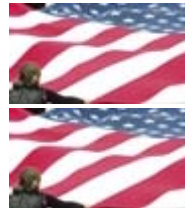




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# 'What a woman can do with a camera'

By Val Van Meter  
*The Winchester Star*

**Winchester** — In the early 1900s, photographer Frances Benjamin Johnston made her name in a career that was not considered a women's preserve: photojournalism.

Yet she sold her pictures, in part, by showing women, and life, in old fashioned terms.

This dichotomy is just one of the issues Professor Geraldine Kiefer covered in discussing Johnston's art at a lecture for the Women's History Month series at



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Shenandoah University.

Kiefer, an artist and assistant professor of art and art history at Shenandoah University, is the author of a monograph on another distinguished photographer, Alfred Stieglitz.

Johnston "had advantages," Kiefer told her audience in Hester Auditorium.

Born in 1864, her parents were involved in Washington, D.C. politics. Her mother, Frances Antoinette Johnston, set an example for her daughter by being a magazine writer, Kiefer said.

Johnston had the advantage of studying at the Academie Julian in Paris, Kiefer noted. "The key for a woman artist to become a success was a Paris education."

But Johnston's career took an unusual turn, when a family friend, George Eastman, who invented the Eastman Kodak camera, gave her one.

Probably due to her family connections, she trained in photography and dark room techniques with Thomas Smillie, who was director of photography at the Smithsonian Institute.

According to her online biography, Johnston opened her own photographic studio in Washington in 1895.

Her social entrée brought the opportunity to



Frances Benjamin Johnston (center), with Mills Thompson (left) and Frank Phister on the steps outside her studio. Photographic print. 'Mid-1890s. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Photos provided by Geraldine Kiefer)



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photograph many of the important people of her day, including Mark Twain and Booker T. Washington.

But Johnston was also an enterprising businesswoman.

In 1900-01, she convinced the Ladies Home Journal to take a photojournalism piece on the route of "Sheridan's Ride."

In 1864, Union General Philip Sheridan left Winchester on the October morning that Confederate General Jubal Early attacked his army camped at Belle Grove in Middletown.

Sheridan raced the 20 miles south on the Valley Pike in time to collect his battered army, and turn what had seemed a Confederate victory into a crushing defeat.

Thomas Buchanan Read wrote a poem, celebrating black Rienzi carrying Sheridan, "from Winchester, 20 miles away," to save the day, and many a school boy had to memorize it when schools still demanded that skill.

The Ladies Home Journal, which, Kiefer said, was building its reputation on nostalgia and picturesque travel, featured Johnston's pictures of Sheridan's Winchester headquarters, quaint toll houses, dirt roads and the historic Wayside Inn and Belle Grove.

What was interesting, Kiefer pointed out, was that Johnston was asked to include people on horses in the pictures. The people were then painted out by the magazine's illustrators and replaced by Union soldiers for the center spread in the July 1901 issue.

Johnston produced some 192 prints of her trip, Kiefer said and must have made many more negatives.

Many of these prints are now in the U.S. Library of Congress and Kiefer copied many for her power-point presentation on Johnston, and for another talk she is doing on Sheridan's Ride.

Johnston started her trip in Snickersville, the present day Bluemont, switching from train to stage coach for the trip over the Blue Ridge.

"She always traveled with friends," Kiefer said, which meant she always had models to photograph.

And, while the Valley Pike was her destination, she photographed many other places along the way.

Some of her pictures include African-American children, Kiefer pointed out.

This ties to a commission she did for Booker T. Washington, photographing the buildings and students at his Hampton Institute in Virginia.

One picture of the Shenandoah Valley, as seen from the Bear's Den rocks in Clarke County, can be seen in the background of a photo she took of herself in her studio, Kiefer said.

Many of the photos are "idyllic" scenes of pastoral life, Kiefer said. Others are historic homes, which may have been taken with an eye to future publications.

In the 1920s, Johnston became more interested in photographing architecture. She did pictorial surveys of many places, including "Old Fredericksburg" and an architectural history of North Carolina.

Another of her interests, Kiefer noted, was promoting the work of other women photographers.

She organized an exhibit of the photographs of 28 women for the Paris Exposition of 1900. One of her earlier photo-essays for the Ladies Home Journal featured other women photographers — "What a Woman Can Do With a Camera."

"I'm fascinated how Frances Benjamen Johnston constructed photographs to fit the then-gender stereotypes," said Amy Sarch Schopick, director of Women Studies at Shenandoah University, "at the same time she herself lived a life tht challenged the very stereotypes she was helping to perpetuate."

Schopick inaugurated the lectures to "start getting a dialogue across disciplines, a shared interest among disciplines that don't realize they have anything in common."

For local historians, Johnston's pictures show a number of sites that no longer exist, like toll houses and covered bridges on the old Valley Pike.

For the artist, her style "effectively packaged the Valley, Sheridan and the Civil War memory, into a spectacle," Kiefer said.

"She resuscitated cultural and historic myths that perpetuated into the ensuing automobile age," said Kiefer, of Virginia as a home of rusticity and racial stereotypes.

Her "modern" mode of photography "proved" the existence of a way of life that had disappeared 50 years earlier.

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