

## INTERPRETING PHOTOGRAPHS AS HISTORY, CULTURE AND LANDSCAPE ART: HARPERS FERRY, 1860-1940

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#### **Commerce, the Railroad, the Automobile, Tourism and “The Big Picture”**

Walter E. Dittmeyer, *Harper's Ferry, W. Va.* Photomechanical print, photogravure. 1912. 6" x 37 ½".  
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Haines Photo Co. [*Harper's Ferry, W. Va.*]. Photographic print, gelatin silver. 1915. 10" x 35 ½". Library  
of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Working within three years of each other, Walter E. Dittmeyer and a Haines Photo Company photographer created big pictures—panoramas of Harpers Ferry. Walter Dittmeyer's photograph is one of a corpus of panoramas, prospects, and details that he created from about 1905 to the early 1920s. Dittmeyer highlighted institutions, businesses and landmarks that locals could point to and show visitors with pride—the church, the college, the hotel, the historic hill, the historic house, the monument. Offered as well were walking and driving “picture tours” that tourists could take and take home, in inexpensive Dittmeyer postcards or his more “toney” souvenir book. The Haines Photo Company's photograph, one of its many panoramas, highlights a pan-American archive of interesting places. Haines's panoramist pursued a broad overview, showing the entire scope of the gap bisected by the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers from the viewpoint of a hypothetical viewer on tour and on the move.

Notwithstanding the inflexion of one image towards the local (Dittmeyer) and the other toward the national (Haines), both feature or imply that traveling to and from Harpers Ferry involved a “romance” of railroad and automobile travel. Thus inflected, they partake of a transition in American visual culture from the sequestered and controlled rail view to the open and self-generated automobile view. They also encapsulate the Harpers Ferry experience in artfully packaged guides, effectively merging the complexity of regional, lived experience into purely visual plenitudes.

A Harpers Ferry pharmacist, photographer and local historian, by 1905-07 Walter Dittmeyer was managing a thriving business in landscape and town views—Jefferson Rock, Chimney Rock, Camp Hill, Maryland Heights, Bolivar Heights, and the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers, among others. He specialized in postcards but also made panoramas. Peaking in 1907 and then again in 1908-10, his postcard portfolio added more intimate glimpses of streets, historic buildings, public and private establishments, and monuments. New pictures were rapidly generated and old ones were retired or recycled. Hand coloring and elegant scripts added distinction and class to carefully arranged compositions and compositional accents. By 1908-10 Dittmeyer was sending his negatives to the Albertype Printing Company in Brooklyn for printing; compared to his 1907 cards, these show a marked improvement in image quality and detail. In 1910, Dittmeyer selected twenty-two key images, including a panorama very similar to the view he would take in 1912, to be reproduced in photogravure (intaglio printing in ink) for a deluxe souvenir portfolio. Likewise reproduced as a photogravure, his 1912 panorama may have been conceived or commissioned for display by one or more of the Harpers Ferry businesses or institutions he so effectively pictured and promoted.

Although many of Dittmeyer's images “page” through a pictorial story of grave events and their commemoration (such as John Brown's Fort, monument, and tablets), they also tell a story of renewal and civic pride. Pictures of or including the Conner Hotel, Hill Top House, Storer College, shops along Shenandoah Street, the Shenandoah Pulp Mill, Harpers Ferry Paper Company, and St. Peter's Catholic Church, whose history Dittmeyer would co-author in the 1930s, invite the tourist to “see” a town with a venerable past and pulsing present. Paired with Dittmeyer's photos of the relatively new (1894) Baltimore & Ohio Railroad bridge and station, they also point to economic recovery and revitalization. Portraying both town and technology, his 1912 panorama summarizes these multiple foci.

Dittmeyer's 1912 view of Harpers Ferry also coheres aesthetically: it is replete with subtle tonal gradations, "etched" foreground clarity, and textural richness. It summarizes not only the view from a key vantage point but the enterprising photographer's approach to image-making and marketing: variety, comprehensiveness, and high quality. Sources and predecessors include an attractive hand-toned postcard he created in 1908-10 and, most importantly, the panorama he reproduced as a photogravure in *Harper's Ferry, W. Va. Souvenir* (1910). Printed and hand bound on fine, heavy stock appropriate for limited-edition prints, this high-end booklet addressed a wealthy and elite public voracious for pictures and postcards. Tourists arriving by rail could revel in the grand scope of Dittmeyer's hilltop landscapes, while motoring tourists could retrace their drives in and around those hills. Having purchased the booklet at a local emporium (Dittmeyer's or another shop carrying his views) and booked rooms at the Hill Top House, (Harpers Ferry's major hotel), they could page through the booklet and then write postcards to family and friends—all under the commercial aegis of the Dittmeyer establishment and perhaps in the same room or portico where his panorama could have been displayed.

Dittmeyer's introduction to *Harper's Ferry, W. Va. Souvenir* provides a rare glimpse into a locally driven agenda for marking a town in transition, honoring Harpers Ferry lore, and luring out-of-town tourists. Beginning with a short "locator" paragraph, the piece segues into railroad boosterism and promotion, then into a sort of geographical/topographical overview with the notation that "[t]he Loudoun Heights are not so high, but they have a marked primeval appearance." This is followed by a historical sketch, heavily weighted on the account of the Civil War. Finally, Harpers Ferry rises up to meet the reader/viewer as the rocky confluence of waters and landforms. "Harper's Ferry is often called the 'Switzerland of America,' and rightly so. The prospects are magnificent, the walks and drives lead into three States."

