

4-1-1990

# Interpreting the Image: How to Understand Historical Photographs

Loren N. Horton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Horton, Loren N. "Interpreting the Image: How to Understand Historical Photographs." *The Palimpsest* 71 (1990), 90-92.  
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol71/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

# Interpreting the Image

## How to Understand Historical Photographs

by Loren N. Horton

IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, having one's portrait (or "likeness") taken was a special occasion for which people dressed specially. Clothing style is one of the best ways to date studio portraits, such as the cabinet card shown here of two adults and a girl. (We might assume that the subjects are parents and child, but there is no definite proof of that in the photograph. We might also assume that it is not a wedding photograph, since the child is present. That, too, is not certain but probable.)

One of the easiest ways to date studio portraits is to find other identified photographs or illustrations of clothing that are firmly dated, and then check for similarities and differences. Various books and magazine articles also offer dating clues about clothing styles; consult the sources listed at the end of this article.

### Clues about Clothing

In general, women's dresses with elaborate cuffs and ornate trim were more likely to be worn in the 1870s and after than prior to the Civil War. This woman's elaborate dress includes enough fashion details to establish clearly the decade in which it would have been most appropriate. Note, for instance, the puff at the shoulders, the stocking-like fit along the arms, and the bands on the upper arm and wrist. These details all indicate a style popular in the 1880s. By the 1890s a much fuller sleeve, called the "leg o' mutton," was in vogue, and a decade earlier the shoulder slope was much simpler and more pronounced.

The entire line of the dress confirms this dating. The pleated and panelled skirt, trimmed in braid in a horizontal design, and the corsetted bodice are also characteristic of

the 1880s, as is the elongated bodice trimmed with a jabot (a strip of white lace or muslin) at the throat. In the 1850s bodice waistlines had been popular, only to be replaced in the 1860s by separate bodices with flared extensions at the bottom, called peplums.

Skirts were elaborately draped at the sides and back. Although this seated figure does not show this feature to its best advantage, the usual dress of the 1880s was full, sometimes with an overskirt. This was the time of bustles, often made of wires and steel stays connected by tapes. Sometimes the effect of a bustle was created with rows of box plaiting on an undergarment. The *Bloomingtondale's Illustrated 1886 Catalog* advertised many varieties of such apparel. Dress illustrations in the Bloomingtondale's catalog are also quite similar to the one pictured here. Apparel in the catalogs was certainly available to people in Illinois and Iowa by the date of the catalog.

The woman's hairstyle is also appropriate to the 1880s. Etiquette books of the time period dictated that hair was to be plaited low at the back but fringed on the forehead.

There are fewer clues for dating men's clothing, perhaps because men's styles are less detailed and changed less rapidly than women's. In this photograph, the man's top button of his single-breasted jacket is not buttoned. We can quickly assume therefore that the photograph was not taken in the 1890s, when men affected that habit. Nothing in this photograph indicates that his clothing is not appropriate to the 1880s.

Children's clothing in the Victorian period was often replicas of adult clothing. We are lucky in this case, because the Bloomingtondale's catalog contains an illustration of a dress almost



Jaycox.



Pheridan, Ill.

COURTESY THE AUTHOR

exactly like the girl's dress worn here. This confirms our earlier estimate of the date.

### Clues about Studio Props

Common to most nineteenth-century photographs are such props as pedestals to lean on, chairs to sit on, and tables with decorative items on them. Because the styles of studio furniture and painted backdrops changed over time, such clues also help us.

The use of balustrades, stair rails, columns, curtains, draperies, and portieres is more likely in early studios (prior to the Civil War and probably not as late as the 1880s). By the 1880s photographers often used rustic backdrops, with rail fences, stumps, straw on the floor, trees, and nature scenes in the background that might remind one of settings of Wagnerian operas. Towards the end of the century, recreational and sporting motifs were used, such as bicycles, croquet mallets, tennis rackets, hammocks, swings, and tack relating to horses or vehicles.

In this photograph, there is no furniture visible, so we must depend upon the painted backdrop and the carpeting for clues. The carpet design is appropriate to the 1880s, although it might have been used earlier or later. The formal interior painted on the backdrop was common for several decades, and is found on photographs from the 1870s through the 1890s. Photographers who wished to have the latest styles of backdrops might change them frequently, but more likely they would keep several backdrops on hand and allow the subjects to choose, or change them from time to time.

### Clues about the Photographer

One should not neglect the photographer's advertising on the bottom of the card or reverse side. Such bits of information help identify a photograph in time and place, since the photographer's address is usually given. In this case, we might research when an individual named Jaycox was actually operating as a photographer in Sheridan, Illinois. If the subjects were identified, we could check their birth dates from family or census records and estimate their ages from their appearance in the photograph and information about the studio.

### Conclusions

This particular photograph is rich in some details and sparse in others. Most photographs in a family collection will be likewise. Because of the elaborate nature of this woman's dress, we can check many details, some of which have relatively precise dating. The clothing of the man and the child and the furnishings and backdrop do not contradict our conclusion that this photograph was probably taken in the last half of the 1880s. In this, we are looking for rough estimates, not absolute precision. □

Nineteenth-century studio photographs may also be dated by their process, format, and availability. Daguerreotypes and ambrotypes were slow and expensive. Therefore fewer were created and fewer have survived. Albumen prints were cheap and durable, and many have survived. (Dates span periods of general use in America.)

