

# How Old is That Photograph?

## Dating and Identifying 19th Century Photographs

### I. What type of photograph is it?

There were five photographic formats in popular use during the 19th century, from 1840–1900.

*Note: The first four photographic processes were all in use during the early 1860s.*

#### A. Daguerreotype:

**Invented in France in 1839**; first commercially available photographs; in popular use by 1840; in use for 25 years, until about 1865; only photographic format available until 1854; always delivered in a case; easily identifiable shiny silver-coated plate has a positive/negative effect when tilted; single print from each exposure; photograph was expensive.



#### B. Ambrotype:

**Introduced in 1854**; in use only about 10-11 years; negative image was captured directly on a glass plate, which was backed with dark fabric, lacquer, or other dark backing to reverse the image to positive; less expensive to produce and shorter exposure times; delivered in a case; still a single print from each exposure.



#### C. Tintype:

**Introduced in 1856**; same photographic process as the ambrotype, but printed on an iron plate that had been coated with black lacquer; in use over 40 years, until about 1900; most popular during the 1860s; much less expensive to produce than either ambrotypes or daguerreotypes; unbreakable and easy to send through the mail; delivered in a case until the mid-1860s; still a single print from each exposure; a magnet will cling to the front or back of the image.



#### D. Carte de Visite:

**Introduced in 1859**, and in use until about 1890; most popular from 1860-1880; photos were 2.375 x 4.5 inches in size; first photographic process from which you could have multiple prints made from one glass negative; less durable than tintypes, but better image quality and very easy to mail; collecting CDV images became a popular hobby, for which the first photo albums were created.



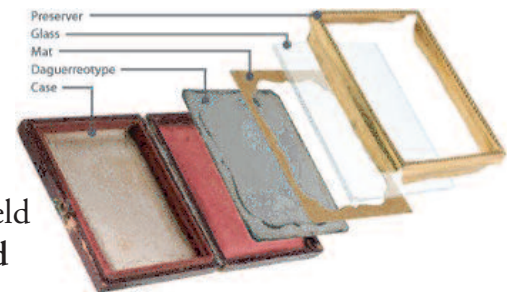
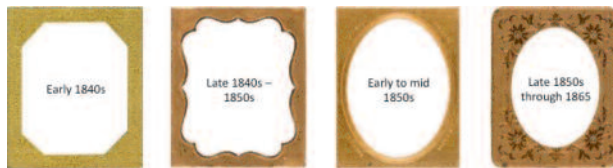
#### E. Cabinet Cards:

**Introduced 1866, but not in commercial use in the US before mid-1870s**; most popular from 1880-1896, and almost gone by 1900, as more modern photographic processes and better cameras were created; most were 4.25 x 6.25" so were twice the size of cartes de visite.



## II. How do you begin dating cased images?

- A. **Look at the case:** Cases were either leather over a wood frame or thermoplastic, which was not invented until 1856.
- B. **Look at the case lining:** Earliest linings during much of the 1840s were plain silk; later linings were velvet; later velvet linings might have the name and address of the photographic studio carved into the velvet.
- C. **Look at the mat shape and texture:** Early mats were simple, heavy, coarse; earliest ones had pebble-like texture and the opening was usually an octagon or oval until about 1845, when the finish became smoother and different opening styles were introduced; during 1850s, mats became lighter in weight and smoother, and embossing was introduced; during late 1850s, mats became much thinner and complex designs were pressed into the metal.



- D. **Use of preservers:** these were first introduced in 1847, and held together the glass, mat, and photograph in the case; reinforced corners were introduced in 1859.



## III. Clues for Civil War images in northern states

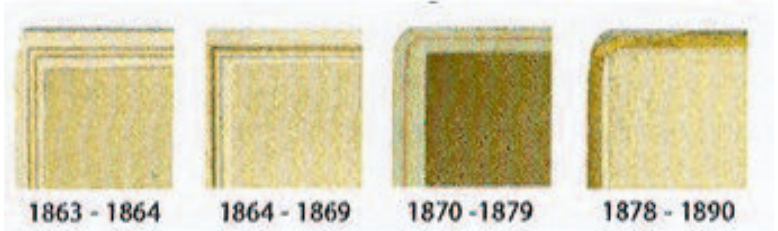
- A. **Revenue stamps:** From 1864-1866, northern states imposed a tax on photographs, to help fund the war effort. These stamps can appear on any of the five photograph formats in use at the time, but are always affixed to the back of the photograph itself.
- B. **Patriotic themes:** In northern states, may see military/patriotic themes embossed into the brass mat framing the photograph, and/or as part of the case design.



