

*Collection Essay*

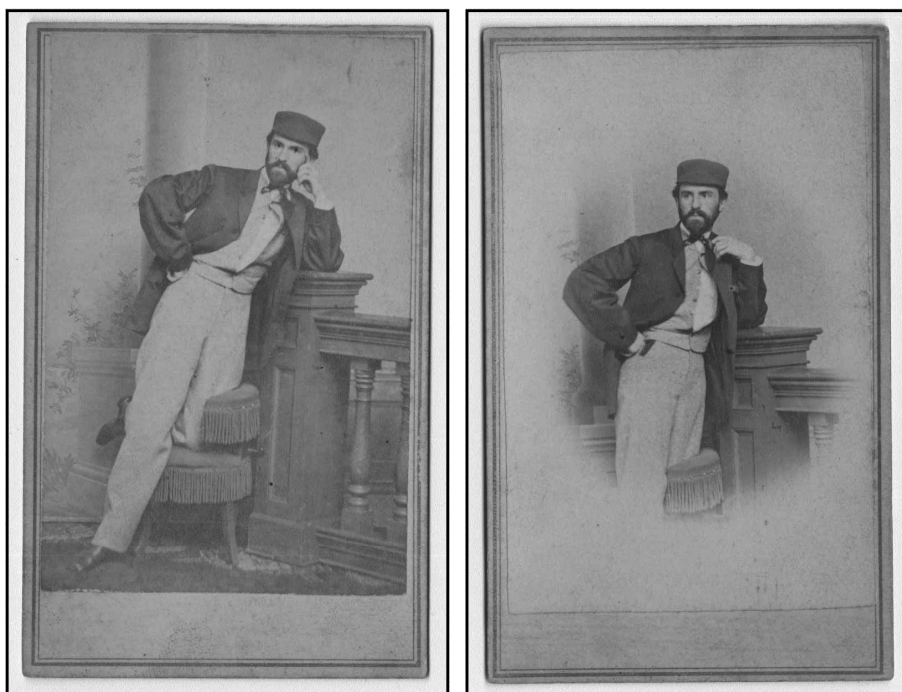
# Cartes de Visite and Cabinet Cards in the Ohio Valley, 1855–1900

Photographs can reveal much about the subjects they depict. They can forever preserve the smiles at a family picnic, the historic launch of a steamboat, or the destruction in the wake of a storm. But photography isn't just valuable for its content—we can also learn about history through its format. From daguerreotypes and tintypes in the early nineteenth century to four-by-six prints and slides of the late twentieth century, photographs have come into being through countless processes over the years. By examining not only the people in front of the camera but also the photographers and photographic trends behind it, we can begin to piece together a broader historical narrative. Two of the most prevalent early photography formats in the Filson's collection are cartes de visite and cabinet cards. This essay will examine the history, technology, and trends of carte de visite and cabinet cards created by Ohio Valley photographers from 1855 to 1900.

## *Carte de Visite (1855–1890)*

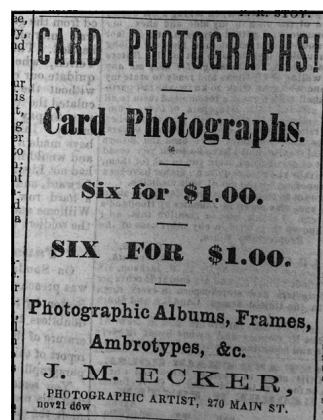
Patented in Paris by French photographer Andre Adolphe Disderi in 1854, the carte de visite, also known as the *carte* or *CdV*, is a visual spinoff of the Victorian era calling card used to announce one's arrival. This trading-card sized, mounted photograph measures 2 ½" x 4 ¼" and was one of the first photographs that offered a more natural appearance than its predecessor, the black-based tintype. Since tin was no longer needed, prices of photos continued to drop, allowing more people to have their photographs taken than ever before. While the format took a few years to gain popularity, by the 1860s at the start of the American Civil War, it became a global phenomenon. European royals, celebrities, politicians, and military generals were having cartes made. Average people began collecting cards of their friends, family, and even political figures they aligned with. Due to their small size, these images could easily be carried and mailed and would often become important family relics of soldiers lost at war. As in other areas around the United States, photographic studios became even more prolific in downtown Louisville and Southern Indiana, with photographers creating upward of a thousand cartes per day.