#### Calotype (1835; never popular in America)

The process required a long exposure time and therefore stiff poses and produced dull, brownish-grey images.

#### Daguerreotype (1839-late 1850s)

The copper metal plate sensitized by iodine fumes exhibits a mirror-like reflection when tilted in direct light. Generally encased, the image plate is covered with a brass plate mat and clear glass. Long exposure time led to stiff poses. These black and grey images were very popular in America. Sizes vary; commonly 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ "  $\times$  3 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".

#### Ambrotype (1852-c. 1860)

The image, fixed on a glass plate, may appear to be a glass negative until backed by black cloth or paper or dark varnish. It is generally enclosed in a case.

#### Tintype (or Ferrotype) (1856-1870s)

The tintype became very popular during the Civil War because it was durable for carrying and mailing. Often in cases and hand-tinted, it may resemble other types of encased images behind glass. Common size: 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ "  $\times$  3 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".

#### Albumen Print (1850; popular in 1860s-1890s)

Glass plate negatives were sensitized with albumen from egg whites. The image was then fixed on paper, with a dull finish (if pretreated with salt) or glossy (if albumenized). Albumen prints were commonly mounted on card stock and are usually identified by two characteristic sizes, the carte de visite and the cabinet card.

#### Carte de Visite (1860s and 1870s)

Immensely popular, this format was sometimes used for calling cards. The size became popular in England when an enterprising individual published a "Royal Album" of fourteen cartes de visite of the Royal Family. One could add one's family likenesses to the album and no doubt feel the greater for the photographic association with royalty. Typical size is 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ "  $\times$  3 $\frac{3}{4}$ " mounted on a 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ "  $\times$  4" card.

Sometimes an imprint on the back identifies the photographer and location. (Caution: Printed cards could be purchased in bulk lot, and a photographer might use up leftover card stock after moving to a new town or sell leftover card stock to another photographer.) Celebrities' cartes de visite were mass produced and used much as today's fan mail photographs. Family albums, with slotted pages, might contain celebrity images (such as Jenny Lind, U.S. Grant, Tom Thumb) that came with the album or were purchased separately. Cartes de visite with a federal tax stamp on the back were produced between

September 1, 1864 and August 1, 1866, when the government was raising revenue to pay for the Civil War.

#### Cabinet Card (1866-1890s)

Also albumen prints, they supplanted the carte-de-visite in popularity. Literally millions were produced. Typical size is 3¾" × 5½", mounted on 4¼" × 6½" cards. Many advertise a photographer on the bottom and back (but the same cautions about leftover card stock hold true). Slotted albums were also available, and during the transition some albums were made with slots for both sizes.

### For more information, consult these sources

*Bloomington's Illustrated 1886 Catalog* (Mineola, New York: Reprinted by Dover Publications, 1988).

Jane A. Farrell, "Clothing for Adults in Iowa, 1850-1899," *Annals of Iowa* (3rd ser.) 46:2 (Fall 1981), 100-20. (Photographs, drawings, and text provide specific information about styles, ornamentation, and colors of clothing worn by Iowa men and women.)

Alison Gernsheim, *Victorian and Edwardian Fashion: A Photographic Survey* (New York: Dover, 1963, 1981). Family photographs can be compared to more than 235 photographs dated from 1845 to 1914.)

Patricia E. Horridge, Diane E. Smathers, and Diane L.

Vachon, *Dating Costumes: A Check List Method* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977), Technical Leaflet No. 102.

Note: Information about men's clothing is sparse in all of these references. Only the Gernsheim book is much help, and the men shown in identified photographs are mostly upper-class individuals dressed in high style. This does not necessarily help us identify men's clothing in the Midwest, although it may help.

Additional sources useful for interpreting and caring for historical photographs are listed in the Spring 1990 Palimpsest, part 1 of this series.

## Tips on Storing Historical Photographs

by Mary Bennett

1. To prolong the life of your photographs, maintain constant temperature and humidity in a clean storage area year round. Don't store photos in basements or attics. Aim for a cool, dry, and consistent environment.

2. Separate prints from each other by placing them in acid-free paper envelopes or triacetate sleeves, with print surface away from gummed seams.

3. Do not use brown kraft envelopes, glassine sleeves, colored paper (because of the dyes), or vinyl or plastic-based materials that contain polyvinyl chloride. Acidic paper will become brittle with age and speed the deterioration of images. Cheaper plastics will often cause fading and sticking.

4. Interleaf albums or large groups of photos with 100 percent rag paper. Wrap oversized photos in archival paper and store them flat in acid-free boxes. Support torn or fragile

photos with acid-free matte board. Make copy negatives of any damaged photos.

5. Store prints vertically in acid-free storage boxes or metal cabinets with baked-on enamel finishes. Wood boxes or cabinets (even if painted) and cardboard release fumes that will accelerate the aging process.

6. Don't use rubber bands, paper clips, adhesive tape, or pens. They damage prints.

7. Always wash your hands or wear white cotton gloves when working with photographs. Never touch the print or negative surface because skin oils and chemicals (such as sulphur) will cause permanent damage.

Sources for archival materials: *Light Impressions* (439 Monroe Avenue, Rochester, NY 14607) and *Hollinger Corporation* (PO Box 6185, Arlington, VA 22206).

The next two issues will offer tips on storing negatives and displaying photos in albums or frames.