

DATING OLD PHOTOS CHEAT SHEET



Every family has, in its boxes and albums of old photos—at least a few mysteries: Photographs with unnamed faces, taken who-knows-when or -where. But those images contain hidden clues that can help you determine who's in them and when they were taken. This cheat sheet will show you what clues to look for in your old family photos, and how to use those clues to solve your old-picture puzzles.

BY MAUREEN A. TAYLOR AND THE EDITORS OF
FAMILY TREE MAGAZINE

TOP PHOTO IDENTIFICATION CLUES



Courtesy of Bill Dodge

1. PHOTOGRAPHIC FORMAT: Different types of photographs became common as photographic technology evolved. Card photographs were produced starting in the 1850s.

2. PHOTOGRAPHER'S IMPRINT: Look up the photography studio in city directories to learn its date of operation.

3. CLOTHING, HAIR AND ACCESSORIES: Fashion trends—especially for women, whose styles changed more quickly and dramatically—can give you a date range for a photo. These sleeves with puffy shoulders and narrow wrists, for example, date to the late 1890s.

4. WRITTEN CAPTIONS: Notes on the front or back of a photo may be vague or incorrect. Try to confirm the information with other photo clues.

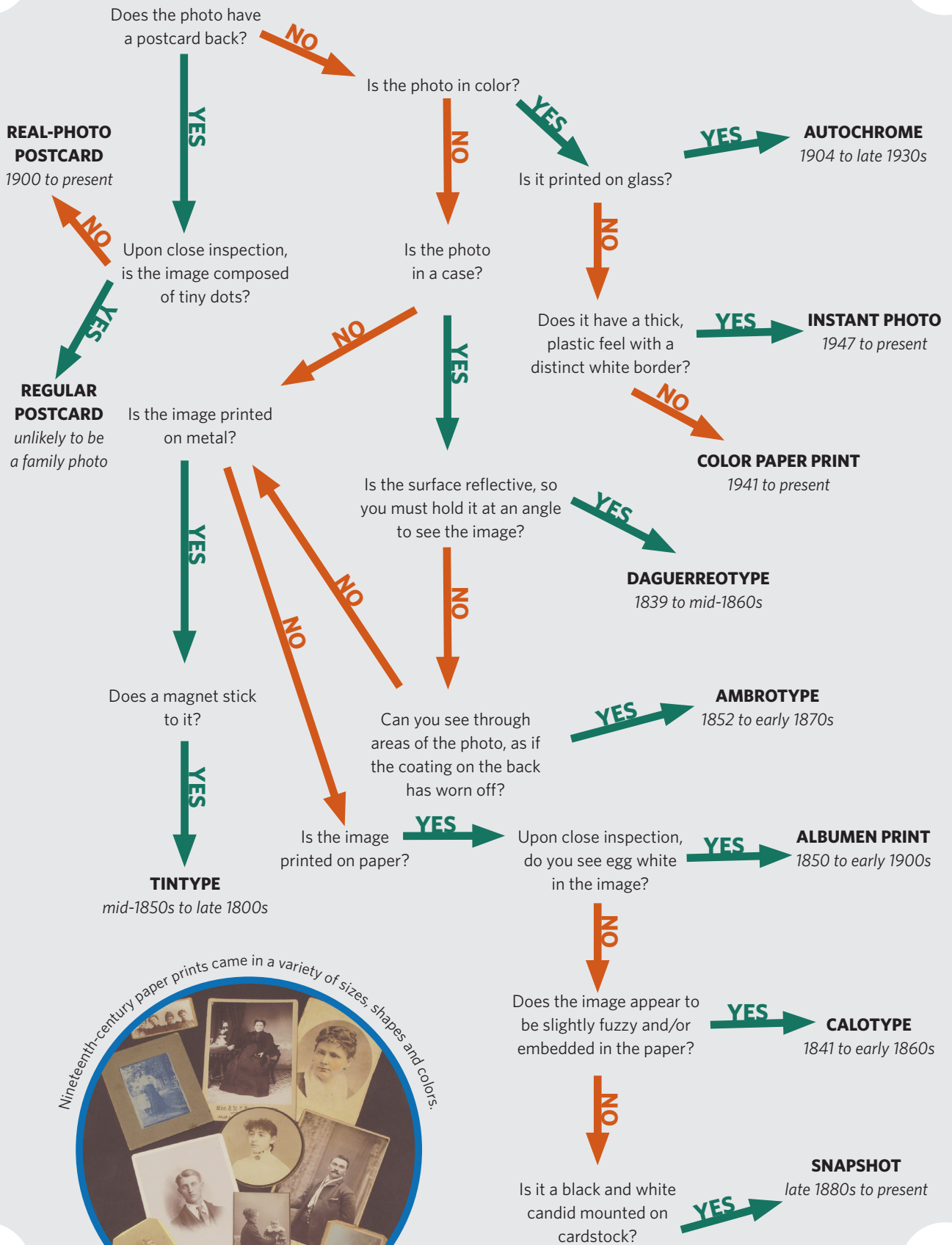
5. ESTIMATED AGES: Once you have an approximate date, estimate the ages of those pictured and examine your genealogy research for family groups that match. Remember, though, that not all photos show related individuals.

