person in the photograph. With this investigative information you can track down your elusive ancestor. Have fun and good hunting using your photo ID!

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