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## Reading Historical Photographs

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# Reading Historical Photographs

Emily Pate

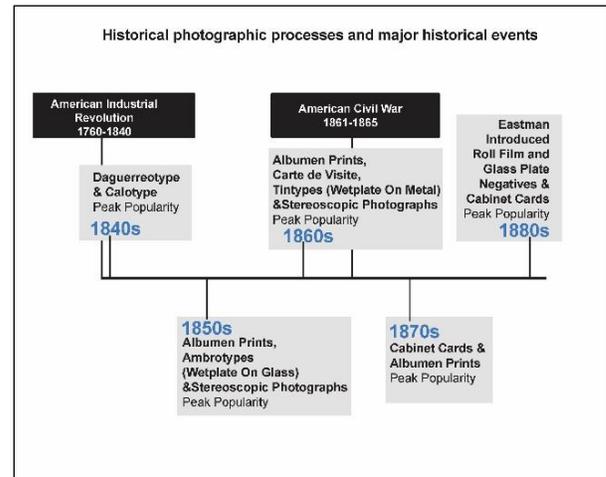
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**Abstract** - For the past two years Emily Pate researched early historical photographic processes and how they are interpreted to gain historical knowledge of the past. The challenges of this project included understanding historic photographic processes that are not commonly used in today's society, and how those photographs can provide historical insight. In the spring of 2013, Pate began an ongoing research project to explore photographic materials and their history through found negatives and undeveloped film. She then began to plan the process of documentation, research, and archiving the photographs, as well as the photographic techniques used. The images she works with are possibly missing from any other archive and could show something not previously recorded.

## I. Introduction

The photograph was invented in 1839 almost simultaneously by Louis Daguerre in France and by William Henry Fox Talbot in England. The Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution periods both contributed to the invention of photography. Scientific experimentation with natural materials and innovations in technology during these periods led to changes in how society perceived reality and art, which ultimately led to the invention of photography.

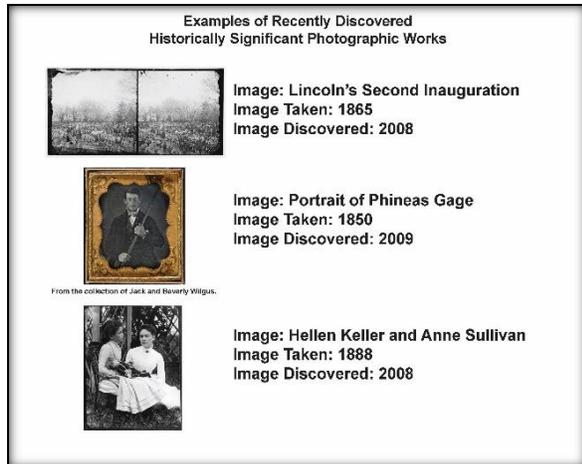
Photography coincided with other major cultural and political events in American history. When photography was popularized in the United States, the Industrial Revolution was just ending and photography continued to grow as a medium through the period of the United States Civil War (see Fig. 1). Since its inception, the photograph took on many different forms. The information provided by the techniques and materials used to make a photograph explain how photography has been used as a means to record a person or event, and how it developed as an art form.



(Fig. 1) Source: Lavedrine, Bertrand. *Photographs of the Past Process and Preservation*. Getty Publications. 2009.

Photographic processes include daguerreotypes and calotypes in the 1840s, albumen prints, ambrotypes, and stereographic images in the 1850s, carte-de-visites and tintypes in the 1860s, cabinet cards in the 1870s, and roll film in the 1880s (Fig. 1). Each process built off of the process that preceded it both in method and in quality. Every time a new process emerged, more knowledge was gained from the physical details recorded by these processes. Eventually, with the invention of roll film, photography became accessible to the professional and the amateur alike, meaning that not only would the wealthy be able to document their lives, but so would the common man and woman.