6. FACIAL FEATURES: Compare shapes of the face, eyes, ears, nose and mouth to reveal possible relationships between those in the photo, or determine whether the same person is in an already-identified image. Facial resemblance may not be enough to make a definitive photo ID, but it can help you form a theory to research.

7. UNUSUAL CLUES: Photo clues hidden in plain sight might include a fraternal society pin, the number of stars on a flag in the background, or the style of a photo mat.

WHAT'S THE PHOTO FORMAT?

A picture's photographic format can reveal a specific time frame when the photo was taken. Follow these steps to determine the format of your mystery photographs.




Nineteenth-century paper prints came in a variety of sizes, shapes and colors.




















Photos: collection of Maureen A. Taylor

PHOTO FORMATS QUICK GUIDE

FORMAT	DATES	CHARACTERISTICS	
daguerreotype	1839-mid-1860s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> developed on copper plates coated with polished silver glass cover and brass mat in a wood, leather or composite case early daguerreotypes are reversed (writing appears backward) reflective surface; you must hold image at an angle to see it 	
calotype	1841-early 1860s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> printed on paper coated with silver iodide salted paper prints use silver chloride image may be fuzzy (salted paper prints are slightly clearer) and appear “embedded” into the paper watermark may be visible 	
ambrotype	1852-early 1870s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> negative image developed on glass with a dark coating on the back, so picture appears positive encased with glass cover and a brass mat image may be see-through where dark coating has deteriorated 	
tintype	1850-early 1900s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> produced on a thin, blackened iron sheet coated with photographic chemicals, then varnished range from 8x10-inch plates to small “gems” may be loose, matted in a paper frame or encased a magnet will stick to the photo may show rust spots 	
albumen print	1850-early 1900s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> produced on paper coated with aluminum chloride and egg whites, using a glass negative egg white may be visible on close examination Civil War-era images may have revenue tax stamp on the back sizes include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » 2½x4-inch <i>carte de visite</i>, offered in America by 1859 » 4½x6½-inch cabinet card, introduced in 1866 » 3¼x5-inch Victoria, introduced in 1870 	
snapshot	late 1880s-present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> first candid images taken with amateur cameras users returned the camera to the factory for prints and more film small prints, varying sizes mounted on cardstock 	
real-photo postcard	1900-present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> photographic prints with postcard backs image appears solid when magnified (a regular postcard image appears made of tiny dots) estimate a date using the design of the postcard back and stamp box; see <www.playle.com/realphoto> 	
autochrome	1904-late 1930s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> first permanent color photo process used dyed starch grains to create an image on glass a special device was needed to see the image coarse grains give image a hazy quality stray color grains may appear in large light areas, such as skies 	
color paper print	1941-present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> introduced by Kodak with Kodachrome film range of sizes; 35mm film size is standard since 1892 narrow the date of nonstandard sizes using the chart at <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_format> 	
instant photo	1947-present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> film made by Polaroid, Kodak and Fujifilm developed on the spot distinct white border, glossy surface and thick, plastic feel may be possible to date a Polaroid by its size; see the measurements at <www.rwhirled.com/landlist/landfilm.htm> 	