What made this format unique was that the carte de visite employed a glass negative, which allowed multiple prints to be made instead of the single one-of-a-kind image of earlier formats. The invention of a multi-lens camera with a repeating back made this possible. Using what is called a “four-tube” camera (with four lenses), the photographer could produce four separate exposures on one half of the glass plate negative and then shift the plate to take four more exposures on the other half. This gave the photographer the ability to uncup all four lenses at once or each one individually, resulting in either eight identical images or eight separate poses. The negative would then be printed onto photosensitive paper, cut into eight individual photographs, and mounted to standard-sized card mounts, creating the carte de visite format (1860–1890). This allowed photographers to sell multiple images at a much lower cost to the consumer. Often cards would sell for a dollar a dozen.



Two examples of how a sitter can pose differently for a carte de visite photographed by I. B. Webster. Cohen Photograph Collection, KyLou.391 and KyLou.392, Filson Historical Society.

Many of the early cartes de visite appear simple; however, when we examine them more closely, we can learn more about photographic trends of the time and often date an image based on certain stylistic traits. Early in the format’s history, from about 1860 to 1868, the image was attached to thin cardboard stock with square corners. Traditionally, the card would be adorned with one or two simple gold lines imprinted as the border. After 1863, more decorative details were added to the

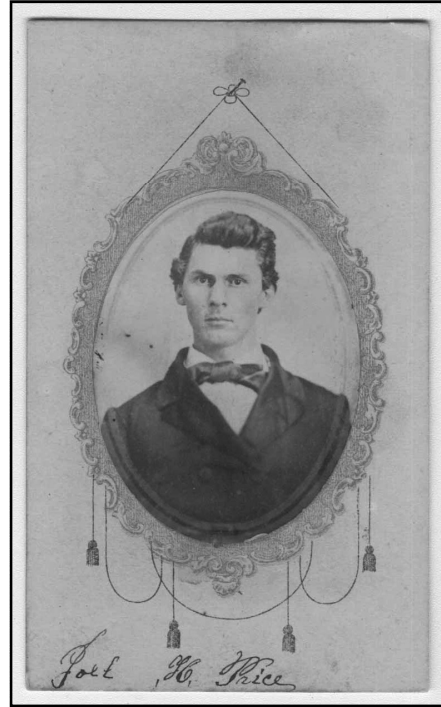


New Albany Daily Ledger, November 26, 1861. Filson Historical Society Newspaper Collection.

format, including oval picture frames, a homage to portraiture at a fraction of the size and price. As the format evolved, photographers began adding in decorative props and objects. Adding a rug on the floor, a chair, a banister, or a musical instrument made the sitter appear to be in a natural pose and environment. By 1869, thicker cardstock was used, and after 1871, the cardstock's corners became rounded. Soon photographers were experimenting with different colored cardstocks, introduced in 1873, and beveled and gilt edges were all the rage by 1875. These trends held true in the Ohio Valley as well, as can be traced in early family photograph collections.

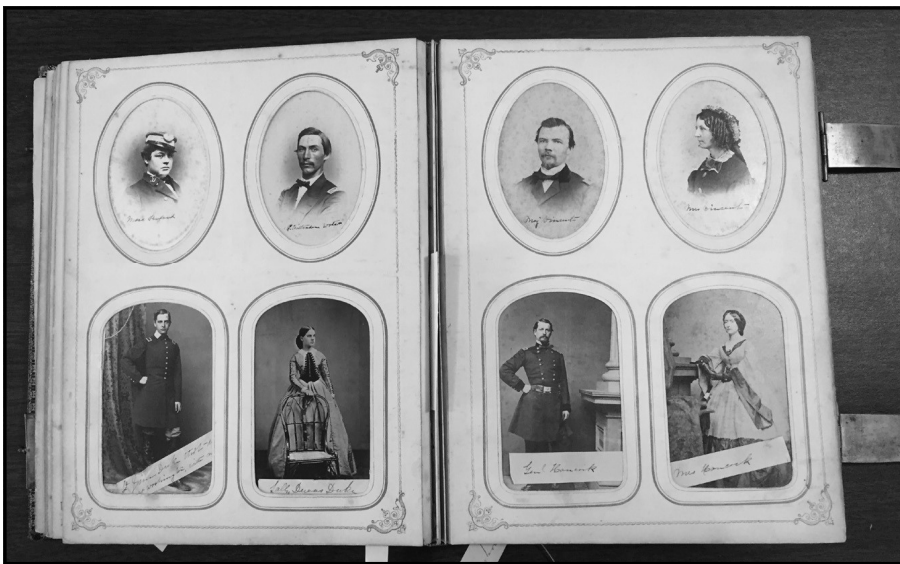


Carte de visite of Sarah Brown, photographed by Jason Mullen. Shelby-Bruen Family Photograph Collection, 020PC32, Filson Historical Society.