With a specialty in panoramas that included cities; gorgeous natural sites; tourist resorts and hotels; battlefields and auto camps; and over 400 views dating from 1908 to the late 'teens, the Haines Photo Company of Conneaut, Ohio offered a Harpers Ferry scene as one "stop" along a Virginia driving tour highlighted by Niagara Falls, Natural Bridge, and Mountain Lake. How these views were displayed and marketed is not known. However, seen in light of Haines's *visual* tour, Harpers Ferry was not a beautiful natural phenomenon to be treasured and written about in a leisurely fashion from the Hill Top House lobby or portico, but a place to be driven through, noted, and "ticked off" rapidly from the passenger's seat of the car. Rather than a confluence of rivers, rails, landmarks and mounded hills—Dittmeyer's town—it is a chain of tracks, roads, roadside buildings and distant vistas, hastily marshaled into position. (That the photographer took the view with Loudoun Heights and the Shenandoah River in deep shadow at the beginning of the day, and obscuring fog elsewhere, adds to that perception.) One gets the distinct feeling that this was indeed a shot for auto-campers: a quick encapsulation of a place that, once purchased, could be compared with other pictures and other itineraries conducted by multifarious motorists driving from the east to the west coast with side trips in-between.

Comparing Dittmeyer's 1912 panorama with the 1915 panorama by the Haines Photo Company, one notes similarities in timeframe (what Harpers Ferry looked like) and how, in general, the genre was conceived (as a broad and sweeping vista). Both feature the confluence of rivers and the meeting of Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia. There are also similarities in conception. Each was one of a series and each was geared to an expanding tourist market in American scenery, cities, industry, parks, hotels, and resorts. Beyond the fact that Dittmeyer shot his town view from Maryland Heights and the Haines Company's photographer captured the town from Loudoun Heights, differences between the two show alternative approaches and maintain aesthetic precedence in the former's camp. Dittmeyer sited his shot so as to realize, bound, and enclose Harpers Ferry as a distinct physical entity. His panorama cradles the town within the confluence of its two rivers, giving it coherence and presence. Clustered as well within converging railroad tracks, it reads as a vital nexus and destination. Haines's photographer shot a very long view of the town, stringing it, as it were, along the tracks. Buildings do not nestle as they do in Dittmeyer's view; rather, they poke out of what appears to be not a place or destination, but a series of plots strung along the rails. Moreover, the Haines picture gives undue prominence to the denuded landscape of Virginius Island, in painfully evident

disrepair from flooding as well as from the demise of riverside industries and factories. Dittmeyer's view also shows a bare spot, the site of the former armory buildings along the Potomac. Lined with trees and a retaining wall and modeled in deep tonalities, this cleared area takes on new life: it belts and bolsters the looming eminence of Bolivar Heights above. A paucity of tonal gradation, compounded by the fact that their photograph was shot in adverse weather and lighting conditions (fog and deep foreground shadow), marks the corresponding site in Haines's view as a scoured and eviscerated landscape in demise.

Let us return to the "big picture," early-twentieth-century tourism and images of Harpers Ferry. Local and regional identities were present within yet ultimately packaged into the broad and encompassing spaces of early-auto and late-railroad tourism. Pictured by photographers such as Dittmeyer and Haines's photographer, local details became sensuous components in the passing panorama of scenery. Regional views became sensuous components in a "catalog" of stunning effects, what Dittmeyer termed the "primeval." Writing after Dittmeyer but in a similar vein, Orville O. Heastand noted in his book *See America First* (1922) that "[t]he road approaches the valley through its rocky gateway of Harper's Ferry where the Potomac, after breaking through the vast well of the Blue Ridge, is joined by the Shenandoah. . . . After climbing by many and various curves you finally reach the top of a towering cliff and look down on the wondrous picture spread before you. . . . Each stop. . . unfolded a view more beautiful than the last. . . each new turn held a vision of delight" (70-71).

In a culture becoming increasingly identifiable by elements and symbols of progress, as well as by vehicles, roads, and artifacts of visual culture geared towards *experiencing* and *possessing* those elements and symbols, Dittmeyer's and Haines's images loom large. They express, structure, and broker scenery into a consumer artifact. Likewise Harpers Ferry looms large. It was a major stop, not only on the railroad, but on new and repaired roads. Progress, however, did not figure in this new railroad/vehicular conglomerate as heavily it had in the old "railroad mix." In the early nineteenth century, the railroad and Harpers Ferry figured as artifacts of a landscape made new and visually exciting by technological inventions and industrial power. From the 1860s to the 1880s, war maneuvers and camps, followed by new and revived industries, peppered a new, industrial, and business-envisaged town. Notwithstanding the introduction of new industries and businesses, by the second decade of the twentieth century, if not before, Harpers Ferry was being figured and marketed as a vestige of America's past (John Brown's raid, the Civil War, the old armory), with postcards and travel book photos showing its antiquities and local color, and panoramas showing its rails, roads, and "historic" topography. Seen in the light of later images as well as those marketed by competitors (for example, W. L. Erwin's postcard "Quaint Relics of Ye Olden Time, Adown High Street," 1908), Haines's and Dittmeyer's panoramas take on a certain urgency—poised, as they were, on the edge of prosperous connectivity and picturesque isolation.

## References

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