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Photographs in Historical Research

This photograph of a canal boat on the Miami-Erie Canal helps later generations visualize a common mode of transportation now vanished. Delphos Photograph Collection (MS 338). ▶

Early photographers recognized history-in-the-making and took advantage of an evolving technology to preserve their moment in time. Likewise, businessmen knew the value of pictures for advertising the success of boomtowns. For the first time, the general public had an affordable means of preserving and sharing family events.



Nineteenth century photographs are an invaluable guide to the study of the people and the cultures they record. Just as George Catlin had used pens and brushes to record Native American cultures before 1850, D. F. Barry and E. S. Curtis used their lenses to preserve the faces, costumes, and ceremonies of western Native peoples.

Photographs have been used to capture spectacular events ranging from natural disasters to train wrecks to presidential visits. Even when the purpose of the photograph was to advertise community growth, observant researchers can learn far more than the photographer intended. Street scenes record spatial relationships between businesses, the mix of automobiles and horse-drawn transportation, changes in fashions, and everyday activities. Photographs are useful for dating everyday objects and describing their use because they often record things which are so common that little is written about them.

Some scholars analyze photographs not for the wealth of detail they provide but for recurring image and composition patterns, to learn what was important to the people of the culture depicted. But whether viewed for pleasure or for content, photographs make the past accessible to the present.

--Lee N. McLaird



◀ A spring or summer photograph of a house illustrates popular yard decoration and landscaping. CAC General Photograph Collection.

Photographs are a particularly good source of information to use when studying and interpreting the historic built environment. They capture moments in time, preserving for later researchers the actual appearance of a building and its site while it was in use. When a historic photograph can be compared with a contemporary view of the same place, researchers not only can trace events and study artifacts as they were but also can discover and analyze changes that have taken place. Such information is critical in understanding architectural heritage and in determining how to preserve, restore, and rehabilitate historic buildings.

To obtain the maximum amount of information these documents can offer, photographs must be "read" systematically. As in the case of the turn-of-the-century Bowling Green family pictured here in front of their home at Troup Avenue and Clough Street, the photograph may reveal who was there, what they wore, and the setting of landscape and neighborhood.

But the photograph raises other questions as well. What was the cultural and natural landscape of Bowling Green in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Does the photograph reveal the approximate time of day or the season of the year? What does it reveal about the socio-economic status of the family, and therefore, the type of dwelling they lived in? What is the larger historic context of buildings and landscapes of this type?

First, the house is an excellent example of a Folk Victorian house, as defined by the decorative detailing on a simple folk house form, in this case, a popular Victorian version of the gable-front-and-wing.

Folk Victorian houses became popular when the growth of railroads made woodworking machinery and abundant supplies of pre-cut lumber easily available to local trade centers. In Bowling Green and throughout much of northwest Ohio, a rapidly growing economy created by the oil and gas boom and an expanding agriculture produced a new middle class eager to take advantage of these building supplies.

Folk Victorian houses were generally much less elaborate than the High Victorian styles they imitated. Detailing was often applied to porches, cornices, and gables, and included turned spindles, jig-saw cut lace-line spandrels, friezes, and brackets. Note the gable and porch detailing in the earlier photograph.



◀ Comparing an historic photograph with a contemporary view can bring to light changes made over time. CAC General Photograph Collection.

Comparing the historic photograph with a contemporary view raises other questions. Was this an urban or suburban environment, and how has the neighborhood changed? How has the house been altered, and what evidence remains to verify that it is the same house?

Several changes are obvious in the contemporary photograph of the same house. Perhaps the most obvious is the disappearance of every piece of Folk Victorian detailing. Countless houses have undergone similar changes because of their owners' desire to make their homes appear more modern.

Nearly as obvious is the disappearance of numerous outbuildings. Perhaps the first to go was the most "necessary" of all outbuildings, the privy. Finally, though not as obvious in the photograph, there is a dramatic change in the neighborhood itself. From a semi-rural environment, the intersection of Troup and Clough now appears as a typical small town residential neighborhood.

--Lee N. McLaird