BERENICE ABBOTT AND ELIZABETH MCCAUSSLAND'S "AMERICA. THE 48 STATES"

Zachary M. Hilpert

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2006

Committee:

Dr. Judith Sealander, Advisor

Dr. Andrew Hershberger
ABSTRACT

Dr. Judith Sealander, Advisor

This thesis will explore the documentary photography of Berenice Abbott, specifically her 1935 planned collaboration with art theorist and critic Elizabeth McCausland to build a portrait of America through images and words. The proposed cross-country journey, which never came to fruition due to a lack of willing funding sources, aimed to produce a book of photographs and journalistic writing titled, *America. The 48 states*, a manuscript intended to capture the essence of the country during the Great Depression. Though the project itself was never realized, Abbott shot a handful of preliminary photographs during a self-funded trip, and she and McCausland produced a small but dense collection of documentation surrounding the proposed efforts. Such a bold attempt to create a serious portrait of America, at a time when no similar book had yet been published, says as much about these two important figures in the history of documentary photography as it does about the ensuing influx of images that would, a short time later, reveal to the country just how low the conditions of their fellow citizens had sunk in many parts of the nation. The plans for the *America* series were not only an attempt by Abbott and McCausland to define their culture as they saw it, but the proposal was also Abbott’s first grand statement of her photographic and social principles, and a harbinger of her subsequent and most vital work.
Dedicated to my parents, Pat and John Hilpert.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am forever indebted to Dr. Peter Barr of Sienna Heights University, who opened up his vast collection of Abbott research to me, and provided me with both the focus of my topic, and the guidance necessary to find much of the subsequent materials and people consulted in my research. His assistance, offered eagerly and without hesitation, made this work possible. The materials I have used from his research collection are marked throughout this thesis with the initials ‘PB’ on first reference.

My knowledge of Elizabeth McCausland’s life and motivations was improved greatly through the assistance of Susan Dodge Peters, Director of Education at the University of Rochester’s Memorial Art Gallery, who provided a friendly voice and valuable guidance.

David L. Prince, curator, and the staff of the Syracuse University Art Collection, deserve a good deal of thanks for making it possible for me to view the Art Collection’s set of prints of Abbott’s Route 1 photographs, and for providing many of the scans of the Route 1 photos I have used in my thesis.

The library staff of the George Eastman House helped by providing me with access to the most thorough interview of Berenice Abbott ever conducted, the 600-plus-page 1975 interview with James McQuaide and David Tait.

I truly appreciate the financial support provided by Dr. Louis Katzner and the selection committee for the Katzner and University Bookstore Funds for Graduate Student Research at Bowling Green State University. The fund allowed me to conduct research at the Eastman House and at Syracuse University, and to visit and interview Ms. Dodge Peters.
Thanks to my committee members, Dr. Judith Sealander and Dr. Andrew Hershberger, both of Bowling Green State University, who have provided invaluable encouragement and guidance throughout the process.

I could not have survived this long in graduate school without the support, sympathy, and empathy of my friends, and especially of Hope Davis, whose love has been a constant, calming, and sublime presence every day over the past year.

And of course, I could not have survived this long in any form without the love and guidance of my parents, Pat and John Hilpert, who really do seem to be the best parents in the world. Thank you so much.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1

CHAPTER 1. TO PARIS AND BACK, AND THE FORMULATION OF A
FRIENDSHIP ................................................................. 11
Abbott’s life to 1934 .......................................................... 12
Looking at New York with new eyes ........................................... 20
Advent of a shared “passion”: Abbott and McCausland meet .............. 23

CHAPTER 2. FROM FRIENDSHIP TO COLLABORATION TO
LIKE-MINDEDNESS .................................................. 30
A plan for collaboration ......................................................... 32
Joint funding proposals .......................................................... 34
On documentary photography .................................................. 38
The role of the photographer ..................................................... 46
Testing their beliefs on the open road ........................................ 49

CHAPTER 3. THE EXISTING PIECES OF AMERICA. THE 48 STATES .......... 51
A precursor to America: Abbott’s work with Henry-Russell Hitchcock ..... 52
Abbott and McCausland hit the road ........................................ 54
Abbott’s May 1935 photos ....................................................... 57
McCausland’s “Dusk Over America” and “The Barn Travels West” ........ 74
One last try: The 1937 application ............................................ 79

CHAPTER 4. ABBOTT’S SUBSEQUENT WORK: IN THE IMAGE OF
THE AMERICA SERIES .................................................. 84
The Changing New York series .................................................................................................................. 85