Photography opened the door for the physical recording of history that had been unavailable to previous generations. It is through this medium we are able to learn so much about the generations that preceded our own. In modern times, there have been many discoveries of photographic articles that contribute to the understanding of historical events. Images such as *Lincoln's Second Inauguration* weren't discovered until 2008 and the only known photo of historical figure Phineas Gage was discovered in 2009 (Fig. 2).



(Fig. 2) Source: "10 Fascinating Recently Discovered Photographs." *Listverse*, 27 Oct. 2009, <http://listverse.com/2009/10/27/10-fascinating-recently-discovered-photographs>.

Images are often misinterpreted or misplaced, which can lead to data being mislabeled or discarded. For example, the image of *Lincoln's Second Inauguration* was mislabeled in the Library of Congress collection as an image of Grant's Inauguration (Eisele).

These are just a few of the many examples of historically important information from previous centuries that have been discovered in modern times. Whether it is simple labeling mistakes or an unknowing viewer, information is easily discarded and misplaced. While it takes the work of historians to verify the identity of these images, it is crucial that the images be conserved so that they can also be verified through their medium—photography.

## II. Body

Over the past two years, Emily Pate used her knowledge of historical photographic processes by pursuing a personal photographic preservation project. In 2015, Pate purchased a Kodak Negative album with about 100 negatives.

With no knowledge of what would actually be in the album, Pate began her research as soon as the album arrived in the mail. She carefully studied the content of the images and determined that they were from the early 1900s, and taken throughout the southern United States. She contacted experts on the places that had been identified in the photographs, and they

were asked to verify or correct the interpretations of the photographs. The images Pate discovered and authenticated were from Birmingham, AL; Mobile, AL; Montgomery, AL; Jacksonville, FL; Palm Beach, FL; Jackson, MS; New Orleans, LA; Chattanooga, TN; Nashville, TN; Fredericksburg, VA (Fig. 3). While Pate has not yet been able to identify the photographer behind these unique photos, they have provided a unique opportunity to learn about the past and the process of archiving historical photographs.



(Fig. 3)

Pate's process involves cleaning each negative, making a physical print in the dark room of each negative, and making notes about her research on each photograph. Next, Pate uses online resources, as well as expertise from archivists and historians to verify her research. Cleaning the negatives involved gentle wiping the non-emulsion side of the negative with a cotton ball with distilled water. It is important not to try to clean the emulsion side because it is easily damaged and scratched. Once the negatives were clean, Pate made prints in the darkroom from each negative. Pate chose to make 8x10 inch prints so that the images were large enough to research details with a loupe (magnifying tool).

It is important to note that there is always the possibility that these images had not been previously printed in physical form. Photographers often only printed what would be used for their business purposes and the rest of the images would be stored or discarded completely. It is Pate's belief that these images had been stored for quite some time before she purchased them. The amount of dust on the negatives and the lack of

scratches or deterioration of the negatives lead her to this conclusion.

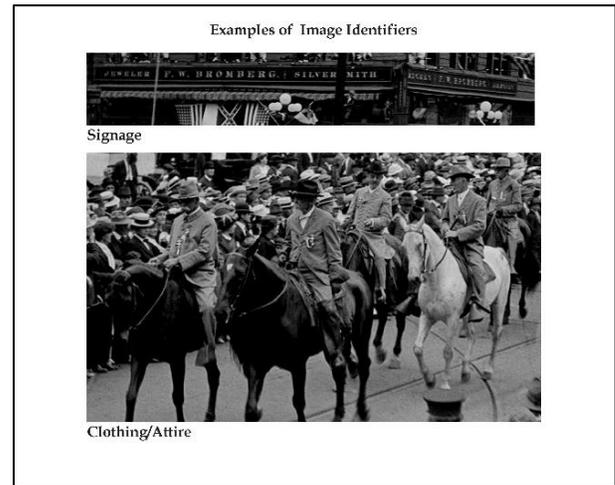
The research of the images involved many aspects. First, Pate considered the medium. These photographs were printed from an unusual negative. Most negatives in their original state have borders. These particular negatives had their borders cut off, so the negatives had only the images without borders. This type of exception in the medium can often make it difficult when trying to identify the type of film being used. Photographers often use the information on a negative to help identify a date range for when the image was taken. Typically, starting around the 1930s, film would often have a manufacturer's name and a film type indicated on the edge of the negative, as with 35mm film. Later, larger sheet film, could be identified by the types of notches (or cut outs) used to correctly place the film in the camera.

