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The thesis of Karen Lynn Selby entitled
"WHAT A WOMAN CAN DO..."

A STUDY OF THE WORK AND INFLUENCE OF 19th CENTURY PHOTOGRAPHER FRANCES BENJAMIN JOHNSTON

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies in the School for Summer and Continuing Education of Georgetown University has been read and approved.

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Feb 25, 1956
Date
"WHAT A WOMAN CAN DO . . ."
A STUDY OF THE WORK AND INFLUENCE OF 19TH CENTURY
PHOTOGRAPHER FRANCES BENJAMIN JOHNSTON

A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
BACHELOR OF ARTS
IN LIBERAL STUDIES

BY

KAREN LYNN SELBY

SCHOOL FOR SUMMER AND CONTINUING EDUCATION
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, D.C.
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"WHAT A WOMAN CAN DO . . ."
A STUDY OF THE WORK AND INFLUENCE OF 19TH CENTURY PHOTOGRAPHER FRANCES BENJAMIN JOHNSTON

Karen Lynn Selby

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ABSTRACT

Frances Benjamin Johnston was considered one of the more remarkable photographers of late 19th-century America who achieved a level of influence and access garnered by few women. Although a photographer, first and foremost she was an artist. Her pictures not only recorded history, but molded society's ideas as well. She was influenced not so much by other photographers but artists such as Rembrandt, Van Dyck, and Gainsborough. In this thesis I will examine her career with consideration as to: how it was that a woman photographer in the late 19th century could accomplish so much at a time when women were not accepted openly in the arts, let alone the work force.

An examination of Johnston's work reveals that it was divided into three categories. The first was portraiture a topic in which most women photographers
began their careers. As her pictures possessed a rare artistic quality, she gained access to many of the most powerful and influential people of her day.

The second category was her historic documentation of the Hampton School and Tuskegee Institute. Founded in 1868 by General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, these schools were designed to educate former slaves, freedmen and Native Americans. Johnston worked closely with Booker T. Washington who wanted to show the world that his students possessed dignity, integrity, and intelligence. Her pictures of these students and school activities impacted on how society viewed members of other races. In this thesis I will study how her pictures achieved this. The third category was her extensive photographing of the industry and architecture of the South in the final years of her career. America's middle and upper classes were embracing the industrial revolution through investment. They were anxious to view the technological advances which both brought America to the forefront of international economics and were making them rich simultaneously. Johnston was able simultaneously to capture a way of life that was just beginning and one that would soon be forever lost.

Frances Benjamin Johnston not only influenced the world of photography but opened further entry for women into the larger spectrum of society and the professions. The industrial revolution had a dramatic impact on the lives of middle class women. New inventions such as the sewing machine gave women more leisure
time and many expressed an interest in learning about photography. Johnston wrote articles describing how as professional photographers women could become independent businesswomen. Recognized today as one of the pioneer women photographers, Frances Benjamin Johnston influenced photography, women, and society.
To Mother and Daddy
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1
FRANCES BENJAMIN JOHNSTON

Born in Grafton, West Virginia, on January 15, 1864, Frances Benjamin Johnston was the only surviving child of Anderson D. Johnston, a clerk with the Quarter Master Corps, and Frances A. Benjamin, whom Frances called "Muddie." Anderson moved his family along the Ohio River and then to Rochester, New York before taking a job with the Treasury Department in Washington, DC. It was there, in the house at 1332 "V" Street, NW, where she would live with her parents and her Aunt Cornelia Hagan, (known as Aunt Nin) throughout much of her life. Frances often traveled with her mother and/or Aunt Nin while her father managed her business affairs. This followed a characteristic common among professional women photographers of her time in that they never married or they divorced and lived with relatives and close friends.  

As befitted most middle-class young women, and even though she was not Roman Catholic, Frances was sent to the Notre Dame Convent in Groveston, Maryland for "finishing." Graduating in 1883, she took top honors ("first premiums") in all of her classes such as: "rhetoric, composition, ancient history, geography, physiology, inorganic chemistry, astronomy, algebra, geometry, bookkeeping, literature and art."  

Later that same year she moved to Paris for study at the prestigious Académie
Julian. It was here she first experienced the prejudice against women in artistic education. The Académie Julian was not only one of the most renowned art schools in Paris, it was also one of the very few which accepted women. Even so, tuition and board for their classes was close to double that for the male students because it was felt women were not there to become professionals but for "the luxury of it." Still, it would be from this training she would credit much of her success as a photographer.

Upon her return to Washington, D.C. in 1885, she and her artist friends would organize the Washington-based Art Students League, which later became a part of the Corcoran School of Art. From these same artistic and social contacts and friends she began her career in photography and found admission to some of the most politically and socially influential homes in Washington.

She began her professional career as an illustrator for various newspapers and magazines. Due to advancement in the technical process of developing pictures, "a rising interest in social consciousness, and an increase in leisure time," publications began moving away from drawings toward the use of photographs. This was made apparent in 1886 when Le Journal Illustré magazine included photographs of French scientist Michel Chevreul in an interview. The issue sold out and changed the course of print publications. Anxious to take advantage of this new development magazines encouraged amateurs and professionals alike to submit pictures to their editors.

At the encouragement of her friend Elizabeth Sylvester, also considered to be
very independent and ahead of her time, Frances decided to make her move to photography.  

I entered upon my new convocation with an ignorance of photography that was as dense as my self-confidence was unbounded. I cheerfully undertook things, and strange to say was frequently successful, which the average amateur would consider impossible, simply because I did not know things could not be done in photography.

Recognizing her limited knowledge of the genre, Frances studied under (Professor) Thomas W. Smilie of the Smithsonian Institute. "It wasn't easy to learn what I wanted ... there were only one or two places, and they didn't warm up to the idea of taking me in. But I got special permission to work in the laboratories at the Smithsonian Institute." In 1890, she returned to Europe for additional studies on the history of photography.

By 1889 she was not only producing photographs but many articles as well. She worked for publications such as: Harpers Weekly, Cosmopolitan, the Ladies' Home Journal and Demorist's Family Magazine. Johnston also contracted with several magazines to develop pictures taken by other photographers.

Her main interest lay in five areas: magazine work, portraiture, copying of manuscripts and paintings, artistry, and architecture. From 1891 to 1913, she spent her time primarily in portraiture and current events. With her family position, (she was said to be a distant relation of Mrs. Grover Cleveland) and circle of friends, she was
given access to some of the most powerful and influential families in Washington and documented to five presidential administrations: Harrison, McKinley, Roosevelt, Cleveland, and Taft. She became notorious for her pictures, especially as she was know to risk life and limb to obtain shots at which others failed. Additionally, Frances did much to support professional women photographers and encourage others to enter the field.

In 1894 she began the construction of her own studio. In describing both philosophy of her work and need for a studio, Frances said:

My aim ... is, and has been to make photographs best serve their purpose of illustration by giving them, whenever possible, an artistic quality and by care in detail, a study of arrangement and lighting to make not photographs but pictures. My publishers seem to have appreciated this effect and my success has been such that I was obliged either to provide myself with a properly equipped workshop or else give up my work entirely.  

