

CHAPTER 2 ~ CARTES DE VISITE

Cartes de visite, which means *visiting cards* in French, are the subject of much debate when it comes to establishing when they first appeared. In one sense, it depends on your geographic point of view.

In England and on the Europe continent, during the middle of the 19th century it was common and socially correct to present a visiting card when attending a social function or calling at another's home.

In the late 1850s, paper photographs became very economical to produce, and soon the rage was to have one's photograph on a visiting card. This was much about pomp and circumstance in Europe, which did not translate as well in the United States. However, the carte de visite eventually became a popular means of capturing and sharing the essence of the everyday person.

Historical Review

With the Civil War causing widespread separation of family and loved ones, demand for photographs was steadily growing. Photographers, manufacturers, inventors, and entrepreneurs saw this as a great opportunity to expand their businesses.

The carte de visite, shortened to CDV in the 20th century, was also called a 'card photograph' or 'carte' in its prime. This format is actually a style and size of a photograph, not a technology itself.

A CDV is an albumen photographic print, mounted on a stiff card. Albumen is a sticky substance made from egg whites, applied to the photographic paper before it was sensitized. This solution became the binder that held the silver nitrate (which creates the image) to the paper.

Once this paper was sensitized with silver nitrate, the paper was then exposed to a glass negative, becoming a contact print. The negative and therefore the print could actually be any size.

So, a carte de visite describes a photograph size more than a photographic technology.

Cartes de Visite in America

The carte de visite was "the most popular and diversified type of photography produced in the nineteenth century".¹ This profound statement from William C. Darrah in his influential book *Cartes de Visite In Nineteenth Century Photography* is easily illustrated with the photographs throughout this book.



Figure 2-1. This charming c. 1864 carte de visite received expert coloring after it was developed. (Actual size.)

By the spring of 1860, dozens of photographers in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia were offering CDVs to their customers.² Since an extensive network of photographers was already in place offering tintypes, ambrotypes, and even some daguerreotypes, the new CDV style spread easily. Not wanting to lose any market

Cartes de visite	
Use	Date
Introduced in U.S.	1861 ¹
Peak Use	1862 - 1878
Waned	1879 – 1890

¹ Most common occurrence or accepted time.

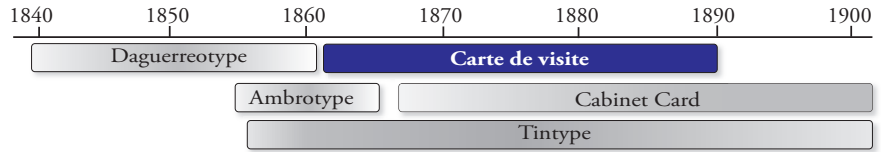


Figure 2-2. Cartes de visite shared the American photographic scene with other formats.

share, manufacturers of photographic equipment and accessories quickly embraced the new format.

The dramatic drop in photograph prices helped further expand the market. Many Civil War era cartes de visite can be found with two cent tax stamps on the back. This meant the photograph sold for less than 25 cents. Some have one cent tax stamps on them, which was used for photographs selling for less than ten cents. So converting the 1865 dollar into today’s money, a photograph selling for 15 cents then is equivalent to an item selling for around \$2.00 in 2013 dollars. Still a lot of money to some, but significantly less than the price of daguerreotypes two decades earlier which were \$2 - \$4 dollars in the early 1840s, which is the equivalent today of \$40 - \$60.

The CDV was not difficult to produce or as delicate as previous photographic types. By simply gluing the photograph to a stiff card, the product was complete. Though it could be framed or put in an album, it was frequently stored, passed around, and viewed by itself. It was easy to mail in a letter. While the casual handling of a CDV did not protect the image from damage, this informal use contributed to the success and popularity of the format that lasted over 30 years.

Dating the Carte de Visite

The actual photograph on a CDV is a very thin sheet of paper that was easily torn and susceptible to extreme curling. Virtually all albumen prints, including the CDV style, are

mounted or glued to a stiffer paper or cardboard. Identifying the evolutionary changes of mounting boards is one of the primary methods of dating the CDV. In addition to mounting board characteristics – fashions, personal styles and backgrounds play an important role in determining when a CDV was made.

Here are steps and research clues for cartes de visite:

- ☞ Clue 1: Determine card thickness.
- ☞ Clue 2: Examine the card borders and artwork.
- ☞ Clue 3: Examine card edges, corners and color.
- ☞ Clue 4: Inspect the photographer’s imprint.
- ☞ Clue 5: Analyze the image size in the print.
- ☞ Clue 6: Look for tax stamps.
- ☞ Clue 7: Inspect clothes and styles for dating.
- ☞ Clue 8: Examine studio backgrounds and props.



Figure 2-3. Late 1870s novelty carte de visite.

Clue #1 ~ Card Thickness & Size



Research into previous types of photographs like the daguerreotype, ambrotype, and tintype always revealed that as time progressed, the photograph's support layer (copper, glass, iron plate) grew thinner. This appears opposite for CDVs as the mounting card (support layer) became noticeably thicker during the CDV's lifetime.



Figure 2-4. Cartes de visite edges. Top edge from early 1860s, second from late 1860s. Bottom two from the 1870s and 80s.

The first card mounts, up to about 1862, were cut from readily available Bristol board by photographers themselves. This early board stock was very thin, usually .010" to .014" thick. Overall card dimensions were not standardized at this time either, generally 2 inches wide by 4 inches tall, but they could vary as much as ¼ inch.

However, the growing popularity, and the increasing volume of CDV production created a demand for pre-cut standardized boards. Photographic supply businesses, which had great experience with mass-producing cases, were ready to provide the next generation of mounts. Of course, they also needed this new business as the use of photo cases was diminishing.

CDV Card Thickness	
Thickness (in.)	Date Used
.011" – .014"	1858 – 1863
.015" – .017"	1862 – 1869
.020" – .030"	1869 – 1880
.030" – .040"	1880 – 1890

Table 2-1. Typical carte de visite card thickness.

For the serious researcher, card thickness is easily measured with a caliper or micrometer. The thickness should be determined from along a card edge that is not damaged, and does not include the actual print that is pasted onto the card. If a caliper or micrometer is not available, a simple home method of measurement is fairly accurate. Using common 20 lb. printer or copier paper, stack several sheets on a smooth hard surface next to a CDV. Three sheets are about .011", four sheets approximate .015", eight sheets approximate .030", and 10 approximate .040".

Determining an accurate CDV thickness is not necessary for most analysis or researchers. A combination of the other clues will most likely arrive at a good date assignment. This information is included as a part of the complete history and characteristics of the carte de visite.

Card Size

The introduction of standardized cards in about 1862 resulted in most cards cut to 2¾" wide by 4" tall. This was very consistent until the late 1860s, when along with thicker cards, the size became 2½" wide by 4" tall, and some 4¼" tall. These sizes seemed to hold until the 1880s when the demand for CDVs faded.

CDV Card Size	
Dimensions	Date Used
2½" x 4½" *	1858 - 1863
2¾" x 4"	1862 - 1869
2½" x 4⅛" - 4¼"	1869 - 1890

Table 2-2. Common CDV card sizes.

* Early cards were hand cut by photographers, size may vary.

CDVs were frequently trimmed by the owner for a variety of reasons, usually to make the card fit into an album. The listed card sizes from 1862 forward are representative of commercial, pre-cut cards sold by photographic supply companies.