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Architectural Photography of Frances Benjamin
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The 1939 Tennessee Valley Architectural Photographs of Frances Benjamin Johnston

David M. Robb, Jr.

Introduction

Preservation and photography go hand-in-hand. Photography, especially dated images, can provide a wealth of unique information to historians. Architectural photography can be very useful to preservation architects. It can document conditions, context, and authenticity of fabric, styles, and fashions, providing unique information not found in written records, legal documents, or family recollections. Architectural photography is often the primary foundation for accurate architectural preservation.

Consequentially, the group of more than 340 architectural photographs specifically commissioned to document the distinctive character of ancestral homes in Alabama is an invaluable and potentially enlightening resource. Made in the spring of 1939, these images are highly regarded but not widely known. Fortunately, they are readily accessible and well preserved in the Prints and Photographs Collection at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. However, the Alabama views in this collection have never been comprehensively published or exhibited. They deserve wider recognition.

This article discusses a small part of this noteworthy collection, a group of sixty-five views that show sixteen Tennessee Valley buildings, including four in Madison County. Beginning with a biographic sketch of the uncommon photographer who made the photographs and a brief summary of her achievements, the article then discusses the photographic character of Ms. Johnston's Tennessee Valley images, and the architectural qualities of the buildings that she documented.

The late Harvie Jones, FAIA, of Huntsville stimulated my interest in these photographs. He affirmed their historic significance to me many years ago and encouraged me to find out more about them. Thank you, Harvie.

The Photographer: Frances Benjamin Johnston

Sixty years ago, in April 1939, Frances Benjamin Johnston arrived in Alabama to spend two months photographing noteworthy ante-bellum buildings of the state. At the time she was the primary photographer of a comprehensive campaign to document early southern architecture, commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation on behalf of the Library of Congress. A nationally renowned architectural photographer, Johnston worked more than 14 years on this project, photographing more than 8,000 buildings in eight southern states. For her distinguished lifetime achievement in architectural photography, in 1945 Johnston was awarded honorary membership in the American Institute of Architects, who commended her exceptional ability to create architectural images that fostered historic preservation.

Frances Benjamin Johnston (1864-1952) had an extraordinary career.¹ It spanned nearly sixty years, from the 1890s until the 1950s. Today she is recognized as America's first successful woman professional photographer. In her later years she was an influential figure in historic preservation. Moreover, in the history of photography, Johnston has a rare distinction: her negatives are preserved and accessible. More than 40,000 Johnston images are held at the Library of Congress.

Johnston's Early Career

As a young woman in the 1890s, Johnston achieved unusual and notable success, initially as a documentary photographer of contemporary events and social conditions. Her images of workers in coal mines and factories, of Teddy Roosevelt's rough riders, and of sailors on Admiral Dewey's *Olympia* are among those published in the first generation of illustrated magazines, including the *Ladies Home Journal*. She traveled extensively (coming twice to Alabama in 1902 and 1906, to photograph students at Tuskegee Institute). Her carefully composed views of students at Tuskegee, Hampden-Sidney College, and Washington, D.C., schools were featured in turn-of-the-century exhibitions in Europe.² She gained renown, as well, as a skilled portrait photographer of influential politicians and public personalities. She made numerous candid, documentary, and portrait images of Presidents Theodore McKinley, Howard Taft, and Theodore Roosevelt, and members of their families.

These remarkable achievements of Johnston's early career are well known by their illustration in numerous historical publications by the Library of Congress and others. They are the focus of the only book about her, which features only the first two decades, 1890-1910, of her long career.³ Her later career is less well known and not comprehensively published.

Johnston's Later Career

Architectural photography is the primary focus of Johnston's later career. From 1909, beginning with a new theater building in New York, Johnston began documenting newly erected buildings for numerous New York architects, including Carrere & Hastings and McKim, Mead & White. Among her other clients, the Morgan, Astor, and Whitney families are just a few of the notable names. She traveled extensively in Europe, photographing historic Spanish castles, Italian villas, and French chateaux owned by wealthy American expatriates. In the 1920s she gave national lecture tours on garden design, showing her own early color slides of garden views and flowers. This experience in garden photography informed Johnston's sensitivity to the importance of setting in architectural photography.

Johnston's Photography of Southern Architecture

Johnston began documenting historic Southern architecture in 1926 with a commission to photograph early colonial buildings in Fredricksburg, Virginia. Her later commitment to build a comprehensive regional program of Southern architectural photography was fostered by the Library of Congress and the Carnegie Corporation. Beginning in the early 1930s, annual Carnegie grants of \$2000 a season enabled her to make annual photographic surveys in eight Southern states, resulting in more than 8,000 photographs of Southern buildings.⁴ Thus, the Carnegie Survey of the Architecture of the South, now at the Library of Congress, brought Johnston to Alabama in the spring of 1939. Her Alabama views, unlike those she made in other Southern states, were not comprehensively published or exhibited by Johnston, due probably to the onset of World War II in September 1939.⁵

Johnston's Photography of Antebellum Alabama Architecture

Johnston's campaign to document Alabama ante-bellum architecture begins on Monday, December 18, 1938. On that day her diary notes: "Bought new car: 1939 Buick Sedan."⁶ It is in this Buick sedan that Johnston traveled with her driver throughout Alabama from April to June 1939. A redoubtable and formidable personality, she was 75 years old, with awesome energy, and renowned equally for three things—for making great photographs, for wearing big hats, and for drinking strong bourbon. Five years later, at age 80, she was still going strong. Not wanting to be called an octogenarian, she made light of her age, calling herself an "octogeranium," still flowering and still flourishing.

In January and February 1939, she prepared for her Alabama trip, making lists of important Alabama buildings. She corresponded with her network of friends and advisors in Mobile, Birmingham and elsewhere, developed during decades of lecturing about historic architecture and garden design.

Johnston photographed in Alabama from late April through late June 1939. She began her Alabama trip in Auburn, arriving there on April 27, 1939, in a "...downpour, with thunder, lightning and a violent hail storm."⁷ At Auburn she consulted with Professor Walter E. Burkhardt, supervisor of the Historic American Buildings Survey for Alabama, and the leading authority on its historic architecture. Johnston stayed in Auburn a week, confirming her final itineraries with Burkhardt while waiting for inclement weather to clear.