Building her studio had a threefold impact on her career. First, it gave her a professional lab. Prior to this she was forced to develop her plates in the bathroom and print in a bedroom window. Secondly, until she had her own studio, she was not fully recognized as a professional by her peers. This due to the fact so many were trying to cash-in on the "easy money" photography seemed to represent. People set up makeshift studios and darkroom in their homes, often turning out poor quality pictures and were, therefore, not taken seriously by career photographers. One was not considered a real professional without a studio.
Third, her studio, while attached to her family home, gave her, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf, a "room of her own," becoming an important artistic social center as well. On Wednesdays, she would clear away her equipment and "receive." Her receptions, which were announced in the local newspapers, would draw a mixture of "high society, professionals, artists, and writers," as well as a group of friends known as "The Push." Frances would strategically position a tray containing her most recent photographs for guests to browse through and would also entertain her friends by rolling back the rug for dancing into the night.\textsuperscript{12}

In 1913 she changed the focus of her career and began concentrating her attention on photographing architecture and gardens. In order to pursue this new interest she moved to New York and went into partnership with Mrs. Mattie Edwards Hewitt.

In 1940 she moved to New Orleans where she frequented coffeehouses and enjoyed her bourbon and cigarettes. When her physician told her to give up her favorite drink she merely switched to cherry wine. She remained fiercely independent to the end, informing all she met that she was the world's greatest photographer.

Before her death she gave most of her papers and photographs to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. except for a number of her favorite portraits which she sold to the Huntington Library in California. She remained highly active for the rest of her life and died in New Orleans on May 16, 1952.
In examining what made her work standout above others there were opinions given by peers and scholars alike. In April of 1900, Osborne Yellot of Photo Era Magazine described her work:

   Everything that Miss Johnston does is touched with that magic wand of the artists which gives life to clay and sentiment to the commonplace. It is not the sole secret of her success,—that secret lies in her indomitable energy, which seems to know no bounds or limitations; but it is unquestionably the secret of the popularity of her work.\\(^{13}\)

Her own description of her technical process was something else. She predominantly used a Kodak camera with no special lenses or filters "There was nothing retiring in my disposition, I wore out one camera after another and I never had any of those fancy gadgets. Always judged exposure by guess."\\(^{14}\) She also did not rule out the study of other photographers, in fact, she encouraged it feeling that much could be learned from them all either good, bad, or indifferent. She believed that it was possible to learn from even the most novice. Maybe, just as she photographed with a straightforward style, the explanation for her success could be explained the same way: "Perhaps her genius was in doing the ordinary exceptionally well."\\(^{15}\)

Acceptance of Photography as an Art Form

All photographers were suffering the same prejudice as fellow artists before them. They were not taken seriously. Hundreds of years ago, painters were thought of
as craftsmen, not artists. If ones art was not one of the original seven muses you were not a true artist, and photographers were experiencing the same fate.

Marion Fisher Washburn in 1897 admitted the perception about photography:

In the minds of most persons, he occupies a rank a good deal below an artist, and a little above a book-agent. He is shabby genteel, the man who serves mimmon, and missed the trust artistic inspiration. He is regarded by painters much as the family doctor regards the quack who advertises, or as the churchman in England regards the dissenter.¹⁶

There was no middle-of-the-fence opinion. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. called the camera "a mirror with a memory."¹⁷ The brother of 19th-century artist Edwin Landseer called it "foe-to-graphic art."¹⁸ Yet the other side of the coin, maybe a little over confident, came from Delaroche in 1839 who said: "From today painting is dead." This observation came six months after the birth of Cézanne and before the births of Monet, Rodin, Renoir, and Matisse.¹⁹

To the world it did not seem possible that a medium which anyone, especially women, could take up and get results could possibly be taken seriously as art. It was probably summed up best by George Bernard Shaw who said: "The photographer is like the cod, which produces a million eggs in order that one may reach maturity."²⁰

It is of interest to note the printing press was looked on with the same disfavor because it was felt a "mechanical reproduction" could not have the same artistic value as a handwritten book.²¹ Scribes, like those who hated the printing press felt that
anything that took so little time to produce could not be worthy of artistic value. Much of the resentment against photography also came from a painter's fear that it would stagnate artistic creativity.\textsuperscript{22}

Into this controversy came women, also trying to make a place for themselves and it became obvious there would have to be changes in attitude, but not just about photography as an art form. "The acceptance of photography and the acceptance of women in the work environment and in particular this field go hand in hand for both are forcing the field of art and the roles of women to be re-written."\textsuperscript{23}

\textbf{Johnston and Women in Photography}

She had a strong personality, enthusiastic conversation, quick wit, a new academic interest in photographic history, support of women's rights-she actively supported and promoted photography for women.\textsuperscript{24}

Women were no more encouraged to pursue photography than any other genre. One of the reasons was it was felt women were unable to operate anything mechanical. A prime example of this was the sewing machine. Even though invented in 1840, not until 1860 was it made available for domestic use because it was felt to be too complicated for women to handle.\textsuperscript{25}

The entrance of women into photography was the signal of several very significant changes in society. It marked an attempt to change the Victorian lifestyle of
middle-class women. Their roles were no longer defined by that of wife, mother and
daughter—they were going to work outside the home. Women were becoming social
workers, joining women's clubs, writing novels and establishing medical and legal
practices.

Women were making themselves heard; they wanted the right to vote the right
to higher education and the right to earn their own living. The reason many of these
issues were being raised was that technology was making housekeeping easier and
faster as well as a decrease in the birth rate giving women more leisure time.

Between 1880 to 1890 the number of women enrolled in colleges tripled and
from 1890 to 1920 the number of women in the work force doubled, though they were
employed mainly in domestic related careers such as social work, nursing and
Teaching. 1900 saw even greater changes as when 7,387 women became physicians. Interestingly, more than 50% of women college graduates never married.

Initially photography tried to keep women in supportive roles such as assistants
to photographers, but gradually it began changing its attitude. Women and camera
were no longer seen as incompatible. For one thing, since photography was not taken
as serious art then it would be most appropriate for a woman to be involved with.
Secondly, technical developments such as dry plates, rolled film and a small format
camera that could be hand held made the media more available to the general public.
Even George Eastman aimed his marketing at women, though mainly as a hobby that
she could do in addition to her domestic duties.\textsuperscript{28} 

Suddenly photography magazines began encouraging the union of woman and the camera. They ran monthly articles encouraging women to take up the medium. \textit{Outings Magazine} went as far as to ask: "Our greatest painters have been men; have we not a right to expect that our most famous photographers will be women?" In fact, many questioned why more young women didn't take up the field,\textsuperscript{29} though one could hardly blame them for being a littler nervous when two months later it was suggested they "lay a tolerably good foundation of elementary chemistry." The only drawback to all of this encouragement was that it was based on the Victorian morals of the day. A woman could take "ladylike" pictures of "ladylike" subjects as long as she remained "ladylike" herself and continued to maintain the home.