Returning to the road: US Route 1, 1954 .................................................................................................. 97

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION: A LOST CAUSE, AND PERHAPS A LOST MASTERPIECE ................................................................. 106

BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................................................................................................ 111

APPENDIX: ILLUSTRATIONS ................................................................................................................ 116
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-01.</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott (Untitled), 1925. (O’Neal)</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-01.</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott (Untitled), 1934. (Mileaf)</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-02.</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott (Untitled), 1934. (Mileaf)</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-03.</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott (Untitled), 1934. (Mileaf)</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-04.</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott (Untitled), 1934. (Mileaf)</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-05.</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott (Untitled), 1934. (Mileaf)</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-06.</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, <em>Main Street, Chillicothe, Ohio (1)</em>, 1935. (Sundell)</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-08.</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, <em>Main Street, Chillicothe, Ohio (2)</em>, 1935. (Sundell)</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


4-01. Berenice Abbott, *De Peyster Statue, Bowling Green, Looking North to Broadway, Manhattan*, 1936. (Museum Of the City of New York (MCNY)) Page 144


4-03. Berenice Abbott, *General View Looking South from 32 East 57th Street*, 1937. (MCNY) Page 146


4-06. Berenice Abbott, *Tallman Street between Jay and Bridge Streets*, 1936. (MCNY) Page 149

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4-08</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, <em>Tri-Boro Barber School, 264 Broadway</em>, 1935. (MCNY)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-09</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, <em>Blossom Restaurant, 103 Bowery</em>, 1935. (MCNY)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-10</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, <em>Daytona Beach, Daytona, Florida</em>, 1954. (Syracuse University Art Collection (SUArt))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-11</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, Untitled (“Have your picture made on Ferdinand,” Florida), 1954. (SUArt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-12</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, <em>Daytona Beach, Florida</em>, 1954. (O’Neal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-12</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, <em>Bus Motor Court, St. Augustine, Florida</em>, 1954. (O’Neal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-16</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, <em>Wooden Bridge, York, Maine</em>, 1954. (SUArt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-17</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, <em>Miami, Florida</em>, 1954. (SUArt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-18</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, <em>Daytona Beach fishing pier, Daytona, Florida</em>, 1954. (SUArt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-19</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, Untitled (couples dancing), 1954. (SUArt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-20</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, <em>Woman on Steps, Baltimore, Maryland</em>, 1954. (O’Neal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-21</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, Untitled (No cursing, No drunks allowed), 1954. (SUArt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-23</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, <em>Man with a lobster, 1954</em>. (SUArt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-24</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, Untitled (alligator wrestler), 1954. (SUArt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-25.</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, Untitled (boy and bicycle), 1954. (SUART)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-26.</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, Untitled (two boys), 1954. (SUART)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-27.</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, Untitled, 1954. (SUART)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-29.</td>
<td>Berenice Abbott, <em>1411 9th Street, Augusta, Georgia</em>, 1954. (O’Neal)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION: AN UNEXPLORED UNFINISHED PORTRAIT

In reality, the eye is no better than the philosophy behind it.

-Berenice Abbott

I first encountered the photographic work of Berenice Abbott in March of 2001 at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, on an assignment for an introductory photography class at the University of Minnesota. The Institute was displaying a roughly 50 photograph retrospective of her career, focusing on two eras: her most popular series, 1935 to 1939’s *Changing New York*, and a series of photographs she produced intermittently later in life – from the 1950s into the 1970s – illustrating scientific principles. The two subjects could not have been more different, but Abbott had shot both groups of photos with a skill and an obvious love of the subjects that amazed me. In the five years since I first became familiar with those two periods of her work, I have spent time off and on getting to know more about both Abbott and her work, but only when the busy schedule of a college student would allow. And so I have relished the opportunity to at last combine my interest in Abbott’s work with my studies, finally having the opportunity to research in depth her life and unique work.