#### IV. How do you begin dating Cartes de Visite?

##### A. Does the card have a border around the photograph?

No borders	1858-1863
2 thin lines, same width	1863-1864
1 thin, 1 thicker line	1864-1869
No borders	1870-1880
Single rounded border	1870-1878
Thick gilt border (to edge)	1878-1890



##### B. How are the card's corners cut?

Square corners	1861-1869
Round corners	1870-1880
Straight cut edge	1861-1890
Straight cut edge in gilt	1882-1890
Beveled gilt edge	1885-1890



- A. Square cut corners, in good condition;*  
*B. Square cut corners showing damage from handling;*  
*C. Square corners trimmed to fit more easily into an album;*  
*D. Corners rounded at time of manufacture*

##### C. Is there a photographer's imprint?

None or blank	1858-1861
Simple lines of text	1862-1864
Vignettes, simple artwork	1863-1869
Complex artwork	1870-1890
Horizontal text/artwork	1869-1880



*Simple artwork on left; complex artwork on right*

*Ca. 1869 on left; 1870-1880 on right*

#### V. Can you date Cabinet Cards using any of the above methods?

There are fine differences in style, color of print or card, etc., but they were in heavy commercial use only about 25 years. During that time, clothing styles were very distinctive, especially for women, and can easily be used for dating.

## VI. 1840s — Women's Clothing

- A. Look for a pleated, fan-shaped bodice, gathered at the front waist, extending in a deep V or U shape well below the waist; fastened in back
- B. Sleeves were tight to the arm and usually cut on the bias, often with an oversleeve at the top of the arm
- C. Common accessories included fingerless lace gloves, gold watches on long chains, ribbon bracelets, and caps or bonnet



## 1840s — Men's Clothing

- A. Look for coat jackets with narrow sleeves, worn over a silk vest with a shawl collar
- B. Shirts had a small collar turned up under a horizontal tie
- C. Men were usually clean-shaven, although some wore fringe beards; hair was ear-length and parted high on the side



## VII. 1850s — Women's Clothing

- A. Early in the decade, will still see fan-shaped bodice, but with larger sleeves and ending close to natural waist; within a few years, bodices were fitted and fastened in the front, and white collars were worn; by end of decade, collars were smaller; hoop underskirts begin to appear
- B. Sleeves were visibly looser by 1850, and continued to grow in size until they were very full; by 1860, most women wore large bell-shaped sleeves over frilly white undersleeves
- C. Common accessories very similar to those worn a decade earlier



## 1850s — Men's Clothing

- A. Coat jackets were looser through the sleeves, and still worn over a vest; patterned vests were popular
- B. Shirts collars are still turned over horizontal ties, but the ties are quite a bit wider
- C. Hair was somewhat shorter during the 1850s, and was often worn oiled, with a large wave at the center forehead; beards begin to appear by the end of the decade



## VIII. 1860s — Women's Clothing

- A. Dresses fasten in the front with buttons; large bell-shaped sleeves are seen in the early years of the decade, shifting to loose sleeves gathered at the wrist by mid-decade; waistline rises throughout the decade until it is slightly above; the natural waistline; military-style braided trim is common during the Civil War years; skirts are full and worn over hoops
- B. Necklines are high and rounded, with small white collars; some V-necks are worn over white ruffles at the neck
- C. Common accessories include shawls, hairnets, wide belts, and elaborate earrings and brooches