CLOTHING AND HAIRSTYLE CLUES IN FAMILY PHOTOS, 1840-1930

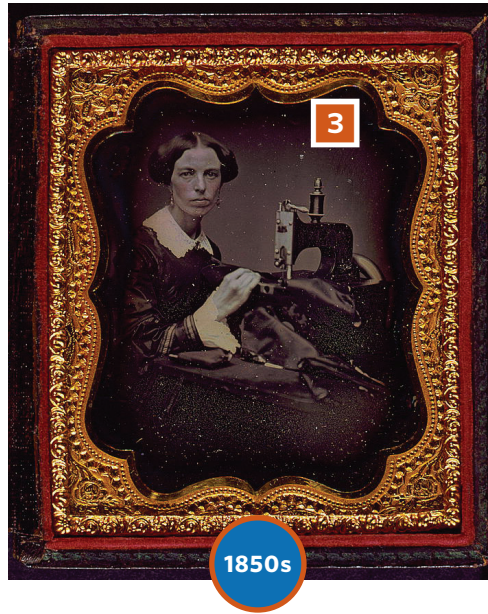
CLOTHING

	Women		Men	
1840-1849	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> low, sloping shoulders long, tight bodice with low, pointed waist bell-shaped skirts that grew more voluminous over the decade 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> white shirt with small, turned-up collar tailored coat with long, narrow sleeves snug trousers 	
1850-1859	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> broad collars, narrowing later in the decade sleeves narrow at the shoulder and widening to the wrist, or gathered at the wrist in the late 1850s white undersleeves bell-shaped skirt over petticoats 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> high, upstanding shirt collar generously cut "sack" suit coat with vest wide-legged pants 	
1860-1868	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> lace collar and cuffs sleeves gathered or flared at the wrist tight bodice buttoned down the front with pointed or round waist full hoop skirt military-themed trim 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shirt collar folded down around neck oversized sack coat single-breasted waistcoat wide-legged pants military uniform 	
1869-1882	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ruffled neckline ruffle-trimmed, elongated bodice pleated trim bustled skirt with flounces, ruching and bows in the back from 1875 to 1877, skirts with smaller bustles, long overskirts and trains 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> semi-fitted jacket buttoned at the top vest 	
1883-1889	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> low-standing collar tight, three-quarter-length sleeves with trim at the wrist form-fitting, elongated bodice apronlike overskirt 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> stiff, high shirt collar slim suit with jacket worn open or partially buttoned waistcoat 	
1890-1900	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "leg-o-mutton" sleeves wide at the shoulder and tight at the wrist horizontal trim on bodice long, A-line skirt 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shirt with small, stiff, pointed collar that rises higher as the decade progresses narrow coat buttoned to the top slim trousers, sometimes creased at the front 	
1901-1909	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> smaller sleeves, full at the shoulder bloused bodice softly gathered skirt S-shaped silhouette created by elongated corset separates of skirt and frilly blouse 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shirt with stand-up collar simple sack coat single-breasted waistcoat fastened high on the chest 	
1910-1918	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> high collar reaching the chin shirtwaist-style bodice bloused over wide waistband tunic-style top skirts gradually shorten to mid-calf briefly, the narrow "hobble skirt" corsets fall out of use during WWI 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> high, starched, removable shirt collar narrow jacket with small, high lapels pants wide at the bottom of the leg 	
1919-1930	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> loose-fitting dress dropped waist short skirts rising to the knee by 1925, then fluctuating 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> single or double-breasted suit with vest relaxed jacket with wider lapels straight, short pants 	

HAIR		ACCESSORIES	
Women	Men	Women	Men
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> center part pulled back full at sides covering ears ringlets at side of head 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> long, oiled hair usually clean-shaven; sometimes sideburns or a fringe beard under the chin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> fingerless gloves gold watch on chain daycap, bonnet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> dark necktie worn in a horizontal bowknot 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> parted in the center twisted into bun or coil covered the ears 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> long on top side part oiled, with a wave at the center of the forehead usually clean-shaven 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shawl deep bonnet daycaps on older women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> wide tie worn in large half-bow top hat for upper classes, bowler hat for working classes 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> center part pulled back into low chignon sausage curls covering ears 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ear length parted on the side facial hair becoming more common 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shawl hairnet wide belt elaborate earrings brooch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> narrow tie suspenders 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> long hair early in 1870s large bun complicated updos hairpieces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> parted in the center beards and mustaches of all kinds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> black velvet neck ribbon large jewelry small or wider-brimmed "picture" hat worn tilted forward mantilla after 1876 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> black or striped tie worn in loose knot 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> pulled back frizzed around the face flat bangs later in the decade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> center part becoming popular trimmed facial hair on older men clean-shaven or large mustache 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> muff novelty jewelry small hat fan and parasol 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> watch with long chain bowtie or tie with four-in-hand knot hat including black homburg 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> pulled back short, frizzed bangs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> short, parted on the side large, shapely mustache beards on older men 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> feather boa large fan, parasol small or wide hat watch pinned to the bosom decorative comb worn high on the back of the head 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> bowtie narrow, dark or patterned tie 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> pulled back full around the face 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> short clean-shaven or groomed mustache 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> large, brimmed hat with decorations including flowers and ostrich feathers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> narrow necktie worn in four-in-hand knot 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> pulled back soft and wide around the face 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> short, slicked-back clean-shaven or neat mustache 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> decorated hat with low crown and broad brim briefly, small, turban-style hat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> narrow necktie bowler hat or cloth cap 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> bobbed hair, sometimes styled close to the head perm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> short clean-shaven or "Charlie Chaplin" mustache 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> long string of pearls high-heeled Mary Jane shoes cloche hat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ties become more colorful as the decade progresses 

