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Article Summary: The editor's note and an introductory essay by Edward F Zimmer and Abigail B Davis explain the significance of this traveling exhibition of forty early twentieth-century portraits made in Lincoln by John Johnson. They provide an insider's view of a small but thriving African American community in a growing city. Notes following the photographs identify some of the people and sites pictured.

See also the article "[The New Negro Movement in Lincoln, Nebraska](#)" for detailed comments on some of the pictures in "Recovered Views."

Cataloging Information:

People pictured: Anna Bedell, Zola Bedell, Florence Jones, Florence Constellawai, Allie O Harding, Lottie Brown, Albert Talbert, Dakota Sidney Talbert, Mildred Talbert, Ruth Talbert Greene Folley, Cora Hancock Thomas, Willie Smith, Oliver Burckhardt, Anna Burckhardt, Ethel Smith, Charles Smith, Anna Hill

Lincoln area landmarks pictured: Newman Methodist Episcopal Church, Epworth Park on Salt Creek, Government Square

Keywords: African Americans, photographs, negatives, John Johnson, Earl Isadore McWilliams, Ruth Talbert Greene Folley

Photographs / Images: 1. three children on a porch; 2. (cover) mother and laughing child; 3. wedding couple; 4. baby on a quilt; 5. Anna Bedell and her daughter Zola in front of their house; 6. women posing in front of little white house; 7. family trio on porch; 8. three generations; 9. toddler and dogs with elder couple; 10. baby in a carriage; 11. Florence Jones and her mother; 12. Florence Jones; 13. women in black on porch; 14. woman at brick house; 15. three women with a cat; 16. family with two daughters on a porch; 17. Lottie Brown; 18. Lottie Brown and a brother; 19. lad in a sailor suit; 20. woman in white; 21. the Talbert family; 22. Dakota Sidney Talbert, about 1915; 23. Ruth Arlene Lucy Talbert with Anna Hill's cat Blackie; 24. three children on a boardwalk; 25. young woman with Nebraska pillow; 26. man wearing a bow tie; 27. Cora Thomas and a friend; 28. Willie Smith; 29. young woman with three puppies; 30. woman in satin and pearls; 31. street paving crew posing; 32. church group at the home of Reverend Oliver and Anna Burckhardt; 33. street paving crew at work; 34. Ethel and Charles Smith with Anna Hill at Salt Creek; 35. man mowing Government Square; 36. boy in Indian costume in tree; 37. costumed girls posing with cards and booze bottle; 38. three costumed girls sitting on a blanket; 39. costumed girls smoking; 40. two well-dressed men, one checking the time

From the Editor

Melodramatic descriptive phrases like “history-making” and “once in a lifetime” are so often applied to commonplace events—a match-up of traditional football rivals, two back-slapping ex-presidents meeting at a fund-raiser, the largest pumpkin at the state fair—that a historical society (and a publication like *Nebraska History*) should, rightly, shy away from them. But how should we describe the rare opportunity to participate in the first full-scale exhibition and publication of historical material that has the potential to change our understanding of our own history?

Perhaps we should not even try to find an inflated descriptive phrase. Perhaps we should simply publish the discovery, relate the story of its coming to us, and take the first tentative steps toward interpreting it. That premise is the rationale for this unusual issue of *Nebraska History*.

On the pages that follow are forty of more than four hundred extraordinary photographs attributed to John Johnson, an African American photographer born in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1879, who remained a Lincoln resident until his death in 1953. Digital prints made from high-resolution scans of the original glass plate negatives, apparently taken between about 1912 and 1925, are on exhibit at the Historical Society’s Museum of Nebraska History at Fifteenth and P streets in Lincoln from September 2003 through January 2004. Thereafter the exhibition will begin a four-year national tour under the auspices of ExhibitsUSA, a division of the Mid-America Arts Alliance. The special section that begins on the facing page and makes up the bulk of this *Nebraska History* issue will be overprinted for distribution as a fifty-six-page exhibition catalog that will travel with the photographs.

This extensive collection of photographs documenting the life of a small Great Plains city’s African American population in the early twentieth century reveals a time, a place, and a community largely unseen and unacknowledged by most Nebraskans. The photographs also reveal the exceptional artistic and technical skills of the photographer, and although many questions about his life and career remain unanswered, the exhibition will doubtless bring him national acclaim as both an artist and a documentarian.

Through these images and the essays that accompany them we hope to introduce *Nebraska History* readers to this unusually gifted photographer whose work was unknown to most Nebraskans before 1999. The circumstances that brought the photographs to public attention are related in the essay that opens the special section. Following the photographs, exhibition notes and notes to the photographs begin the process of describing and interpreting this newly revealed and unprecedented Nebraska treasure.

Finally, we must acknowledge with heartfelt thanks those who have shared the images that came into their care, and those who shared their stories: The McWilliams family, Ruth Greene Folley, and Tom Kaspar loaned or donated the photographs. Countless others contributed their time, knowledge, and memories. Their generosity offers all Nebraskans a broader perspective of the state’s history—not through a “history-making, once-in-a-lifetime” event, but through a remarkable expansion of our knowledge and understanding made possible by these breathtaking “Recovered Views.”

Donald Cunningham

RECOVERED VIEWS

AFRICAN AMERICAN PORTRAITS 1912-1925



RECOVERED VIEWS

AFRICAN AMERICAN PORTRAITS, 1912–1925

By Edward F. Zimmer and Abigail B. Davis

Ninety years ago, a man with a camera captured a glimpse of the African American community of Lincoln, Nebraska—a glimpse shaped by the photographer's personality, artistry, and craft; by the demands of his clients; by his camera; by the time and place; and by his race and the race of most of his subjects. This brief essay can only provide a preliminary context for viewing a few of these evocative pictures—those comprising an exhibition first shown at the Nebraska State Historical Society's Museum of Nebraska History in September 2003, and thereafter traveling throughout the United States under the auspices of ExhibitsUSA.

There is much more to be learned about the photographer, his community, and his photographs, and almost certainly there are errors in this essay. And, like all authors, we have specific viewpoints—in this case those of planners in the Lincoln/Lancaster County Planning Department, experienced in Lincoln research and history, but not specialists in photography, African American history, or the family histories of many of the African Americans of a century ago who look out from these images. Although much remains to be learned, knowledge that will come through revelation, response, and correction, we can begin to add relevant details, and can document specific stories that illuminate major themes in the history of this community and this country. Most of all, we know that much can be learned and revealed by offering our early findings for correction and enrichment.

The forty photographs in the exhibition, all of them reproduced on the following pages, represent approximately 10 percent of the images identified by 2003 as the work of a talented early twentieth century photographer working in Lincoln, Nebraska. Some confusion clouded the initial research on this body of work, as the photographs are not signed or stamped with the name of a photographer or studio, and most survive as glass plate negatives, rather than as photographic prints, which would more likely bear inscriptions or notations.

To say that we "discovered" these photographs a few years ago ignores an obvious truth: To the descendant families of many of the photo subjects, the portraits are family heirlooms and were never lost. But attention to the photographer, his body of work, and the collective portrait they form of the African American community within the larger population of Lincoln began to come into focus in 1999.

That year, Kathryn E. Colwell, a graduate student in Community and Regional Planning at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, completed her master's thesis, "Identifying Cultural Resources: A Case Study of African American Historic Landmarks in Lincoln, Nebraska." Working on behalf of the

Historic Preservation Program of the Lincoln/Lancaster County Planning Department, she applied a wide range of research methods including interviews; archival work in deeds, directories, church and family histories; and review of local and national secondary sources to illuminate a neglected topic of Lincoln history—the African American heritage of the city. Concentrating on the pre-World War II era, she outlined a vibrant community of families, churches, clubs, businesses, and social groups, within a setting that was at once nurturing and discriminatory. Her work laid a foundation for further efforts and immediately resulted in the listing of four significant buildings on the National Register of Historic Places. Abigail B. Davis succeeded Colwell as the preservation intern in the Planning Department and continued researching Lincoln's African American heritage.

Colwell's energetic and insightful work stimulated interest and opened doors and hearts, and she generously shared research leads and ideas. One such lead was a group of three dozen glass plate negatives preserved by members of the McWilliams family, whose roots in Lincoln date to the 1880s. The family shared these images with John Carter of the Nebraska State Historical Society, whose special expertise is Nebraska historic photographs. He recognized immediately that he was viewing significant works by a photographer not yet known to him. No comparable work documenting an African American community in a midsize Midwestern city of the early twentieth century is known; moreover, the photographic quality of the images is exceptional.

The negatives probably had been collected and preserved by Arthur McWilliams, Sr., who until his death in 1990, had resided in the house where they were found. McWilliams had strong interests in photography and in the history of Lincoln's black community, and before his death he shared information and prints from the negatives with Butch Mabin, a reporter for the *Lincoln Star* (now *Lincoln Journal-Star*), who wrote about them. Arthur McWilliams, Jr. retains additional glass negatives inherited from his father and is a leader in the current research and education efforts.

Mabin continues to report for the *Journal-Star* and wrote about the McWilliams negatives again in 1999. The resulting publicity soon drew the attention of Douglas Keister, a Lincoln native now a professional photographer working in California. As a young photographer in Lincoln, Keister had acquired a group of more than 260 glass negatives of similar subject matter and artistry. Thirty years later he still had them, and he made them available for research. Tom Kaspar, a Lincoln architect, also came forward to share about two dozen negatives he had purchased in the early 1970s. His group includes the earliest photographs yet identified in the body of work, depicting the unveiling of the Daniel Chester French statue of Abraham Lincoln on the west side of the Nebraska State Capitol in 1912.

An important group of photographs was emerging, united by time, place, subject matter, and technique. But the identity of the photographer remained a mystery. Given the material's multiple connections to the large and active McWilliams family, we initially focused our attention on their ancestors. One, Earl Isadore McWilliams (1892–1960), an uncle of Arthur McWilliams, Sr., had worked in the 1910s as a "finisher" at the Elite Studio for a prominent Lincoln portrait photographer, Alva Townsend. Earl's life travels were traced from Lincoln in the early 1920s, to Colorado by the 1930s, to California by the 1950s, and to his death in San Francisco in 1960. But no documentation has yet been uncovered establishing involvement by Earl McWilliams in photography after his early connection with Townsend.

