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INTRODUCTION

This book was born out of the need to easily find information that would help establish a date for old pictures during genealogical research.

What I found though was a limited amount of information to help decipher the undated photographs in boxes and albums tucked away in trunks, closets, attics, and basements. I felt there was a need to provide in one place, without distraction, comprehensive information to help establish a date of almost any 19th century photograph within a few years.

Like many, I became a genealogist out of circumstances, the deaths of some close family members, and the realization that I did not really know them as well as I could or should have. These events soon inspired me to explore a path that was a natural fit.

I did not start with a completely blank slate. I am a professional photographer and graphics designer, specializing in commercial product photography. As a life-long photography enthusiasts, and possessing graphics design specialties, I had the inclination and now the inspiration to develop a comprehensive set of resources to help genealogists of all skill levels.

The results include a website devoted to 19th century photographs, presentations at genealogy conferences around the country, and of course this book and others.

This 20 year journey has also included collecting thousands of 19th century photographs, supplier catalogs, early photography manuals, and period advertisements.

Defining the Card Photograph

This book will take you from the early 1860s through the end of the 1890s. The focus is primarily on the carte de visite photograph and its larger cousin the cabinet card. Through most of this era the looks, styles, and sizes were fairly standard at any given time. However, with amazing regularity, every few years, something significant would change and become adopted by most photographers or subjects. This could be some technological improvement, a new photographic style used, or even a fashion change. This makes dating them easy as they evolved in identifiable steps.

The two dominate photograph formats, cartes de visite and cabinet cards, required that the actual photograph paper be glued to a rigid cards. The photographic paper was very thin and would curl tightly if left alone.

The card characteristics give us many clues as to the date of the photograph.



Figure i-1. 1867 Carte de visite of the author's great-grandfather.

Carte de visite

The carte de visite became the dominate photograph from the Civil War period to the late 1870s. It was a small photograph, about 2.5 inches wide by 4.12 inches tall, about the same size of a 6th plate tintype. Slight size variations occurred, especially during the early years since the mounting cards were usually hand-cut by the photographer.



Figure i-2. The carte de visite was similar to a 1/6th plate tintype in size, from which its name is derived. (Actual size.)

Cabinet Card

The cabinet card was larger than the carte de visite, and became the preferred photograph format about 1880. Measuring 4.25 inches by 6.5 inches, it offered a much sharper image. The size of the cabinet card remained unchanged to about 1900, however many datable variations of colors, edges, and style were introduced every few years. This KwikGuide will explore all of them.



Figure i-3. The larger cabinet was produced using the same steps as the carte de visite. Glass negatives were created, and the print was created from the negative. (Actual size.)

Photo Formats with More Exciting Names

Towards the end of the 19th century, entrepreneurs and creative photographers inspired a wide variety of new photograph formats and sizes. With names like the Victoria, Promenade, Panel, and Boudoir cards, the underlying photographic technology was the same, but recognizing and dating the formats can be confusing and misleading. These variations along with oversized prints are identified and explained in their own chapter.

Why Study Old Photographs?

Photographs add an exciting, visual dimension to our genealogical records. If someone walked up to a table with a pile of old photographs along with a pile of census records, they would most likely turn their attention to the photographs first. We are picture oriented. Writing has only been commonly used for a couple thousand years - if that. Yet we are used to seeking out visual clues in our surroundings: recognizing from a distance the saber tooth tiger as a foe, to seeing a buffalo for food, to discovering hidden dangers or rewards as we drive the highways.

Many old family pictures are not dated or identified, yet may be assumed a specific relative by conjecture or family legend. But just as documented confirmation of an ancestor's place of residence 100 years ago is preferred over 'we heard he lived there,' it is prudent to confirm that the picture could at least be that person based on the availability of photographs or that type of picture at the time of the person's apparent age.

Most photograph dates can be established within two to six years of when the photo was taken.

Once a picture has been reasonably dated within a few years of its origin, then a more confident assignment of the person's identity can be made and defended. Accuracy is very important in the written words of census records, court recordings, and other documents – the same standard should be applied to the analysis of old photographs. Your family history will be more rewarding because of it.

Protecting Your Old Photographs

While this book does not delve into the detail of protecting, storing, or restoration of old photographs, it is important to stress some important considerations about handling your images. I frequently am asked what causes the most damage to photographs. The scientific answer is extreme temperature fluctuations, high and low humidity, and continual exposure to direct sunlight. However, I have found the overwhelming cause of damage to old photographs is people.

Physical Protection

The number one enemy of old photographs is the finger and thumb. Oil, moisture, and leftover snack crumbs are damaging. Please do not grasp the images with a thumb directly on the image, carefully handle by the edges – after you have washed your hands. Even better, invest in some inexpensive, yet archival safe, plastic sleeves which allow you to examine both sides of the photograph without ever touching it.



Figure i-4. Ancestor photographs are part of a living history.