Alabama Weather, Spring 1939

In architectural photography, weather is crucial. Clear sunny weather is best. In the most interesting architectural photographs, strong value contrasts between bright sunlit areas and dark shadows contribute substantially to define significant architectural elements. Overcast days, without strong contrasts, produce less interesting photography. In Alabama, spring weather can be erratic. For Johnston, the Alabama weather was challenging, to say the least, making her extensive travel and photography all the more remarkable. Rainy weather, quite unsuitable for out-of-doors architectural photography, plagued much of Johnston's Alabama campaign. Later she wrote: "... I encountered

nearly six weeks of continuous rain.... for over forty days there was some rainfall sometime during every twenty-four hours. This unfavorable weather hampered me greatly and curtailed my progress.”⁸ Fortunately, while in the Tennessee Valley, Johnston did have several days of good weather. As we shall see, the photographs she made on these few sunny days rank high among her most interesting views.

Johnston’s Photography in the Tennessee Valley

In early May Johnston came north to photograph Tennessee Valley buildings for a week, from May 9 through May 15, 1939. She arrived in Decatur on May 9, and made it her base for day trips to photograph buildings in Huntsville on May 10, at Wheeler Plantation, Courtland, and Town Creek in Lawrence County on May 11, and in Athens on May 12. She then traveled to Florence on May 13-14, photographing in Tuscumbia and Cherokee on May 13 and returned to Decatur on May 15 to complete her Tennessee Valley photographs. Thereafter she worked in central Alabama in late May and finished her Alabama photography in Mobile in late June.

Tennessee Valley Buildings Photographed by Johnston

During her seven days in the Tennessee Valley area, Johnston made sixty-five views at sixteen sites. Large antebellum homes are the predominant type of building that she photographed. Most of these homes are classic revival designs, dating from the three decades before 1860. Only two public buildings, both banks, were recorded, but no churches, courthouses, or schools. She also photographed several small service buildings. The buildings photographed by Johnston are geographically distributed over six counties as follows:

<u>county</u>	<u>sites</u>	<u>views</u>
Colbert	1	9
Lauderdale	2	13
Lawrence	3	16
Limestone	2	10
Madison	4	9
Morgan	<u>3</u>	<u>8</u>
totals	16	65

Note: For detailed information about the buildings photographed by Johnston in the Tennessee Valley, including location, brief histories, and references, see Appendix 2, page 49.

Johnston's Tennessee Valley Photographs

Now let's turn to the photographs themselves: their type and format. Most are exterior views of primary elevations, quintessential approach views showing the major public entrance to a building. Oblique views predominate, showing the front and part of a side of the building and enough setting to give a good sense of both the architecture and its ambiance. Twelve images are interior detail views—showing noteworthy staircases, elegant mantelpieces or fine doorways. Johnston made all her views on 8x10 inch glassplate negatives, using a large view camera mounted on a sturdy tripod.

Johnston was a view-taker, not a printmaker. She was not a darkroom worker. Once she took or made the negative image, her job was done. Other people developed her negatives on her behalf. Following her instructions, the printmakers made positive prints from them. Most were 8x10 inch contact prints on glossy finish paper, appropriate for study and illustration purposes.

As she was a skilled photographer, Johnston's negatives had fine resolution, sufficient for them to be enlarged for display in exhibitions. Details are still clear in her 11x14 inch matte prints and her larger 14x18 inch prints.

For architectural photography of Johnston's day, monochrome (black-and-white) photography was the professional standard for several reasons. Architecture illustrations in books and magazines of her era were predominately monochrome because of economic and technical printing reasons. Moreover, monochrome views were often preferred over color for architectural illustrations. Two-dimensional value-based compositions were considered more effective for abstracting onto paper the salient features of three-dimensional architectural forms. Using these criteria, color was a distraction as well as being time-consuming and expensive in architectural photography.

At its best, monochrome architectural photography is quite effective for conveying the primary architectural distinctions of a building. It is particularly appropriate for historic architecture with few colored finishes. All of Johnston's architectural photography in Alabama is black-and-white monochrome photography.

Purpose of Johnston's Photography

Johnston conceived her photographs as artistic interpretations of distinguished architectural design. The photographs were intended to capture as well as convey the essence of a building's architectural character. Made with great care and attention to their pictorial quality, the photographs were intended to illustrate books about architecture or to be featured in exhibitions. In these respects, the purpose of Johnston's photographs differ significantly from those made for the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), also at the Library of Congress.

The artistic premise of Johnston's architectural photography complements the more documentary character of HABS photography. Intended to record specific conditions and often made as part of a narrative report, HABS photographs were conceived as reference records. They were made in various formats with different equipment by many people. To ensure accurate identification, HABS views often include labels and plaques unsuitable for illustrations or exhibits.

Exemplary Images

Among Johnston's Tennessee Valley photographs, several exemplary images stand out. Some are important because of the significance of the building's architectural design or its historical status. Many are distinguished by the superior pictorial qualities of Johnston's images.

When we consider the character and quality of Johnston's photographs, we begin to understand why these images are useful and important. Johnston's way of looking at architecture is distinctive. Her images are enlightening and interesting. Her sense of time, place, and atmosphere is recognizable. Areas of light and dark values are well distributed in rich compositional patterns. Important architectural elements are emphasized, often by strategically located highlights. The process of obtaining that appropriate balance of pattern, form, and emphasis began with selecting the best viewpoint, the right spot to place the camera to obtain the optimum image, the image giving the most information about the building.



Fig. 1 Portico, 1840s, at LeRoy Pope House. Huntsville, Madison County.

Note: All illustrations in this article are made from photographs taken in May 1939 by Frances Benjamin Johnston. They are reproduced by permission of the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

One of Johnston's more successful Tennessee Valley images shows a building that is architecturally distinguished and historically significant. Johnston's image of it is captivating. It shows the elegant portico on the west side of the *LeRoy Pope House* in Huntsville (Fig.1, page 10). Begun in 1814 by the founder of Huntsville, Colonel LeRoy Pope (1765-1844), the initial portion of this large residence may be the oldest brick house in Alabama. The portico, a later addition designed by Huntsville architect George Steele in the early 1840s, features six substantial Tuscan columns with an unusual truncated pediment topped by a balustraded deck. Above the columns, on the face of the tympanum, is a reeded sunburst motif that is repeated on the front and sides of the frieze below.

Johnston's view of the LeRoy Pope House shows the hallmarks of her best architectural images: a strong, well-balanced composition, a telling pattern of dark and light values, and most important, a viewpoint that involves the viewer while capturing the essence of the building's architectural design and emphasizing its major features.

The process of making successful architectural photography is challenging. Several ingredients are essential. First, a basic understanding of architectural issues is needed to select the best view angle to capture the essence of a particular building. Among architectural photographers of her day, Johnston was renowned for her ability to quickly select the best viewpoint to photograph a particular building. In this view of the Pope house, Johnston selected a viewpoint that features major architectural elements of the portico: balustrade, truncated pediment, columns, and the sunburst motif on the side frieze. A positive arrangement of light patterns is an essential ingredient of this engaging image. To make this view, Johnston was fortunate to have a sunny day, and to be able to take her view of the west elevation in the afternoon, when the sunlight was falling in an enlivening pattern across the portico. Here also, Johnston was fortunate to have a clear view of the building, without obscuring shrubbery. The location of her camera can be recreated. It was probably set just forward of the west brow of the hill on which the Pope home is sited, overlooking the town of Huntsville.

