

13 Ways to Find Physical Characteristics Without Photos

As we all know, there are no photos available for all of our ancestors, especially many of those who lived primarily in the 1800s or earlier. On the other hand, we may have photos in our collection in what I call my “Unknowns,” where they have not been identified, and may never be identified.

So how do we know what our ancestors looked like if there are no identified photos? Well, there are several artifacts that are available to family historians and genealogists that at least describe their physical characteristics.

Below is a list of 13 different examples. I am sure that there are more.

- **World War I or II Draft Cards** – on the second page of the card, questions were asked about the applicant’s physical characteristics: height, build, eye color, hair color, physical markings, physical deformities, and in one version whether he was bald.
- **Naturalization Records** – there have been a few variations of naturalization forms, but several of them asked for skin color, height, weight, eye and hair color, as well as distinctive marks.
- **Passport Applications** – although some applications indeed have photos (although less than high quality), a number of physical characteristics were requested of the applicant, such as stature, forehead, eye color, nose, mouth, chin, hair color, complexion, face characteristics, and distinguishing marks.
- **Military Discharge Records** – there are an abundance of forms in the military, and many of them record physical characteristics. My father’s discharge from the Marine Corps included height, eye color, hair color, and complexion were noted.
- **Military Enlistment Records** – include height, hair and eye color, and complexion
- **Voter Registration** – in some voter registration logs, physical characteristic information was requested. In some records, applicants included their age, height, complexion, eye color, hair color as well as marks or scars.
- **Pension Applications** – In pension applications, there often is a place to enter physical characteristics. Examples for a Civil War pension, include a place to enter age, height, weight, complexion, and eye and hair color. In Surgeons Certificates, there is an abundance of health information as well.
- **Immigration Records** – In immigration records for specific years, some physical description info was required. In this example, health condition, deformities, height, complexion, eye and hair color, and identifying marks were required.
- **Prison Records** – The usual age, hair color, height, eye color, physical deformities, and I have seen one that includes temperament!
- **U.S. Customs Service Records** – for seamen, their physical description was included in the records.
- **Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files** – physical appearance information was included in the records.
- **Drivers and Other Licenses** – Licenses didn’t always have photos but often include height, weight, hair color and eye color.
- **Hospital and Other Medical Records** – include height, weight, and race.