Left: early 1860s  
Above: mid 1860s

**1860s — Men's Clothing**

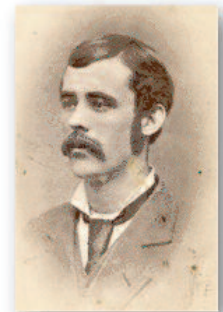
- A. Coat jackets were very long and overly large
- B. Shirt collars are folded down around the neck over narrow neckties
- C. Hair was worn level with the ears in back and parted on the side; some men remained clean-shaven, but every manner of chin whiskers was seen and full beards were the norm
- D. Many men were photographed in uniform between 1861-1865; itinerant photographers often followed units from camp to camp and took photos of the men to send home to families

**IX. 1870s — Women's Clothing**

- A. Dress bodices remain fitted and continued to be buttoned in the front; dress fronts showed an overskirt, similar to an apron, and the underskirt was heavily decorated; bustles appeared and replaced hoop underskirts; at mid-decade, bustles often were quite large, but much reduced in size and disappearing by the end of the decade; trains appeared as bustles disappeared; by 1880, most skirts fall straight to the floor
- B. Sleeves grow narrower and are fairly close-fitting, cuffed at the wrist
- C. Necklines are ruffled
- D. Common accessories include neck ribbons, large locket and crosses, jet jewelry, and matched earrings and necklaces

**1870s — Men's Clothing**

- A. Coat jackets were shorter and close-fitting; vests are worn
- B. Shirt collars are purchased separately from shirt, so may be white with a colored shirt; neckties are wide and begin to look like modern ties, but with a large, loose knot
- C. Hair was worn shorter, often with mustaches or beards

**X. 1880s — Women's Clothing**

- A. Bustles disappear; bodices are tightly-fitted, with a waistcoat-like effect that extends below the waist; buttons are visible; necklines are high, with low stand collars
- B. Sleeves are tight and trimmed at the bottom
- C. Skirts still have draped overskirts early to mid-decade and some women continue to wear small bustles; by end of decade, skirts have an elegant draped effect in front
- D. Common accessories include fans and parasols, muffs, and jewelry

**1880s — Men's Clothing**

- A. Coat jackets were short with narrow sleeves; top button only was buttoned
- B. Neckties are a variety of styles, but all are wide and soft
- C. Hair is worn shorter, mustaches or beards are seen, but more and more men are clean-shaven



## XI 1890s — Women's Clothing

- A. Bodices are tightly-fitted, with waistcoat-like effect and extend just below the waist; buttons are often covered; relatively high collar, almost to chin
- B. Sleeves begin to balloon out above elbow; at most extreme size in mid-1890s, called "leg o'mutton" sleeves; sleeves are tight from elbow to wrist
- C. Skirts are smooth at the hips, front, and sides; gradual flare to an A-shape; may flare below knees by late 1890s; some bustles make a fresh appearance
- D. Common accessories include feather boas, large fans, and parasols
- E. Hair is often worn in a top knot on top of the head



## 1890s — Men's Clothing

- A. Coat jackets were fairly narrow and frequently buttoned all the way to the top; trousers were narrow
- B. Collars are stiff; by 1900, the collar is likely to be both stiff and high
- C. Neckties are narrow bow ties early in the decade; before 1900, men wore modern-style neckties, often tucked in the vest at an angle
- D. Hair is worn short and most men have large mustaches
- E. Many men are photographed in military uniforms during the Spanish-American War



## XII A few resource books that will be helpful

- *Cased Images & Tintypes Kwik Guide* by Gary W. Clark
- *19th Century Card Photos Kwik Guide* by Gary W. Clark
- *Dating Old Photographs 1840-1929* by The Family Chronicle
- *More Dating Old Photographs 1840-1929* by Halvor Mooreshead
- *Family Photo Detective* by Maureen A. Taylor
- *Uncovering Your Ancestry through Family Photographs* by Maureen A. Taylor
- *Hairstyles 1840-1900* by Maureen A. Taylor
- *Bonnets and Hats 1840-1900* by Maureen A. Taylor
- *Finding the Civil War in Your Family Album* by Maureen A. Taylor
- *Dressed for the Photographer* by Joan L. Severa
- *My Likeness Taken: Daguerreian Portraits in America* by Joan L. Severa
- *An Illustrated History of Hairstyles 1830-1930* by Marian I. Doyle
- *Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harper's Bazaar, 1867-1898* edited by Stella Blum