With these basic issues about architectural photography in mind, let us consider several different groups of Johnston's Tennessee Valley images. The first group comprises images that have become significant historic documents because of the common fate of the buildings portrayed. Subsequent groups reveal different aspects of Johnston's photographic expertise.

Lost Tennessee Valley Buildings Photographed by Johnston

Some Johnston images are important as historical documents of the appearance and character of *lost* buildings, buildings that no longer exist. Misfortune or disaster has destroyed some buildings since the buildings were photographed in 1939. Others have been lost through neglect or disuse or simply razed because of economic change during the past sixty years. Of the 148 buildings that Johnston photographed in Alabama, nearly one third have been lost since 1939. For these lost architectural achievements that can never again be experienced in person, Johnston's photographs can be the best available means of



Fig.2 The Forks of Cypress. 1830. Formerly near Florence, Lauderdale County. Struck by lightning and burned June 6, 1966.

experiencing the buildings vicariously and obtaining a positive understanding of their architectural merit.

In the Tennessee Valley, Johnston's photography documents three buildings lost since 1939. We'll consider this group of lost treasures first, discussing the architectural character of the buildings themselves and the nature of Johnston's photography of them.

Among the now-gone Tennessee Valley buildings photographed by Johnston, the most grievous loss is *Forks of Cypress* (Figs.2 & 3, pages 12 & 14) north of Florence. It burned in June 1966 after being struck by lightning; ruins of its massive columns survive. An extraordinary building, the *Forks of Cypress* was probably designed by William Nichols and built about 1830 for James Jackson (1782-1840), a planter and breeder of nationally known race horses.

A large two-story mansion, with a plan about 58 feet by 37 feet and over 4,000 square feet, *Forks of Cypress* was distinguished by an unusual monumental colonnade (82 feet by 64 feet) of twenty-four Ionic columns that surrounded all four sides of the house and provided wide, well shaded porches on every side. *The Forks of Cypress* is the only Alabama building with a peristyle (surrounding) colonnade, and may be the only one built in the United States featuring Ionic capitals.

Johnston was clearly impressed by *Forks of Cypress* when she photographed it on May 14, 1939. She made ten photographs of it: the most views she made of any Alabama building. Seven are exterior shots, providing enlightening images of the impressive Ionic colonnade around the house. Three interior views show the elegant Federal detailing of the hall staircase and two graceful mantelpieces.

Perhaps the most evocative exterior view Johnston made at *Forks of Cypress* (Fig.3, page 14) looks along the porch of the main elevation. This photograph, too, is an exemplary image, distinguished by an artful composition of architectural form and pictorial pattern. At the left, it shows shuttered windows and the double-door main entrance, a view of distant foliage in the center, and the bases and massive columns of the main elevation colonnade at the right. The pattern of contrasting sunlight and shadow on the brick pavement neatly echoes



*Fig.3 Porch. **The Forks of Cypress.** 1830. Formerly near Florence, Lauderdale County. Struck by lightning and burned June 6, 1966.*

the rhythm of architectural elements on the left. These elements are nicely balanced in an elegant asymmetrical composition that effectively conveys the grandeur of this lost masterpiece. Similarly, in her oblique view of the main elevation (Fig.2, page 12), notice how she located her camera to show sunlight along the right edges of the columns.

Johnston was renowned for her ability to quickly find the best viewpoint to locate her camera to make the most telling image of a building. This knack is particularly desirable in challenging situations, when deteriorating fabric and/or overgrown shrubbery may limit choices or preclude conventional camera sitings. In these situations comprehensive overall views of the entire structure may not be makeable, or even desirable. One solution of the deft and resourceful photographer in these situations is a partial view of a building, a view that focuses on a salient architectural feature and is made from a location close to the building.

Such a view is seen in Johnston's image of an exceptional Adamesque fanlight doorway on a small Federal style home formerly in Courtland in Lawrence County, the W.W. James House (Fig.4, page 16). This view features an unusually detailed doorway of exceptionally sophisticated design. The paneled double doors, engaged side pilasters, carved sunburst motifs, and heavily molded cornice required considerable woodworking expertise. This doorway might be a demonstration piece, to show the skills of the home's initial owner Westwood Wallace James (1795-1866), who was a cabinetmaker from Virginia. Built about 1825, the house was sadly neglected in 1939, as seen in the missing stairs and shutter. It was demolished circa 1940, shortly after Johnston shot this telling detail of an exceptionally fine architectural element.

Johnston addressed a similar challenge in her view of a lost Madison County home, the David Wade House (Fig.5, page 17), formerly north of Huntsville. Built about 1840, it too was deteriorating when she photographed it in May 1939. (It was subsequently demolished in the late 1940s.) Here, Johnston selected a distant overall view in order to include, and emphasize, the most distinctive architectural feature of the house, the massive oversized entablature above the columns. Even though the long gap across the wooden fabric shows that it had obviously lost much of its original detail, Johnston's image conveys a sense of its original imposing grandeur. She achieved this effect by positioning her large camera near the building so that her lens pointed upward at a moderately steep angle. In the resulting image, the large entablature dominates the scene, especially because its highlighted face contrasts so strongly with the dark shadowed walls behind the porch beneath it.



*Fig.4 Entrance. **W.W. James House**, circa 1825. Formerly near Courtland, Lawrence County. Demolished circa 1940.*

One unusual building photographed by Johnston exemplifies a type of building that is often lost—the small service building. Today, when viewing an imposing historic house preserved from centuries past, it is easy to ignore that it may be the sole survivor of a formerly large domestic complex of many buildings. A surviving big house was often originally the heart of a galaxy of numerous small service buildings, typically one-story structures, each with a single function.



Fig.5 David Wade House, circa 1840. Formerly near Huntsville, Madison County. Demolished 1940.

When the function is no longer needed, the service building is rarely maintained, let alone preserved. Most are torn down. We know them by familiar names—outhouse, spring-house, well-house, icehouse, kitchen—but these small buildings are becoming increasingly rare to experience first-hand.

Small domestic service buildings are not photographed very often, for the same historic reasons they are not often preserved. Their significance is not recognized, and not thought worth documenting, until it is too late when they are nearly extinct. In assessing the scope of Johnston's Alabama photography for the Carnegie Survey, we should remember that its stated primary purpose was to document examples of distinguished architectural design. Her mandate was to photograph ancestral homes having architectural merit, not their functional context. Consequently it is not surprising to find only a few service buildings among the more than 340 views she made in Alabama. These few typically are distinguished by unusual features.

