

Thomas' Tips & Ask: The Photo Edition



Thomas' Tips & Ask How to Identify Old Family Photos: Part One



I've recently embarked on a family photo scanning project and every so often I encounter a picture that confounds me. I can't identify either the people or the location in the photo and there is no writing on the back of the picture as well.

Tip #1: Physical Photo Sleuthing

In the photo above - which I believe to be either Henneberg or Pressner ancestors on my mother's side - I determined that it had been mounted in a scrapbook or photo album due to the black paper on the back of the photo.



Before I set out on using various online photo identification tools or even a photo identification protocol that I've developed, I wanted to remove some of the black paper since I was CERTAIN there had to be handwriting about the people and place underneath.

One of my favorite tools for working with photos is a set of stainless steel spatulas and carvers that I purchased on Amazon. This set of tools is rather inexpensive and probably were intended for chemists to use, but archivists have found they can help when working with photos and documents.



Using one of the spatulas, I located a “bubble” between the photo and the black paper backing and very gently removed it without damaging the photo.





Of course, before I started this process, I scanned the photo as a high-resolution TIFF file so that I had a digital version in case the photo was damaged.

The process left me disappointed. There was no handwriting underneath although there was a large section at the top of the photo where black paper could not be easily removed.

The next step? I took a damp sponge and carefully blotted the area. After a few minutes, I was able to remove small areas of the black paper, but again there was no writing visible.



Tip #2: Photo Identification Methodology

Next, I looked closely at every detail in the photo to try to determine the date, persons in the photo, and location. Here's what I usually look for:

- **Location:** Was the image taken in a photo studio? Is there a photo studio stamp at the bottom or on the rear of the photo? Or was the photo taken at home?
- **Persons:** Identify the gender, age, and relationship of the persons in the photo.
- **Date:** Identify the date of the photo based on clothing, hair styles, decorative objects, etc.

In order to get a better look at the details in the photo, I used a digitized version saved in TIFF format and then used the MyHeritage Photo Tools to enhance and colorize the image.

Here are the elements I noticed:

- The woman on the left appears to be in her late 30s or early 40s, wearing eyeglasses and sitting in a carved chair. Behind her on the wall are two prints, none of which seem to be family photographs.
- The boy in the middle is about 10 years of age. He appears to be holding a flag or a banner that is rolled up.
- The man on the right is in his 40s wearing a suit with a cravat and a cravat pin.
- On the mantel in the rear are various pieces of painted china, a clock, and on the right what appears to be a photo portrait of a gentleman.
- On the small table in the foreground is a vase, a small portrait in a frame, a large fruit or vegetable, and a religious print in a frame.

After carefully reviewing the image and details, it seems I am still “stuck” in terms of identifying the photo. Using the MyHeritage Photo Tools, I created an enhanced and colorized version of the photograph hoping to find more clues. However, despite how amazing these tools work, I really couldn't find anything more that could help me.



I even created a “negative image” in order to view more details, but to no avail.



Next Steps: Contact Family Members, Social Media, and Artificial Intelligence

In Part Two of this article, I'll explore the options available both through my family and friends network, social media, and I'll also put the power of artificial intelligence to use and compare this unidentified photo with family photos in which I've already positively identified ancestors.

Resources

- **MyHeritage Photo Tools**
<https://genealogybargains.com/myheritage-photoenhancer>
- **SE Double-Ended Spatula and Carver Set (Amazon)**
<https://amzn.to/3oMpkPD>