As mentioned above, Frances Benjamin Johnston did much to encourage women to take up photography. She did it by being seen. Her work was published in newspapers, magazines and books. Women approached her for advice from how to start their own businesses, to camera and darkroom tips and techniques. It became a women's network for professional purposes and it was one of the first of its kind.

Her hallmark article "What a Woman Can Do with a Camera" appeared in the September 1897 \textit{Ladies' Home Journal}. She recognized the twofold reason a woman might choose a career as being to make money and find personal fulfillment outside her domestic duties. Johnston also challenged women to do much self-searching in
order to determine if photography would be right for her.

The prime requisites—as summed up in my mind after long experience and thought are these: "The woman who makes photography profitable must have, as to personal qualities, good common sense, unlimited patience to carry her through endless failures, equally unlimited tact, good taste, a quick eye, a talent for detail, and a genius for hard work.\textsuperscript{30}

Frances gave examples of areas an entry-level photographer might try or consider for future specialization—such as portraiture, architectural work, copying paintings, and photojournalistic work for newspapers and magazines.

She offered common sense information that would help any novice, no matter what type of business:

The best general rule to follow is to accept cheerfully any work that comes, doing what there is to do, rather than waiting for the particular kind that one would prefer. Usually, a business woman who shows a disposition to do anything asked of her in her line of work, soon finds herself able to exercise some choice in the matter of pursuing her own taste and pleasure.\textsuperscript{31}

She insisted that training was imperative before taking up the art, but admitted that finding such schooling would be difficult. Frances warned against becoming commonplace and challenged other photographers to "keep up with the advancement of the art" and guard against a lack of originality. She went into great technical detail on what was involved in setting up a darkroom and studio, including the expectation to spend up to two thousand dollars. She passed on information that would have
otherwise been gained through trial and error.

Johnston's exposure and recognition had other far reaching implications. Her success encouraged other women and as a result they banded together for mutual support. These women shared many common characteristics such as creative interests, class, and the social morale's of the times. They experienced many of the same stigmas placed on them as women trying to enter into the work force. Even the Ladies' Home Journal reflected many of the conflicting attitudes of the day.

In an article which appeared in the Ladies' Home Journal, "The American Woman in the Market-place by an American Mother" it was preached how it was understandable that women entering the work force in the years following the Civil War due to so many men dead on both sides - it was a matter of survival. Though the message was made very clear, that once men re-entered the workforce, it was a woman's duty to return to the home. It was their job to raise children and tend their husband; it would be unnatural to do anything else.

Not willing to turn back the clock, Johnston and her peers believed themselves equal to any other in the workplace. In her own words:

I believe ... that one reason why I have made a good income is that I have never done 'cheap' work. I have always tried to make my work rank with the best and asked prices that correspond. In other words, I never accept less than I think my work is worth. I would not advise women to enter this profession unless they are willing to work hard, and do their best. I think
photography can be made as much of a profession as medicine or law, and offer a less crowded field.\textsuperscript{33}

From all over the countrywomen sought her advice and even fellow professional Gertrude Käsebeir, with whom she sometimes traveled, asked how she might meet royalty. Frances ended her article by saying:

Above everything else be resourceful, doing your best with what you have until you are able to obtain what you would like. Resource, common sense, a cultivated taste and hard work form a combination that seldom fails of success in a country like ours, which a woman needs only the courage to enter any profession suitable to her talents and within her power of accomplishment.\textsuperscript{34}
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CHAPTER 2

PORTRAITURE

Late 1800s Victorian society was enamored of having its portrait taken. As a result Frances earned the title "America's Court Photographer" and with good reason. She photographed five presidential administrations as well as most of the rich and powerful of Washington, D.C. society.

Johnston used a traditional approach to her portraits, but her art school training gave her advantages her competitors didn't have. Unlike conventional studies of the time, she was able to capture the character of her subjects and yet have them appear relaxed and natural.

As to portraiture, it is my ambition to make photographic portraits much as a painter would give a sitting—in the first place to have a through artistic room, which does not suggest in any way the far chilliness the usual 'gallery' then to give plenty of time, a half a dozen sittings if necessary, to the study of pose, expression and lighting, to give unlimited care to detail, to seek the very best in a sitter and capture that if possible.

She took the rich and powerful and made them appear stately, and gave them humor with a "twinkle." Her portrait of Joel Chandler Harris (fig. 1), creator of Uncle Remus, went on to be used as a U.S. stamp. She captured their inner character and
was able to show them as three-dimensional humans rather than as stiff, flat lifeless people as so many of her peers did. To her subjects, rich or poor, she gave grace and dignity, and it is clear that they all trusted her. In fact, feminist Susan B. Anthony (fig. 2), who was very sensitive to her strabismus, which is a slight dis-coordination of the eyes, never allowed herself to be photographed full-face. Not only did she allow Frances to take her portrait full front; she was so pleased she authorized its use for the National American Woman Suffrage Bazaar Calendar.4

Johnston's approach was to take multiple pictures, experimenting with light and poses until she saw what she was looking for, the "beau ideal." She judged exposure by guess, checking her work later with a "blueprint" or cyanotype. She would be quoted as saying she wore out many cameras with this technique, but no one could argue with her results. The principle was "to get as clear a representation of my subject as possible and without too much insistence on detail at the expense of character or composition."

She refused to use painted screens and odd props but tried to put her subjects in as natural a setting as possible. While she would crop her pictures, she would never re-touch the negatives. Frances felt this was a technique used only by amateurs and that it removed the "character and individuality" of the subject.5

In portraiture especially there are so many possibilities for picturesque effects—involving composition, light
and shade, the study of pose and arrangement of
drapery—that one should go for inspiration to such
masters as Rembrandt, Van Dyck, Sir Joshua Reynolds,
Romney and Gainsborough, rather than to that of
chemical formulae.6

Portrait photography or any portrait is more than placing a figure in a chair
and taking their picture. What is the purpose of the portrait? What is it that the
subject and/or photographer is trying to portray? It is for historical documentation or
propaganda? What will the subject wear? Where will they be posed? What will they
be doing in the picture?

She would instruct others interested in the genre:

Do not attempt to pose people, or to strain your sitters
into uncomfortable or awkward positions, in order to
obtain picturesque effects. Watch them, and help them
into poses that are natural and graceful. Study their
individuality, striving to keep the likeness, and yet
endeavoring to show them at their best. Avoid
emphasizing the peculiarities of a face either by lighting
or pose; look for curves rather than angles or straight
lines and try to make the interest in the picture center
upon what is most effective in your sitter.7

Whether they were men or women, Frances approached her subjects quite
differently. With women, they were usually posed sitting or standing, but usually
showing their full figure in order to show their gowns to their best advantage. She
used a light colored screen and often posed them holding something such as a fan or
flower. If the portrait were done in the subject's home, she was posed next to some
object of special real or sentimental value. Johnston was more likely to use soft subtle lighting, though there were often exceptions to every rule.\(^8\)

Peer portrait photographer, Alice Hughes of London wrote in the *Harmsworth Magazine* of 1899 that women, no matter what age, looked best in cream white or soft color and soft flowing drapery. Also, a tea gown, which had an open neck, would not "age" as quickly as a more formal dinner dress. She also noted the interest in using techniques that could be seen in portraits by the great masters in that some women wished to be photographed in large hats and low dresses à la Gainsborough and Reynolds. Girls photographed better standing rather than sitting, and if seated, should be turned with their backs to the camera, throwing her head over her shoulder.\(^9\)

Symbolism was primary in her portraits of men (fig. 3). They were photographed predominantly in a work environment, sitting at or standing next to their desk, more than likely posed as though caught in the middle of their workday. They were made more at ease by holding objects, again, usually items of duty and authority such as pens, paper, official documents, or perhaps a cigar. They have a sense of purpose and authority. The lighting is darker, more severe. There is less gradation of tone as seen in the phonographs of women, more black and white. The men are usually photographed with viewer eyes focused on their head and shoulders.
Not all subjects approached their sittings with the same enthusiasm.

