



Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

“To an energetic, ambitious woman with even ordinary opportunities, success is always possible.”

*Frances Benjamin Johnston
Feminist & Photographer*



“The New Woman,” self-portrait, 1896

Through the Lens of Frances Benjamin Johnston

[Frances Benjamin Johnston](#) (1864-1966) was among the first professional and nationally acclaimed women photographers in the U.S. Her [groundbreaking](#) career spanned more than 60 years during which time she served as White House photographer to five administrations. She also created a systematic method for documenting historic buildings, and she mentored other women in running successful photography businesses.

Born in Grafton, Virginia, fifty-six years before women won the vote, Johnston’s family moved to Rochester, New York, then to Washington, D.C., where her mother became a political journalist and her father an official for the Treasury Department. Johnston attended private schools, then graduated in 1883 from what is known today as Notre Dame of Maryland University. With a passion for art, she also studied at the [Académie Julian](#) in Paris and at the Washington Art Students League.

However, it was a gift from a family friend that captured Johnston's imagination and changed her life forever. In 1888, entrepreneur George Eastman, inventor of [Eastman Kodak](#) cameras and films, [gave](#) Johnston her first camera. She was hooked. She began photographing family and friends while learning the craft of photography and dark-room techniques with [Thomas Smillie](#), director of photography at the Smithsonian.



Booker T. Washington, by Frances Johnston

Soon Johnston was back in Europe photographing items for the museum's collections. On her return, she worked for Eastman Kodak in Washington, D.C., learning the technical aspects of her craft. By 1894, at the age of 30, Johnston [opened](#) her own photography studio becoming the only female photographer in the city.

Johnston's work gained national recognition in the 1890s and early 1900s. She often sold images to the [Bain News Service syndicate](#), frequently writing the stories that accompanied her photos. She was also hired by national periodicals to photograph the political, religious, business, and social celebrities of the day. Johnston's

portraits were iconic and included suffrage leader [Susan B. Anthony](#), author and humorist [Mark Twain](#), and educator [Booker T. Washington](#).

During the administration of President Benjamin Harrison (1889 - 1893), Johnston became the official White House photographer. She retained that title during the tenures of Presidents Cleveland, McKinley, Roosevelt, and Taft making intimate portraits of the Presidents and their families plus diplomats and other world leaders.



President Benjamin Harrison and family, by Frances Johnston

But Johnston wasn't afraid to rattle feathers. Defying social and gender norms, she made boundary breaking self-portraits. In one that she made in 1896 called "The New Woman," Johnston is seated in front of a fireplace with her dress hiked up to reveal her petticoat. She holds a cigarette in one hand and a beer stein in the other. In another image made about the same time, Johnston is dressed as a man wearing a cap and sporting a fake mustache, while holding a bicycle. Her avant-garde images won respect and influence among Bohemian circles. She also had a reputation as an entertaining drinking companion and story teller.

When Johnston launched her career, cameras were large, cumbersome, and quite heavy. Yet, she traveled extensively in pursuit of her art, hauling her large format cameras, tripods, film holders, and related gear across Europe and the U.S. to swanky venues, as well as coal mines in Appalachia, and rugged natural sites such as [Mammoth Cave](#).



*Susan B. Anthony, ca. 1890
by Frances Johnston*

Outspoken and passionate about progressive education, Johnston also documented students at public schools in Washington, D.C., and at the newly opened Black colleges [Tuskegee Institute](#) in Alabama, and the [Hampton Institute](#) in Virginia. She also focused her lens on the [Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania](#).

In the 1910s, Johnston became interested in photographing contemporary architecture, landscapes, and gardens. This evolved into another body of work executed in the 1920s that was dedicated to documenting and preserving historic buildings in the South. Grants from the [Carnegie Corporation](#) enabled Johnston to travel thousands of miles by car, criss-crossing the South to make a comprehensive photographic survey of Southern architecture from the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. These photos were exhibited widely and also published in several books. Johnston moved to New Orleans in the 1940s where she died in 1952 at the age of eighty-eight.

Throughout her life, Johnston fought to advance and promote photography as an art form that rivaled painting. She also believed in being paid for her work. She encouraged and supported women in becoming professional photographers by giving lectures, speeches, and writing articles with practical tips for success. One such piece, "[What a woman can do](#)," was published in the Ladies Home Journal in 1887. Her advice is still relevant today.

Although Johnston's career was revolutionary, towards the end of her life, she had already slipped into anonymity. In 1942 a philanthropist and writer [purchased](#) a portfolio of unsigned photographs at an antiquarian bookstore. Having no idea who had made them, he showed the photos to the director of photographs at the Museum of Modern Art, [John Szarkowski](#). Eventually, Szarkowski identified Johnston as the artist and in 1966 MOMA [exhibited](#) 43 of the photographs.

More recently, in 2021, The New York Times published a story about Johnston in its [Overlooked](#), series which sparked renewed interest in her life and work. Today, the Library of Congress has a collection of more than 20,000 of Johnston's photographs, plus 3,700 glass plate and film negatives. Still, no museum has ever mounted a comprehensive retrospective of Johnston's incredible archive.



Frances Johnston working in 1938

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Frances Johnston was bold, determined to live life on her own terms.

Ask Yourself: Where am I settling and not swinging out for what I want or believe?

Ask a Friend: What would it take for you to live life fully?



[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, when she married one of Dennett's great-grandsons. Today, she curates the family's archives.

Sharon has spent twelve years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her essays about Dennett have appeared in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), and [New Hampshire Magazine](#).

Sharon is a popular speaker at women's and civic groups, and also book clubs. She is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. [Schedule](#) a talk with your group!

Sharon lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs.

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Share the newsletter and invite others to subscribe. Follow me on social media. www.SharonSpaulding.com



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