



Johnston, Frances Benjamin (1864-1952)

by Roberts Batson

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Unlike most women of the Victorian era, pioneering photojournalist and documentary photographer Frances Benjamin Johnston was destined to become an independent trailblazer. Her mother, one writer observed, "acted as if equal rights for women were already a fait accompli."

Young Frances, who was born in West Virginia on January 15, 1864, grew up witnessing her mother's success as a journalist in late nineteenth-century Washington D. C., covering the hardball world of politics.

While most of her contemporaries were trolling the marriage market, Johnston was already planning a career. When not yet twenty years old, she left home for Paris to study studio art at the Académie Julian. There she learned drawing and composition, as well as the basics of symmetry and perspective, skills that would serve her well.

Johnston also immersed herself in the boisterous bohemian social life of the Paris art world. Returning home in 1885, she emerged a thoroughly modern woman. For the remainder of her long life--she lived to age 88--she enthusiastically enjoyed her liquor and cigarettes and happily flouted social conventions of all kinds.

Indeed, one of her most famous images, a self-portrait from around 1896, shows her as a "new woman," skirts hiked to the knee, a cigarette in one hand and a beer stein in the other, reveling in the transgression of a number of the social conventions that restricted proper Victorian ladies.

Another depicts her wearing a false mustache and dressed as a man. In this image, she poses before a bicycle, itself a contemporary symbol of women's independence and strength. This image in particular is reminiscent of the work of photographer Alice Austen, who photographed women in male drag, often on bicycles, and may be intended as an homage to her.

Johnston's Career

Johnston first made a living by drawing illustrations to accompany magazine articles. That work soon expanded to writing the articles as well.

Photography, which had been invented early in the century, became much more accessible when George Eastman developed his No. 1 Kodak in 1888. Magazines and newspapers then eagerly sought photographs instead of drawings.

Johnston wrote Eastman, inquiring about his new camera, and he sent her one. Thus began her new career.

Johnston's decision to embark on a career as a photographer was a daring one. Although the new



Two self-portraits by Frances Benjamin Johnston.

Top: Seated in front of a fireplace with a cigarette in one hand and a beer stein in the other.

Above: Wearing a false mustache and dressed as a man.

Images courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

technology--especially lighter cameras and new ways of developing film--opened the field to women, social conventions nevertheless marked photography as a male preserve. Johnston's boldness is particularly clear in her interest in figure studies and nudes, subjects deemed unseemly for women artists in the nineteenth century.

In 1895 Johnston opened her own photography studio in her family's home at 1332 V Street NW and built a very successful business as a portraitist. Among her notable subjects were Susan B. Anthony, Alice Roosevelt, Mark Twain, Booker T. Washington, Joel Chandler Harris, George Washington Carver, and Isadora Duncan.

Johnston's family connections--her father was an executive at the U. S. Department of the Treasury and her mother was a journalist--gave her access to prominent figures in both politics and society. She became the official White House photographer for the administrations of Presidents Benjamin Harrison, Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, and William Howard Taft. She is responsible for many of the images by which these historical figures are most readily evoked.

One of her most famous photographs is that of Natalie Clifford Barney, the famous American expatriate lesbian who hosted a salon in Paris at 20 rue Jacob. Another is her photograph of President McKinley, taken minutes before he was shot in Buffalo, New York in September 1901.

Although she became famous for her images of politicians and socialites, Johnston also took a number of photographs of nude females. She also created images of sailors dancing together.

She next moved into the field of social photography, where she became noted as an important photodocumentarian for her images of students in Washington schools, at the Hampton Institute in Virginia and the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama--both founded to educate newly freed slaves--and the Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Critics have noted that Johnston always respected her subjects equally, presenting black students in a carpentry class with as much dignity as Presidents and debutantes.

Acutely aware of the obstacles faced by women in her profession, Johnston became a fierce advocate for women in photography. At the Paris Exposition of 1900, she curated an exhibition of photographs by twenty-eight women photographers.

Johnston's career moved into its third phase in the early twentieth century. She discovered that photographing gardens and giving lectures to garden clubs was very lucrative. Perhaps inspired by her business partner and presumed lover, Mattie Edwards Hewitt, a home and garden photographer, Johnston became a well-known garden photographer herself. Among her portfolio were documentations of the Dupont estates and the garden of Edith Wharton.

This interest led to her fourth subject: buildings. Architects needed photographs of their buildings, and she was able to supply them with superb documentation. In 1927, she began a lengthy project to document colonial-era buildings in the South.