Most people consider dentistry and having their pictures taken as being equally unpleasant and painful. and shrink from one quite as much as they do the other. I do not know if dentistry can be robbed of its terrors, but I am sure that the imaginary sufferings of those who visit the photographer can be to a great extent mitigated.10

Of the portraits Frances took of the Roosevelt family, Alice Longsworth Roosevelt was one of her favorites (fig. 4). She also took many pictures of her brothers Tad, Archie and Quentin. Of these subjects she would write with humor that the first task in shooting the rambunctious youngsters was to catch them. She described how on one occasion upon arriving at the White House: "...that even the photographer duly authorized by the President [Johnston] to make some pictures of his children found the boys securely locked in one of their own rooms, the more cautions ones not taking any chances and carefully hidden under the bed."11

The signals in her portraits were clearly the Victorian morals of the time. Women were dressed in their best finery, their sole purpose being to look elegant and receive their guests. Men, on the other hand, were meant to be in charge and hold positions of power.
Fig. 1. Joel Chandler Harris

Fig. 2. Susan B. Anthony

Fig. 3. President William McKinley

Fig. 4. *Princess Alice*

ENDNOTES


5. Watts, 255.


8. Watts, 259.


11. Daniel and Smock, 149.
CHAPTER 3

PHOTOJOURNALISM

The turn of the century saw in the age of industrialization and with it many changes. Factories and refineries created jobs and moved workers away from rural farms toward urbanization. People became caught up in patriotism and the feeling that theirs was the greatest nation on earth. The increase in availability of information and technology lead the way to further developments. For instance, technical advances made books, magazines and newspapers readily available to the general public and therefore an awaking awareness of social, political and economical issues.\(^1\) Also, more work meant more money and more leisure time.

As the public began reading about other people, places and things in the news, they not only wanted to see them, but see the proof of their growing prosperity as well. Frances wrote about the much sought after pictures of the White House: "It is curious that so many of those who write of the White House take it for granted that everybody knows just how the famous Blue Room looked when Mrs. Harrison was holding a reception there."\(^2\)

Johnston was one of the first American woman photojournalists. She photographed everyone from Presidents Harrison, Cleveland, McKinley, Roosevelt and Taft to Mrs. Cleveland and the wives of the cabinet, to Theodore Roosevelt's
children. From inaugurations and the opening of Congress to coal mines, Mammoth Caves, to expositions such as the Worlds Columbian and the Louisiana Purchase, she documented them all. A member of the DAR, she was present for and photographed the laying of the cornerstone for the Memorial Continental Building on April 4, 1903.³

She was known as "The American Court Photographer" and was considered the first official White House photographer. She covered everything from major events such as inaugurations, openings of congress and the worlds fair to expositions and intimate interior shots of the White House rooms. Her photographs documented not only bureaucracy at work but also a behind the scenes look at everyday life in the White House. Frances would associate herself with George Grantham Bain, who created the first U.S. news picture agency.⁴

Taking advantage of her writing talents Johnston added captions to her pictures creating what is now known as the standard picture story. Many of her assignments for Demorest's and the Ladies' Home Journal contain not only her pictures, but her copy as well. As more and more demands were made on her time France was not able to expand on this and finally had to leave the copy writing to others.

Her first expose came in December of 1899, from Demorest's Magazine, for
whom she did a two-part study of the U.S. Mint in Philadelphia and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in Washington, D.C. Frances made a name for herself when she entered the Kohinoor Coal Mines of Shennandoah, Pennsylvania, becoming the first person to achieve underground pictures when others had failed. The only way to get the photos was through the use of a flash powder, which, at that time, was magnesium. There was potential for the flash powder to set off a chain reaction causing gases in the tunnel to explode. Another problem experienced was the light from the flash reflected against the shining black coal. According to Frances, "the atmosphere was fogged and heavy with dampness, smoke, and a fine, gritty dust."

Miners whether hoping she would show their work conditions in a national magazine or just out of a genuine interest in helping her, assisted all they could. "The people everywhere claimed my interest, which was returned in a measure, as everyone seemed to have a personal concern in the success of my pictures, and were always ready to pose with the utmost patience." She took pictures of the child laborers (fig. 5) and other miners that gave a face to the industry and the country's awakening concern over child labor. She was very impressed with the young boys who worked the mines, but made no statement regarding child labor.

They were open and trusting of Frances inviting her into their homes and their lives. She would speak of the dignity she discovered among them. "I confess to the
strange charm of the people, their labor, and the country. I would like to go back someday. I shall be very sorry if I don't.\textsuperscript{7}

In 1903 Frances traveled to Lake Superior for documenting a different type of mining. The Misabe Range produced 1/6 of the world's coal through strip mining. Through her pictures investors were able to see huge belching shovels and trains that on one hand, destroyed the land, and on the other, made them rich and the U.S. number one in production of steel.\textsuperscript{8}

Women working in a shoe factory in Lynne, Massachusetts (fig. 6) were the subject of another pictorial essay in 1895 and while she may have taken time to get to know these women and find out about their work conditions and wages, it was not something she pursued or exploited. Unlike fellow photojournalist, Jessie Tarlbox Beals, who used her camera to influence social reform, Frances never made known or expressed her point of view either verbally or through her work.

She took the last pictures of William McKinley fifteen minutes before he was assassinated on September 6, 1901. It would be her picture referred to as "the Buffalo Pose" that would be used for the statue at his monument in Caton, Ohio. It was called "The Buffalo Pose" because it was taken at the Pan-American exposition in Buffalo, New York, the day before his assassination.\textsuperscript{9}

Exploitation of her photographs was rampant. Everyone wanted to see the last
pictures of McKinley and as popular as these photos were, she didn't see any money from them. She finally gave up trying to enforce her royalty rights because of the volume of reproductions. Even George Eastman considered taking advantage of her prints when he found out she had been using a Kodak camera.10

Showing great insight, Frances later reflected on some of her last images of him:

My pictures of McKinley, taken the day before he was killed, was just an accidental snapshot. So anxious to pose the way you wanted him to, but always he was a little self-conscious before the camera, and never at his best. But I caught him wholly at the climax of a great speech, when he had wholly forgotten himself, and it was his best picture.11

In 1899, during the Spanish American War, Admiral George Dewey attacked the Spanish at Manila and totally destroyed their fleet. It brought an end to the war and made him a hero. As she was about to embark on a vacation in Europe, Frances received an urgent message from George Baining stating that Dewey was returning by way of Naples and he frantically implored her to get pictures.