One of the few service buildings that Johnston photographed in the Tennessee Valley is an unusual small one-story octagonal frame building, an office at the *Beaty-Mason House* in Athens, Limestone County (Fig.6, page 19); a view of the entrance portico of the main house is discussed following. Dating from the mid-19th century, this charming little building features an arched doorway, matching windows, and a curving pyramidal roof, topped by a turned finial. Built probably as an office for an unidentified owner, it was photographed by Johnston for the same reason it has been preserved. This unusual survivor has distinguishing architectural features, unlike the typical service building that was usually razed when no longer needed for its initial use.

Issues in Architectural Photography

Architectural photography often involves resolution of conflicting challenges. They all have to be considered when selecting the best viewpoint to make the most useful images. Any of these challenges can adversely affect pictorial quality. Favorable weather is essential. Lighting is always an issue. Siting is another.

Optimum view angles can be constrained for buildings on hills. Built-up urban settings may limit viewing distance of overall views of large buildings. Large trees and overgrown shrubbery may obscure old historic structures. For urban buildings, unattractive neighbors, unsightly utility lines, and intrusive support poles can be difficult to exclude from the view most revealing of the building's architectural character. In these challenging situations several useful solutions are available to the resourceful architectural photographer. The partial view is one solution. The vertical format view provides another.

The close-up partial view focusing on a single architectural feature is a common solution. One architectural element dominates the image in the partial or detail view. Undesirable, nearby distractions are excluded. The close-up view can effectively respond to the special challenges of a limited viewing distance.

Selecting a *portrait* (vertical) format rather than a *landscape* (horizontal) format is a second solution. Frequently employed when the



*Fig.6 Office, 19th century, at **Beaty-Mason House**, Athens, Limestone County.*

salient architectural feature, which is often a doorway or window, has vertical proportions, the vertical view can complement and enhance perception of the vertical architectural feature (See Fig.6 above). Also, the vertical view, like the partial view, can easily exclude undesirable adjacent distractions that would be seen in a horizontal view of the same feature. The vertical view is thus frequently employed in challenging situations.

Lighting and Siting Challenges

We've already noted the critical contribution of strong sunlight in Johnston's successful images of the *LeRoy Pope House* and *Forks of Cypress*. Another fine Johnston image distinguished by effective use of sunlight is seen in her view of the *Bibb-Bradley-Beirne House*, located in the Twickenham Historic Preservation District, Huntsville (Fig.7, page 21). Photographed by Johnston in May 1939 on the same day as her views of the *LeRoy Pope House*, this view was taken probably later in the same afternoon, as shown by the long shadows on the lawn on the north side of the house.

Built circa 1835 on the site of an earlier house for former Alabama Governor Thomas Bibb (1783-1839), it was later the home of Bibb's daughter, Mrs. James Bradley, and the Bierne and Newman families. Historically, it is significant as the commandeered headquarters for General William Sherman during the 1864 Federal occupation of Huntsville.

Johnston's image is an oblique vertical view, facing right, that prominently features the building's impressive full-height Ionic portico. Notice the carefully considered pattern of shadows and highlights across the architrave, columns, low shrubbery, and lawn in the foreground.

Even on sunny days scheduling of architectural photography has to be carefully planned, especially when several buildings are to be photographed on the same day. Ideally the view will be scheduled for the best time of day for that particular building when its most distinctive architectural features are highlighted by direct sunlight. East-facing buildings are best shot in the morning; west-facing ones in the afternoon. But travel and shooting schedules may not always work out.

Johnston's schedule for shooting her views of four Huntsville buildings can be recreated, based on the light patterns seen in the views combined with knowledge of the direction faced by surviving buildings. On May 10, 1939, she apparently left Decatur early in the morning to drive to Huntsville, going first to the *David Wade House*

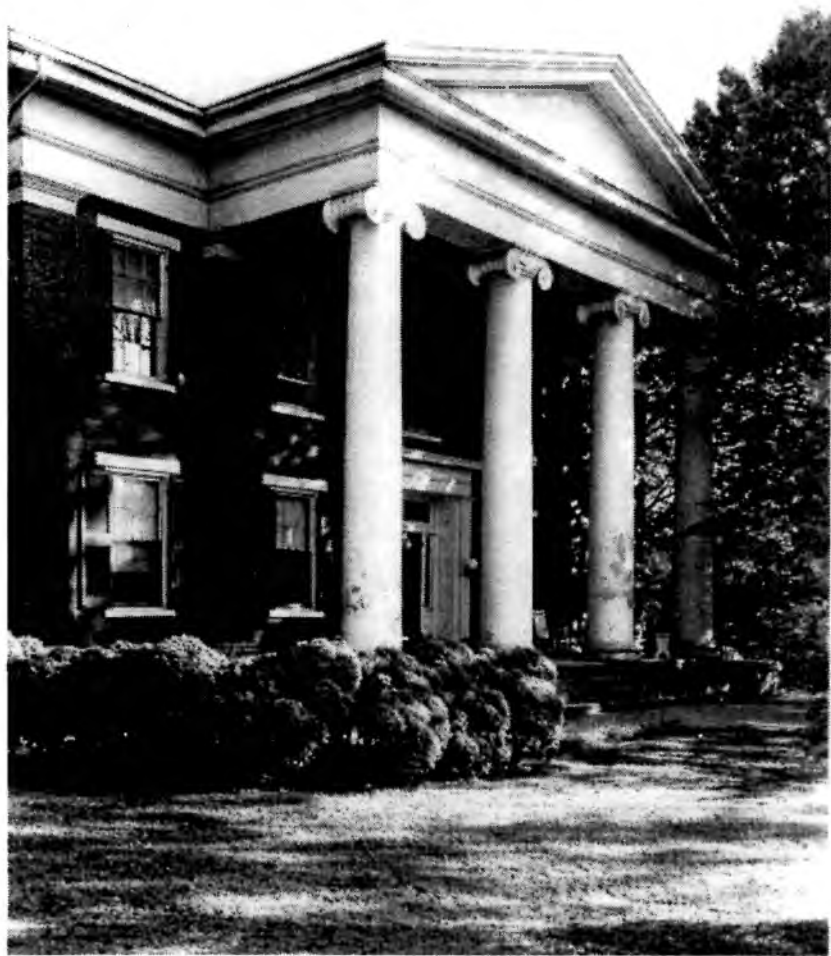


Fig. 7 Bibb-Bradley-Beirne House, circa 1835. Huntsville, Madison County.

to photograph its facade with the light coming from the left (Fig. 5, page 17). In the early afternoon, she shot the *LeRoy Pope House* in full sunlight (Fig. 1, page 10) and then the *Bibb-Bradley-Beirne House* (Fig. 7, above) in the lengthening shadows of the late afternoon sun.