Community members continued to share family photos, memories, and introductions. In December 2000 we were introduced to Ruth Talbert Greene Folley, then ninety-four years old. Born in Ardmore, Oklahoma in 1906, Ruth Talbert came to Lincoln as an eight-year-old when her father, the Reverend Albert W. Talbert, became pastor of Newman Methodist Episcopal Church, which had served Lincoln's black community since the 1890s. Mrs. Folley's vision is now dimmed, but her mind is not. We conversed about current events and about her childhood in Lincoln in the 1910s. We asked about the photographs we were researching and she described a family portrait of her father, her brother Dakota, and her mother Mildred, with young Ruth seated in front. We recalled that one of the Keister negatives depicted such a scene, but Mrs. Folley went one better, producing from her box of family pictures a vintage print from that exact negative. "Mr. Johnny Johnson took our photo," she told us, and went on to describe her father commissioning Johnson to photograph Sunday school groups in Lincoln's Antelope Park, and other specific recollections of Johnson's role as the community photographer. Mrs. Folley has since donated to the Historical Society eighteen

photographs by John Johnson depicting her family, friends, and Newman Church groups and members, along with other photographs and important family artifacts. She also has created, with Abigail Davis, an extensive oral history of her life in twentieth century Lincoln.

Reinforcing these clear recollections is a supporting document from Johnson's own hand in the collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society. In 1938 he compiled a "Negro History of Lincoln 1888-1938" for that year's National Negro History Week. It is a typescript list of several hundred names of African American residents of Lincoln, most listed by occupation. Earl McWilliams is duly cited, along with four young women, under the heading "Photographer's Assistants." The sole listing under "Photographer" is John Johnson. Too much remains to be learned to assign all the photographs under study solely to John Johnson, especially as he appears in several photographs, suggesting he had either a remote shutter release or a helper. But Johnson is the leading candidate for the photographs' authorship and we attribute them to his hand.

According to census records John Johnson was born in 1879 in Lincoln, Nebraska, son of Harrison (Harry) Johnson and his wife Margaret. Harrison Johnson (1849-1900) is buried in Lincoln's Wyuka Cemetery under a Civil War veteran's headstone. His obituary in the *Nebraska State Journal* in May 1900 recounts that "when but a boy" Johnson had escaped from slavery and "sought protection inside the lines of the First Nebraska regiment." A roster of the regiment lists Johnson as a private. After the war he settled in Nebraska, and Lincoln city directories indicate he worked as a cook at Lincoln hotels and a turnkey at the county jail. County records show that he bought a house lot in the south part of Lincoln by 1880 and built a house there, probably with the assistance of carpenter James Trusty, another African American veteran of the Union Army.

John Johnson graduated from Lincoln High School in 1899, appearing in that year's annual among the track team. He attended the University of Nebraska for a few semesters, participating in sports. He remained in the family home at 1310 A Street with his widowed mother until her death around 1922, and several photographs of the house and its occupants are among the surviving negatives.

Lincoln city directories and his own "Negro History of Lincoln" list Johnson's occupations as janitor at the Post Office (a frequent subject of his photos), drayman (a cart or wagon driver), and photographer. He married Odessa Price, a widow, in 1918. Together they moved to the north edge of Lincoln in 1923, but sold their new residence in 1929 and returned to 1310 A Street, living there until their deaths in 1953. Their move from 1310 A Street may have marked the end of Johnson's photographic endeavors. None of the photos yet identified date later than a view of the cornerstone laying at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, which is inscribed October 8, 1922.

Between 1912 and 1922, the period during which Johnson was taking photographs, Lincoln's population grew from 44,000 in 1910 to 55,000 in 1920, when the city had finally regained the numbers of residents lost in the turbulent 1890s. The African American population, poorer than the community at large, was especially affected by the Panic of 1893 and had dropped from 1,360 in 1890 to just over 800 in 1900. The black community was also slower to rebound, slipping to 733 residents in 1910 before climbing to 900 in 1920, according to Colwell's research.

This small community within the larger city fostered several churches, including three founded in the nineteenth century that still serve the community in the twenty-first. Quinn Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, established in 1871 and recipient of a grant of land from the Nebraska State Legislature in 1873, is featured in several photographs. Mt. Zion Baptist Church, which was granted a building lot by the state 1883, is pictured in 1922. Newman Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in 1892, is represented by several images, including Rev. Talbert and his family (Plate 21) photographed at the front door of their small church. Many of the photographs depict well-dressed individuals posed in front of building walls—probably churchgoers literally in their "Sunday best."

Lincoln was experiencing a major building boom in the 1910s and '20s, and the Chamber of Commerce slogan boasted "A New Skyline Every Morning." The photographer took an interest, photographing the steel skeleton of the new Miller and Paine Department Store and several views of the mid-1910s construction of a new wing of the U.S. Post Office and Courthouse, where Johnson worked for a time. Several of these views focused on the workers, such as an old gentleman mowing the grass on Government Square, where the Post Office stood (Plate 35), and scenes of a street paving crew (Plates 31 and 33).

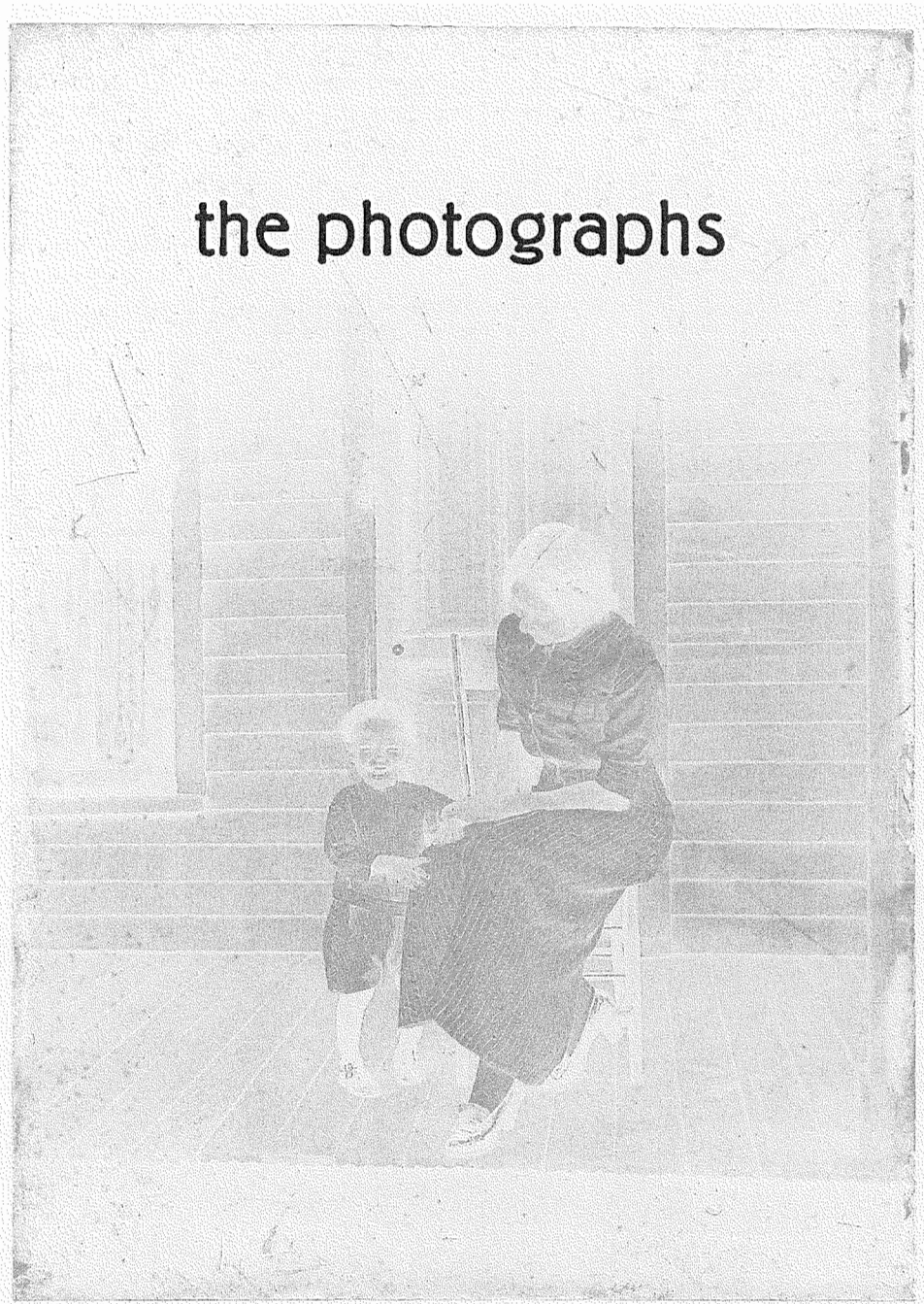
What is hard to discern from the photographs is the state of race relations in early twentieth century Lincoln. Some photographs of school children show racially mixed groups. Ruth Talbert attended Lincoln Public Schools and the University of Nebraska, and neither system segregated its students. But the teaching certificate she earned in 1926 was not a passport to employment; Lincoln schools did not hire African American teachers until the 1950s. When Ku Klux Klan organizers went national in the early 1920s, Nebraska became a focal point, and Lincoln was home to an estimated five thousand Klansmen—"the largest and most vocal [klavern] in the state"—according to Michael Schuyler in a 1985 *Nebraska History* article. Thousands of Klansmen paraded on O Street (Lincoln's main thoroughfare) during state conventions in 1924 and 1925. Residential segregation, not apparent in early residential patterns, became codified in the 1910s when new developments inserted race restrictions into deeds, beginning in the Sheridan Park area in 1916, where the paving crew of plates 31 and 33 appear to be working.

As a whole, the body of photographic images attributed to John Johnson provides an insider's view of a growing city and the small but thriving African American community within it. Cherished children are posed with bows in little girls' hair and rings on babies' plump fingers. Other records show that discrimination in housing and employment was intensifying, but the photos depict small, tidy houses. Many of the subjects are not yet identified, but families may yet recognize and report on heirloom images. The body of negatives is widely scattered, but we hope all can be made accessible, at least for study. With each new find, with each shared memory, a truer image emerges of a time, a place, and a community worthy of remembrance.

Edward F. Zimmer is Preservation Planner with the Lincoln/Lancaster County Planning Department.