In order to gain access to the Admiral and his battleship, Olympia, Frances went to the assistant secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt. He hand wrote a message to the Admiral on one of her calling cards: "My dear Admiral Dewey, Miss Johnston is a lady and whom I personally know. I can vouch for, she does good work,
and any promise she makes she will keep."

Dewey gave her his complete trust and she took over 150 pictures of him, his ship, and men (fig. 7). Even in the early days of journalism time was money--he/she who got his/her pictures to press first sold the most papers or magazines.

It is unclear exactly how it happened, but Frances entrusted her photographs to fellow photographer J.C. Hemment, even though she had been warned repeatedly that he was unscrupulous. Mr. Hemment "accidentally" left her pictures in his London hotel room, therefore beating her to press by nine days.

One source, *History of Photography*, claims that Miss Johnston was working for two papers at the same time, other sources say she was anxious to begin her holiday and trusted Hemment to get them back to her publisher. Another theory was that she was so strongly indoctrinated in the Victorian morals of her time that she never questioned that a gentleman might not be anything but honorable in dealing with a woman.

Dewey was not the only hero that she photographed. She was on-hand when Theodore Roosevelt's new Rough-Rider uniform was delivered from Brooks Brothers (fig. 8). She was also on hand when the roughriders, back from the Spanish-American Wars were about to be mustered out of the service. In viewing the photographs themselves, her subjects were predominately male. From the coal
miners to sailors to soldiers to dock workers, all display pride and strong character.

Her photojournalistic portrayal of women was also strong. Not physically, such as seen in pictures of the men, but all are seen with a sense of purpose from shoe factory to office worker to cigar factory. Both male and females have the characteristic dignity and pride of Johnston’s pictures. None are victims and none are looking for sympathy or pity. Even the children in the coalmines have the same courage and pride.

Of her photojournalism it should be noted that she, like her male counterparts, was commissioned and paid for her work. Her photographs were very straightforward and conservative.¹² Neither crusader nor reformer, her photographs document with a touch of interest and concern.¹³ While she loved the work, in 1910 she began to move into other areas.
Fig. 5. *Kohinoor Coal Mines*

Fig. 7. Admiral Dewey

Fig. 8. Theodore Roosevelt

ENDNOTES


5. Daniel and Smock, 43.

6. Daniel and Smock, 43.

7. Daniel and Smock, 43.

8. Daniel and Smock, 45.


11. Peterson, 126.

12. Peterson, 141.

CHAPTER 4
THE HAMPTON ALBUM

There was great confusion following the Civil War and a primary question was what to do about the emancipated slaves. Few had the necessary skills to support themselves and those who refused to indenture themselves back to their former masters found they had nowhere to go. An additional issue was the closing of the Western frontier which meant, to the Victorian mind, the need to "rehabilitate and civilize" Native Americans.

During the War, Samuel Chapman Armstrong, born in Hawaii of missionary parents, commanded Union troops composed of Negro freedmen. Impressed with their "devotion, courage in battle and eagerness to learn," he decided to make a contribution to their future after the conflict. Armstrong's vision was for a school based on the Hilo Boarding and Manual Labor School for Boys and the Laahuna-luna Seminary schools of Hawaii.

The idea was to create a chain reaction whereas his school would train students in basic survival skills, and they, in turn, would go on to teach and lead other African-Americans. The school would also help to "solve" the Native American issue by training them as well.
With two teachers and fifteen co-educational students, Hampton Institute opened in April 1868, and by 1899 grew to more than 1000 students. They were predominantly self-sufficient from building the campus to growing their food. Students were taught some academic courses, but the majority of classes involved manual trades such as agriculture, carpentry, sewing, cooking, housekeeping and shoe making.

From the beginning, as well meaning as its intentions were, the school was surrounded in controversy. To some, it was proof of the American dream in progress. White Victorian society felt anything was possible and that hard work and perseverance would lead to success. Most financial contributors were religious organizations and white northern philanthropists, who felt their own version of the American Dream was what the minority races should be trying to achieve. Naively they believed the multiple complex issues could be resolved within one generation.

There were also those, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, who felt the school kept the students in low-paying menial jobs and did not give them the necessary resources to advance themselves as a white college would do. In addition, racists used Hampton as propaganda that a vocational education was all non-white races were capable of.

In 1899, Rev. Hollis Burke Frissick, General Armstrong's successor, approached Frances Benjamin Johnston to do a photographic study of the institute. It was the school's wish to show its philosophy through pictures of daily life in an attempt to reach a large segment of the general public, both black and white.
Additionally, their goal was to reach more potential students, possible donors, and employers for their graduates. According to the *Southern Workman and Hampton School Record*:

The exhibit which Hampton is preparing to send to the Paris Exposition emphasizes the importance placed by the school authorities on the training of the Indian and Negro in the arts that pertain to home and farm life...it is part of the plan of the exhibit to contrast the new life among the Negroes and Indians with the old, and then show how Hampton has helped to produce the change...The value of such an exhibit lies not only in showing to others but in making clear to the school itself what it is doing.

Johnston was chosen for the project because they felt she was "an artist of high rank", she was geographically convenient, and her fees, for this project, were lower than other photographers. (She charged $1000 plus the living and transportation expenses of she and an assistant.) This was due in part from trying to compete professionally in a male dominated genre and possibly for the fact she was never considered a very astute businesswoman.

School officials also wanted Johnston because of her sympathetic portrayal of blue-collar workers and their environments such as seen in her photographs of coalfields and mines, shipyards, and shoe factories. Additionally, studies of the D.C. District Schools showed Frances' ability to pose and work with students.

The Hampton pictures were taken over a six-week period beginning in December 1899. This presented a challenge of shooting against stark winter,
shadowless landscapes. In other hands, they could have appeared barren, bleak or hopeless, but Frances made them appear like "fine-grained shimmering taffeta." Her lighting has been compared with that of Seurat's in his landscape paintings.

Frances did not take sides in the controversy, but thorough her pictures showed both sides of the debate. In comparing the old ways versus the new, she would demonstrate possibilities for potential students. Compare "The Old Folks at Home" (fig. 9) with "A Hampton Graduate at Home" (fig. 10) and "The Old Well" with "The Improved Well," and it is clear to see the difference between the lives of the poor, uneducated, ex-slaves and the more educated, successful graduates of the Institute.

"The Old Folks at Home" and "A Hampton Graduate at Home" is a literal comparison between old and new. An elderly couple and a "new" family are compared almost item by item. The couple sits in a shabby cabin, whereas the family is seated in an elegant dining room. Gaps between the boards and stains on the floor can be seen in the cottage; whereas a fine rug covers the floor in the house. The couple is neatly dressed but the clothes are worn and the woman wears her hair covered by a scarf, slave style. The family wears the latest fashions and hairstyles. The table is obviously homemade and their meal is modest, served and cooks with simple unsophisticated utensils. There are deep shadows to emphasize the one light source in the window or door to the right. In the fireplace, even though it is winter, there is no fire and three sides of the tiny cabin can easily be seen, whereas one is not
sure of the dimensions of the dining room and stairs in the background shows the way to another luxury, a second floor.