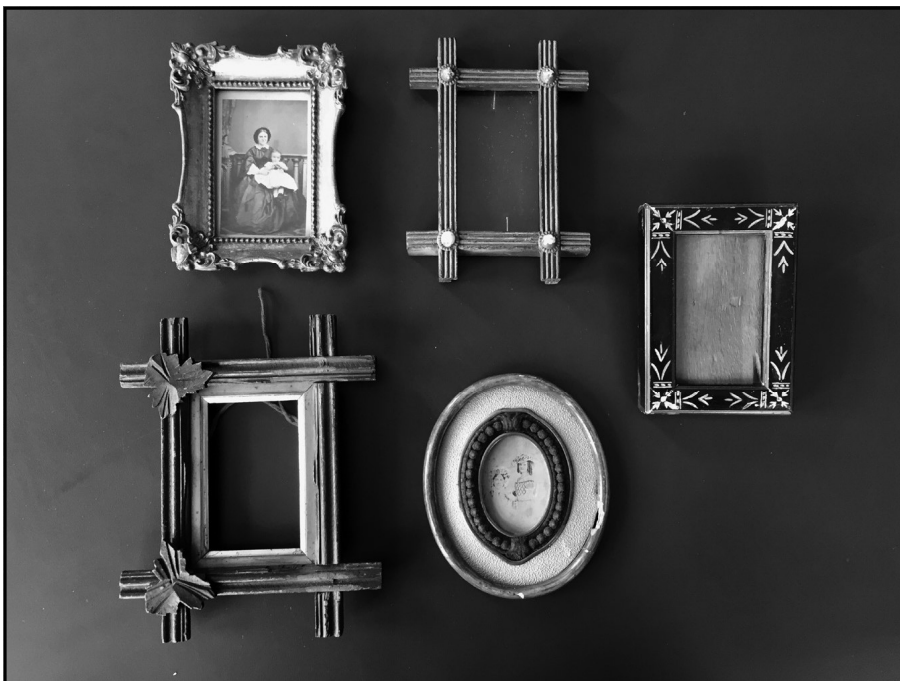


Decorative oval frame carte de visite of Joel H. Price, photographed by J. W. Williams. Cohen Photograph Collection, KyS.492, Filson Historical Society.

As mass production of cartes increased, the need for a place to store all of them arose, and E. & H. T. Anthony and Company, the largest supplier and distributor of photographic supplies at the time, quickly began producing albums to hold these treasured cartes de visite. The carte album became an instant success, and soon other creative display options began popping up on the market, including carte picture frames.



Buford-Duke family carte de visite album, ca. 1860. Buford-Duke Photograph Collection, AL-040, Filson Historical Society.



Examples of carte de visite frames of varying materials including wood, leather, and glass. Photograph Collections, 021PC23, Filson Historical Society.

### *Cabinet Cards (1890–1900)*

By the 1870s, the carte de visite was waning in popularity. Their carte albums full, consumers were looking for the next new fad. Photographers were also hoping to find a larger surface space, as, due to its size, the carte de visite did not lend itself well to photo editing and manipulation. Drawing on the same technology as the carte de visite, the cabinet card was invented. Double the size of the carte de visite, the cabinet card measured 4 ½" x 6 ¼". This process created two larger photographs, giving the photographer a larger surface space or canvas to edit and manipulate the image.

It is said that the first example of this format earned its name because it was displayed in a cabinet for viewers to peer at. This larger format was an instant hit with photographers and remained in popular consumer demand until the turn of the twentieth century. Early cabinet cards were very simple, just like early cartes. They often included only the bust of the sitter, with a faded blank background and no additional elaborations. Like the carte, the cabinet card was made with elaborate card mounts, such as beveled and gilt edges. Photographers experimented with masking, removing stray hairs and freckles, and capturing larger views of the sitter.



