Don't You Know Who I Am?

**Pic. 1:
A German
passport
dating
from 1811**

How did the modern identity document evolve? Well-recognised passport expert and collector Tom Topol explains

The French revolution at the end of the 18th century marked the birth of a 'modern' passport system. By 1799, you needed a passport to leave France. In the beginning, a passport consisted of a single sheet of paper and gradually developed into today's high-tech security document. What has changed in these 200+ years? The most obvious change is that you now need a passport to enter a foreign country. However, there are many more aspects that have significantly changed the functionality of a passport over time.

Passports usually consisted of a large single or double sheet of paper, pre-printed with additional entries or completely handwritten. When they were first created, nobody was thinking about durability or the practical use of a passport, of course. It is therefore no wonder that such passports made of simple and thin paper quickly developed wear and tear when not properly handled or due to frequent travel; once, a traveller would fold their travel document several times to make it fit into a wallet.

What was the content of an 18th and 19th -century passport?

The header featuring a coat of arms was a significant part of the document, as this stated in large and bold letters who issued the passport, sometimes followed by a long list of the issuer's (noble) titles. Then came a short greeting – 'to whom it may concern' – followed by the bearer's name, destination or route of travel, and often the purpose of travel. Finally, the passport featured a statement to support the traveller on their journey to freely cross the border(s), followed by the date, place of issue, signature and seal.

'Support requests to pass freely' have since vanished in many modern passports, but in others they still remain.

There was no physical description of the bearer at all! A passport was therefore maybe rather like a 'letter of recommendation' to travel and was designed to support the traveller on his journey.

It took another decade to include a physical description of the bearer in a passport. In around 1811, passports began to include the following characteristics: age, height, hair, forehead, eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth, chin, beard, face, stature, teeth, and distinguishing features (Pic. 1).

These personal characteristics made a basic 'physical identification' of the bearer possible for the first time in 19th-century passports.

By around 1850, wealthier travellers ordered their passports through a passport agent, including a fancy leather wallet with the name of the passport bearer printed in gold. This not only afforded the passport greater protection; it probably also gave the impression the bearer was an important traveller when it was inspected at the border. Passport agents also acquired the necessary visas for their customers (Pic. 2 and Pic. 3).

Having researched passports and their history for more than fifteen years now, I believe this German passport from the Kingdom of Hannover (Pic. 4), which was issued in 1863 and valid until 1864, was one of the first passport booklets ever. The booklet has sixteen pages. I have never seen an earlier passport in this form. The German Empire used passport booklets from 1871 onwards.

Pic. 4: A German passport booklet dating from 1863
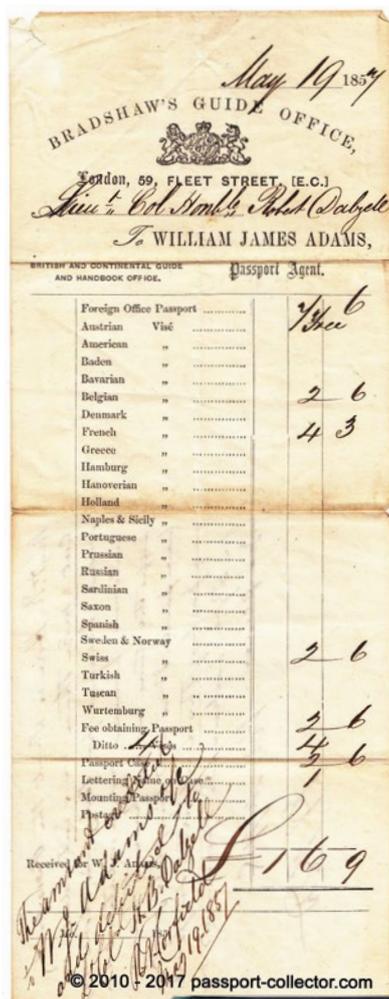

Security features in the 19th century

This German passport booklet from the Kingdom of Saxony (Pic. 5), which was issued 1866 and valid until 1868, perfectly illustrates the security features of the time: sealed colour thread binding, microprinting, a coat of arms watermark, and embossed graphics and letters.