*Tin and pottery grace the table and newspaper cover the mantle in the cabin but the graduate has glass and china, linen and "real furniture" not homemade. There are paintings and nick-knacks on the piano. An obviously larger source of light gives openness to the room.*

Frances looks at both homes objectively, she does not look down on the older couple, she gives them dignity and pride. The same may be said for the graduate. His/her family does not show superiority, only a sense of well being and security though it has been pointed out that the graduate's home contained many material items but no books.

Campus pictures, such as *Agriculture. A class judging swine.* (fig 11) and *Geography. Studying the seasons,* (fig. 12) display students dressed in full Victorian fashion regardless of the setting. The women wear hats, bustles, high collars, and full skirts, looking somewhat out of place in the middle of a field or barnyard.

Many of the men wore military uniforms donated by the army. These uniforms give the appearance of control and order and "to emphasize how completely the students have accepted white culture,"\(^{16}\) thus appeasing any fears the white population might have about the black students.

According to Booker T. Washington, Hampton graduate and founder of the Tuskegee Institute: "no white American ever thinks that any other race is wholly
civilized until he wears the white man's clothes, eats the white man's food, speaks the 
white man's language and profess' the white man's religion." Yet he also felt that 
"just now" it was more important they earn money through labor than spend money 
on material things. The philosophies were not those of the students, but those of 
school officials and financial contributors.

In studying Miss Johnston's camera angles and point-of-view there are several 
important traits. Such as, the viewer is an observer and is in no way pulled into or 
made a part of the picture. Much like early 18th-century painter, Jean-Antoine 
Watteau, who's scenes and figures appear as if on stage, and whose work Frances 
would have most assuredly studied in Paris, there is often distance or a physical 
barrier between the students and the viewer. Anyone looking at the photographs 
could immediately understand their message.

Other observations were that the pictures are in landscape format and always 
include the entire class. Students were posed in two different patterns. One was in 
the shape of a triangle such as seen in "Saluting the flag" (fig. 13). The point of the 
triangle extends forward to the front of the picture. A patch of ground separates the 
viewer from the children. Johnston always photographed her subjects against 
interesting backgrounds such as trees in the mist with the figures just below the 
horizon. Proof in the power of the photographer and an eagerness to please were 
demonstrated in the fact that such a large group of youngsters could hold still for such 
a long exposure.
The second layout is along plane lines. Probably Johnston's best and most famous photograph is "Students building a banister..." (fig. 14). In this picture the students and the banister, while on different levels, follow along the same lines. For instance, the upper, lower and landing banisters join in the center of the picture accented by the student. On the left, the student, banister and landing divide the photograph into thirds. The space between the main post and the student on the landing forms a perfect square and in the woodwork behind the seated student. The upper and lower stairs meet at the post forming another triangle and numerous geometrical shapes can be seen in the woodwork. Each of the students was on a different level and each assumed a difference stance. The rungs of the stairs give vertical lines to the print. Johnston makes what could have been a very busy picture a wonderfully esthetic portrait.

Inter-related action can be seen in "Geography. Studying the Seasons" (fig. 15) as with other classroom pictures. The lesson of the day is on the blackboard and every fiber of the students is focused on learned. They pose as if very intent, concentrating on the task at hand. The teachers, while often present, were almost invisible in most pictures. This was done purposefully so there was no evidence of a superior or inferior figure represented. In fact, in no picture was there focus drawn to any one particular character. This draws the theme of equality throughout the series.²¹

Lincoln Kirstein, who in 1966 found the long lost photos, described the
students as "frozen...habitat groups...almost, but not quite entirely--believable." He felt they represented "the white Victorian ideal." What the white's felt other races should be aspiring to.\footnote{22} It is of interest to note that for the most part, these figures do not possess the casual informal, more comfortable stance of figures in Ms. Johnston's portraits of Washington society.

The relevance of Ms Johnston's pictures changed shortly after their exhibition in Paris. There was some criticism that the pictures seem to say that only through Hampton and its vocational education could African-Americans get ahead, when in actuality, the town of Hampton had many black middle-class families who owned their own homes, farms and businesses unrelated to the school.\footnote{23} Criticism also focused on the fact the exhibit seemed to concentrate primarily on the vocational studies of the school and did not show the academic side where students studied Egypt and castles in France.

While the pictures would go on to receive international critical acclaim, win the grand prix of the exposition' and be seen in an exhibit called \textit{American Negro},\footnote{24} they did not withstand the test of time for their original purpose.

The school itself came under fire for its lack of inclusion of academic courses and began to add more college level classes until it became know as a liberal arts college rather than a vocational training school. To this day, critics cannot agree on the statement Johnston's pictures made about the schools. What most did agree on was that, for their time, they reflected a genuine attempt to solve a very complex
social, psychological and economic issue.

The photographs are revealing of the Progressive Era mentality. They show social progress in visually measurable terms and assume that education can conquer a multitude of evils. In a time of bitter and overt racism, lynching, and little opportunity for black advancement, the Hampton pictures presented the best aspiration that educators and reformers could envision at that time.\textsuperscript{25}

Anne Elizabeth Peterson in her thesis on the early years of Frances Benjamin Johnston looked on the photographs with favor: "The resulting photographs give testament to the radical advancement of blacks during the thirty years the school had been opened. By juxtaposing photographs of old and new ways of life, she emphasized the somber dignity of the race and its much improved condition."\textsuperscript{26}

Probably the most poignant observation was by poet Josephine Miles who said: "Down from another planet they have settled to mend the Hampton Institute banisters. They wear bow ties and braces, the flutings they polish with a polished hand."\textsuperscript{27}

The project was not without personal danger for Ms. Johnston. In 1902, after photographing Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee, she stopped in Ramer, Alabama to do a study of one of the "little tuskegees" or satellite schools. It was founded by its principal Nelson E. Henry, a graduate of the Tuskegee Institute. When she arrived by train late in the evening, Henry began driving her, in his carriage, to his home outside of town. Whether due to the lateness of the hour or the distance to the Henry home,
they returned to town, headed for a white hotel.

Two men, Armes and Turnipseed, were outraged that a white woman was riding with a black man after dark. They attacked the couple with guns, firing multiple shots. Frances only escaped with the help of George Washington Carver, who had been a passenger on the same train. Carver, after they had hidden in the woods for a day and a half, would describe it as "the most frightful experience of my life ... and for one day and night it was a very serious question indeed as to whether I would return to Tuskegee alive or not."

Henry was never able to return to town again and his school was disbanded though he would go on to start another. Johnston was so outraged she tried to take her case to the President Roosevelt but the men involved were never punished for the attack.