Abigail B. Davis, formerly with the Lincoln/Lancaster County Planning Department, is now pursuing a master's degree in City Planning.

the photographs



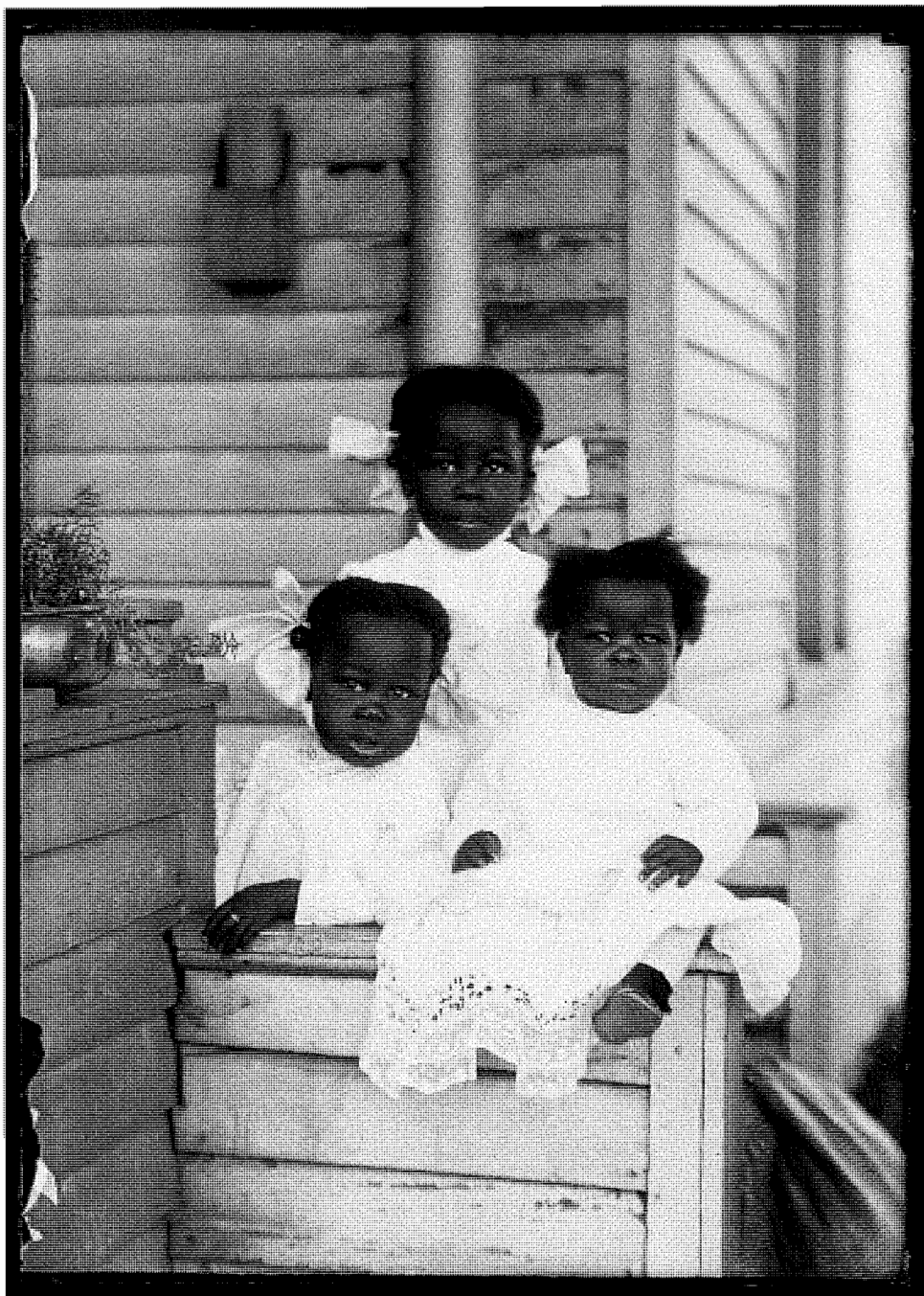


Plate 1

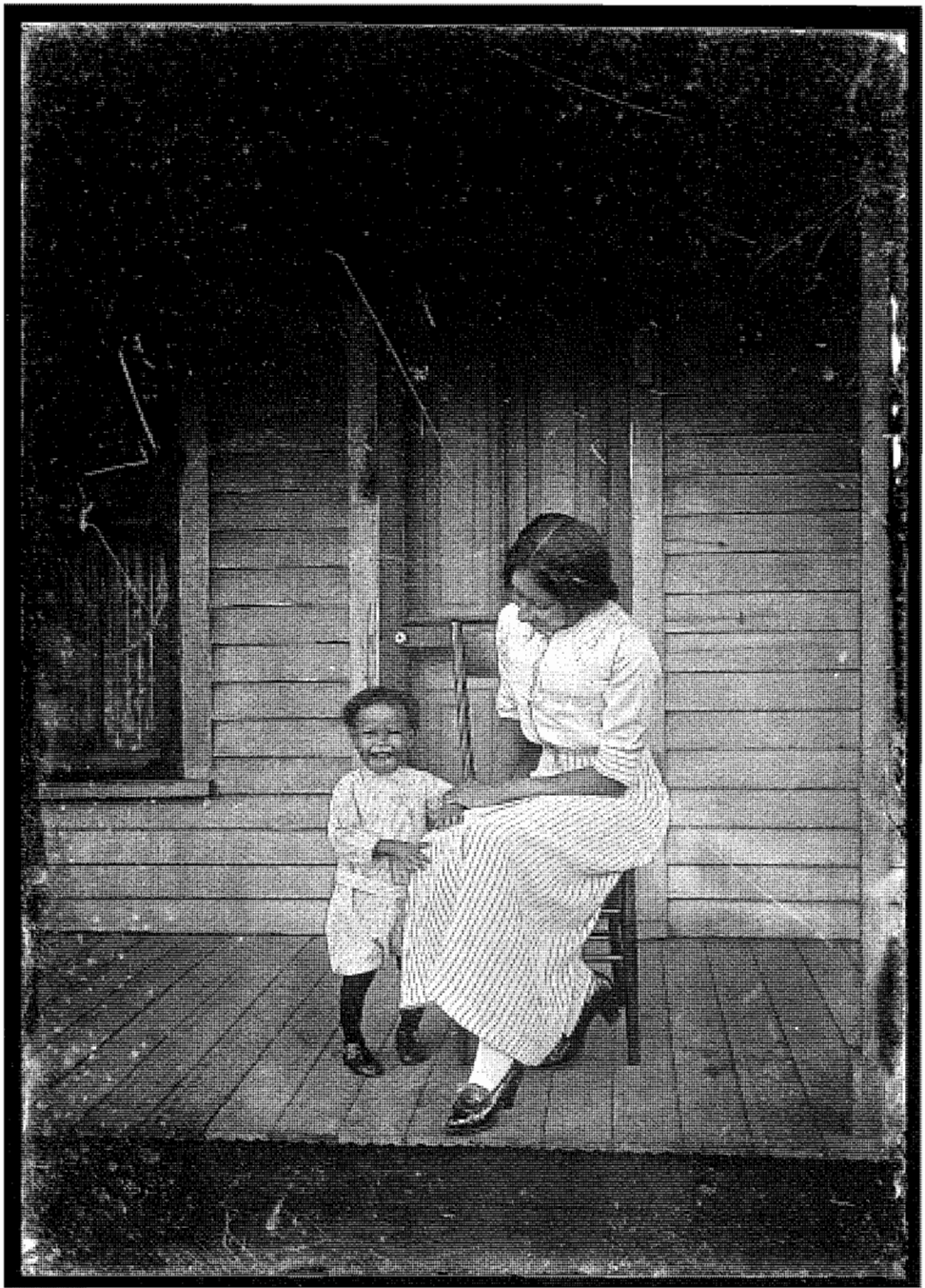


Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 6

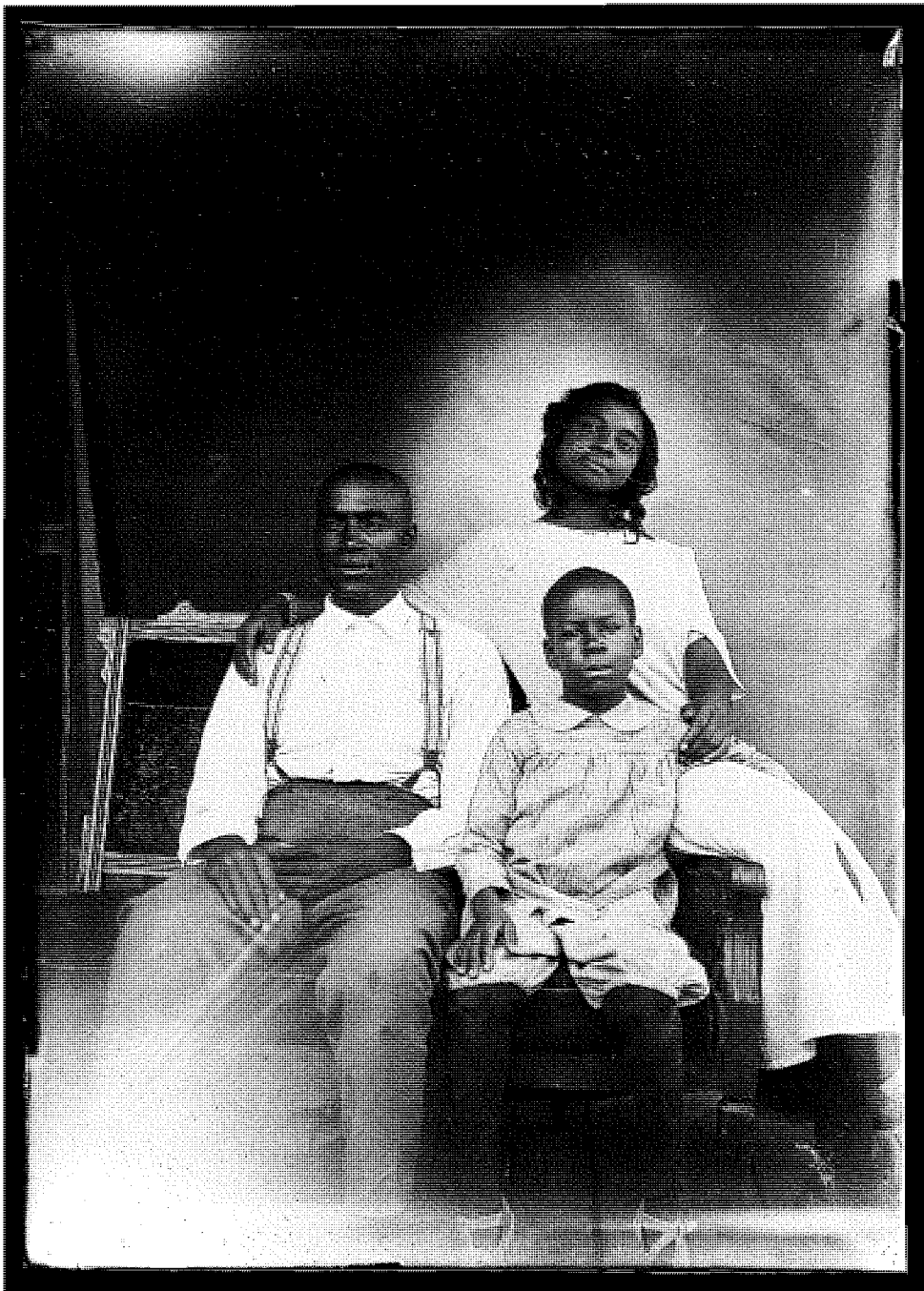


Plate 7



Plate 8

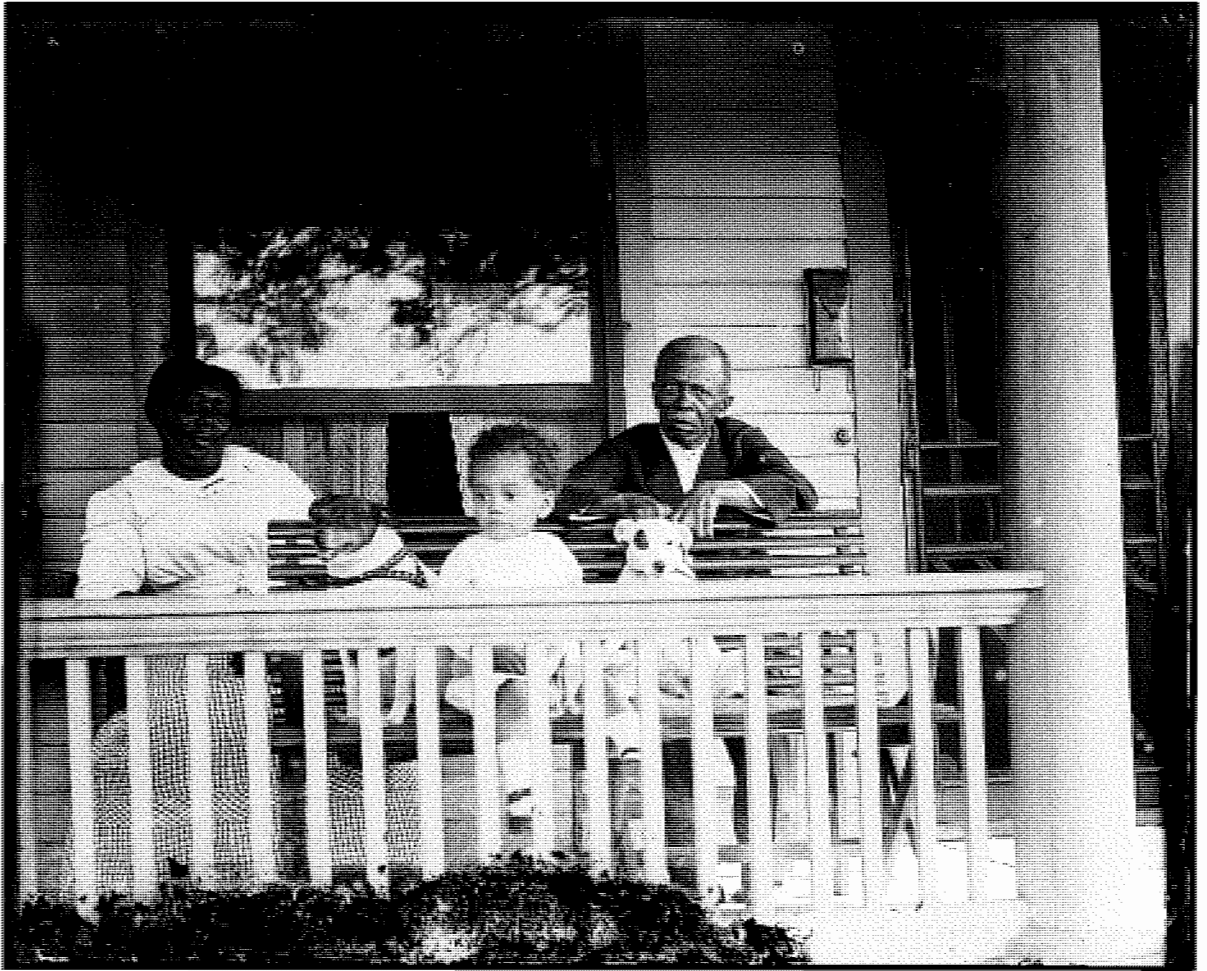


Plate 9



Plate 10



Plate 11

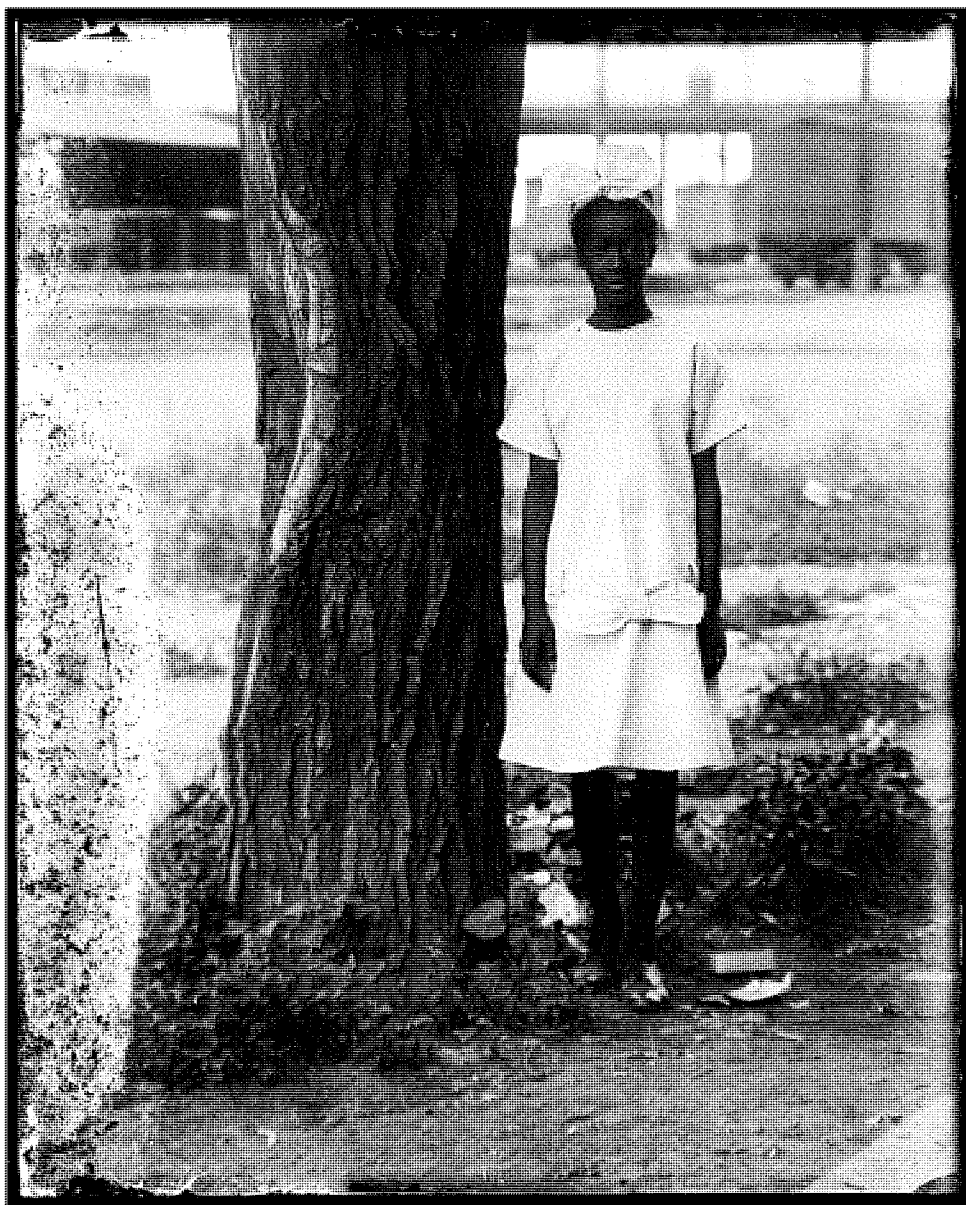


Plate 12



Plate 13



Plate 14



Plate 15



Plate 16

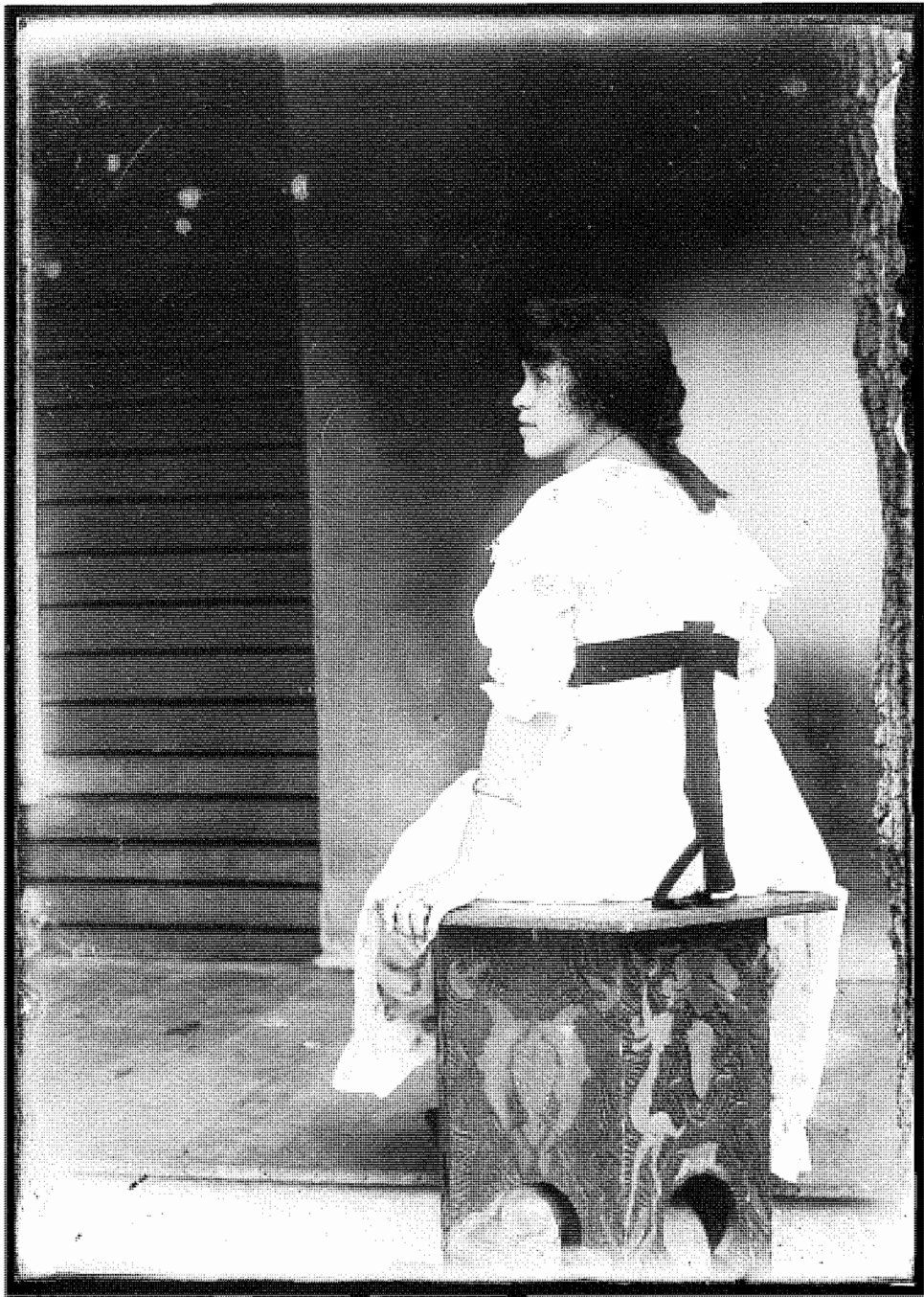


Plate 17



Plate 18

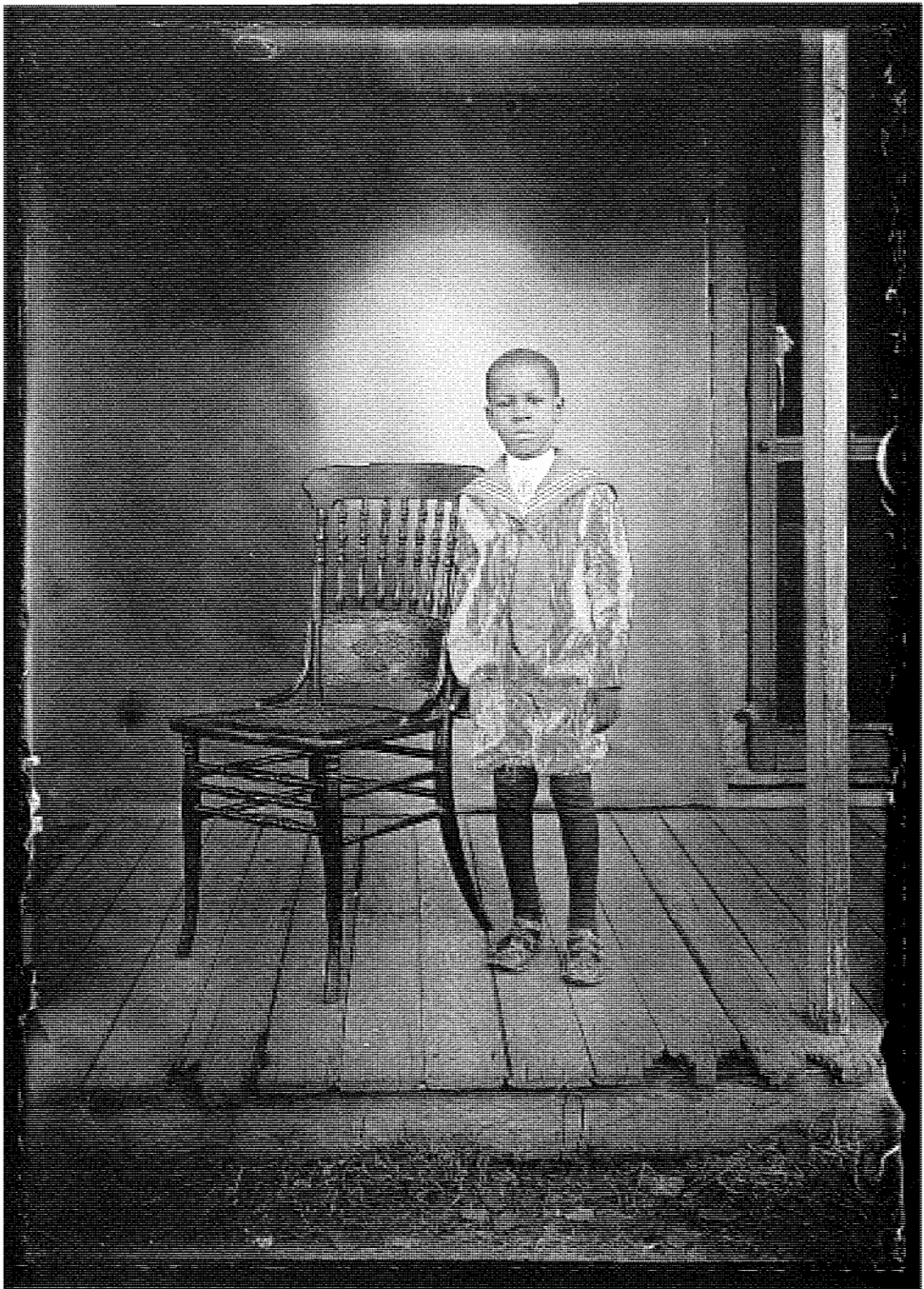


Plate 19



Plate 20



Plate 21

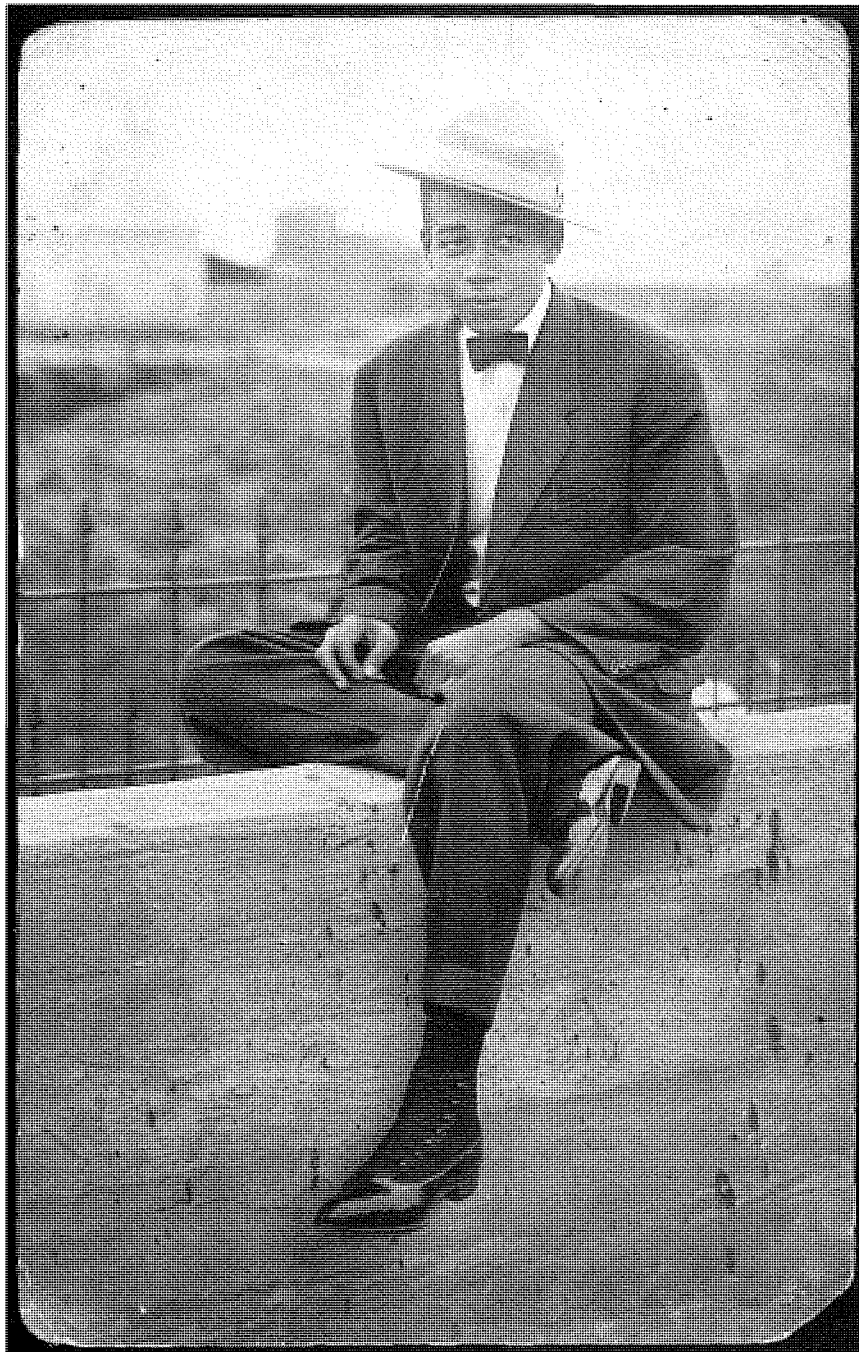


Plate 22



Plate 23



Plate 24



Plate 25



Plate 26



Plate 27

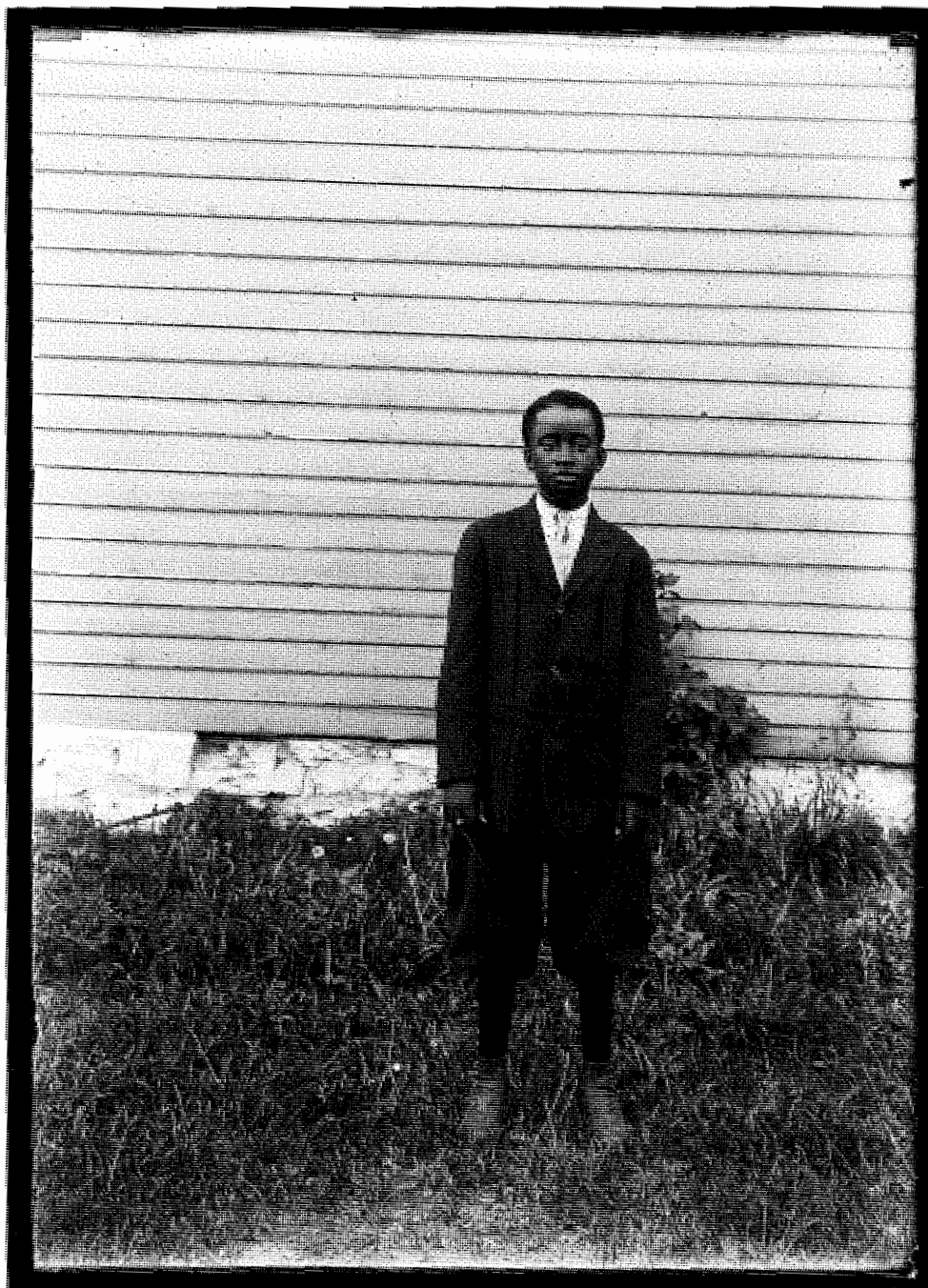


Plate 28



Plate 29



Plate 30



Plate 31



Plate 32



Plate 33



Plate 34



Plate 35

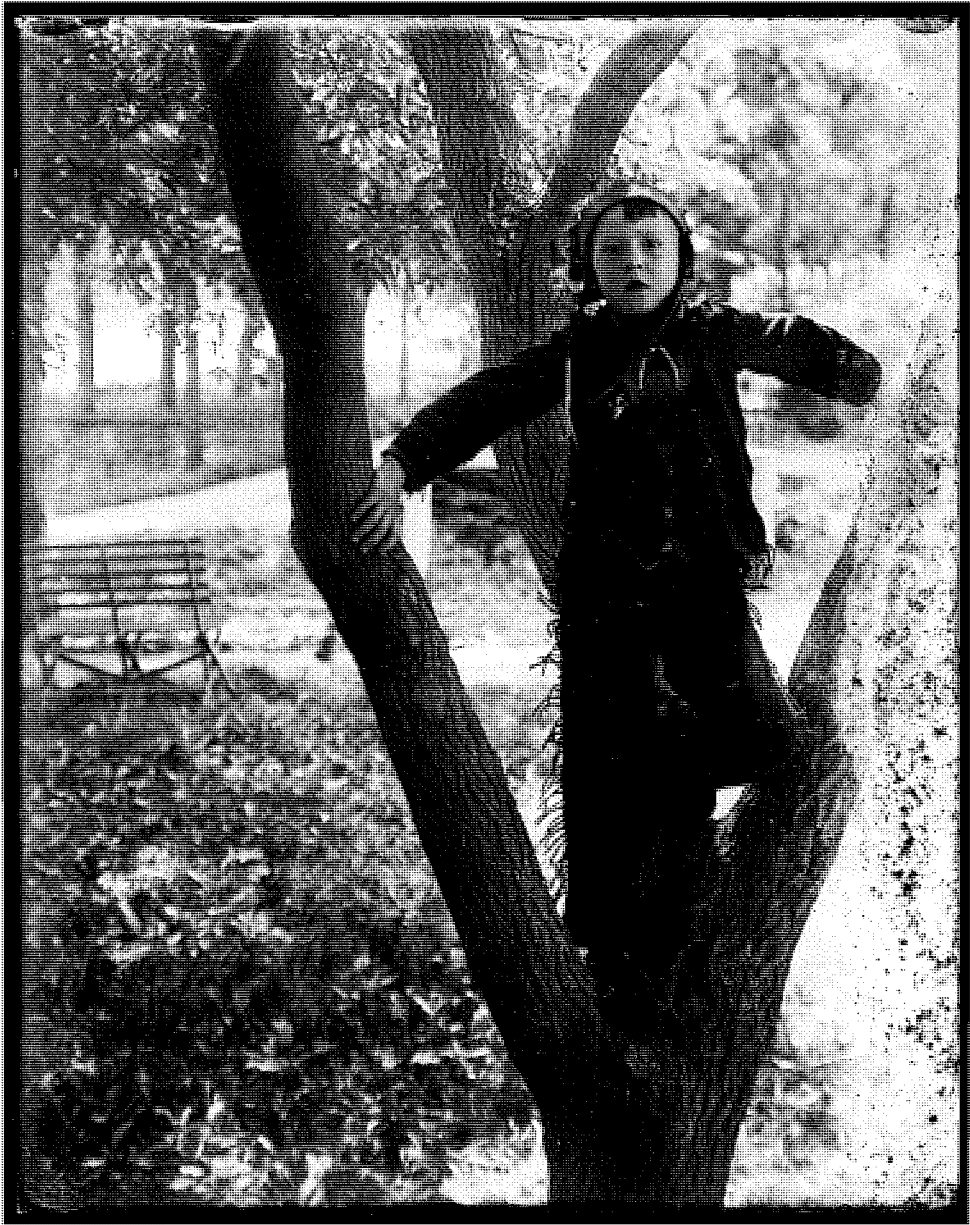


Plate 36



Plate 37



Plate 38



Plate 39



Plate 40

Notes to the Exhibition

This exhibition presents forty prints from a truly extraordinary collection of black-and-white photographs made by an African American photographer who lived and worked in Lincoln, Nebraska, in the early part of the twentieth century. Made between about 1912 and 1925, these portraits, views, and candid shots are more than just stunning images; they document life in a vibrant black community in a small Plains city, a society rarely depicted in any medium.

