

Reading Historical Photographs: What Can We See, What Can We Learn?



GPO HISTORY TALK

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Reading Historical Photographs

What Can We See,
What Can we Learn?

- **GPO's historical photograph collection has something on the order of 10,000 images in prints, negatives, slides, and digital files.**
- **One of the responsibilities of the historian is to make the photos available, and to provide accurate, interesting information that illuminates and interprets the photos.**



Reading Historical Photographs

What Can We See,
What Can we Learn?

- There is a well-established set of techniques among historians and photography experts for looking and interpreting photos.
- The framework has three elements:
 - Observe
 - Reflect
 - Query



Reading Historical Photographs

What Can We See,
What Can we Learn?

- **OBSERVE** - Identify factual details
- **REFLECT** – Form and test hypotheses
- **QUERY** – Develop questions to gain further understanding



Reading Historical Photographs

OBSERVE

- Look at the factual information the photo provides (who, what, when where)
- Describe what is visible | What do you notice first? | What people and objects are shown? | How are they arranged? | What is the setting? | Are there any textual clues visible (words, signs, etc.?) | Are there details you cannot identify?



Reading Historical Photographs

REFLECT

- Think in more abstract terms about the photo, add other knowledge to what we can see.
- Why was it taken? | How was it composed? | Why was the image made? | What's happening in the image? | When was it made? | Who was the intended audience?



Reading Historical Photographs

QUERY

- **Synthesize the explicit (what we can see), the implicit (what is known but not visible), and the unknown.**
- **What's missing from the photo? | What happened a moment before the shot was captured? A moment after? | What do you wonder about after seeing the image?**



Reading Historical Photographs

“Parts” of Photos

- Photographs are made up of
 - Composition (what the photographer grouped together in the frame)
 - Capture of a moment (is there action or activity?)
 - Setting
 - Focal point (what’s in the center or in focus, what’s the important object or statement?)



**Reading
Historical
Photographs**

CONTEXT

- **Many elements give a photo its context**
- **Photos are composed by the photographer, much like writing or drawing.**
- **Elements are consciously included, excluded, emphasized**



Reading Historical Photographs

The GPO Collection

- GPO's historical photos are documentary, but for the most part not of events (at least prior to the 1960s).
- Their intention is mostly pretty clear: to record and promote the largest printing plant in the world.



Reading Historical Photographs

The GPO Collection

- **There is a historical arc:**
 - Few or none pre-1890
 - Relatively few 1890 – 1920
 - An explosion of photos 1920 – 1940
 - Fewer during and just after World War II
 - Character of subjects changes by mid-50s (more events, less plant)
 - Now largely event-based



Reading Historical Photographs

The GPO Collection

- A simple filing system was put in place many years ago, relying on the agency organizational chart. 80 – 90% are identified with at least an organizational unit, rarely names of people, and only sometimes a date.
- That system has been expanded to provide a bit more ready detail
- There are almost always multiple copies of each print.
- Many have appeared in GPO publications

Reading Historical Photographs



**TRY A BRIEF EXERCISE TO
DEMONSTRATE THE**

OBSERVE <-> REFLECT <-> QUERY

FRAMEWORK



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Exercise

- **Take a couple of minutes to closely examine the photo on the following slide**



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Now, list
everything you
can say with
certainty (“I
see. . .” rather
than “This
might be . . .”)





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What is the
central or focal
item? What
most
prominently
draws your
attention?





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Reflect

- **Answer these questions:**
 - Why was the photo taken? What was its purpose?
 - When was it taken? How can you tell?
 - Where was it taken? How do you know?
 - What happened one minute after the photographer snapped the picture? One minute before?



Reading Historical Photographs

The original identification assigned to this photo is that it shows the production of postal money orders in Building 4, 1940s. That identification was based on one piece of documented information (that it was the money order section) and on judgements based on observation.





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Eventually,
another photo
came to light,
clearly the same
setting, with a
definite date of
1933. A
problem since
Building 4
wasn't built yet.





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- The second photo, although obviously the same location, is a different view. Based on further research, we determined that it was taken in part of the old GPO building, now demolished, located where Building 3 now sits. An exterior shot of the rooftops of the old building, taken from Building 2, reveals an extension with a roof and clerestory pattern that matches what is visible from the inside here.

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It's necessary to query and test assumptions throughout. Both shots are of Money Order Section, old building, mid-1930s





Reading Historical Photographs

- This technique can be applied to most any photo. Give it a try!
- Observe <--- > Reflect < --- > Query