It would be after her work with the Hampton and Tuskegee institutes that she would change her focus from portraits to architecture.
Fig. 9. The Old Folks at Home

Fig. 10. *A Hampton Graduate at Home*

Fig. 11. Saluting the Flag at the Whittier Primary School

Fig. 12. Geography. *Studying the Seasons*

Fig. 13. Agriculture. *A class judging swine*

Fig. 14. Stairway of Treasurer's Residence. Students at work.

ENDNOTES


5. Guimond, 48.

6. Guimond, 42.


18. Campbell, 16.
22. Campbell, 18.


26. Peterson, 121.

27. Daniel and Smock, 96.
CHAPTER 5

WOMEN'S PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBIT

In April of 1900, as a result the success of the Hampton pictures at the Paris Exposition, Johnston received a letter from Mrs. Charles Herotin. On behalf of the United States Commission, Mrs. Herotin asked: "Do you speak or write French and could you give a short address on the work of women in Photography and their specialties?" Frances' response was not only to accept the invitation, but suggest an exhibit as well.

What Johnston organized within one month consisted of 142 photographs taken by twenty-eight women from professionals, such as Gertrude Käsebier, "One of the country's most gifted professionals," to Mary Paschall, "a self-taught amateur." Interestingly, none of Johnston's own photographs were included, possibly because she was already being shown at the Exposition in two other exhibits, the Hampton pictures and the D.C. Schools survey.¹

Before approaching any of these women, France sent her list to friend Alfred Stieglitz, photographer and supporter of women in the arts. His enthusiastic response was: The list of women photographers you sent me is complete and I can think of no one that you may have overlooked... The women in this country are certainly doing
great photographic work and deserve much commendation for their effort."²

The women in her exhibit were divided into two styles. First was the "straight forward style favoring over-all clarity and multiplicity of detail. The second group was composed of those who believed that photography was "the equal of any other visual arts."³ They achieved paint-like effects using soft focus and "simplified composition." Frances fell into both of these categories, due to the fact her primary income came from photojournalism, yet she always maintained her interest in artistic photography as well.⁴

There were several interesting commonalities among the women Frances included in her show. All of the women had backgrounds in art, they all were from middle to upper middle-class families, and all belonged, at one time or another, to a camera club.

Inclusion in a camera club was very important to the early 20th-century photographer. It was not a social gathering place, but a valuable resource. Here one could attend lectures on composition and chemicals, use equipment and darkrooms, and have a network of peers for support. Their meeting places were everything from hotel rooms to lavish buildings custom built for their purpose. At times it was difficult for women to gain admittance to these clubs, and those that were, sometimes found themselves segregated from the male members. English women photographers
often sighted their difficulty in attending clubs as one of the reasons they lagged behind their American sisters.

At the time Johnston requested photographs from the artists, she also questioned them about the impact of being women had on their work. Some were hesitant to be included in the exhibit because they did not want their pictures to be seen as "women's work." They wanted their work judged on its own merit regardless of the sex of the photographer. Others wrote back that women were technically better photographers than men were and some felt their sex gave them an advantage over their male counterparts because they were given access to areas men were not. Probably most important, the women felt they were equal because they were able to charge and receive higher fees. It meant just because they were women did not mean they had to charge less, as women in other professions were often forced to do.

By the time she left for France, the July 6, 1900 Evening Star would report:

To startle the Old World with a revelation of what the women of this country have accomplished in triumph over the remainder of the world. Miss Frances Benjamin Johnston of this city, one of the most widely known of women photographers, has succeeded in securing a collection of pictures of incomparable beauty from her feminine colleagues, which she is taking to Paris, to be exhibited at the international photographic congress in the French capital as a feature of the great exposition now in progress. The show was such a great success that representatives from Russia persuaded
her to take the exhibit to St. Petersburg and Moscow, making her's the first of its kind to ever be seen in that country. It is of interest that the exhibit did not appear in the United States until long after her death.

Upon her return to the States, Johnston pared down the exhibit to run as a series of articles for the Ladies' Home Journal in 1901 entitled "The Foremost Women Photographers of America." Among the artists profiled were, again, Gertrude Käsebier, about whose work she said: "It is, therefore, not only its beauty of conception and execution, but also its dignity of purpose which makes her work at once the inspiration and despair of the growing army of pictorial photographs."9

Other photographers in the series were: Miss Mathilde Well (June), Frances and Mary Allen (July), Emma J. Farnsworth (August), Eva Lawrence Watson (September), Zaida Ben-Zúsuf (October), and Elizabeth Brownwell (November). About Zaida Ben-Zúsuf, Frances wrote: "Miss Ben-Zúsuf impues all of her studies with a touch of the picturesque, and at her best combines a rich effect of light and sweeping lines of drapery and distinction of pose."10

Amy Doherty in her article "Frances Benjamin Johnston" in History of Photography, compared Johnston's list with that of Clarence Bloomfield Moore who in March 1893 composed a list of leading women photographers for an article in Cosmopolitan Magazine. Both lists contained only one common name (other than
Johnston herself), Emma Justine Farnsworth. All other names in Moore's list have faded from memory. While list, on the other hand, contains the names of Gertrude Käsebier and Eva Watson-Schultz who are, to this day, are still studied for their contributions to photography.¹¹
ENDNOTES


3. Quitslund, 97.

4. Quitslund, 98.

5. Quitslund, 104.


7. Quitslund, 97.

8. Quitslund, 98.


CHAPTER 6
ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY

In 1913 Frances changed the focus of her career. She changed to a different type of portraiture-architectural. For, according to many photographers that’s exactly what the genre is. It was also taken just as seriously because "the builders and designers were no long around to explain what they were trying to accomplish."¹

The same techniques are used in photographing houses as photographing people. Such attributes as composition and light are just as important in architectural photography as in portraits.² For instance, depending on the time of day, morning versus afternoon, overcast versus sunny, a house will appear different. Frances also understood that her classical training in light, shade, shadow, and perspective were just as important for architecture as in any other type of photography.³

Why did Johnston so completely change the direction of her career? After having been involved with the rich, powerful and exciting why did she change exclusively to houses and gardens? There is little to document her switch in direction.

In 1909 Frances received her first architectural commission which was to photograph The New Theater in New York City. From 1913 to 1917 she moved to
New York and went into partnership with Alice Hewitt, concentrating entirely on buildings and gardens. In 1925, she traveled to Europe and the Middle East where she shot everything from chateaux and gardens to castles. In 1930 she donated many of her negatives to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. forming the nucleus of its Pictorial Archives of Early American Architecture.

In 1933 she was awarded a $26,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation to document colonial architecture in the South. This was the first of seven consecutive grants awarded her by the corporation. Johnston was also given several commissions to photograph many of the estates in the Fredericksburg, Virginia area. So outstanding was her contribution to the field of architecture that in 1945 she was made an honorary member of the American Institute of Architecture.⁴

Proliferation of photographs and expertise in the field resulted in many demands for her on the lecture circuits, multiple awards and several major books: Colonial Churches in Virginia such as The Architecture of Georgia, The Early Architecture of North Carolina, and The Early Architecture of Georgia.