Cabinet Card of Henrietta Helm, photographed by Bergman. Individuals Photograph Collection, 021PC34, donation of Phillip Cherry Sr., Filson Historical Society.



Example of a Cabinet Card that captures the full bust, photographed by John Elrod. Cohen Photograph Collection, KyLou.144, Filson Historical Society.

As the format developed, photographers creatively used its larger surface area. Portrait photography soon documented major life events such as baptisms, communions, and weddings, creating family keepsakes of these special moments. Photographers also began using backdrops, props, and costumes to add some theatrical touches, filling the studio with whimsical scenes. By adding tree stumps, grass, rocks, and plants, the photographer could transport the sitter into an outdoor scene. Sand and grass placed around a stationary bike gave the illusion that the sitter was riding along the beach on a beautiful cloudy day. Photographers continued pushing these boundaries by blending realism and romanticism.



Unidentified man with two young boys, pose for their portraits in a wooded scene, photographed by Paul Günter, Cohen Photograph Collection, KyLou.267, Filson Historical Society.



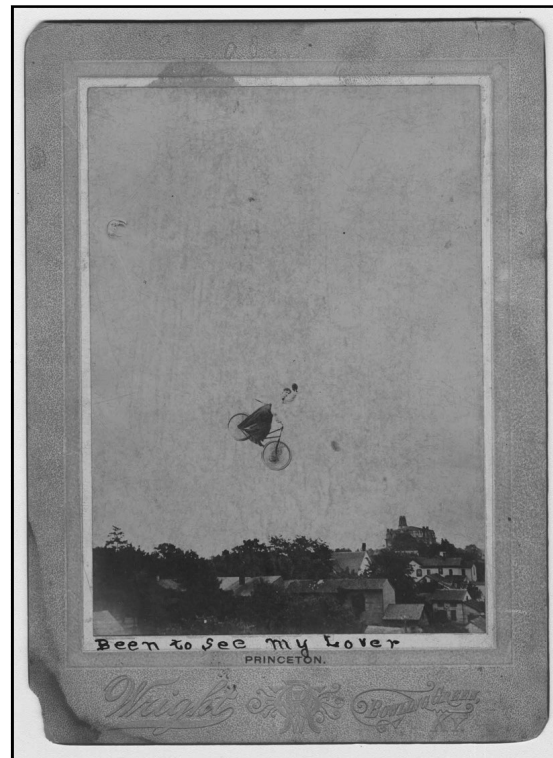
Lewis and Joseph Bond pose for their portrait in a wooded scene, photographed by Edward Klauber. Cohen Photograph Collection, KyLou.305, Filson Historical Society.



Young woman holds wildflowers while posing in a field of wildflower, photographed by Stuber & Bros. Cohen Photograph Collection, KyLou.412, Filson Historical Society.

In addition to adding props, photographers also experimented with photo manipulation, masks and borders, and hand-tinting to add dashes of color and pops of texture to images. Examples include a woman flying her bike through the sky, with the caption reading, “Been to see my lover,” and an image partially unrolled like a scroll, bringing a bit of three-dimensionality to the cabinet card. This was an era of extravagance, whimsy, and romance, which can be seen in many early Ohio Valley studio photographers’ works.

No matter the format, photographs forever preserve a moment. It is up to the viewer, the scholar, or the genealogist to interpret these photographic objects holistically, studying the subject matter and format and the photographer who created the image. By examining not only the people in front of the camera but also the photographers and photographic trends behind it, we can begin to piece together a broader historical narrative. Cartes de visite and cabinet cards are just two prevalent early



An example of photo manipulation a woman riding through the sky on her bike, caption reading, “Been to see my lover,” photographed by Wright. Cohen Photograph Collection, KyBG.5, Filson Historical Society.



An example of photo masking and added borders, this woman's image appears on a partially unrolled scroll adding a bit of three-dimensionality to the image, photographed by Gregory. Cohen Photograph Collection, KyLou.224, Filson Historical Society.

photographic formats in the Filson's collections that help us preserve collective memories and document photographers and photographic trends in the Ohio Valley from 1855 to 1900.

Heather Potter,  
Curator of Photographs and Prints,  
Filson Historical Society