Johnston made views at two public buildings in the Tennessee Valley, showing early banks in Huntsville and Decatur. The one view made in Huntsville is unusual and atypical among her 1939 Alabama photographs. Unlike any other Johnston views, it shows only a small and insignificant part of a historic building. Natural features dominate the view. This view, made from near the pool of Huntsville's Big Spring, looks up to the east. The base of the bluff behind the spring fills most of the image. Only at the top is a small glimpse of a building, the *Huntsville Branch of the State Bank of Alabama*. Above the bluff, we see only the top part of the back side of the bank. This curious view, shot in early afternoon sunlight, tells little about the architecture of the building. For this reason, the bank is not illustrated in this article.

For two buildings in Decatur, the weather and siting conditions were not as favorable for Johnston. Neither building could be left out, for both have unusual architectural features. In addition, they are historically important as rare survivors among the few antebellum buildings still standing in Decatur after the Civil War.

Unusual materials and unique design elements distinguish the *Decatur Branch, State Bank of Alabama*, built about 1834-36 (Fig.8, page 23). Granite, rarely used in Alabama buildings, is the fabric of the impressive columns and the window transoms and sills. Also unusual is the 5-column portico. It is odd, literally and figuratively. An even number of columns—2, 4, 6, 8—is the norm for classic revival porticos. Also unusual are the square capitals (usually round) and the atypical arched window with Gothic tracery in the tympanum. This 1939 view documents a historic condition since changed; the arched window, probably a later addition, was removed during the 1979-80 reconditioning of the building.

Johnston's view was apparently taken on an overcast day, evident by the subdued lighting and the absence of highlights. In making the view, her camera placement may have been constrained by the building's urban setting, as suggested by the close cropping of the large neighbor building at the left side of the view. Notice also how she sited her camera to de-emphasize the utility wires by having one set overlap the tympanum rather than cutting across the columns below.



Fig.8 Decatur Branch, State Bank of Alabama, circa 1834-1836. Decatur, Morgan County.

A different urban challenge is confronted in Johnston's view of the *Dancy-Polk House* (Fig.9, page 25). Built circa 1829 for Colonel Frank Dancy, this wood frame structure on a high brick foundation is one of the oldest surviving buildings in Decatur. An unusual profile—a two-story central core flanked by one-story wings—and a Palladian-style double porch on the east elevation are prominent features of this building. However, the best views of these features are severely constrained by a deep railroad cut constructed near the building after it was completed. The railroad cut dominates the foreground of any overall view of the east side of the house and the Palladian porch. Another impediment was a large tree to the right of the porch.

Johnston's solution made the best of a tough situation. She made a straightforward frontal view of the entire house. Emphasizing the unusual roof profile, the view is centered on the Palladian porch. The deep railroad cut and the large tree are just simply accepted, as distracting clutter in the foreground and an obscuring intrusion on the right.

Tree and Shrubbery Challenges

For the architectural photographer of historic buildings, trees and shrubbery can present special challenges. Century-old trees and mature shrubbery may be quite desirable for cooling summer shade or for screening privacy. However, for the photographer they may obscure the optimum view of distinctive architectural details, especially of low one-story structures. At neglected buildings, overgrown shrubbery may preclude the desirable oblique corner view, showing both front and side elevations.

The best way to minimize foliage in architectural photography is to take views when trees are bare in late winter. Johnston's late spring travel schedule precluded this choice in her Alabama photography. One all-season remedy to obscuring shrubbery is siting the camera closer to the building to make less comprehensive frontal views or close-in partial views. Detail views of major features are another solution. These may be the best alternatives for showing the architectural character of a building.

Johnston encountered obscuring foliage at the earliest Tennessee Valley building that she photographed, a log house at *Pond Spring*, the later home of General Joseph Wheeler in Lawrence County, east of Courtland (Fig. 10, page 25). Built about 1818 probably by the Hickman family, this log house is constructed of hand-hewn logs, in the traditional mode used by the first generation of settlers in this area. It has a dogtrot plan of two square *pens* separated by an open breezeway covered by a roof joining the pens. The pens were probably constructed at different times, as suggested by the break in the roof line. Johnston did not make an entire view of this interesting early survivor, probably because full views were apparently obscured by nearby trees. She made a partial view of it, showing only the left pen and the open breezeway. To make this view, she had to carefully site her camera to shoot between the two trees seen at the left and right edges of her view.

Sometimes shrubbery is unavoidable. Johnston had a similar shrub challenge at another early Tennessee Valley building, *Pope's Tavern*, built about 1820 in Florence. Overgrown shrubbery in the foreground and the foliage of a large tree at the right dominate the one oblique view (not illustrated) she made of this low structure.



Fig.9 Dancy-Polk House, circa 1829. Decatur, Morgan County.



Fig.10 Log house, circa 1818, at Pond Spring (Gen. Wheeler home), near Courtland, Lawrence County.

Similarly, large boxwood shrubs dominated the foreground of views of the 1845 entrance portico of the *Beaty-Mason House* in Athens, Limestone County (Fig. 11, page 27). Featuring two full-height Ionic columns, this grand portico was designed by architect Hiram H. Higgins for Capt. John Mason and added to the front of a substantial brick home built in 1826 by Robert Beaty, Mason's father-in-law. (The house became the official residence of the president of Athens College in 1960.) Johnston's vertical view, probably taken on an overcast day, made the most of a challenging situation. The vertical format complements the height of the tall columns. She placed her camera to make a pleasing contrast of rounded boxwood mounds seen against the taut hard geometry of the classical revival architecture.

A grove of tall trees dominates views of the front elevation of *Belle Mina*, located north of Mooresville in Limestone County. This imposing building is one of the earliest and most sophisticated of Alabama's plantation mansions. Featuring a full-height hexastyle Tuscan portico across the front, it was built circa 1826-35 for Thomas Bibb (1783-1839), planter, lawyer, and second governor of Alabama. Johnston recognized *Belle Mina*'s importance, making six views of it: five exterior and one interior. Three of these views illustrate this article.

The exterior shots of *Belle Mina* all show partial views of different aspects of the building. None show the entire portico, probably because of the obscuring trees. Taken on a sunny day, these views are enlivened by strongly contrasting highlights and shadows. One view emphasizes the gracious ambiance of *Belle Mina*'s setting (Fig. 12, page 28). Dappled patterns of sunlight and dark shadows pervade the view. Tree foliage, grass tufts, and the brick entrance walk are primary motifs, seen in front of the left of the portico and a one-story service wing in the background. A second partial view, with a tighter, close-in vertical format (Fig. 13, page 29), emphasizes two sunlit portico columns framing the elegant fanlight doorway of *Belle Mina*'s main entrance.