She concentrated on early American architecture rather than that of the 18th- and 19th-centuries because she felt those had already "been done and well." The buildings that held her interest was a continuation of what meant most to her in her earlier career-the every day working class. Frances took pictures of the everyday
dwellings and businesses of the working class. She and a driver would scour the countryside looking for and recording farmhouses, mills, log cabins, taverns and inns.\textsuperscript{5}

In a radio interview she once said:

\begin{quote}
Whenever I traveled I came across tragic examples of decay and neglect. Often, too, fire had destroyed and left no trace of some of these once-beautiful homes ... the old farm houses, the mills, the log cabins of the pioneers, the country stores, the taverns and inns, in short those buildings that had to do with the everyday life of the colonists had been overlooked. In fact, no photographic records of them existed.\textsuperscript{6}
\end{quote}
ARTISTIC PHOTOGRAPHY

Interestingly, American photographers were not as involved with artistic side of the genre as their European counterparts. In fact, they lagged more than six years behind. That does not mean that the U.S. was not without its innovators. Frances counted among her peers such photographers as Alfred Steiglitz, Gertrude Käsebier, Eva Lawrence Watson, Frances and Mary Allen, Robert Redfield, and Henry Troth to name a few. They were known to correspond and seek each other's advice in many difference areas.

All of Johnston's photographs were artistic, be they portraits, press photographs, or architectural shots. It was this artistic ability that made her pictures so outstanding. For instance, many of her studies could be cropped to form different images. Such could be seen in her picture of rural African-American children (fig. 17). Trees in the background and tall grasses and a fence in the foreground frame the children. Through cropping, the children and even the dog can be grouped into several different pictures.

The same eye for detail in composition could be seen in her study of school children on a Washington, D.C. trolley (fig. 18). Each group of children at the
windows creates a separate and complete picture.

In her artistic studies, she did many of the female figures both nude and draped. She did studies of motion through dance often times using Isadora Duncan's dance troop as models. She experimented with toning both silver and sepia. She also did studies of children posed, dancing and playing.

Her own description of art photography was:

Any person of average intelligence can produce photographs by the thousand, but to give art value to the fixed image of the camera-obscura requires imagination, discriminating taste, and, in fact, all that is implied by a true appreciation of the beautiful. For this reason it is wrong to regard photography as purely mechanical. Mechanical it is, up to a certain point, but beyond that there is great scope for individual and artistic expression.9

Her most well known artistic portrait was The Critic (fig. 19), done in 1900 in which a young woman studies a painting. The balance, simple composition, study of drapery, soft focus and diffuse light contribute to what is considered her best artistic endeavor.

Another artistic development came in 1904 after serving as a judge at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. One of her fellow judges was Antoine Lumiere who was credited with the development of the autochrome process. He taught Frances this technique and she became the first in U.S. to experiment with color photography.10
Frances was disappointed that she was not able to donate as much time to her artistic work as she wanted. "My hobby is 'art in photography,' but outside of a study of detail and arrangements in my pictures, I have been able to do but little, even experimentally, in this line, as I have been kept so constantly busy with the work at hand."\(^{11}\)

In an amazing example of art imitating life-imitating art, Johnston attended the 1892-1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The purpose of the fair was to celebrate the advances of the country. With its palaces, lakes, fountains, and statues it was meant to be proof positive that the U.S. was the greatest nation on earth - looking for all the world like one of the Seven Wonders of the World.\(^ {12}\)

Expositions were highly popular during the 19th century. At the 1893 fair, more than twenty-seven million people attended. This would be comparable to one-fourth of the population of the U.S. "To understand their importance and draw in modern terms, they could be seen as a combination of the Olympics, Disney World, the Super bowl, and the National Gallery—an international entertainment and cultural event with lasting social importance."\(^ {13}\)

The architectural firm of John Wellborn Root and Daniel H. Burnham were chosen to create the design. Though Root died while the fair was within the early development stages, Burnham went forward with the plans to use the Beaux-Arts
style, which consisted of huge buildings with white columns and large domes.\textsuperscript{14}

In parallel symbolism, Thomas Cole, in 1836, did a series of five paintings entitled \textit{The Course of the Empire}. Their purpose was to portray the progress of civilization and reflect Cole's vision that the U.S. was a "Garden of Eden" grown from wilderness to civilization.\textsuperscript{15} To compare Cole's \textit{The Consummation of the Empire} (fig. 20) with Johnston's view of the World's Columbian Exposition (fig. 21) is startling. They seem to be viewing the same buildings from the same point-of-view even though the fair was almost sixty years after the painting. It is highly possible that with Johnston's background in art and the popularity of Cole's work that she was familiar with this painting and chose to make the comparison.

It is also possible she saw and tried to parallel Cole's meaning in his painting. He had attempted to warn others of sacrificing nature in order to increase industrialization.\textsuperscript{16} Johnston would have know of the fight over the location of the World's Fair of choosing the lakeside property which were sacrificed for the multi-million dollar spectacle and that behind the scenes of this wonder were not strong foundations, but weak plywood and plaster.
Fig. 15. *Children on a Fence*

Fig. 16. *Children on a Trolley*

Fig. 17. The Critic

Fig. 18. *The Consummation of the Empire* by Thomas Cole

Fig. 19. *The World Columbian Exposition*

ENDNOTES


2. Abrahcn, ix.

3. Abrahcn, xiv.


8. Peterson, 83.


11. Peterson, 84.


CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Frances Benjamin Johnston was one of the most remarkable photographers of the 19th-century. She entered the field just as it was beginning its "golden era" and made an impact on not only the medium, but in both the technology and philosophy of the art as well. She combined an artistic background with the new technology creating a style that made her the most known and popular photographer of her day.

In addition, even though she never openly discussed her own views, she influenced society's views on our government, history, social issues, and economic status. She also helped change society's view of women in the home, in business, and in art. Her portraits were revolutionary in that they captured the personality of the sitter and made them appear more relaxed and casual than prior pictures had. She revolutionized the now standard picture story for newspapers and magazines by not only taking the pictures but writing the copy as well. She competed with men on an equal footing for assignments and was often able to get shots her male counterparts couldn't.

While she showed the glory of the United States through its leaders, heroes,
industry and expositions, she also photographed the average man at home and at work. She helped bring the plight of the poor and uneducated to light through her pictures of the South and the attempt to better the lives of former slaves through her documentation of the Hampton Institute and Tuskegee Institute.

Photography and women's rights were on parallel courses, and so it natural that they would find each other. Frances Benjamin Johnston supported the women of her time. She held exhibits for their work and wrote articles encouraging them to enter business and, in particular, photography. In 1897, she took a self-portrait entitled the New Woman, in it, she broke all of the Victorian taboos about women: legs showing, smoking and drinking. But this was the Johnston that only her friends saw. For she was not a rebel or a suffragette, to be anything but the ultimate professional would have hurt her business. She was very careful to keep her personal life and business separate. But that does not mean that she did not instigate change, she made things happen. Perhaps this can best be demonstrated by Anaïs Nin who said: "...They were a great inspiration to me--were the women who were able to free themselves, who did not demand their freedom, who were able to create it."1
Fig. 20. *The New Woman*

ENDNOTES

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