

Dating Old Photos

Delving into the world of family history research is like embarking on a captivating journey through time. One of the most compelling aspects of this journey is the ability to decipher the stories hidden within historic photographs. These snapshots from the past offer windows into the lives of our ancestors, and by learning how to estimate their dates, we can unravel valuable insights about their experiences. In this video and handout, we will explore the art of dating historic photographs and provide practical tips for researchers to unlock the secrets held within these visual treasures.

The Basics of Dating Historic Photographs

Photographs can carry distinct markers that uncover their time of origin. Here are two primary factors to consider when dating historic photographs.

Clothing and Fashion Trends

The attire captured in a photograph can offer remarkable clues about its era. For instance, the style of clothing, the cut of garments, and the types of accessories can all point to specific time periods. Keep in mind that your ancestors may have worn the same styles for years, so while clothing styles can help narrow a timeframe, it is not an absolute marker in time.

Photography Techniques and Formats

As photography techniques evolved over time, so did the appearance of photographs. Early techniques like daguerreotypes and tintypes yielded distinct visual qualities that differ from later photographic methods. Analyzing the format, quality, and physical characteristics of a photograph can provide valuable insights into its historical context.

Photography Timeline

- Daguerreotype: 1839-Early 1850's
- Ambrotype: Mid 1850's – Mid 1860's
- Tintype: 1850's – 1870's

Daguerreotype: Invented by Louis Daguerre in 1839, the daguerreotype was one of the earliest and most iconic forms of photography. These images were captured on a polished silver plate coated with a light-sensitive layer. Daguerreotypes often exhibit a reflective surface due to the silver base, and they were typically encased in ornate cases or frames. When identifying daguerreotypes, look for their mirror-like quality, intricate cases, and the absence of a negative – each daguerreotype is a unique positive image.



1 Louis Daguerre in 1844
(Daguerreotype) Wikipedia



Ambrotype: Introduced in 1854 by James Ambrose, the ambrotype offered a more affordable alternative to the daguerreotype. This process involved creating a glass negative that appeared positive when backed with a dark surface. Ambrotypes were often sealed and protected with glass covers or mats. To distinguish an ambrotype, watch for its glass-backed appearance, along with occasional hand-tinting of cheeks or accessories. Also, check for a dark backing that turns the negative into a positive image.

Tintype: Also known as ferrotypes, tintypes emerged in the mid-1850's and gained popularity due to their durability and cost-effectiveness. Tintypes were created by coating thin iron sheets



3 Tintype- Unidentified Union Soldier LOC.gov

with a light-sensitive emulsion. Unlike daguerreotypes and ambrotypes, tintypes were not fragile and did not require a glass cover. When identifying tintypes, recognize their iron base, which might show signs of rusting over time. They are often more matte in appearance compared to the reflective daguerreotypes.

These early photographic processes each carry unique characteristics that provide insight into their historical and technological contexts. By understanding the distinct attributes of daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and tintypes, we can appreciate the diverse visual narratives preserved within these early forms of photography.



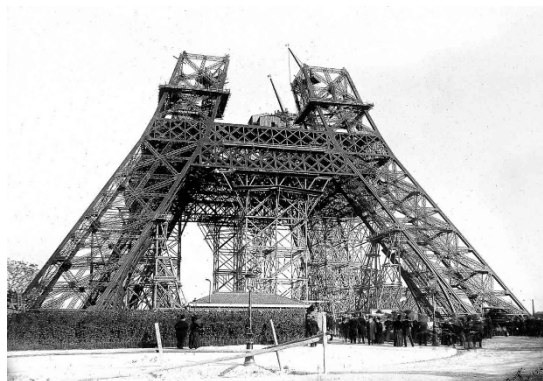
2 Ambrotype - Unknown Confederate Officer with wife and baby ca. 1861-1865, LOC.gov

Analyzing the Background and Setting

Beyond fashion, the background and setting of a photograph can reveal significant information about its date.

Architecture and Landmarks

The presence of recognizable buildings and landmarks in the background can be instrumental in dating a photograph. For instance, if an image features the Eiffel Tower under construction, it automatically places the photograph between 1887 and 1889 when the iconic landmark was built. By researching the history of notable structures, researchers can better understand the photograph's timeframe.