Despite the unusual negatives, measuring the dimensions of the image itself gives insight to the type of film and possibly when it was manufactured. Based on the film's dimensions of 2 ¼ in. by 3 ¼ in., Pate was able to identify the film as medium format 120 mm film ("Standard Film Sizes and Plates."). Medium format, 120 mm, was produced beginning in the early 1900s and is still produced today ("Standard Film Sizes and Plates."). This information helped Pate to set the frame of when these pictures could have possibly been taken.

The next step in Pate's identification process was to look more closely at the details of the images. Street signs, buildings, posters, transportation, and clothing are all factors that are taken in to consideration when trying to date an image. For this particular project, Pate used key identifiers, such as the ones previously mentioned, to continue narrowing down possible time periods.

One specific example of her research methods can be seen in Fig. 4. This is an image of Birmingham, Alabama. Pate was able to identify Birmingham from several distinct indicators in the image. The first indicator she used was the business sign seen clearly in the upper left hand corner of the image "F.W. Bromberg Jewelers." Upon investigation of this business, Pate determined that the image could possibly be from Birmingham, since there was an F.W. Bromberg Jeweler in that area. At this point in the process she is not certain about the image's location, but it is a starting point

for Pate to continue a deeper investigation into the image.



(Fig. 4)

Another indicator is the dress and decorum of the men riding the horses. The people on the horses appear to be taking part in some sort of parade or procession. Pate assumes that the image was taken in Birmingham, as well as acknowledging that the medium format film was likely from the early 1900s. With these assumptions, she began researching the clothing of the men in the parade procession. It seemed that they are in uniforms, possibly related to the military. This conjecture led Pate to research military parades and processions in Birmingham Alabama in the early 1900s. Pate did most of her research by comparing her images to ones she found online, for example at the Birmingham Public Library Archives website ("View of Great Confederate Reunion Parade in Birmingham."). She then emailed her image to an archivist at the Birmingham Public Library and asked for help in confirming the location. The archivist was able to verify Pate's findings and the image was determined to be the Reunion of the United Confederate Veterans on May 16-18, 1916 ("View of Great Confederate Reunion Parade in Birmingham.").

This process was repeated for each of the nearly 100 negatives that Pate purchased. Each negative proved to have its own challenges and mysteries, but the process of attempting to identify the images remained the same.

### **III. Conclusion**

The purpose of this project was to attempt to use the knowledge of historical photographic processes and media to understand history. It was also a study of preservation and how important it is to understand a medium in order to preserve history itself. While some of the images Pate found have yet to be identified, more than three-fourths of the images have been identified. She plans to take the necessary steps in preserving the physical negatives as well as to make digital copies of each negative to create a digital archive of the images.

As more people begin to use digital technology as a way of documentation, many analog techniques of photography are discarded and lost forever. Even images such as the “snapshot” are important for gathering information for historical insight and preservation. Consider the many negatives and prints that exist but have yet to be discovered and authentically interpreted. This information is crucial to providing insight about past generations.

Preservation of documents is essential for preserving the history of a generation, a place, and time period. With the emergence of digital technology, understanding older technologies such as film and the early processes of photography, has become a more specialized field.

With historical photographic works being discovered every day, it is imperative that we have people who understand the significance and value of these images. Interpreting and protecting such work is crucial to preserving our history.

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