

Timeline of Early Photography

- In January of 1839, in France Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre, announced a new method of picture-making. By the Fall of 1839, the first portrait of a human being was taken by Robert Cornelius in Philadelphia. In April, 1840, Samuel F. B. Morse, in New York City, endorsed the new method called the daguerreotype, a process Morse, himself, had been experimenting with. Although others had been working simultaneously on pioneering methods of making pictures by the use of light, most of the credit for the invention was given to Daguerre, who named it after himself. The Daguerreotype was a silver clad copper plate, polished and sensitized by iodine, then developed over mercury vapors. Americans embraced the new technology and it was an immediate sensation. The daguerreotype continued to be made until about 1860.
- In 1854, another photographic method, the ambrotype, entered into practical use in America, after the collodion process was invented in England in 1851-1852. The ambrotype was a thin collodion negative on glass behind which a dark background rendered the image positive. Some people theorize that the ambrotype process was named for James Ambrose Cutting, a Massachusetts inventor who was awarded a patent for one aspect of the process in 1854. It continued in use until the American Civil War but, due to its fragile nature, rapidly lost ground to another recently invented photographic method, commonly known as the “tintype”.
- In 1856 a form of “tintype” was patented by Peter Neff who called it a “Melainotype” and also by Victor Griswold who called it a “Ferrottype”. Tintypes also had a collodion emulsion over a japanned or lacquered sheet iron base (a ferrous plate). Although popularly known as tintype, there was no tin in the materials. Because of its durability, the ferrottype or tintype rapidly replaced the ambrotype in common use by 1860 and continued in use through the end of the nineteenth century.
- About 1860, the first commercially practical paper photographs came into common use. They were albumen prints made from collodion glass plate negatives printed on card stock. The carte de visite (or visiting card) was the most popular form throughout the Civil War. By using negatives, it was easily reprinted, allowing copies to be ordered and enlargements to be made. By the 1870s, an equally popular and larger form of albumen photograph, known as the cabinet card, was in popular use.

For more information about early photography and many helpful resources, we highly recommend the official website of The Daguerreian Society, www.daguerre.org.

There are many excellent publications on the history of early photography, but some of the basic standard references include:

Craig, John S. Craig’s Daguerreian Registry. 2 vols. Rev. ed. Torrington, CT:

John S. Craig, 2003.

Mace, O. Henry. Collector's Guide to Early Photographs. Radnor, PA: Wallace-Homestead Book Co., 1990 or revised edition, published in 1999 by KP Books.

Newhall, Beaumont. The Daguerrotype in America. First published in 1961. Published again in 1968. Third revised edition re-published in paperback by Dover Publications, New York, 1976.

Taft, Robert. Photography and the American Scene. Originally published in 1938. Re-issued several times in paperback by Dover Publications, New York, including in 1989.