The photographer who created the images in *Recovered Views: African American Portraits, 1912–1925* was unquestionably skilled: A thorough understanding of pictorial composition is evident throughout the exhibition. The brilliant use of space and proportion within the frame, the handling of natural light, the full photographic tonal range from bright but detailed whites to deep blacks, testify to technical mastery in every step in the process of exposing and developing glass plate negatives. This is not the work of an amateur, but of a highly accomplished professional. Besides the photographer's technical and aesthetic prowess, the images give evidence of his striking rapport with the sitters. His ability to make them feel at ease in front of the camera is abundantly clear. It adds warmth and intimacy to the technical mastery evident in his work, and raises it to a level seldom achieved even by many well-known photographers of the day.

Much remains to be learned about these images and their maker, currently believed to be John Johnson of Lincoln, son of a slave-turned-Civil War veteran. But what is known and indisputable is the value of these photographs, not only as documents of people in a seldom-seen time and place, but as masterful examples of the photographer's art.

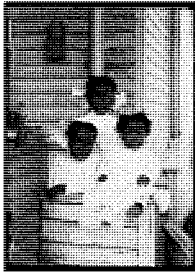
The forty prints in this exhibition were generated by Brixen Imaging of Lincoln, most from digital files produced by the Nebraska State Historical Society's Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center digital imaging laboratory in Omaha. All the prints show the entire original uncropped, whether a glass plate negative or vintage print (Plates 21–23). The few known vintage prints that match extant negatives are all