Supported by grants from the Carnegie Corporation, Johnston traveled throughout the South, documenting hundreds of buildings. She was honored for this work by both architects and historic preservationists. Many of the buildings she photographed were later destroyed. One of these is Uncle Sam Plantation in Louisiana, which she photographed shortly before it was demolished in 1940.

Retirement in New Orleans

Johnston first photographed New Orleans in 1938. She fell in love with the city and decided to retire there. She loved its unique architecture, its French heritage, its European ambience, and the bohemian camaraderie she found in the city's French Quarter.

After living at 812 Dauphine Street and 929 Dumaine Street, she purchased a century-old building at 1132 Bourbon Street, a Greek revival townhouse that had been built by Henry Clay's sister-in-law. She moved into the house in August 1945, and named it Arkady (Arcadia). It would be her cherished home for the rest of her life.

The house is in the residential end of Bourbon Street, but by the time Johnston settled there the street had already become known for its lively nightlife. She wrote a friend, "They tell me if you start eleven blocks over--at Canal and Bourbon--and hope to drink your way with a stop-over at every life-saving station on the way, you won't get to 1132 Bourbon for about six months."

Johnston's Professional Achievement

Johnston bequeathed her work and papers to the Library of Congress, a collection of 20,000 photographs and 17,000 documents, so a substantial record of her professional life remains. Her early photographic donations became the nucleus of the Library of Congress's Pictorial Archives of Early American Architecture.

As a photographer, Johnston's accomplishments were many. Most obviously, she brought artistry from her classical art training to the new field of photography. Her pictures are marked by an unusual symmetry and clarity.

A photograph she composed of six Hampton students repairing a staircase is so carefully choreographed that it becomes a stunning study in the artful application of balance. Her Tuskegee photographs of students stacking hay and cultivating onions evoke the dignity and monumentality that painter Jean-Francoise Millet gave to French farm workers.

Johnston is also admired for her use of light and shadow. Even in the early days of black and white photography, her use of variant degrees of gray tones provided infinite shadings.

In addition, Johnston was responsible for technical innovations. She received national attention as early as 1892 for her photographs inside Mammoth Cave. To provide adequate lighting for this project she devised a mixture of magnesium and potash to create "an explosive flash." Similarly, in 1909, she imaginatively used electric spotlights to photograph the interior of the New Theatre in New York City. Three years later she developed what she called "color photo-transparencies," very much like large slides that were designed to be framed and hung so that light would pass through them.

Johnston's versatility is also an important aspect of her achievement. She excelled as portraitist, social documentarian, and photographer of both gardens and architecture.

Johnston's Personal Life

Less is known about her personal life than her professional life. She never married and there is no record of any romantic relationship with any man, although many men were friends and colleagues.

Her most significant relationship seems to have been with Mattie Edwards Hewitt. Early in the twentieth century, Johnston moved to New York. For a period of about six years, Hewitt worked with her in her studio and they lived together there. Existing letters from Hewitt to Benjamin are filled with passionate and sensual endearments.

Although some scholars dismiss these endearments as merely expressions of friendship, phrases such as "Ah, I love you better than ever you know" and "I slept in your place and on your pillow--it was most as good as the cigarette you lit and gave me all gooey" indicate a very intense relationship rooted in some level of physicality. While the extent of their physical intimacy may be debated, the two women certainly shared a romantic friendship.

In Johnston's last years in New Orleans a neighbor named Mrs. Tom Sawyer became her caretaker. The exact nature of this relationship is not certain, but clearly it was an affectionate one.

Johnston left her home (the most valuable part of her estate) to Sawyer and Sawyer made it her home until she died in the early 1980s. The house was then left to a gay man, Clyde Webb, who had, in turn, been Sawyer's caretaker.

Johnston died on March 16, 1952 in New Orleans. Her body was cremated and interred in Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington, D. C. Sawyer was buried in her family cemetery near Pulaski, Tennessee.

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About the Author

Roberts Batson received undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. In addition to professional achievement in theatrical and academic spheres, he has been a longtime gay community activist. The author of over 200 articles on New Orleans history and contemporary culture, he has been awarded Sigma Delta Chi and Vice Versa awards. In 1994 he created an acclaimed New Orleans Gay Heritage Tour, which he continues to conduct, and in 2002 began performing a one-man theatrical show, *Amazing Place, this New Orleans*. Batson is currently working on a book on New Orleans gay history.