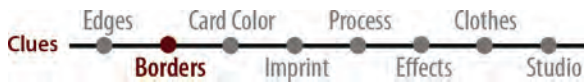


Clue #2 ~ Card Borders



Borders appear on some cabinet cards around the outside of the image, resembling the borders used on CDVs. However, they were not always present and sometimes a light colored photograph on a dark card gave the appearance of borders.

Early cabinet cards from the 1870s had the fewest borders, though some can be found. Yet one style of border is exclusive to the early cabinet card era. This style is similar to one used on CDVs; a thick gilt border extending to the edge of the card. Introduced in the late 1870s, it has not been seen past the early 1880s. Thick and bulky looking, this style was not very elegant.



Figure 3-7. A single-line outline is found frequently; a thick gilt outline mostly used in the 1870s; embossed artwork on light colored cards was popular in the late 1890s.

The most common border is a single thin line with rounded corners, though it did not have strong presence until about 1890. Through this last decade, the single line border appeared on roughly half of the cabinet cards. The line colors were varied, with a dark red being most popular, with matching text color that identified the studio.

In the mid-1890s, some cards, almost all them a bright

white, were embossed around the edges with fine patterns. The emboss began at the very edge but extended into the card only about 1/8 inch as shown in Figure 3-7.

A unique characteristic that emerged in about 1887 was a single line, usually a geometric or artistic pattern, underneath the photograph, but above the studio imprint.



Figure 3-8. Single-line patterns under photograph were popular in the late 1880s to early 1890s.

Cabinet Card Borders	
Description	Date Used
No Borders	1870 - 1900
Single Thin Line Border	1885 - 1900
Thick Gilt Border to Edge	1872 - 1885
Artistic Line Below Image	1887 - 1995
Fine Embossed Patterns	1894 - 1900

Table 3-2. Common cabinet card borders

Clue #3 ~ Card Colors



Several card colors were popular in the latter part of the 19th century, and like other styles, they came in and went out of favor at identifiable dates.

Natural Shades & Pastels

Initially, cabinet cards were made from natural raw cardboard, both front and back. The actual fibers on natural cards can be seen with a magnifying glass. However, in the mid 1870s the backs were coated with soft off-white or even light pastel enamel. This gave the artistic imprints a better surface for printing, rather than the rough natural surface of a bare card. The two most popular colors were primrose, a pale yellow and pearl, a rich off-white,⁴ though pink, blue, and green are also found.



Figure 3-9. A variety of pastel cards were popular in the 1870s through the 1880s.

Dark Card Colors

In the late 1880s, dark colored cards were introduced. The cards came in a variety of colors, the most popular were dark maroon and black. Green was a very attractive version, but is rarer than maroon and black. The darker card colors showed the gilt studio and address lettering nicely with the contrast.

The earliest dark cards of the 1880s were only colored

on the front, with the back being natural or gray; about 25% were natural and 75% gray. By 1890 most cards were equally colored front and back.



Figure 3-10. 1888 maroon cabinet card.

While the dark cards are not rare, they did not capture a large share of the marketplace, possibly because they were more expensive than standard colors. Compared to primrose or pearl cards noted earlier which were \$1.10 per hundred, maroon cards were \$1.20 and black were \$1.30 per hundred.⁵

Cabinet Card Colors	
Description	Date Used
Natural: Front and Back	1870 - 1878
Natural Front, Coated Back	1876 - 1900
Coated Front & Back	1888 - 1900
Pastel: Pink, Green, Yellow	1870s - 1889
Dark Maroon, Green, Black	1884 - 1895

Table 3-3. Popular cabinet card colors.

Clue #4 ~ Photographer Imprints



Front imprints include the text and artwork below the photograph, allowing the cabinet card to become a self-advertising piece of work. This information holds some of the most valuable clues to dating cabinet cards, yet it is often overlooked.

Before the cabinet card, the carte de visite was imprinted with studio or photographer information only on the reverse side, there was very little space to put the information on the front, though a few photographer names can be found there.

Front and back imprints contain some of the most accurate cabinet card dating clues.

However, the cabinet card provided so much more space that the photographer could place his important information on the front of the card instead of the back, or in many instances, both places. In the mid-1880s, the artwork on the front became larger and more artistic. By 1888 nearly all cards had the imprint on the front in an attractive, usually cursive typeface. From this time on only about 50% of the cabinet cards also had back imprints. By eliminating the back imprint, a photographer could save money on card stock.

Front Imprints

Several different traits of a front imprint can yield clues to the date of the cabinet card. These include:

- ☞ Type size and font used
- ☞ Words or unique graphics
- ☞ Printing technique used for imprint

Early cabinet cards continued the simple style pioneered by the CDV; usually a small easy-to-read listing of the photographer or studio name on the left, and the location on the right. These prevailed until about 1880 when larger elegant cursive typefaces were used.



Figure 3-11. Front imprints evolved from plain text in the 1870s to elegant embossing in the late 1890s.

Portrait photography was very competitive and the industry was continually making improvements. One of the popularly advertised improvements was a burnishing of the cabinet card print that gave the image a shiny or polished look. Beginning in the very late 1880s, the claim of “Extra Finish” or “Superior Finish” was sometimes listed in the imprint block, usually with a graphic of an artist’s palette. These card markings place the cabinet card from 1888 to roughly 1894.

Besides the studio name and address, other artwork or features were added to the imprint block. One of the most easily recognized traits is a monogram, usually stylized letters of the photographer’s name. This was usually placed in the center of the imprint. The earliest observation of this is 1886, but it became almost standard from 1890 to the middle of the 1890s.

Front Imprints	
Characteristic	Date Used
Small plain text	1870 - 1883
Cursive and larger text	1883 - 1900
Centered monogram	1889 - 1894
Foil stamped text	1890 - 1900
Embossed text and artwork	1894 - 1900

Table 3-4. Front cabinet card Imprints.

About 1890 foil stamped imprints were introduced. Easily recognized by its glossy gold overlay, it was prob-