

Broadening Student Understanding of the New Deal through the Photographs of Gordon Parks

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“I feel it is the heart, not the eye, that should determine the content of a photograph. What the eye sees is its own. What the heart can perceive is a very different matter.”

—Gordon Parks, 1975 ¹

IN 1972, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) awarded Gordon Parks with the Spingarn Medal, “in recognition of his unique creativity, as exemplified by his outstanding achievements as photographer, writer, film maker and composer.” Four decades earlier, however, Parks was at the beginning of his career, and New Deal agencies were confronting the challenges of the Great Depression.

In the late 1930s, magazines exposed Parks to the work of documentary photographers including Margaret Wolcott Post, Russell Lee, Jack Delano and others. They sparked his love of photography. So, Parks bought a camera and taught himself how to take photographs. After taking fashion photos in St. Paul, Minnesota, he began a portrait business in Chicago and his exceptional work led him to receive a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship in 1942. Other fellowship recipients include Katherine Dunham, John Hope Franklin, and Zora Neale Hurston. Parks was the first photographer to receive the fellowship, which paid him

\$2,000, and enabled him his choice of employers.

He selected the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and relocated to Washington, D.C. The FSA was a New Deal agency created in 1937 to address poverty in rural America. It offered support to tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and others most in need of social programs. The FSA included a photographic unit tasked with documenting daily life of Americans most affected by the Great Depression. Its director, Roy Stryker, employed some of the most talented documentary photographers in the country.

Upon his arrival in D.C., Parks

saw firsthand new housing projects commissioned by the Alley Dwelling Authority (ADA), initially funded under the Public Works Administration and later the Works Progress Administration. During the war, many D.C. residents lived in alleys and alley buildings as a result of overcrowding caused in part by the massive influx of people working for the federal government. Due to discrimination, African Americans composed a disproportionate amount of those forced to live in alleys. The ADA commissioned housing projects to address these issues. One of the housing projects completed by the ADA was the Frederick Douglass Dwellings, designed by Howard University professor and architect Hilyard R. Robinson.

Photographing the daily life of African Americans was the focus of Parks’s initial work. In July 1942, Parks took many photographs in the Douglass

Dwellings, including the three featuring children in this article. When he first arrived in the city, he had admitted to Stryker how little he knew about the District. In response, Stryker instructed him to tour the city to gain a feel of the cultural and social context in which he would work.

Parks did as Stryker suggested and later recorded in numerous autobiographies that, much to his surprise, the racism he witnessed and experienced was striking. For example, in *Voices in the Mirror: An Autobiography*, published in 1990, Parks wrote,

Washington, D.C., in 1942, bulged with racism. I arrived there in January of that year with scant knowledge of the place, knowing only that beneath the gleaming monuments and gravestones lay men who had distinguished themselves. What I had learned along the way had little to do with this sprawling city where Washington and Lincoln had been empowered.... In a very short time Washington was showing me its real character. It was a hate-drenched city, honoring my ignorance and smugly creating bad memories for me.

Following his observations of the city and out of a desire to convey what he had experienced, Parks asked Ella



Watson, an African American who worked cleaning the FSA offices, if he could photograph her. She agreed, and he took a series of photographs over a period of four months, the most famous of which, taken in August 1942, is featured on page 107.

Parks continued to work for the FSA and later the Office of War Information, taking thousands of photographs in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. His images and ones taken by other FSA photographers (see sidebar on p.

105) can contribute to student understanding of the New Deal.

Invite students to observe and reflect on the following images (without the titles or captions), which Parks took shortly after arriving in Washington:

- Anacostia, D.C., Frederick Douglass housing project. Boys playing leap frog near the project (www.loc.gov/item/2017765052)
- Anacostia, D.C., Frederick Douglass

housing project. Playing in the community sprayer (www.loc.gov/item/2017765038)

- Anacostia, D.C. Frederick Douglass housing project. A dance group (www.loc.gov/item/2017765050)

Students might wonder: Why did Parks photograph these children? How old are the children? What emotions or

values do these photographs convey about African American communities in Washington in 1942? What details are or are not included, and why?

Then, ask students to give one or more of the photographs a title and share their suggestions with the class.

right: Anacostia, D.C. Frederick Douglass housing project. Playing in the community sprayer (www.loc.gov/item/2017765038)



Farm Security Administration - Office of War Information Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress

The images in the Farm Security Administration - Office of War Information Photograph Collection form an extensive pictorial record of American life between 1935 and 1944. The online presentation of the FSA-OWI Collection by the Library of Congress features more than 170,000 items—including nearly 2,000 photographs taken by Gordon Parks—and is available at www.loc.gov/collections/fsa-owi-black-and-white-negatives/about-this-collection.

This U.S. government photography project was led for most of its existence by Roy E. Stryker, formerly an economics instructor at Columbia University, and employed such photographers as Gordon Parks, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn, Jack Delano, Marion Post Wolcott, John Vachon, and Carl Mydans.