Dating a Cased Image

1. Early photograph cases were made of leather-coated wood, sometimes inlaid with mother-of-pearl and often lined with velvet. Leather hinges joined the covers.
2. Brass photo mats of the early 1840s had a pebbly or sandy texture and simple oval- or octagon-shaped photo openings.



HIDDEN CLUE

Props such as this sewing machine may indicate the subject's occupation or interests.

Clues in Photos of Children

1. Children of both sexes wore short dresses and long hair until about age 5. Girls' dresses gradually became longer until adulthood. Boys wore short pants from age 5 until approximately age 12.
2. To tell girls from boys in photos, look at the hair: Girls' hair was generally parted in the center; boys' hair was parted on the side.

3. Clothing styles for little girls generally mimicked women's clothing. The photo on the left dates from the Civil War era of full skirts. Open necklines and shoulder bows are typical of girls' dresses.
4. The Little Lord Fauntleroy look for boys—a floppy lace collar, frilly blouse or sashed dress, and hair bow—was popular around the turn of the century.



HIDDEN CLUE

Our ancestors sometimes posed with photos to include deceased or absent loved ones in the picture.



Photos, bottom: Collection of Maureen A. Taylor. Top: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division; left: LC-USZC4-8989; center: LC-USZC4-3598; right: LC-DIG-ppmsca-41011

Photo Identification Quick Tips

■ **ZOOM IN.** To get a good look at details, scan photos at a high resolution and zoom in on your computer. You also could examine photos in good lighting using a photographer's loupe.

■ **COLLECT CLOTHING CLUES.** Compare clothing in your photos to the resources listed below. Fashion trends hit cities and upper classes first, but women might remake dresses or use accessories to keep up with trends. Some photography studios had shawls and hats for patrons to borrow.

■ **CONSIDER AGE.** Younger women generally adopted new styles more quickly than more mature women, who tended to wear older styles. And just as today, women might prefer to wear a different style of clothing or hair.

■ **BEWARE BRIDAL PHOTOS.** Wedding photos might show brides wearing any color (right, top). Queen Victoria popularized the white wedding dress in 1840, but few could purchase a dress for one wear. Only in the 20th century did white become the ubiquitous color for wedding gowns.

And although bridal gowns followed other fashions, a bride may have worn her mother's or grandmother's gown. Look for other clues to confirm a date.

■ **RESEARCH ETHNIC ATTIRE.** Immigrants often abandoned full ethnic dress after arriving in America, but occasionally posed in accessories such as caps, head scarves and mantillas (the women, below right, are from Wales). See the Resources for references to help you pinpoint a place of origin.

■ **LOOK FOR A TAX STAMP.** Card photographs were taxed during the Civil War. Refer to the Old Photographic website (see Resources, below) for dating the tax stamp on the back. A 2- or 3-cent stamp indicates the image cost 25 or 50 cents and was made between Aug. 1, 1864, and Aug. 1, 1866.

■ **CHECK THE BACKGROUND.** Elaborate painted studio backdrops like the one at right became popular in the mid-1880s. An obvious edge to a canvas backdrop might indicate the photo was taken by an itinerant photographer.



Photos: collection of Maureen A. Taylor

RESOURCES

Websites

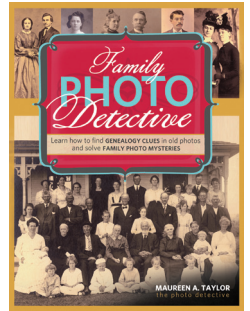
- **Ancestry.com: Historic Catalogs of Sears, Roebuck and Co., 1896-1993** \$ <search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1670>
- **Craig's Daguerreian Registry** <craigcamera.com/dag>
- **The Daguerrian Society** <www.daguerre.org>
- **Fashion-Era** <www.fashion-era.com>
- **The Land List: Polaroid Film Index** <www.rwhirled.com/landlist/landfilm.htm>
- **The Photo Detective** <www.maurentaylor.com>
- **Playle.com: How to Identify and Date Real-Photo Vintage Postcards** <www.playle.com/realphoto>
- **National Media Museum: Photography Articles and Fact Sheets** <www.nationalmediamuseum.org.uk/Collection/Photography/PhotographyArticlesFactSheets.aspx>
- **PhotoTree.com: Photo Identification** <www.phototree.com/identify.htm>
- **National Media Museum: Daguerreotypes** <nationalmediamuseumblog.wordpress.com/2013/04/16/find-out-when-a-photo-was-taken-identify-daguerreotype-photograph>
- **Old Photographic: Tax Stamps** <oldphotographic.com/tips/tax-stamps-on-carte-de-visite-photos>
- **Wikipedia: Film Format** <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_format>
- **Wikipedia: History of Western Clothing** <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:History_of_clothing_%28Western_fashion%29>