A modern passport has thirty or more security features, both visible and invisible to the naked eye.

Photography was commercially introduced in 1839, but it was not until 1915 when most countries made passport photos mandatory. No rules applied in the early days; all pictures were accepted even if the
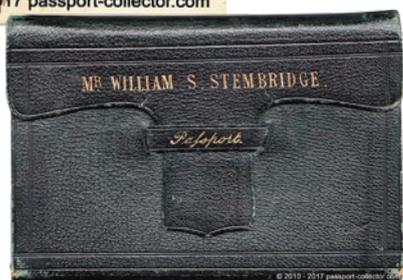
Pic. 2 and Pic. 3: A UK passport agent bill (an extremely rare item of great significance in passport history) and a UK passport in its leather wallet

Pic. 5: Passport for the Kingdom of Saxony, Germany, in 1866: security features (passport booklet produced by Giesecke+Devrient)

bearer were on horseback, wearing a hat or posing with their dog. All that mattered was that the photo fit onto the passport document. Passport photos have therefore been used for just 102 years!

Incidentally, odd passport photos are one of my favorite collectible characteristics. I often say that old passports are 'art' as they all were rather individual in those days, both curious and beautiful.

Stamps and visas

When you travel today, at least within Europe, you no longer collect stamps in your passport if you are European. If you are not a citizen of a European country, you will only get a stamp entering and leaving the EU. Travel between EU countries is usually not documented in your passport.

Meanwhile, Australia doesn't even issue visible visas. Their visas are only provided in an electronic format, which is then verified at the border.

This presents a stark contrast to the time when your passport was filled with colourful stamps and visas each time you crossed a border – another aspect of my 'art' statement that makes the history of passports so fascinating to me.

Indeed, research on this topic is an immense pleasure for me and collecting and preserving these historical travel documents is both entertaining and instructive. When will you start your collection?

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US-American passport historian Craig Robertson says: 'You present a passport, a booklet, and have to prove to the border guard that you are the document. Lots of people assume it's the other way around. […] It's this notion that the most authoritative representation of you is not your embodied identity, but the piece of paper.'

A paradox?! Have a think about it! ■
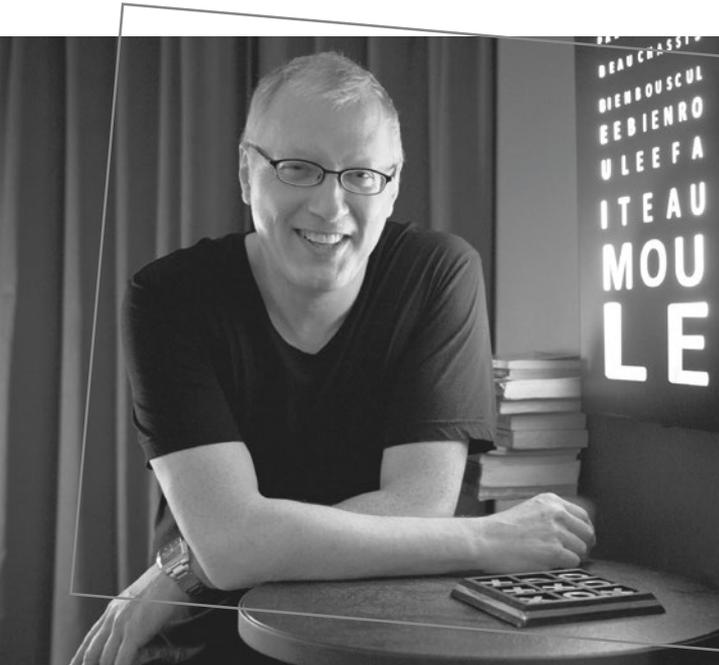
About the author:

Tom Topol is a member of the Ephemera Society in the UK and USA and a well-recognised expert on passports and their history with several publications (see reference list online). He offers consulting to collectors, foundations, museums and news media agencies on the topic.

His website, www.passport-collector.com, is a gold mine of information on historic and important travel documents. Tom also discusses current news on passports and visas, border security and security printing on social media.