

Cracking the Family Photo Code

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[Are You My Cousin?](#)

Finding old family photos is exciting for any genealogy researcher, but finding unlabeled or unidentified photos? That can be frustrating.

The 8 steps below are designed to walk you through the process to get those unknown individuals in your photo(s) identified.

Step #1 - What is the Provenance of Your Photograph?

Begin thinking about the provenance or the history of ownership of your photograph.

How did you come to have the photograph(s) in your family collection? Who had the photograph before you? Which side of the family saved the photographs through the generations? Which side of the family are the individuals in the photo from? Was the photograph with a group of others? If so, what other photographs are in the group? Are some of those photographs identified.....even if just by surname?

Knowing the answers to any if not all of these questions can help place your unknown photograph in a particular family line. That alone will narrow down the possibilities of the individual's identities and move you closer to identification.

Step #2 - Determine the Type of Photograph

The Traditional Method

There are 6 basic types of antique photographs. Determine the type of photograph you are working with to narrow down the date of the photograph.

1. **Daguerreotypes** were popular from 1840's -1860's. They are typically small with the most common size being 2 3/4 x 3 1/2 inches and housed in a case. Developed by Louis-Jaques-Mandé Daguerre, the daguerreotype is on polished silver, and is reflective like a mirror. The image appears to almost "float".

2. **Ambrotypes** (1855-1865) are in small hinged cases like the daguerreotypes, but do not have that reflective, mirror-like quality. Ambrotypes are produced by the wet collodion plating or an emulsions process and the image is created on the glass.
3. **Tintypes** (1856-1890's) were popular for more than 30 years. Instead of glass, the image is on an iron plate. Early tintypes were in small, hinged cases like the daguerreotypes and the ambrotypes. However, the cases were soon replaced by paper sleeves. Often today, tintypes are found in one's collection without the sleeves.
4. **Cartes des Visites** (introduced in 1859) were small albumen printed photographs popular in the 1860's-1870's. Measuring 2 1/2 " by 4", the photographs were mounted on thick paper and used much as the calling card was used in the 1850's. The Civil War saw a rise in the carte de visite popularity as soldiers and families exchanged photographs. You will often see a carte de visite referred to as a CDV.
5. **The Cabinet Card (1860-1890's)** was also an albumen print on thin paper and mounted on thicker paper. The primary difference from the CDV is the cabinet card was larger. The cabinet card reached its peak popularity in the 1880's but continued to be used in the early 1900's. Keep these general guidelines in mind when examining your cabinet card:
 - a. The cardboard mount is thicker than the CDV.
 - b. Later cabinet cards (1880's) were starting to have beveled edges. Those edges may have a gold or silver color. A scalloped border indicates a cabinet card from ~1886 – 1900.
 - c. The color of the cardboard mount is important. The darker colors such as brown, burgundy, green, or black were later (1880's and 1890's).
 - d. Borders on a cabinet also help in dating the photo. Early cabinet cards had no borders. A single line border dates to 1885 – 1900. Embossed patterns for a border were used from 1894 – 1900. Lastly, an artistic underscore is from 1886 – 1896.
 - e. Imprinted photographer's marks or any artwork on the back of the cabinet aid in dating the cabinet card as well. In general, the fancier or more elaborate the design the later the date of the photo.
6. **Real Photo Postcards (RPPC)** were popular from 1907-1920. Because the RPPC could be sent through the mail, it had some unique features such as the design, postmarks and stamps that help date the postcard and place it in a location. Photographs of individuals or groups of individuals were developed on a thicker cardstock. "Postcard" is written on the back. In 1907, the divided back was used, creating a space on the left for the message and a space on the right for the address.

The MyHeritage Photo Dater

[MyHeritage](#) introduced their **Photo Dater** which can be a game changer in dating and ultimately, identifying individuals in your old family photographs. Currently, the Photo Dater is free to use, but potentially, may go behind their subscription paywall in the future.

When using the Photo Dater, keep in mind:

- The estimated dates are just that - estimates. Use your analysis skills to determine if that date is correct.
- The Photo Dater works for photographs that have people in them. Photos of scenery or other topics without faces will not receive an estimated date.
- Not every photo will receive an estimated date from the tool. If the tool does not have enough info within its contents, an estimated date will not be given.