Books

- *20th Century Fashion* by Valerie Mendes and Amy de la Haye (Thames & Hudson)

- *America's Children: Picturing Childhood from Early America to the Present* edited by Kathleen Thompson and Hilary Mac Austin (W.W. Norton)
- *The Child in Fashion 1750-1920* by Kristina Harris (Schiffer)
- *Craig's Daguerreian Registry*, revised edition by John S. Craig (self-published)
- *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion, 1840-1900* by Joan Severa (Kent State University Press)
- *Family Photo Detective* by Maureen A. Taylor (Family Tree Books)
- *Fashionable Folks: Bonnets and Hats 1840-1900* by Maureen A. Taylor (Photo Detective)
- *Finding the Civil War in Your Family Album* by Maureen A. Taylor (Photo Detective)
- *Folk Costumes of the World* by Robert Harrold (Sterling Publishing)
- *Hairstyles 1840-1900* by Maureen A. Taylor (Photo Detective)
- *The History of Hair* by Ann Charles and Roger DeAnfrasio (Bonanza)
- *An Illustrated History of Hairstyles 1830-1930* by Marian I. Doyle (Schiffer)
- *The Long and Short of It* by Bill Severn (David McKay Co.)
- *My Likeness Taken: Daguerreian Portraits in America* by Joan Severa (Kent State University Press)
- *Nineteenth Century Photographic Cases and Wall Frames* by Paul K. Berg (self-published)
- *Out-of-Style: A Modern Perspective of How, Why and When Vintage Fashions Evolved* by Betty Kreisel-Schubert (Flashback Publishing)
- *Support and Seduction: A History of Corsets and Bras* by Beatrice Fontanel (Abradale Press)

PHOTO-IDENTIFICATION WORKSHEET



Solve your family photo mysteries one step at a time. Fill in the following information about your mystery photo, then attach a copy of the image to the form. Find more tips for solving old photo mysteries in Maureen A. Taylor's book *Family Photo Detective* (Family Tree Books) <shopfamilytree.com/family-photo-detective>.

1 TYPE OF PHOTOGRAPH	8 COSTUME TIME FRAME
2 TYPE OF ENCLOSURE	9 PROPS & BACKGROUND DESCRIPTION
3 SIZE	
4 PHOTOGRAPHER'S IMPRINT	10 OWNER'S NAME & CONTACT INFORMATION
5 PHOTOGRAPHER'S DATES OF OPERATION (CITE SOURCE)	
6 SUBJECTS & CAPTION	11 CLUES IN GENEALOGICAL RECORDS
7 COSTUME DESCRIPTIONS	12 POSSIBLE SUBJECTS & THEIR LIFE DATES

USING THIS CHEAT SHEET

■ **HYPERLINKS:** This Dating Old Photos Cheat Sheet is enhanced with hyperlinking, so you can click right through to the recommended websites. You may see a message asking for permission to access the site; click Allow or Yes to continue.

■ **PRINTING:** This cheat sheet features a chart of clothing and hairstyle clues that spans two pages (pages 4 and five). You can print the cheat sheet on single, letter-size sheets on your home printer. Then, to use the two-page chart of clothing and hairstyle clues, just place pages 4 and 5 side by side, to look like this:

WOMEN				MEN			
Clues	Photo	Clues	Photo	Clues	Photo	Clues	Photo
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No styling devices • Hair styled in well-torn, pulled-back style • Hair pulled up and over forehead • Hair down the middle 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hair pulled back and over forehead • Hair pulled up and over forehead • Hair pulled up and over forehead • Hair pulled up and over forehead 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hair pulled back and over forehead • Hair pulled up and over forehead • Hair pulled up and over forehead • Hair pulled up and over forehead 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hair pulled back and over forehead • Hair pulled up and over forehead • Hair pulled up and over forehead • Hair pulled up and over forehead 	
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