Although photographers in Roy Stryker's unit were sent out on assignments throughout the United States and Puerto Rico, the unit's main office was in Washington, D.C. The office distributed photographic equipment and film, drew up budgets, allocated travel funds, hired staff, developed, printed, and numbered most negatives, reviewed developed film, edited photographers' captions written in the field, and maintained files of negatives, prints, and captions. The main office also distributed images to newspapers, magazines, and book publishers, and supplied photographs to exhibitions.

Staff photographers were given specific subjects and/or geographic areas to cover. These field assignments often lasted several months. Before beginning their assignments, photographers read relevant reports, local newspapers, and books in order to become familiar with their subject. A basic shooting script or outline was often

prepared. Photographers were encouraged to record anything that might shed additional light on the topic that they were photographing, and they received training in making personal contacts and interviewing people.

The collection encompasses the images made by photographers working in Stryker's unit, as it existed in a succession of government agencies: the Resettlement Administration (1935–1937), the Farm Security Administration (1937–1942), and the Office of War Information (1942–1944). The collection also includes photographs acquired from other governmental and non-governmental sources, including the News Bureau at the Offices of Emergency Management (OEM), and various branches of the military and industrial corporations. In total, the collection consists of about 175,000 black-and-white film negatives and transparencies, 1,610 color transparencies, and around 107,000 black-and-white photographic prints, most of which were made from the negatives and transparencies. The collection was transferred to the Library of Congress in 1944.



Next, provide them with additional information about Gordon Parks, including the quote at the start of this article and ask whether the information makes them want to rethink their titles.

Next, share with students Parks's most iconic photograph from this period, the photograph of FSA employee Ella Watson (www.loc.gov/item/2016646280).

Ask students to observe the image carefully. You may choose to introduce the Library of Congress's Primary Source Analysis Tool, and invite students to record their observations, reflections,

and questions about the photographs.

Students might wonder: When did Gordon Parks take this image? Who was the woman in the photograph? Why did Gordon Parks take her portrait? Why did she sit for this photograph? You may choose to use the Question Formulation Technique, created by the Right Questions Institute (<https://rightquestion.org>), a Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Consortium Partner, to help students develop open-ended questions about the photographs.

Invite students to share their observations, reflections, and

questions. Next, tell students that the photograph was taken several weeks after the images of the children. Share that its bibliographic record states that it is [a] "photograph show[ing] Farm Security Administration employee Ella Watson standing with mop and broom in front of American flag," and it is better known as Gordon Parks's "American Gothic."

Lead a class discussion with students. Ask: Do you believe Parks staged this photograph, and if so why? What do you believe is the meaning of the American flag behind Ella Watson? Why do you believe Parks gave his photograph the name "American Gothic," the



Anacostia, D.C. Frederick Douglass housing project.
A dance group (www.loc.gov/item/2017765050)

same name as the famous Grant Wood painting that he viewed at the Art Institute of Chicago? What do you believe are the similarities and differences between Wood's and Parks's images?

Finally, encourage students to compare the Watson photo with the three photographs of children and the excerpt from Parks's autobiography (on p. 104). Ask students to share what they observe from this excerpt, and what questions or reflections their observations prompt. Ask them what words from the excerpt connect to evidence in the photographs.

If time allows, provide students with additional information from this article, and generate with students a list of possible topics that they would like to research. Such a list might include:

- Life in the District of Columbia during World War II
- Gordon Parks, Ella Watson, Roy Stryker
- Other documentary photographers, including: Margaret Wolcott Post, Russell Lee, Jack Delano
- Other FSA photographs taken in Washington, D.C.
- FSA photographs taken in other communities
- Howard University professor and architect Hilyard R. Robinson
- New Deal Agencies, specifically The Farm Security Administration, The Alley Dwelling Authority, The Works Progress/Projects Administration
- Frederick Douglass housing project in D.C.
- Julius Rosenwald Fellowship
- Spingarn Medal

Invite pairs of students to select a topic, generate five questions about it, and share their answers. Assign students to use their findings to create mini-exhibits with longer written responses. 📌



Ella Watson (www.loc.gov/item/2016646280).

If you try these suggestions, or a variation of them, with your students, **tell us about your experience!** During the last week of April, the Teaching with the Library of Congress Blog at blogs.loc.gov/teachers will feature a post tied to this article and we invite you to comment and share your teaching strategies.

Note

1. The Gordon Parks Papers are held in the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress, which is accessible to registered researchers over age 18. The author of this article spent some time reviewing Parks's papers and came across a draft of an editorial published in November 1975 in *The New York Times*. The original draft included this quote, but it was omitted from the printed version.



Caneisha Mills is the 2022–23 Teacher in Residence at the Library of Congress. For more information on the education programs of the Library of Congress, please visit www.loc.gov/teachers.