

Dating Old Photographs

These are approximate dates as some remote areas continued with some older processes long after they had been dropped from use in major cities.

1840-1850 **Daguerreotype** - Produces a mirror image which can appear or disappear, depending upon the viewing angle. Any text in the photograph is reversed. They were usually displayed in an ornate, hinged box. They were most popular from 1842 to 1856 but faded from use during 1857-1860.

Common size is 2½ x 3¼ inches. They are now considered collector pieces.

1854-1861 **Ambrotype** - Image is on glass and frequently framed like a Daguerreotype. Most popular from 1855-1861 but waned from 1861-1866.

- 1855-1857 Image sandwiched between two pieces of glass.
- Single pane of glass used from 1857 onwards often using a black backing.
- Common sizes are 3¼ x 4¼ (1/4 plate), 2⅝ x 3¼ (1/6 plate) and 2 x 2½ (1/9 plate).

1856-1867 **Tintype** - They were also known as “Ferrotypes.” As the backing is frequently iron they will often attract a small magnet. Early ones were put under glass but later ones were placed in cardboard sleeves. Most popular from 1860 to 1870

- Packaged in cases up to the early 1860’s
- Cartouche cards appeared in about 1863. These were thin cards with a window, usually oval, cut out, with an ornate design printed simulating a picture frame. These were only popular for a few years and were seldom used after 1866.
- Embossed window frames were popular during the civil war, first patented in 1865 and were used into the early 1870’s.
- Brown or 'chocolate' plates as they were known were introduced in 1870. They have a distinct hue, though some may be subtle as there were three different tints available.
- Carnival and beach tintypes were popular as novelty items throughout the 1890’s and even into the early 1900’s. These usually show people in festive or posed settings, and may be mounted in a colorful sleeve.

Usual size is 2½ x 3½ inches.

1859-1880 **Carte de Visite (CDV)** - Changed consumer photography significantly with custom albums appearing in the early 1860’s. The image was developed on a thin sheet of paper and glued to solid card stock. The standard size was 2¾ x 4¼

- Square borders until 1870 and then rounded corners after that.
- Borders – No border 1860-1862
- Two thin lines 1862-1863
- One thin and one thicker line 1864-1869
- Very thick border – 1874-1880
- Later in the 1880’s the border disappeared.

Backgrounds - Until late 1860's the background was either void or had a chair, small table or other object to steady individuals during the photo session. 1870's decorative backdrops became common, sometime too many fences, rocks and other decorations distracted from the person in the photograph.

- Required a Tax stamp to help pay for the civil war between August 1864 and August 1866. The tax stamp had to be affixed to rear the photograph.
- Most popular between 1860 and 1880

1870-1900 **Cabinet Cards** - Often has the photographers name and location printed or embossed on the bottom of the card. Popularity peaked in 1875 to 1900. The common size is 4¼ x 6½ inches.

- Before 1870 cards were made from raw Bristol board, both front and back
- 1870-1875 the backs were coated with soft-off-white or light pastel pink. The most common colors were pale yellow and pearly through light pink, blue and green do exist.
- Mid 1880's dark colored cards introduced with the most popular being dark maroon and black. Dark green is rarer but does exist.

Imprints - Front and Back

Imprints are the text and artwork printed on the card. The front usually includes the studio or photographers' name and location. The back sometimes includes the same information, but more elaborate.

Front Imprint - Several style changes are easily datable. Artistic print means the typeface used is highly ornate cursive style.

- Small, plain print - 1866-1884
- Artistic print - 1882-1900
- Foil stamped artistic print - 1890-1900

Back Imprint - The backside of the photograph became an elaborate advertisement for the photographer. The following trends have been observed:

- Medium size (less than half the back) – 1866-1890
- Artwork covers nearly all the back – 1888-1900
- Note: The back was frequently left blank to reduce costs.
- General Rule: The fancier it is, the later the date.

Card Borders - The borders (lines or artwork on the card) and the manner in which the card edges were cut or treated are some of the best-known clues to dating the cabinet card. Characteristics to look for are:

None - 1866-1900

- Thick gilt border to card edge - 1878-1886
- Single thin line - 1884-1900
- Embossed patterns - 1894-1900

- Artistic underscore - 1886-1896

No single rule applies across all cards.

Card Edges - Card edges experienced numerous changes during the latter 1800's. These included beveled edges, gilt treatment, and scalloped edges. Throughout the time, plain straight cut edges could also be found. The simplest ones were the cheapest and as such, there was always a market for them.

- Plain cut - 1866-1890
- Beveled - 1882-1890
- Scalloped - 1886-1900
- Most fancy edges are from the 1890s.

Up to 1900 cards had rounded corners and after 1900, square corners were used.

Resources:

Archival Materials: www.printfile.com

Books

(Gary W. Clark)	Cased Images & Tintypes 19 th Century Card Photographs 20 th Century Photographs
(Maureen Taylor)	Family Photo Detective Uncovering your ancestry through family photographs
Family chronicle	Dating old photographs 1840-1929
Halvor Moorshead	More dating old photographs

Web Resources:

Old Photographs	www.deadfred.com
Other resources	www.cyndislist.com
Minnesota Studios	www.mnhs.org/people/photographers
Wisconsin Studios	www.wisconsinhistory.org
General list of photographers	www.langdonroad.com

There are many other resources on the WEB both for the US and overseas.
Google "Old Photographers" or "Old Photographic Studios"