Postcards as Primary Source Objects
Basic Dating Guide

Dates are always approximate. Here are some of the most common clues:

**Postmark** (the mark stamped by a postal office to record the date of mailing)

- If the card was mailed, is the date on the postmark legible?
- Postcards may have been in circulation, on the market, or owned by someone for years before they were mailed, so the postmark is a clue, but not a definitive answer. It’s often close.

**Divided back** (a postcard with two sections provided for writing both correspondence and address on the back)

- Is there a dividing line printed on the back of the postcard?
- Before March 1, 1907, the United States did not allow people to write anything other than the recipient’s name and address on the backs of postcards. The UK introduced divided backs earlier in 1902. Picture postcards **without** the dividing line are, therefore, definitely pre-1907. However, picture postcards **with** the dividing line may still have images printed on the front that were photographed pre-1907.

**Physical attributes** (how a postcard was made)

- What clues about dates can you get from the printing, the paper, and the graphic design?
  - **1900s-1920s =**
    - Images often have pale watercolor or color-wash type colors, and are possibly also hand-colored.
    - Postcards are either without borders or may have a white border.
    - Postcards may be printed on thin paper.
  - **1930-1945 =**
    - Linen-weave, thicker paper.
    - Card borders are often colored; they may be white as well.
  - **1939-ongoing =**
    - Sometimes glossy photographic color.

**Elements within the image** (what got photographed in the picture)

- Are there objects in the image that help you to identify a time period?
  - Fashion: For example, are there women wearing long dresses, “flapper”-style dresses, etc.?
  - Transportation: Are there street cars, horse-drawn vehicles, identifiable car models, etc.?