# Identifying Photographs

Even though a photograph may not have anything written on the back, there are still some ways to identify when it was taken and what is happening in the photograph. This guide will help you discover clues to identifying your old photographs.

## Material Clues

Photographic Prints: There are many different guides that will help you identify different print processes for photographs. Knowing what type of photograph you have will help you narrow down what year the photograph might have been taken. The earliest print types were daguerreotypes beginning around 1839. Between that time and today there have been dozens of different print processes. Knowing the characteristics of these prints will not only help you identify the decade they were taken but it will also help you care for the photographs. The Library of Congress' Popular Photographic Print Processes chart will help you to date the image you have.

Slides: Slide mount designs can often tell you the year a slide was created if the collection used Kodak slide mounts. Use this Kodachrome Slide Mount Chart to narrow down the date for your image.

Film: Sheet film has unique notch markings on the edge of the film that help identify the brand and type of film used. Once you identify the brand and type based on the notch code you can determine how long that film types was manufactured to get an idea of the age of the film. Film will also usually have a code number printed along the edge of the film that can be looked up. Sources for identifying notch codes are: Matt Osborne Photography, Wikipedia and Photo Detector.

Postcards: If postcards are not stamped with a date from the post office you can identify the year by looking up unique postcard markings. In addition to postcard markings you can guess the time a postcard was mailed by looking at the postage amount used as well as the abbreviations they are using for states. Postage prices and abbreviations can usually be traced within certain time frames to make it easier to identify when the postcard was written if it is not stamped, or if the stamp is illegible. Sources for dating postcards are: Smithsonian's Postcard History, Center of Southwest Studies Tips for determining when a U.S. postcard was published and The 2 Buds Deltiology.

## Content Clues

The easiest way to determine the year a photograph was taken is if a photographer or photograph studio is printed on the photograph. Then you can determine when that photograph studio was active. Usually photograph studios didn't last longer than a decade, and if they did they usually moved buildings or worked with other photographers. These address changes and photographer partner changes are usually noted on cabinet cards so determining the age of the photo is easier because you can cross reference the address and name of the photo studio in the city directories to determine when the photograph was taken. For Ohio photographs, a great book resource is *Ohio Photographers 1839-1900* (OH 779.09771 G133o) by Diane VanSkiver Gagel

## Transportation Clues

Transportation evolved rapidly in the 19th and 20th centuries and can provide clues about when a photograph was taken. Carriages, trains, bicycles and cars can all be dated. Tips for using transportation to identify a photo include:

Identifying carriages: If a carriage appears in your photograph you should note what kind of carriage it is and look for clues as to when the carriage might have been produced and used. The Columbus Metropolitan Library has several important print sources for identifying carriages:

American horse-drawn vehicles (R 688.6 R61a) by Jack D. Rittenhouse.

Working horses: looking back 100 years to America's horse-drawn days (R 688.6 F791w) by Charles Philip Fox.

From shop to factory in the industrial heartland (OH 688.60973 K55f) by Thomas Allen Kinney.

Identifying cars: Earlier car models are more difficult to identify than newer models, but there are plenty of online resources and print resources to help. Newer model vehicles can usually be found by performing a reverse image search in Google, or by taking a picture of the image and using Google Lens. Print sources for identifying Ohio-made cars include:

Made in Columbus Automobiles (OH 629.22209 B274) by Richard E. Barrett.

Golden Wheels: The story of automobiles made in Cleveland and Northeastern Ohio, 1892-1932 (OH 629.22209 W131g2) by Richard Wager.

Popular websites for identifying automobiles by decade include Boldride and Retrowaste, which can also be used to identify clothing.

License plates are a helpful way to identify when a picture was taken because license plates changed so frequently, especially in the past. Ohio and other states changed their plate designs so much that the unique designs are easy to look up to hopefully help you identify when photos were taken. License Plates of the World by Michael Kustermann is a good resource for identifying historical license plates.

Bicycles: Bicycles in photographs are also another good way to determine the year of a photograph. The style of the bike should give you an approximate age of when the photo was taken. On your bicycle: an illustrated history of cycling (R 796.609 M148o) by James McGurn is a good source.

Trains: Identifying trains is easier when you have an idea of what rail line or what railroad company you are looking for. Sometimes that information is not available so you can find the train type by searching the engine number on the front of the train and often along the side of the train engine. Sources for identifying trains are SteamLocomotive.com and Columbus Railroads.

Airplanes: Airplanes with serial numbers can be identified by searching their aircraft number usually displayed on the wing of the aircraft. U.S. planes are suffixed with an N number. The Fedeveral Aviation Authority (FAA) has a FAA Registry for airplanes in the United States and Air Britain can identify airplanes in the UK.


**Street Clues**

The type of street lighting in photographs can sometimes help you identify what time period your picture is from. If you see that electric lighting is present than you know the photograph cannot be any older than 1875. Early street light designs and Wikipedia include dates and illustrations for street lighting.

If an image has traffic signals in the picture this is another good way to determine an approximate time the photograph was taken. Willis Lamm's Traffic Signal Collection and Wikipedia are sources to help identify the

timeframe of a traffic signal. Along with city street signs another good method for dating photographs is the style of Highway Signs, as they have changed in style over time.

**Building Clues**

Address:  Sometimes all you have to go on is a numeric address on a building with no other information known. Occasionally that is enough of a clue to identify the building. For instance, we once had a building that we could only identify as having the numeric address **1211** during the 1940s. That information was enough for me to look at all of the **1211** buildings in the Columbus directory at that time to narrow the possibilities. After comparing what buildings were standing with the building that I had a photograph of I tracked my building to 1211 Bryden Road with the Google Street View feature on Google Maps.

Google and Bing Maps:  This is another way to verify the identity of a building if it is still standing. You can verify the building you have an image of against images of current buildings. Google also has a good "travel back in time" feature that is useful within the last 10 years if the building was demolished in the last 10 years. Bing has particularly nice aerial photography that can be viewed as well.

Other Images:  Looking at the images of buildings on the Franklin County Auditor site is another good way to determine the identity of a house or location. All existing buildings should have a photograph on their website. Sometimes Google image searches are also helpful in determining the identity of a building, or searching a brief description of a building. If you know the neighborhood or architectural style sometimes these key words will help you find the correct building you are looking for. The German Village Society has property information and images for homes in the German Village neighborhood.

Architectural Style: If you can identify the style and era of a building you have in a picture that can help to determine what area of Franklin County it is in based upon the architectural styles found in certain neighborhoods. If you have a picture of a mid-century modern Cape Cod, it is probably safe to say it is not located in Victorian Village. This can also be said for older homes, if a house was built in the late 1800s that may give you a clue to the location of the home based upon when houses were built in certain areas of Central Ohio. A great book for identifying architectural styles *is* A field guide to American houses: the definitive guide to identifying and understanding America's domestic architecture (728.0973 M114f2 2013) by Virginia McAlester.

Questions? Contact us at history@columbuslibrary.org or book a Reserve an Expert for a virtual meeting with a librarian.