Step #3 - Perform a Google Image Search

The type of Google Image Search we will use is a *reverse* Google Image Search. Currently, Google defaults to Google Lens for this type of reverse image search. Google Lens is also an excellent tool for identifying objects, including landmarks, plants, and animals. [Tip: Keep it on your smartphone for quick non-genealogy look-ups.]

Truthfully, finding family photos and/or identifying individuals in an old family photo can be hit or miss on Google, but it is always worth looking. I personally never want to miss out on a potential find just because I think something “might” not be there.

To perform a research image search:

1. Visit www.Google.com/imghp .

Begin by navigating to Google’s dedicated image search page.

2. Click the camera icon which opens up Google Lens.

On the right side of the search box, you’ll find a camera icon. Click on it to initiate the image search process.

3. Select “Upload an Image.”

Upload your image and hit “search”.

4. Assess your search results.

Step #4 - Check for a Tax Stamp

Tax stamps are unique to the later years of the Civil War time period, so their presence can narrow down the date of the photo quite narrow.

The Sun Picture Tax (1 August 1864 to 1 August 1866) was a revenue tax designed to generate money for the government. The Civil War was going on longer than anticipated and the government needed to generate money as the war continued. Photographers were required to charge the revenue tax on daguerreotypes, ambrotypes and cartes des visites. Once the customer paid the appropriate tax, the photographer placed a stamp on the photograph, initialized it and dated it. This essentially canceled the stamp and showed the tax paid. Sometimes, the researcher is not always so fortunate.

The tax stamp may be present, but have no date, simply an "X". Photographers were human and took shortcuts. Simply writing an "X" was simpler and quicker. Over the years, the stamp may have fallen off leaving a darker square where it was. The existence of the stamp (or the outline of a stamp) does give the researcher a time period for the photograph.

Step #5 - Study the Fashions

Fashions came and went for ancestors as they do today. When attempting to identify an unknown individual in a photo, familiarize yourself with the styles your ancestors may have worn during a specific time period. Don't try to memorize all of the fashion trends from each time period. Keep the resources below handy for quick referral:

- [Harper's Bazaar](#) - Google Books
- [Godey's Lady Book](#) - Google Books
- [Sears Roebuck Catalog](#) - At Ancestry.com
- [Fashionable Folks: Bonnets and Hats, 1840-1900](#) by Maureen Taylor
- [Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harper's Bazar, 1867-1898](#) by Stella Blum
- [Fashionable Folks Hairstyles 1840-1900](#) by Maureen Taylor
- [Fashion-Era.com](#)
- [Out-of-Style: An Illustrated Guide to Vintage Fashions](#) by Betty Kreisel Shubert
- [Library of Congress](#) - Photos, Prints and Drawings
- [Fashion History Timeline](#) [My Favorite!]
- [Barber Instructor & Toilet Manual](#) at HathiTrust

Step #6 - Research the Photographer

A photographer's mark may be on the back or the front of the cabinet card. Earlier cabinet cards typically have smaller, more discreet marks or simply a photographer's name. A photographer's logo provides valuable clues when attempting to identify a photograph including the location where the photograph was taken. Research into the photographer can provide a time frame and a location for the photograph as well.

City directories can be valuable resources when searching for possible photographers of your ancestors. Directories will give you a location and often the occupation of individuals (in this case, photographer.) Because directories were published yearly or every two years, you can track a photographer year by year giving you the ability to place the photographer and your ancestor in a specific time and place.

Knowing the photographer's place during a specified time period, narrows the candidates for identification down to those in that area.

Step #7 - Search Your Family Tree for Candidates

Now is the time to look at the family tree you have built through your genealogy research. Who in your family tree fits the date and history of your photograph? You may well come up with several individuals in your tree who the photograph could be. That's okay.

You may need to turn to your traditional genealogy records for physical descriptions of your ancestors to help confirm an individual's identity in a photo. Seek out:

- WWI & WWII Draft Cards
- Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) Records
- Jail Records
- Passport Applications
- Oral History

Step #8 - Crowdsourcing The Photo

There is no denying it, but the more eyes you get on a photograph, the higher your chances someone recognizes the person. Crowdsourcing your photograph is all about utilizing other family members and researchers to gather those clues to identifying the individuals.

It also provides the opportunity to discover the details and story behind the photo and people in it.

Tip: As you reach out to individuals for help, always ask “Who else should I talk to?” . If someone recognizes one of your family photos, they likely have more information about the family. You will share research interests and potentially work on other parts of family history projects together.