Second is the accidental bend, crease, or tear. Since these photographs are more than 100 years old, the paper base has dried considerably. What was once a flexible photograph is now stiff and extremely brittle. Larger photographs should be stored in archival sleeves along with an acid free stiff card stock or mounting board behind it for support. Some small photographs would benefit from this also. However, resist the temptation to tape or glue the picture to the new board.

Digital Archives

Another way to protect the future of your photographs is to have them scanned at a high resolution, and then archived as digital files on your computer, in the cloud, or to a removable storage device.

Archiving your photos as high resolution files not only ensures you have copy of your actual photographs, but these same files can then be used in a variety of manners such as sharing with friends and relatives, posting onto genealogical and social boards, and creating prints or photo books.

The photos should be archived digitally no matter what condition they are in, since restoration techniques can many times bring a damaged photo back to life. The high resolution scans of the photos are crucial to good restoration.



Figure i-5. Author's paternal grandmother, 1893.

Card Photographs - Ancestral Portraits

This book covers carte de visite and cabinet card photographs in detail, and strives to help answer the genealogist's and collector's toughest questions. The vast majority of 19th century individual and family photographs were produced in one of these formats. I hope that this tour through history and viewing the many fine photographs will reveal some insight into those ancestors and their lives.

The goal of this book is to enrich genealogists, family historians, and collectors with the knowledge to help them discover valuable information about all those old photographs in albums, boxes, and drawers. With this newly discovered information, their genealogical history can become more accurate, exciting, and fulfilling.

Enjoy the past and happy research.



Figure i-6. Author's maternal grandmother, 1899.

CHAPTER 1 ~ A BRIEF PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY

Carte de visite photographs were only evolutionary improvements from previous paper processes, yet they ushered in the first dramatic change in commercial photography since the introduction of the daguerreotype twenty years earlier. This paper photograph was created from a glass negative and was inexpensive to produce.

The carte de visite was patented in 1857 by the Frenchman Adolphe Eugène Disdéri in Paris, though the pat-

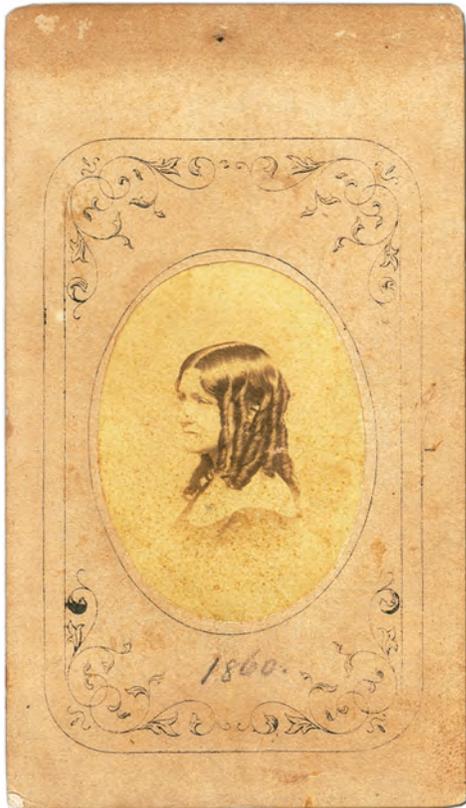


Figure 1-1. 1860 paper photograph with hand drawn artwork.

ent was actually for a camera that took four pictures, each 3.25" x 2.125" on a full-size plate. Cut and then mounted on a stiff card, these became the rage in France after Emperor Napoleon III stopped his marching army in front of Disdéri's studio, entered with his staff and sat for portraits. This would be a public relations coup that Disdéri could not have dreamed of.

However, the movement did not sweep the United States until the early 1860s. It is rare to find a carte de visite taken before 1861 as ambrotypes and tintypes were still the most common methods of producing pictures. Gradually they became more available, and then seemed to become an overnight sensation around 1863. This success probably was due to affordability. Until this time, tintypes were sold in wooden miniature cases, usually costing more than the photograph itself. The carte de visite cost significantly less to produce.

Cartes de visite and the first cabinet cards were created using common steps, chemicals, and papers. The cabinet cards were merely larger, and benefited from improvements in cameras and lenses. In the mid-1880s, new chemicals and papers were introduced which improved the photographs even further, but the technique for creating paper prints did not change much from the early 1860s to the late 1890s.

There was an earlier, but less successful process for paper prints. An Englishman named William Henry Fox Talbot patented in 1841 a method for creating negatives on paper via a solution of salt and silver nitrate. His salt prints, or calotypes as he named them, were never intended for portraiture work, but were mostly used for architectural and landscape pictures. He strictly protected his patent and forced photographers to pay expensive licenses to use his technique. This did not set well with English or French photographers, and the process was never widely adopted in America. Besides the licensing issues, the grainy quality of the salt print could not match the clarity and beauty of the daguerreotype or even the ambrotype.

For the reader that wants to learn where their paper prints fit into the history of photography, we must first look at the daguerreotype in the 1840s.