cropped, some to postcard dimensions, others to fit standard presentation folders of the time. We have chosen not to speculate about the photographer's intentions, however, and to allow the full plate to represent his work, even when that means allowing elements of the location or set to show, details that he might have planned to crop from the final print. Whether or not that was his plan, his eye for composition is evident in the framing of almost every image: Most appear to be carefully composed from edge to edge, leaving a "conventional" portrait available for cropping, but framed within a larger photograph that tells a more complex story than the central image alone.

Most of the photographs exhibit some damage, ranging from pinholes that might have appeared when they were originally developed, to fingerprints, large scratches, water damage, and flaking and deteriorating emulsion that occurred later. Some negatives were dirty, and they were cleaned before scanning, but no other attempt was made to improve the images from the condition in which they came to us. Their tonal values were adjusted digitally, but with sympathy for what a photographer printing them optically some ninety years ago could have done. Since so few vintage prints are available, we had no reliable models to follow in making those adjustments and simply attempted to bring each image to its optimum.

For this publication we have chosen not to caption the plates, save for plate numbers. If titles for the photographs ever existed, they are now lost to us, and any titles we might contrive would only provide a distraction. In the notes that follow the plates we offer social and historical contexts, along with questions that arise from these enigmatic images.

John Carter
Senior Research Associate
Nebraska State Historical Society

Notes to the photographs



1. Three children on a porch. Children can be difficult to photograph well, but serious, formal portraits like this one, as well as the relatively casual, natural shots in this collection, suggest the photographer was able to develop a trusting rapport even with his

youngest subjects. These children sport clothing, shoes, hair ribbons, and finger rings typical of the 1910s. Babies of both genders wore dresses, but the center-parted hair and absence of a ribbon may suggest the youngest of the three is a boy. A mystery in this image: Are the folds of fabric at the lower right the mother's skirt, peeking from behind the banister where she sits, hidden by the children, to balance the youngest child?



2. (cover) Mother and laughing child. Spontaneity is not easy to capture with a cumbersome view camera that requires the photographer to compose and focus an upside-down image on a translucent ground glass, and to do so while under a dark cloth. The mother

and son's identities, as well as the source of the little boy's obviously genuine delight, remain a mystery.



3. Wedding Couple. The identity of this handsome couple is unknown, but the proprietary way the man grasps the arm of the woman's chair reinforces the likelihood that this is a wedding portrait. The "Roman" chair appears to be the

same one on which the young woman rests her Nebraska pillow in Plate 25 and on which the woman in white lounges in Plate 20.



