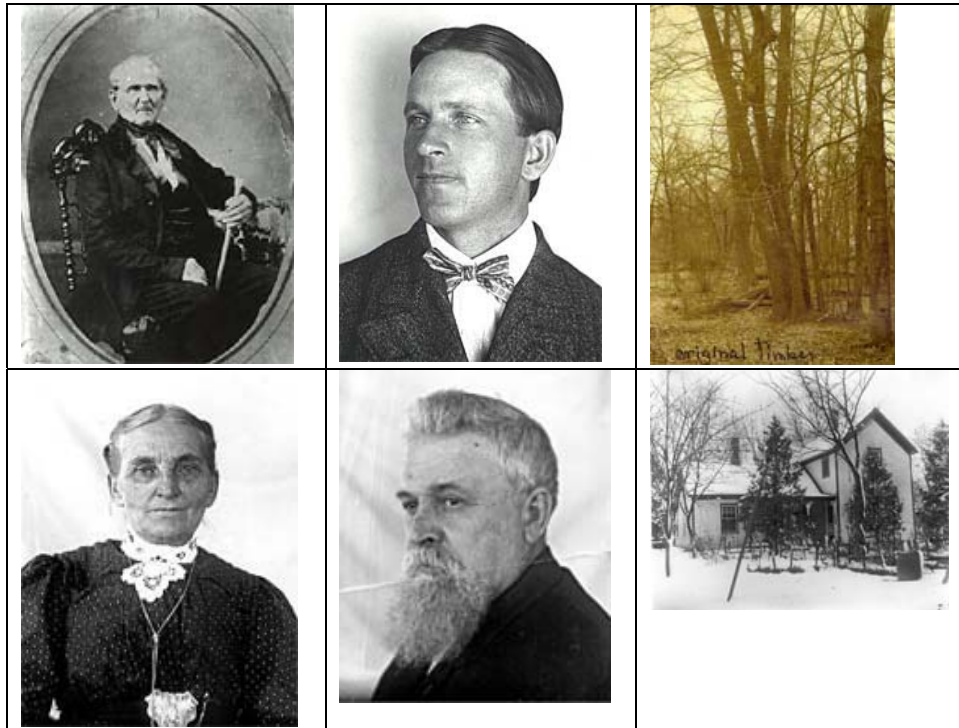


Research Activity One

What is an historical photograph and how can I use it in research?



These photos are among a set of 500 given to the Museum. Some of them have notes on the back, but others do not. There are not written materials with the photos, though the donor of the photos had contact with a descendant of the family, and wrote a book about the photographer, who is the man in the second picture in the top row.

Many families have boxes or albums full of old pictures. Sometimes we know who is in the photographs of recent years, and where and why the picture was taken. Other photographs are a mystery (Who were all those babies, anyway?). We often wait until the grandparents have passed on to identify the people and scenes in the oldest pictures. Valuable family history is lost.

Luckily, it is possible to analyze the photographs for historical information, and then go on to research the people and places of ancestors. A photograph can be called historic if it is more than one generation old. We often think of historic photographs as being black and white only or being made with primitive cameras such as box cameras and glass negatives. To younger people, historic photos could be those made 50 years ago with the first Polaroids and having faded color film.

Below is an exercise in analyzing an historic photograph. While studying the details of the image, read and answer the questions according to what you see and what you already know about past times. Some parts of the photograph may prompt you to ask questions to research for an answer (for example, **what** is the man on the left wearing on his head?)



Overview and First Impression:

- a. What is the subject of this photograph? What is going on in the scene?
- b. If it a recent picture? About how long ago do you think it was taken?
- c. Where do you think the photograph was taken?

1. Identify the photograph from clues, if any are there

- a. Can you tell who took the photograph?
- b. Does the photograph have a title?
- c. Is anything written on the back or margin? (Or as a caption, if it is in a book).
- d. Where did you find the photograph?
- e. What is happening in the picture?
- f. Do you, or does anyone else, recognize the people or places in the photograph?

2. Putting the photograph in context of time and place

- a. Why do you think it was taken?
- b. Who was the audience it was intended for?
- c. What era, event, or theme does it illustrate?
- d. Does it appear to be an amateur photograph? A journalistic one? An artistic one? How can you tell?

3. Analyzing the photograph in its details

- a. Divide the photograph into several sections. List the objects found in each section. How does this help explain the photographer's purpose?
- b. Can these objects be classified into types? What classifications would you use?
- c. What details are the best clues to the meaning of the photograph? Why?

4. Evaluating the photograph

- a. What, if any, deductions, inferences, or generalizations could you make about the subject from this photograph? How will this help you with your research?
- b. What questions does the photograph prompt?

Use these questions and others that you think of when you analyze other photographs in your research of a family. Remember, you can find valuable details in the clothing, hairstyles, signs, architecture, machinery, and landscape to help you learn the story of each photograph. It may not be the same story as the photographer wanted to capture a memory of, but it still contains a lot of information. **Write down** everything you think you learned about the person(s) from the photograph(s).

Use the questions that came from your analysis to further investigate the story of the person, the family and the time and place in which he or she lived.

Closing:

Now that you have analyzed a historical photograph according to the guidelines above, you have a new tool to use in the research of your farm family. Complete the procedure for other photographs and summarize what you learned from them. This can lead you to more research on elements of the photograph, such as farm machinery, crops, animals, or farming techniques. Everything is connected. Our next research lesson will be about interviewing a person to gain information about farming. We will be going from the visual to the aural.

Assessment Suggestions:

- Did the students focus on the details of the photographs or just the first impression?
- Did the students methodically analyze the sections of the image?
- Did the students list as many details of the image as possible?
- Did the students summarize their findings with the most important details about the person, actions, or events related to farming?