



## Family Photo Tips

Our family photos are all precious to most of us. They are an irreplaceable history of our family and ancestors and the time periods in which they lived.

### Dating photos:

- 1.) Card-mounted studio portraits, common from c.1860, are often printed with the photographer's details. Search online to see if operational dates are recorded on any freely-searchable photographer/studio databases and websites. Be aware, though, the data displayed may be incomplete. Use it as a guide alongside other photo dating methods.
- 2.) Look at the type of photo. Daguerreotypes, for example, were popular from 1839 to about 1860. Many young men were photographed before they went to war during the Civil War (1861-1865) using the tintypes.
- 3.) Cabinet cards, popular in the late 1800s, are easy to recognize because they are mounted on cardstock, often with an imprint of the photographer and location just below the photo.
- 4.) Check both the front and the back of the photograph for a photographer's name or imprint. You can check city directories or contact your local historical society to find out when the photographer was in business. Some photographers were only in business for a few years, so this information may help you really narrow down the time period when a photograph was taken.
- 5.) The setting or backdrop for a photograph may be able to provide clues to location or time period. Early photographs, especially those taken prior to the advent of flash photography in 1884, were often taken outside, to take advantage of natural light. Often the family may appear posed in front of the family house or automobile. Look for the family house or other family possessions in other photos for which you do have names and dates. You can also use household items, cars, street signs and other background items to help determine the approximate date a photograph was taken.
- 6.) Look at the fashion your relatives are wearing. You may be able to date a photo by how your ancestors were dressed, the jewelry they wore, or something they held in their hands.

- 7.) Look at any furniture that may be in the picture, that will also help date the photo in some cases. Even when photos were taken outside, they often brought out a chair or a table to include in the photo, and in some cases, to show how well they were doing.
- 8.) Train yourself to recognize visual clues by studying and comparing your photos with firmly dated examples online, in books, and in galleries and museums.
- 9.) Begin examination of your old family photos with those that can be positively identified. Typically, these will be photographs of relatives you knew during their lifetime, or who are/were recognizable to your parents and their generation. Sit down with your parents or grandparents and ask them about photos. Don't wait for someday to do this; do it now.

### **Protecting photos:**

The problem with older photos is that many people keep them in albums that actually accelerate their deterioration. They contain glues, acids, and other chemicals or those clear sheets that over time will attach themselves to the photos and ruin them.

- 10.) Move photos to archival storage, either in acid-free albums or boxes. Look for labels that show the container has passed Photographic Activity Test (PAT). Store in a dark place away from direct sunlight at room temperature and with low humidity (not an attic or basement in most cases).
- 11.) Try to maintain the order of the photos if they are old black and white placed there by the people who took them because their placement might help you determine a timeline or relationships.
- 12.) Scan the originals to create a digital library. It is easy to do on a flatbed scanner; most copiers now have this included. Scan at 600 pixels per inch (ppi). At the very least, take pictures of the photos with your phone and save them on a thumb drive or DVD. Store them in a safe place like a safety deposit box.
- 13.) Today with software programs almost any old damaged photo can be restored digitally. Or you may want to take them to a professional restorer if the photos are especially fragile and important.
- 14.) Keep in mind that some names written on the back of a photo may be the result of guesswork or a failing memory and may not be accurate.
- 15.) Children's ages can be judged fairly accurately from their physical appearance, so when young boys and girls appear in a dated or closely dateable photo, try to calculate their likely birth years to within a few years, to find them on the family tree.
- 16.) Sometimes significant dress clues appear in photos. For instance, white or colored dresses with ornate hats or bridal veils were typically worn at weddings, while dull black clothes and black accessories were donned for mourning. A boy aged 3-8 would wear pants today but

from the mid-16th century until the late-19th century, male babies and toddlers could be dressed in gowns or dresses.

- 17.) Some ancestors were photographed just before they left home, emigrated, and/or soon after their arrival in a new city or country. Location then becomes especially significant, hence the importance of viewing any printed details on card mounts.

## Glossary:

**Ambrotype** is a positive photograph on glass made by a variant of the wet plate collodion process. The ambrotype was introduced in the 1850s. It replaced the use of the daguerreotype and was in use during the 1860s. The ambrotype was superseded by the tintype.

**Daguerreotype** was the first commercially successful photographic process (1839-1860) in the history of photography. A daguerreotype is a unique image on a silvered copper plate.

**Polaroids** created by using an instant camera uses self-developing film to create a chemically developed print shortly after taking the picture.

**Tintype**, also known as a melainotype or ferrotype, is a photograph made by creating a direct positive on a thin sheet of metal coated with a dark lacquer or enamel. Tintypes enjoyed their widest use during the 1860s and 1870s, but lesser use of the medium persisted into the early 20th century.

## Sources:

*Your Old Family Photos are Fading Away*, Jeff Wignall, Bottom Line, January 15, 2019.

*Family Photographs and How to Date Them*, Jayne Shrimpton, 2008.

*Directory of Pennsylvania Photographers, 1839-1900* by Linda A. Ries and Jay W. Ruby (Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1999).

*The Everything Guide to Online Genealogy*, Kimberly Powell, 2008.