



Frances Benjamin
Johnston
1864-1952, Washington, D.C.

Although she was not from Virginia, Frances Benjamin Johnston, one of America's earliest female photographers and photojournalists, spent much of her life documenting the people and architecture of Virginia. She was born in Grafton, West Virginia, on January 15, 1864, but her family eventually moved to Washington, D.C., where she was educated both at home and at a convent school in nearby Maryland. Hoping to become an artist, she studied for a year at the Academie Julien in Paris. Upon her return to Washington, Frances developed an interest in photography, a field that few women had been able to enter as it traditionally required the use of heavy equipment and an extensive knowledge of specialized (and sometimes dangerous) chemicals. However, technological innovations in the 1880s made cameras lightweight, portable, and simpler to use, and a few adventurous women such as Johnston embraced the opportunity to explore this art form. Obtaining her first camera from family friend George Eastman, Johnston studied photography at the Smithsonian Institution and began contributing articles with her own pictures to publications such as *Demorest's Family Magazine* and the *Ladies' Home Journal*. By 1890, she had her own portrait studio in Washington.

During her long career, Johnston photographed many famous Americans, such as Mark Twain, Booker T. Washington, and Susan B. Anthony. She was the official White House photographer during the Harrison, Cleveland, McKinley, Roosevelt, and Taft administrations. She became one of America's great social and documentary photographers when in 1899 she was commissioned to document the success of the Hampton Normal & Agricultural Institute in Hampton, Virginia. It was the first educational establishment to open its doors to African-Americans and Native-Americans. The resulting photo album was shown at the Universal Exposition of 1900 in Paris, in the "Exhibit of American Negroes," and later as "The Hampton Album" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Funded by the Carnegie Corporation, Frances Johnston worked as the photographer for the Carnegie Survey of the Architecture of the South, a systematic record of the early buildings and gardens of nine southern states between 1933 and 1940. Her photographs appeared in a variety of publications, including *Colonial Churches of Virginia* (1930), *Historic Homes of Virginia and Charleston, South Carolina* (1930), and *The Hampton Album* (1966). Her photographic survey of the homes of Fredericksburg, Virginia, now in the Library of Congress, formed the beginning of the Pictorial Archives of Early American Architecture. The Frances Benjamin Johnston Collection at the Library of Congress includes 20,000 photographic prints, and 3,700 glass and film negatives.

As an independent woman in a man's profession, Frances Benjamin Johnston lived life on her own terms, and in doing so, expanded professional opportunities for women. Johnston died on May 16, 1952, in New Orleans, where she had spent the last ten years of her life.