At *Belle Mina*, Johnston also shot a special type of partial view: an interior view of domestic woodwork. Although she made relatively few of these interior views, they rank among the most interesting photographs that she made in her Alabama campaign.



*Fig. 11 Portico, 1845, at **Beaty-Mason House**, Athens, Limestone County.*

Interior Views

Among Johnston's Alabama architectural photography, few images show interior scenes; most are exterior views. Only 11 percent of her Alabama photography show interior architectural features.⁹ This is understandable, considering both her mandate and also inherent limitations of interior photography.

Interior photography is challenging. It requires more work and time than exterior photography. Siting a bulky view camera is more difficult in a small parlor than on a large lawn. Special equipment may be needed, such as wide-angle lenses for short shooting distances. Furniture may have to be moved and drapery pulled back. Distracting blemishes of unrepaired fabric or deteriorated paint are more difficult to minimize when composing the image of an interior scene.

Lighting is especially daunting. For Johnston, lighting of interior views was just as weather dependent as for exterior scenes. She appears to have used natural light only. No artificial floodlights highlight important details or soften dark shadows. Sunny days were best, just as for exterior views, when strong sunlight could stream inside through undraped windows and open doors.



Fig.12 Portico, left side. Belle Mina, circa 1826-35. Near Mooresville, Limestone County.



Fig.13 Main entrance. Belle Mina, circa 1826-35. Near Mooresville, Limestone County.

Because interior views are difficult, Johnston shot them only when her time and effort would be rewarded. Only exceptional architectural features warranted the trouble. In turn, their high quality stimulated exceptional effort in composing the image. Consequently Johnston's few interior scenes rank among the most interesting photographs that she made in Alabama.

Views of Stairs

Views of stairs dominate Johnston's interior views. She made fourteen photographs of Alabama stairways. This high number is not surprising. Stairs are prominent features in the large Federal style and classical revival homes that she photographed. They had to be substantial to ascend above the high ceilings needed to circulate air during hot summers. Skilled artisans were needed to design these challenging structures and to ensure they were sturdy and structurally sound.

The stairs Johnston photographed in Alabama are often complex. In Federal style houses, paneled woodwork was fashionable to enclose the actual structure supporting the stairs. (This enclosing woodwork provided a case for the structure, hence the term *staircase*.) In addition, stairs are often embellished with elegant scrollwork endpieces and by elaborate banister endings.

These features make stairs interesting subjects of architectural photography. Taking a stair view is often more straightforward than other interior photography. Usually the main hall has less furniture and drapery than other rooms, so little has to be moved out of the view. Optimum lighting is obtained by careful selection of the best time of day, the time when the most sunlight will stream into the main hall through the wide open doors of the main entrance.

In the Tennessee Valley Johnston made eight views of main hall stairs in six area homes.¹⁰ At Belle Mina, she photographed the unusual spiral stairway (Fig.14, page 31). Its self-supporting cantilevered structure required complex and artful engineering to make it structurally sound.

Belle Mina has exceptionally fine Federal period woodwork, exemplified here by the stair's intricate scrolled endpieces. In Johnston's image the carefully composed vertical format emphasizes the elegant shape of the stairway, spiraling upward to the right. It is further enhanced by the soft lighting, probably obtained by opening the wide main entrance door at the opposite end of the main hall (Fig.13, page 29).



*Fig.14 Spiral Stairway. **Belle Mina**, circa 1826-35. Near Mooresville, Limestone County.*

Another challenging factor in making interior shots is seen in this view. When fabric or paint has deteriorated near a primary feature, it may be difficult to compose an interior view to exclude the distracting blemish. Here, the peeling paint on the wall would have been hard to exclude from any view of this staircase.

Telling Details

At two Tennessee Valley homes Johnston made only detail views. Fine stairs and superior woodwork are features of both homes, which may be the reason Johnson selected them for photography. Also, both had substantial adjacent trees or shrubbery, which may have inhibited useful overall exterior views.

At *Woodlawn*, near Florence, Lauderdale County, Johnston made no overall view. Instead, she shot one interior view of the staircase and only one vertical partial view of the exterior, perhaps because boxwood shrubbery obscured any useful overall view. Built about 1825 for James Hood, a planter and merchant born in Ulster, Ireland, *Woodlawn* features notable Federal period woodwork and an impressive formal boxwood garden.

Johnston's interior view shows the fine Federal Staircase (Fig. 15, page 33). The lighting in her image emphasizes its distinctive features: the unusual upturned end of the banister, the toothed bottom edges of the end pieces, and the vertical elements of paneling in the door and the case under the stairs.

Coming from the right, this lighting probably came through the open double doors of the main entrance. It is also seen in Johnston's exterior detail view showing *Woodlawn's* large fanlight doorway (Fig. 16, page 34). This vertical format view emphasizes the unusual granite entrance steps, fine tracery of the fanlight doorway, and Flemish bond pattern of the brick exterior.

At the *Rhea-Burleson-McEntire House* in Decatur, Johnston made only interior detail views. Built in 1836 for John Sevier Rhea, grandson of Tennessee Governor John Sevier, this grand house is located on the south bank of the Tennessee River. It has exceptionally elaborate interior woodwork, as seen in Johnston's carefully arranged view of a doorway and hall mirror (Fig. 17, page 35). This view in the main hall shows one of the most sophisticated Federal style doorways in the Tennessee Valley, featuring paneled double doors framed by an impressive engaged columnar architrave. Notice the reflection in the gilded mirror bench at the right of the view. Its reflected image shows the foot of the staircase, dado paneling, and carved doorway on the opposite side of the hall.

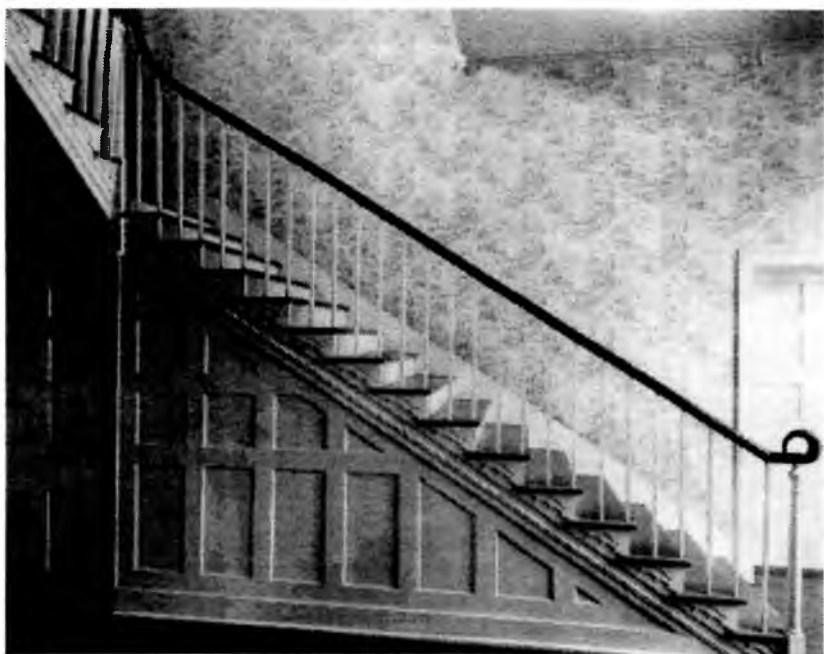


Fig.15 Federal Staircase. **Woodlawn**, circa 1825. Near Florence, Lauderdale County.