4. Baby on a quilt. Neutral space plays an important role in this photograph, in which the foreground is eliminated and

the background is virtually undifferentiated, flattening the image. The tied crib quilt was likely a colorful piece, its "bow tie" pattern banded by a bright print, a sharp contrast to the plain backdrop. A faint outline of gathered fabric by the left table leg, might, as in Plate 1, suggest that someone is propping up the baby from behind.

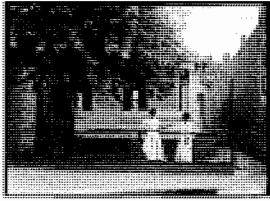
This baby's mother, like many African American mothers of the time, may have been attended by Dr. Arthur Moss, who practiced between 1911 and 1938. He was one of three African American physicians in Lincoln during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Midwives also assisted at births.



5. Anna Bedell and her daughter Zola in front of their home. The house in the photograph bears the number 1429 and probably is

1429 Mulberry Street, where the Bedell family lived from 1911 to 1923, according to city directories. James A. Bedell was a porter at the Lindell Hotel and also worked as a shoe shiner and valet. Zola is remembered as friendly, beautiful, and well liked. A few years after this picture was taken, Mrs. Bedell and Zola both contracted a fatal illness and were mourned at a double funeral.

The bent willow benches, the slatted long bench, and the screened porch reveal strategies for keeping cool when houses were not airconditioned. Was the horse tied at the back of a house used for riding, pulling a small carriage, or both?



6. Women posing in front of little white house. The house portrait, a photograph of people and their estates, is a staple of nineteenth and

early twentieth century photography. Here luminous backlighting, the surface textures of surrounding buildings, and the posed figures lend a formal dignity to both dwelling and occupants.

The women wear dresses and aprons made from the "wash goods" worn frequently during warm months. Usually cotton, these lightweight fabrics relied on woven patterns or subtle stripes for visual impact. The photographer's technical skill enabled him to depict his subjects and their clothing in fine detail.



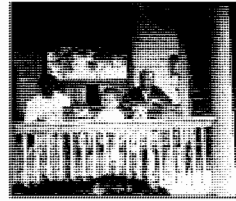
7. Family trio on porch. Although their names and their relationship to each other are unknown, their pose suggests this man, woman, and child are a family. The portrait, shot on a porch, takes on a stylized, almost classical formality by the addition of a painted

studio backdrop and idealized poses reminiscent of classical art. The backdrop is a so-called "clouded headground." Mail-order catalogs boasted backdrops painted in oil on fine muslin "extensively used for full figure work and small groups." Despite the formal backdrop, the adults wear "at home" or work clothes, and the boy sports the "bloomer" short pants and black stockings that was the uniform for young males.

When he printed the negative did this photographer, like many of his day, intend to crop out the jarring details of gritty reality that show around the edges? Or was he in some way satirizing the romanticized studio photo sets common at the time? Regardless, this portrait, like the others in this collection, is tender, revealing, respectful, and dignified.



8. Three generations. These affectionate but unidentified women are probably related. Most likely the young woman and the girl are the daughter and granddaughter of the woman seated in the center.



9. Toddler and dogs with elder couple. Is this a grandchild, given a front-row seat with the other source of family pride and joy—the two canines? Or is

the arrangement of people and dogs in the image much less deliberate? The woman wears an everyday gingham skirt, but has a neat bar pin attached to her collar, and the gentleman has put on his coat for the occasion. Even the dogs are well dressed: harnesses and collars like those pictured were widely available, often decorated with studs, spikes, or even pearls.



10. Baby in a carriage.

This photograph was taken in front of the same house as the three children on a porch (Plate 2); in this view the baby is wearing a bonnet. The potted plant on the porch appears in both photographs and suggests they were taken at about the

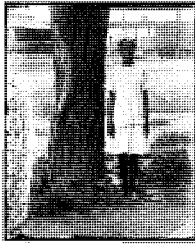
same time.

The carriage is typical of the time period, but offers no firm clues as to the photograph's date. Baby buggies with collapsible hoods were popular in pre-automobile days because they afforded "ample protection in all kinds of weather," as the Sears, Roebuck, and Company catalog of 1908 boasts, and many had an adjustable back and footrest, allowing the carriage to function as a seat or bed.



11. Florence Jones and her mother. Ruth Talbert Folley (see Plates 21 and 23) identified the girl as Florence Jones. The woman seated to her right is probably Kate Constellawail, Florence's mother. The Lincoln rail yards and the O Street

viaduct visible in the background suggest the photograph was taken near their home at Seventh and N streets near the city's warehouse district.

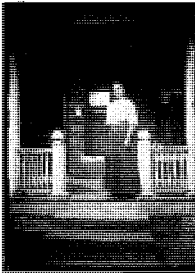


12. Florence Jones. Florence appears in several of Johnson's photographs, by herself, with her mother, and with others. She graduated from Lincoln High School in 1923.



13. Women in black on porch. The young woman on the left wears a pearl necklace, bracelet, and two rings, suggestive of a

formal occasion, but the seating arrangement is certainly casual.



14. Woman at brick house. The pose of the woman on her front porch, slightly to the right of center and facing slightly away from the camera, relieves the rigid symmetry of the balusters, newel posts, and pillars. She wears a "waist" (blouse) and skirt,

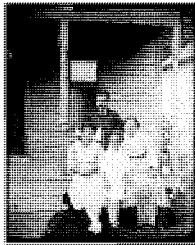
the basic wardrobe of the time. Do her patterned belt, stag-head fob, and snake bracelet suggest she had dressed up for the photographer?

Neither the woman nor the house has been identified, though the address above the door, 431, offers a possible clue. Some city directories identified African Americans with the letter c (for "colored") after their names, a practice that, ironically, has proven useful decades later in documenting some residences of early Lincoln African Americans. Thus far a search of directory entries for the residents of houses numbered 431 has proved inconclusive.



15. Three women with a cat. The woman on the right may be Allie O. Harding, who ran a dressmaking business from her home for many years. The women's stylish dresses and the lacy cap worn by the elder woman add an air of formality, while the

casual poses and the cat convey a level of comfortable hominess.



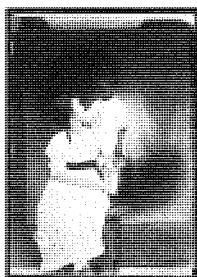
16. Family with two daughters on a porch. A handlebar mustache and crisply parted hair lend the father a dapper air. The mother wears a somewhat less formal gingham skirt, but the girls are well dressed for summer. The plant in the

dovetailed box on the porch and the stems and leaves intruding into the lower right-hand corner of the frame further the summertime notion. Note the boardwalk that curves up to the front step.



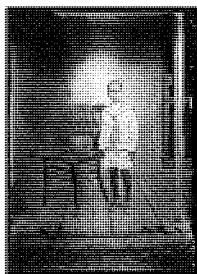
17. Lottie Brown. Lottie was born about 1897, the oldest of the eight children of John and Ludie Patterson Brown. She was raised in Fremont, Nebraska. Lottie married Clifton Greene as a young woman. She remained in Lincoln for some years after they

divorced, moving to Chicago in the early 1930s. Lottie's great-niece, Betty Grimes, remembers her as "a beautiful and fiery woman," and when visiting Lottie in Chicago in 1940 thinking that her Great-aunt Lottie was as intriguing as ever. A vintage print of this photograph shows only Lottie sitting on the carved hexagonal stool in front of the backdrop, the porch details having been cropped out. Note the straight pins that hold the velvet sash of the dress in place.



18. Lottie Brown and a brother. This romantic, formal portrait reflects contemporary trends. Lottie Brown looks every bit the storybook heroine in her sashed empire-waist dress, and her little brother's Chinese-style suit evidences the craze for the Orient that was in

vogue in the early decades of the twentieth century.



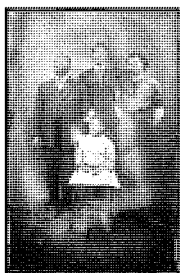
19. Lad in a sailor suit. This well-dressed little boy in a sailor suit and black stockings wears an outfit right off the catalog page. An errant pant leg, however, reveals the stocking garter worn to keep children's hosiery above the knee. This dapper young fellow is also

depicted in less formal wear in Plate 7.



20. Woman in white. This young woman appears relaxed, confident, and almost saucy, especially compared to the much more formal young woman in white in Plate 30. The identities of the two "women in white" and their relationship to the photographer remain

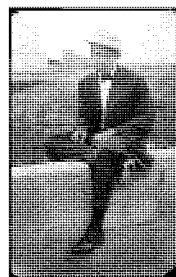
mysteries to be solved. This woman poses on the same "Roman" chair that holds the Nebraska pillow in Plate 25, and on which the bride sits in Plate 3.



21. The Talbert Family: Rev. Albert, Dakota, Mildred, and Ruth. This family portrait was taken in front of the Newman Methodist Episcopal Church, at 733 J Street, in about 1914. The Talberts came from Guthrie, Oklahoma, in 1913. Rev. Talbert was pastor of the

church until 1920, also serving as secretary of the Western General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The swastika on Dakota's lapel was a common symbol in the 1910s signifying friendship, good luck, and good health. Riggs Pharmacy in Lincoln used it as a trademark, and in their advertising called it the "Sign of Good Health." The ancient symbol, seen in Egyptian and Native American cultures, had widespread benign uses before it

was co-opted and ultimately corrupted by the National Socialist Party in Germany. A woman in Plate 32 wears a belt with a swastika buckle.



22. Dakota Sidney Talbert, about 1915. Dakota was born in Fort Scott, Kansas, in 1898. He served as a private in WWI, and after the war married Stella Conrad, whose family was from Broken Bow, Nebraska. The couple had two girls, Louise and Naomi. Lincoln city directories from 1920

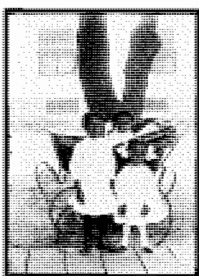
through 1924 list Dakota as an elevator operator, shiner, driver, and cook. He was the chef at Hoenshel's Golden Pheasant Tea Room in Lincoln, and later a chef in Omaha. He died in Lincoln in 1968.



23. Ruth Arlene Lucy Talbert with Anna Hill's cat Blackie. At age eight Ruth Talbert (see also Plate 21) posed behind her family home at Seventh and J streets. In 2002, at age ninety-seven, Ruth Folley remembered dressing up for the photo, and receiving instructions about

exactly where to sit from John Johnson, whose camera was already set up a few feet away. Her mother had arranged for the portrait on the recommendation of her neighbor and friend, Anna Hill. When Mrs. Hill's cat Blackie showed up, the photographer asked the little girl in her best dress and hair bows to hold the kitty on her lap.

