

## RESEARCHING OLD PHOTOS

Nothing brings your family history and memories alive like pictures. While it's great to know the name of your great grandmother, seeing her face in a photo makes it personal. Hopefully you have lots of family pictures. And hopefully you know who's in them. Unfortunately though, it's not unusual to have a picture and be clueless about it. Maybe you got some photographs from "grandma's attic", or from a newly discovered third cousin, but the subjects are unknown as well as when and where it was taken. This is unfortunate, as we don't want to toss out these "lost souls" and have them become flea market fodder! With some detective work, maybe you can figure out who's in them.

Like any family history search, it's always best to start with what you know. Record everything you know about the picture: who, where, & when you got it, any writing on the back, or previous owners for example. Any tidbit of info you have could be helpful. You might want to create a data sheet to record these facts, along with any future information you gather. Having all your information in one concise location will make it easier for you to reach a conclusion.

Make some copies of the picture, including the back if there's writing on it, and use these as your working copies. Always keep your valuable original safely stored away in an archival container. Send or give these copies to other family members, along with all the data you have, and then pick their brains for any information about the photograph. Do they know any of the people? The occasion? The time period? Location? The photographer? Have they ever seen the picture before? If so, when, where, and with whom? Do they have any opinions about the picture? Other family members may be your best source of information.

Assuming a family member doesn't solve the mystery, here are some techniques for gathering more clues:

1. The type of picture (Daguerreotype, glass plate, tintype, cabinet card, etc. ) and size of the print can at least help give you a range of time that the picture was taken. Visit [www.eastman.org](http://www.eastman.org) for a nice timeline of photographic events. One of the better references is "Care and Identification of 19th Century Photographic Prints" by James M. Reilly. Your library may have this or a similar text you can use. Local photographers may also help you identify the type or the links at the end of this article.
2. If a photographer's name is listed or imprinted on the picture, then you can research this person. Also, the imprint often lists the location, another valuable clue! Look at city directories for the area (found in libraries) or local historical societies to determine when this photographer was in business, addresses, etc. The Eastman.org web site also has some biographies. If there was more than one photographer in town, your mystery ancestor might have gone to the nearest one. So if you know who in your family lived near the photographer, you might be able to deduce the people in the photo.
3. Fashion or clothes can be a clue for time period. What are the subjects wearing? This will take some research, as not many of us are familiar with the fashion trends over

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time. Look to your library for reference texts. Be careful of wedding dresses though, as the bride might be wearing her mother's dress!

4. Can you tell if the picture is from a special occasion? Like a wedding or baptism. If so, what are the major events in your family that might relate?

5. Finally, look at the picture itself. Are there any "props" that might give a clue? Are the people holding anything that might be time period or occasion related? As with many photos, sometimes the photographer took a picture of something he didn't realize was there at the time. Like a sign in the background, or a car. This is especially useful if the subjects are outside. All these might be clues as to when or where the picture was taken.

The idea is to put all your facts together and see if you can deduce the who, where and when of the image. If all the above fails though, a last resort is to post your picture on the web and invite others to help with identification. You can do this either on your own web site or at: <http://www.city-gallery.com/album/>. Good luck!

For more information:

Dating old photos:

<http://www.city-gallery.com/guide/>

Tips & Worksheet for dating photos:

<http://library.thinkquest.org/C001313/clues1.htm>

For preserving your photos:

<http://www.webYFL.com/generic.html?pid=6>).

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