Imagine the amount of time needed to set up this dense complex view of doorway, mirror, and reflection, and to wait for the optimum moment when light would be streaming through the main entrance door (out of the view) at the right. This detail interior view is shot in vertical format, as seen elsewhere in situations where Johnston wanted to focus viewer attention on significant architectural elements. (The vertical format is used in three of the four interior views she made of the *Rhea-Burleson-McEntire House*.)

The absence of an exterior view by Johnston may be explained by the siting and setting of the house. Located close to the south bank of the Tennessee River, its front elevation faces east toward a large planting of pecan trees. Today any useful architectural view of the full-height portico of the main elevation is fully screened by the foliage of these tall mature trees. This may have true in 1939. Although the trees' status at the time of Johnston's photography is not known, a recent owner of the property told me in 1996: "They've been here a long time. They are very old."



Fig.16 Fanlight doorway. Woodlawn, circa 1825. Near Florence, Lauderdale County.

Fortunately, the historic architectural appearance of the house is known through an extraordinary 19th century photograph that clearly shows the tetrastyle (four-columned) portico. The photograph taken on April 23, 1865, documents a memorial concert on that day for Abraham Lincoln. The photograph shows a brass band playing on the roof of the house, facing toward an encampment of Union soldiers.¹¹



Fig. 17 Doorway, mirror, and reflection. Rhea-Burleson-McEntire House, circa 1836. Decatur, Morgan County.

Telling Details—Exterior

Johnston's photography of two distinguished Tennessee Valley buildings demonstrate her exemplary skill in making telling exterior detail views. At both buildings she made selective, partial views focusing on exceptional architectural features. Today, these photographs are revealing images of these architectural achievements and Johnston's photographic artistry.

At *Barton Hall*, near Cherokee in Colbert County, Johnston made nine views, seven exterior and two interior. Johnston's large number of views of *Barton Hall* is appropriate for an unusual building with some of the most sophisticated architectural features found in a Tennessee Valley building.

Built about 1847–49 for Armistead Barton, who died before its completion, the hall was occupied by his widow until 1884. Today, its distinction is recognized by its designation as a National Historic Landmark in the National Register of Historic Places.

Its complex plan features a Doric entrance portico on the two-story main body of the house, and two one-story rear wings with Doric side porticos and a loggia. A sense of one important element of this plan is effectively conveyed in Johnston's well-composed view of a side portico (Fig. 18, page 37). It shows a unique feature of *Barton Hall*, the refined Doric entablature with tryglyphs and metopes located on the frieze of every portico, and on all sides beneath the roof edges. Notice also the carved moldings about the windows and the engaged corner pilaster seen above the portico.

Johnston's two interior views of *Barton Hall* both show the unusual stairway that dominates the main hall. The more effective view of this complex structure is a partial view that focuses on a single element, a flight of stairs (Fig. 19, page 38). The view features one of the flights that rise from each end of the main hall. They ascend in a series of double reverse flights connected by bridge-like flying landings. This remarkable structure is challenging to photograph in its entirety in any condition. Using only available natural light, Johnston's views convey a convincing sense of its complexity and unique architectural character.¹²

For most of the Alabama buildings that Johnston photographed, she usually made only one or two views of the primary exterior elevation. More than six views is unusual. She made nine or more views at only six buildings in Alabama. By this measure, these structures rank among the most interesting in the state. Three of these buildings are located in the Tennessee Valley. Two have already been discussed: *Forks of Cypress* and *Barton Hall*. The third is the *Saunders-Goode-Hall House*, where she made one interior and eight exterior views.



Fig. 18 Side portico. **Barton Hall**, circa 1847-49. Near Cherokee, Colbert County.

They include one of Johnston's most elegant views of a Tennessee Valley building.

The *Saunders-Goode-Hall House* is located north of Town Creek in Lawrence County. It was built in 1830-35 for the Rev. Turner Saunders, planter and Methodist minister from Brunswick County, Virginia. It has been cited as an "outstanding expression in Alabama of Jeffersonian classicism exhibiting Palladian influence."¹³ The



Fig.19 Flight of stairs. Barton Hall, circa 1847-49. Near Cherokee, Colbert County.

Saunders-Goode-Hall House is constructed of brick in a three-part H-shape plan, with a central two-story pavilion flanked by one and one-half-story wings.

Dominating the design is the massive Doric portico and raised entrance porch of the main pavilion. The portico is the primary feature of Johnston's partial view, looking to the right, that shows the left and central pavilions of the *Saunders-Goode-Hall House* (Fig.20, page 40). On the left pavilion, notice the well-crafted brick work above the windows and the engaged pilasters.

One of Johnston's most elegant detail views of Tennessee Valley architecture is her view made on the far right of the entrance porch showing two doorways (Fig.21, page 41). The larger double door enters the main hall of the central pavilion; the smaller door enters the right pavilion. Both doorways show exceptional artistry in their design. The larger door is especially notable with its paneled double doors framed by geometrical sidelights and transom, and engaged flanking colonettes that support the substantial molded entablature

above the transom. This design treatment is echoed in the smaller door, with subtle subordinating variations such as matching pilasters in place of the engaged colonnettes.

We can appreciate and enjoy these sophisticated architectural nuances thanks to Johnston's hard work in composing this perceptive partial view. Imagine the challenge she had in locating her bulky view camera between the columns near the edge of the porch. She had to allow sufficient room for herself to get between the porch edge and the back of camera to compose and focus the image on her view plate. And she had to remember not to step backward!

A more distant oblique view, looking left, features the portico and right wing (Fig.22, page 42). It shows the raised basement and the intricate brickwork of the parapeted end chimneys. It also shows yet another instance where a well-placed tree presented an interesting challenge to a photographer. Here, Johnston sited her camera to compose her view with the trunk just to the right of the portico columns and much of the foliage above the roof.