Ruth Talbert Greene Folley was born January 29, 1906, in Ardmore, Oklahoma, when it was still considered "Indian Territory." She graduated from Lincoln High School in 1924. She received her Kindergarten and Primary Teacher's Certificate from the University of Nebraska in 1926, but the Lincoln public schools first hired African American teachers in the 1950s. She married Clifton Ellsworth Greene with whom she had a son, Clifton Ellsworth Greene Jr. She later married John Folley. She has been a longtime Lincoln resident and member of the Newman United Methodist Church. She was employed by the General Services Administration and at the Malone Community Center in the daycare center and as the cook and child nutritionist.



24. Three children on a boardwalk. These perfectly groomed children, who also appear in Plate 2, bear the cherubic countenances popular in romantic imagery of the day, but their placement on a boardwalk grounds them in everyday reality.

Their expressions, while serious, seem open and unintimidated, a testament to the photographer's rapport with his subjects.



25. Young woman with Nebraska pillow. This graceful portrait uses the strong horizontal lines of the clapboard siding

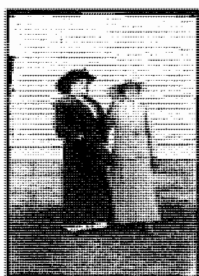
and the grassy lawn running up to it to create a sense of depth. Deepening "shadows" surround the bright center of the image, creating a vignette or telescope-like effect.

The straighter cut and shorter skirt of the girl's outfit suggest this image may be a later one in the collection. Felt letters were commonly sewn onto pennants, pillows, and throws to spell out school names in the 1910s and '20s. But why are the "N" and the lowercase "a"s backwards? The curved seat was known as a "Roman" chair, touted by the Sears catalog as "very popular as an odd corner piece." It appears in at least two other portraits, Plates 3 and 20.



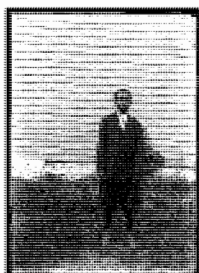
26. Man wearing a bow tie. This unidentified gentleman strikes a confident, casual pose, and despite the tipped-back hat and slightly crumpled jacket, his shoes are well shined and his tie is knotted in a perfect bow.

The photographer frequently placed subjects in front of clapboard siding. Was he fascinated with the power of horizontal lines and the way his subjects interrupt the repetition of those lines to form outlines of themselves? Or was he merely taking advantage of a handy background with good light?



27. Cora Thomas and a friend. Mrs. Thomas (right), impeccably dressed in a light suit and hat, is accompanied by an elegantly appointed friend in a fur stole and muff. Cora Hancock, originally from Fort Scott, Kansas, married Lon B. Thomas and, with their

five children, ran a neighborhood grocery store in the front room of their house at 715 C Street. Later, Cora's son Wendell owned and operated the Thomas Funeral Home in Omaha, which is still in business today.



28. Willie Smith. The son of Charles and Ethel Smith (Plate 34), young Willie wears a "Buster Brown" style suit, tie, and high button boots. The dandelion in fluff in the background suggests spring. Could this and other portraits of well-dressed people shot

against the clapboard background have been made on Easter?



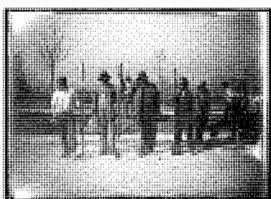
29. Young woman with three puppies. This young woman dressed in gingham was a steadier model than the pups she cradles. She herself may have coiled her braided hair into the buns over her ears, or her hair may have been styled by one of several African

American hairdressers, including Mildred Talbert (Plate 21), who plied their trade in customers' homes. This worn porch is the same one on which the boy dressed in a sailor suit stands in Plate 19.



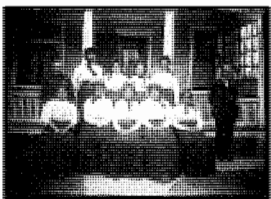
30. Woman in satin and pearls. This portrait is typical of professionally made "occasional" photographs of the time. Young women graduating from high school often dressed in white, and the elaborate dress with lace and net insertions and beaded satin testifies to a

special occasion. The geraniums suggest springtime, further support for the possibility that it is a graduation portrait.



31. Street paving crew posing. The African American members of a street paving crew are the principal subjects of this photo-

graph, which also shows Caucasian workers in the background, including one "lying down on the job." Many African Americans worked in the construction trades, and a few eventually owned and operated their own businesses. In a recent informal interview McKinley Tarpley, a skilled concrete and asphalt finisher who eventually owned a concrete and asphalt company, said, "I'd watch 'em rake it in, standing with my straightedge, then I'd finish it level. No one could finish like me, and I wouldn't teach 'em my secret."



32. Church group at the home of Rev. Oliver and Anna Burckhardt. Posed in front of the Burckhardt house at 1239 Washington

Street, with Rev. Burckhardt standing to the right, these women may have been the Stewardess Board of the Church of Christ Holiness, which Anna Burckhardt chaired for sixteen years. All the women wear white waists (blouses) and dark skirts, but express their individuality with jewelry, belts, and decorative buckles (one a swastika; see Plate 20). Some are wearing ribbon rosettes, but it is impossible to make out any lettering that would more precisely identify the group.

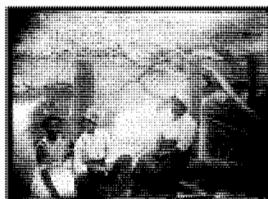
Rev. Burckhardt was born in Missouri in 1868 and settled in Lincoln in 1890. In addition to his ministry he worked as a porter for the Burlington Railroad and as a waiter at the Lincoln Hotel. Anna was a well-known oil and watercolor artist and was nationally recognized for her china painting.



33. Street paving crew at work.

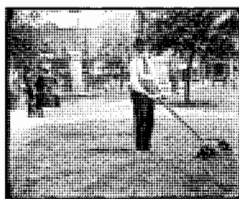
This paving crew spreading blacktop may be working in the Sheridan Park area, a new

development in 1916 where race restrictions were written into deeds. Surveys of housing data suggest little racial segregation in residential neighborhoods before this time.



34. Ethel and Charles Smith with Anna Hill at Salt Creek. The casual, sleepy atmosphere of an afternoon at the lake might

suggest an accidental snapshot-like composition, but the careful subject placement evident throughout the photographer's work suggests that this, too, is a highly structured photograph and anything but accidental. The dam in the background resembles one near Epworth Park, a popular Methodist summer camp on Salt Creek south of Lincoln.

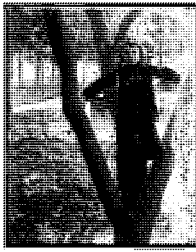


35. Man mowing Government Square, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Johnson did not restrict his photography to African American subjects. Several in the

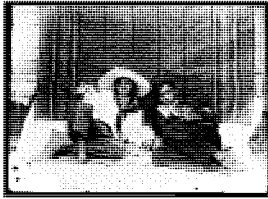
collection were made at public events at which most of the participants were Caucasian, such as the dedication of the Daniel Chester French statue of Abraham Lincoln at the state capitol. Others, like this one and No. 36, are portraits of Caucasian subjects.

The fountain in Government Square (left) was not simply a place to toss coins and make a wish; its highly mineralized, saline water was prized by some for its supposed beneficial properties. Once a week Rev. Albert Talbert and his daughter Ruth (No. 21) would make the journey downtown to fill a jar with mineral water to promote health and longevity.



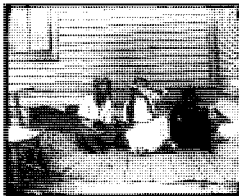
36. Boy in Indian costume in tree. "Playing Indian" was a popular pastime for early twentieth century children, and several youth organizations, such as the Camp Fire Girls, adopted stylized, ersatz Native American

costumes. Whether this boy was part of an organized group or simply wore the costume for play is unknown.



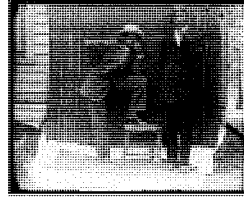
37. Costumed girls posing with cards and booze bottle. An informal tradition in early twentieth century photography, both

amateur and professional, was to create scenes in which young women were dressed as men—usually men misbehaving. Cowboys, gamblers, highwaymen, and a variety of other cads, villains, and miscreants were depicted, probably to the shock and horror of the young ladies' grandmothers. In this example the two costumed girls are posed against a backdrop fashioned from a blanket that evokes a serape. The big sombrero furthers the exotic, south-of-the-border illusion. Playing cards and a booze bottle suggest two of the principal forms of vice at the time.



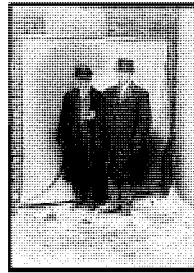
38. Three costumed girls sitting on a blanket. Another in a series of four known "bad girl" images that appear to have been made at the same time.

Two or three girls appear in all four images, and many of the same props (stool, table, blanket, bottle, and cards) also show up. The scarf on the head of the girl on the left seems to be the same one worn by the girl on the left in Plate 37.



39. Costumed girls smoking. Another in the series of "bad girl" photographs, this one showing them wearing men's clothes and smoking. The girl on the left is

wearing the same trousers in Plate 37.



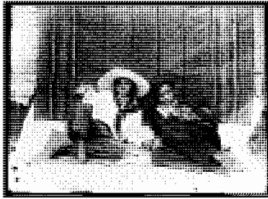
40. Two well-dressed men, one checking the time. Are these well-appointed men, one in a bowler, the other in a "telescope" style hat, carefully posed in front of the backdrop, or is this a frozen moment of real life, one of the men consulting his watch out

of impatience with the photographer? The snow at their feet, as well as their gloves and topcoats, suggest less-than-ideal conditions for outdoor photography, but the image is charming and well exposed despite the nip in the air.



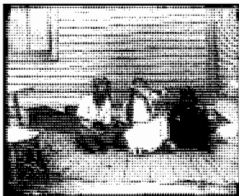
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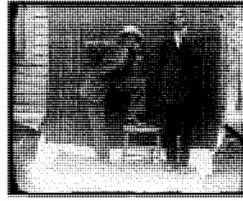
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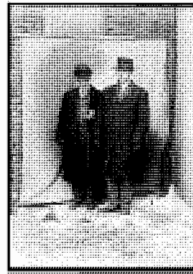
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