4 RareHistoricPhotos.com

Environmental Clues

Details within the environment, such as seasonal elements and vegetation, can also help narrow down the date of a photograph. A snowy landscape suggests winter, while blooming flowers indicate spring or summer. These clues add layers of context to the image and enable researchers to make more precise estimations.

Studying Personal Details and Accessories

Personal details and accessories within a photograph can shed light on the identities, lifestyles, and interests of the individuals captured.

Hairstyles and Accessories

Hairstyles and accessories are reflective of cultural norms and trends. The "flapper" hairstyles of the 1920's or the elaborate Victorian-era hairdos provide clear markers of their respective times. By studying these details, researchers can glean insights into the social context of the photograph.

Props and Objects

Objects and props present in a photograph can reveal occupations, hobbies, and passions. For instance, a photograph featuring a vintage camera implies an interest in photography, which can align with specific historical periods when photography gained popularity. These objects add depth to the stories behind the photographs.

Research Tips

- Start with what you know about the photo. Where did you get the photo?
- Are there any written clues or markings on the back of photos?
- Examine costume
- Props or Objects
- Card stock
- Are there uniforms that can date the photo.
 - Research Reenactors. They know military uniforms.
- Landscape or Architecture?
- Vehicles or bicycles?
- Was the photo taken in a studio?
- Is there a photographer or studio noted on the frame or back of the image?
- Ask Family? Share it on Facebook with a group of family members.
- Who is the photographer? Some photographers might be traveling photographers.
 - Look at other photos by the same photographer to date-range when the photo was taken.
 - Look in city directories and newspapers to research photographers.
 - What type of photo is it?
- Look at hair color, eyes, jewelry, and buttons.

Resources for Further Exploration

Maureen Taylor – The Photo Detective

Maureen Taylors Website

[Sign up for her newsletter](#)

Maureen Taylors Tips

- Who might have given you the photo?
- Who owned it before that... and before that person (chain of custody).
- Do not make up a story about the photo. Let the facts lead you.
- Do not assume the caption on the back is correct.
- Record family with audio using smart phone apps like MyHeritage Reimagined, File Shadow.
- OspreyPress.com is a resource for military uniforms and unit histories.
- Research the Photographer as if they are a family member.
 - Google the photographer
 - Look on eBay for photographs by the same photographer.
 - Look on DeadFred.com for images by the same photographer.
 - Research photographers in City Directories.
 - Look in the State Archives.

Books

[Genealogy TV Amazon Store](#) – Fun Genealogy Stuff!

[Military Uniforms of the 19th Century Book](#) by Kevin F. Kiley

[Dating Old Photographs 1840-1929](#) by Family Chronicle

[Fashionable Folks Hairstyles 1840-1900](#) by Maureen A. Taylor

[The Photo Detective](#) by Maureen A. Taylor

[Fashionable Folks: Bonnets and Hats, 1840-1900](#) by Maureen A. Taylor

[Uncovering Your Ancestry through Family Photographs](#) by Maureen Taylor

[The Last Muster: Images of the Revolutionary War Generation](#) by Maureen Taylor

Websites

[FamilySearch Wiki - Dating Family Photographs](#)

Online Photography Archives

National Archives Blog – [How to Date Family Photographs](#)

Automobiles

AutomobileCatalog.com

<https://vintagefashionguild.org/>

Military Uniforms

U.S. WWII https://www.usww2uniforms.com/figures_army.html

This website has modern day combat and special skills badges <https://www.army.mil/uniforms/>

Conclusion

Dating historic photographs is a captivating endeavor that bridges the gap between generations, allowing us to connect with our ancestors on a personal level. By mastering the techniques of analyzing clothing, backgrounds, personal details, and accessories, researchers can unlock the hidden narratives within these visual artifacts. Each photograph becomes a portal to the past, revealing the lives, experiences, and moments that shape our family history. As we explore, learn, and preserve our heritage, we ensure that the stories of the past continue to resonate in the present and inspire future generations.