Significance of Johnston's Architectural Photography

Johnston's architectural photographs are important for several reasons. First, they were created as artistic images of distinguished architectural design. At their best, they can stimulate interest and evoke emotion. They can intrigue the viewer and move people's hearts. They can make you think "This is a fascinating building that some day I would like to see and experience, in person." Second, as noted for three Tennessee Valley buildings, Johnston's images can be important as surviving documents of buildings lost since she photographed them in 1939.

The growth of historic preservation owes much to architectural photographers like Frances Benjamin Johnston, whose evocative images have often been the foundation for galvanizing preservation efforts into action. (It's worth noting that in the late 19th century the growing interest in architectural preservation coincides with the first generations of architectural photography, an inter-relationship for further discussion elsewhere.)



Fig.20 Saunders-Goode-Hall House, circa 1830-35. Near Town Creek, Lawrence County.



*Fig.21 Two doorways on portico porch. **Saunders-Goode-Hall House**, circa 1830-35. Near Town Creek, Lawrence County.*

The doorways in this view can be glimpsed between the portico columns in the overall view (Fig.20) on the facing page.



Fig.22 Portico and right wing. Saunders-Goode-Hall House, circa 1830-35. Near Town Creek, Lawrence County.

Recognition of Johnston's Alabama Views

Historians and architects have recognized the significance of Johnston's Alabama architectural photography even though it has not been comprehensively published. Huntsville preservation architect Harvie Jones often affirmed the high quality of Johnston's architectural photography. He considered her views as invaluable resources for several major conservation projects that he supervised.

Examples of Johnston's Alabama views were included in two recent exhibitions featuring Alabama photography.¹⁴ In addition, two recent books on Alabama architecture feature her work. Eleven Johnston views illustrate Mills Lane's handsome 1989 study of Alabama architecture.¹⁵ Fourteen Johnston views are published in Robert Gamble's 1987 *Alabama Catalog* of buildings in the Historic American Buildings Survey.¹⁶

Gamble's *Alabama Catalog* is invaluable as well for determining whether or not Johnston photographed a specific Alabama building. Gamble's entries (organized by county and place) include the Library

of Congress negative numbers for Johnston's photography of Alabama buildings for the Carnegie Survey of the Architecture of the South. These entry listings are the only available published book source documenting Johnston's Alabama photography. They are the historical foundation of this article.

The next time that you browse through the *Alabama Catalog* or the large-format pages of Mills Lane's book, notice the images by Frances Benjamin Johnston. Recall how they were made in the wet spring of 1939. Marvel at their artistic quality. Remember they were made by a remarkable 75-year-old photographer. These photographs are a singular record by a discerning observer of Alabama's antebellum architectural heritage.

Note: This essay was developed from a general discussion of Johnston's photography presented at the 1998 Annual Meeting of the Alabama Historical Association in Mobile on April 17, 1998.

About the Author:

David M. Robb, Jr., studied art history at Princeton University (BA) and Yale University (MA). He has been interested in historic preservation since working as a college intern at Historic Deerfield and at the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. The founding curator of the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, he was later director of the Telfair Academy, Savannah, where he initiated major renovation programs for two National Historic Landmark buildings: the Telfair Mansion and Museum, and the Owens-Thomas House. Formerly director of the Huntsville Museum of Art, 1985-94, he is now retired and lives in Huntsville.

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Note: Rights of article revert to David M. Robb, Jr., upon publication of Quarterly Vol. XXVI, Nos. 1&2.

Endnotes

1. *The only book-length biography published about Johnston focuses on her early career. See: Pete Daniel and Raymond Smock. **A Talent for Detail: The Photographs of Miss Frances Benjamin Johnston 1889-1910.** New York: Harmony Books Division of Crown Publishers, 1974.*
2. *Johnston's 1899 platinum prints of students at Hampton Sidney College that she exhibited in Europe were acquired in the 1960s by the Museum of Modern Art, New York. See: Lincoln Kirstein (introduction). **The Hampton Album.** New York: Museum of Modern Art / Doubleday and Co. 1966.*
3. *Daniel and Smock. **Talent for Detail.** 1974.*
4. *The only comprehensive publication of Johnston's architectural photography (which includes illustrations only, without text discussion) is available only in a microfiche edition. See: **The Carnegie Survey of the Architecture of the South 1927-1943, Photographs by Frances Benjamin Johnston (1864-1952).** Microfiche edition reproducing eight thousand 8x10 inch photographic prints in the Library of Congress. States covered: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. Teaneck, New Jersey: Chadwyck-Healey, Inc., 1984.*
5. *Small selections of Johnston's Alabama images were included in exhibitions of her views of Southern architecture at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., in January 1944, October 1947, November 1948, and November 1952.*
6. *Frances Benjamin Johnston Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.: microfilm reel 2, frame 202.*
7. *"Alabama Itinerary, April 27 to May 31, 1939." Johnston Papers, Library of Congress.*
8. *Frances Benjamin Johnston letter to Dr. W.G. Leland, July 11, 1939. Johnston Papers, Library of Congress.*
9. *Johnston made only 36 interior views during her Alabama campaign. At Tennessee Valley locations, she made 12 interior views, 18 percent of her total in this area.*

10. Johnston made eight stair views in six Tennessee Valley homes at Barton Hall (2 views), Woodlawn (1), Forks of Cypress (1), Saunders-Hall House (1), Belle Mina (1), and Rhea-McEntire House (2). Other interior views were made at Forks of Cypress (2 views of mantelpieces) and Rhea-McEntire House (2 views of doorways). For locations see Appendix 2.

11. The photograph of this unusual event is illustrated in the exhibition catalogue for **Made in Alabama: A State Legacy**. Birmingham, Alabama: Birmingham Museum of Art, 1995, page 253, Fig. 260 (cat. no. 235).

12. For more recent photography of the extraordinary stairway at Barton Hall, see Chip Cooper, Harry Knopke, and Robert Gamble. **Silent in the Land**. Tuscaloosa: CKM Press, 1993, pages 160-61, 176, 192.

13. Robert Gamble. **The Alabama Catalog, Historic American Buildings Survey, A Guide to the Early Architecture of the State**. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987 page 254.

14. **In View of Home: Alabama Landscape Photographs**. Huntsville, Alabama: Huntsville Museum of Art, 1989, organized by Frances Osborn Robb, checklist no. 44 and 45, pp. 16, 34, 35 (illus.), 68, and 69 (illus.); and **Made in Alabama: A State Legacy**. Birmingham, Alabama: Birmingham Museum of Art, 1995, page 270, Fig. 290 (cat. no. 261).

15. Mills Lane. **Mississippi & Alabama**. American Architecture Series of the Beehive Press, distributed by the Abbeville Press, 1989.

16. Gamble. **Alabama Catalog**.