Recent years have seen a rise in the number of scholars who share my own enthusiasm for more fully developing the public knowledge of Abbott’s career. What this implies, of course, is that Abbott’s career has gone largely unnoticed by those outside the art and academic worlds up until past decade or two, and this is largely true. The reason, likely, is that Abbott never focused on a single subject or style for more than a decade, meaning that her work was not

---

singly classifiable. Her early years as an American expatriate shooting portraiture in Paris produced numerous interesting images, but her subjects were rarely celebrities, or those known outside the Parisian artists’ community. Her documentary photography work of the 1930s, centered chiefly on a visual exploration of New York City, is her most well known work, but has yet to come close to the kind of fame associated with projects by contemporaries such as Ansel Adams, or Dorothea Lange. In the last decades of her life, Abbott took an interest in scientific photography, producing unique and unprecedented images of scientific principles for use in textbooks, yet these have rarely been acknowledged as art rather than simple illustrations. It could also be said that Abbott never produced one defining image or readily identifiable series, such as Lange’s *Migrant Mother* or Robert Capra’s *Death of a Loyalist Soldier* and his D-Day invasion photographs. Abbott’s continued lack of fame, then, seems to be tied to the impossibility of applying genre labels to her entire body of work, or finding one single aspect of her varied career that stands above the rest. Simply put, she never stuck with one style long enough to achieve lasting fame.

That is by no means to say that the lesser fame Abbott enjoys relative to many of her contemporaries is deserved; she produced a large and impressive body of work by any photographer’s standards, and in recent years – particularly following her death in 1991 – there has been a small but rich collection of research released on her career. In particular, two works have shed light on what has been, until the last decade or so, a relatively little-explored life’s work: Peter Barr’s 1997 Boston University dissertation, “Becoming Documentary: Berenice Abbott’s Photographs, 1925-1939,” and Bonnie Yochelson’s 1997 book for the Museum of the City of New York, *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York (The Complete WPA Project)*. Barr’s

---

2 Of the few people whose fame has continued beyond and after 1930s Paris, James Joyce and Eugene Atget stand out.
extensive and unrivaled work explores the development of Abbott from an unknown sculptor and darkroom assistant into one of the most active documentary photographers of the Depression era and, indeed, of 20th century America. Yochelson’s book focuses on Abbott’s most well known effort, her Works Progress Administration-sponsored documentation of the changing face of New York City in the first part of the century. The book includes an extensive essay on the conception and execution of the project, along with reproductions of the entire 307 image series – the first time ever that the full project has been published – and detailed notes based on the work of Abbott’s project research team. Additionally, a biography of Abbott by Julia Van Haaften, who in 1989 produced a book of Abbott’s photography, has long been in the works, though no publication date has been set.

Previous work on Abbott’s career, scholarly or otherwise, has been few and far between. In 1970, the Smithsonian Institute published the first retrospective volume of Abbott’s work, titled *Berenice Abbott / Photographs*, including 140 of her best works. Michael G. Sundell’s 1980 essay, “Berenice Abbott’s Work in the 1930s,” is perhaps the earliest known effort to explore Abbott’s photography in a more than passing way. Hank O’Neal’s 1982 mini-biography, *Berenice Abbott: American Photographer*, includes the most complete retelling of her life so far published (25 pages long) and another retrospective look at her photographs, with approximately 200 prints. She was also the subject of a number of magazine features in the last decade of her life.

In these works, the writers and photo reproducers have focused on the three previously listed genres of photography in which Abbott was active: her portraits of Parisian artists, writers, actors and socialites in the 1920s; her celebrated New York work; and her images illustrating scientific principles. And while these eras have begun to receive their rightful due – at least
within the confines of the relatively small amount of exploration done on Abbott’s career – another incomplete aspect of Abbott’s photography, her repeated and never-fully-realized forays into developing a photographic portrait of America, has received virtually no recognition in the retrospectives. Barr and Sundell touch on these photographic attempts in their work, but as Barr himself has stated, much more needs to be done.

Hoping to make the first step toward filling this deficiency in the knowledge of Abbott’s varied and impressive career, this thesis will explore Abbott’s first attempt at such a portrait, an incomplete series entitled *America. The 48 states*. that she and art theorist and critic Elizabeth McCausland proposed and partially carried out in 1935. The plan Abbott and McCausland discussed would have put them both in a car, setting off down the road to photograph and write about what America meant to them, and how the country was shaping up in the middle of the nation’s worst economic crisis. Abbott the skilled photographer would capture on film the state of the nation, from city to rural village to farmland, while McCausland the celebrated art critic and writer would chronicle their adventures with her pen. Prior to seeking full funding, the two women set out on a practice run of sorts in May and June of 1935, shooting numerous photographs and producing two essays on what they encountered.

Unfortunately, repeated attempts to find funding for a full-scale undertaking of the proposed series proved unsuccessful, and the project was never fully realized. What remains, however, is by itself worthy of exploration. The proposals Abbott and McCausland both produced seeking that elusive funding spell out both the plan for their journey, and their ideas of what they believe made America the country it was at the time. The photographs produced on the trip reveal a great deal not only about the country Abbott and McCausland saw that early summer of 1935, but also what both women believed best represented the places and people they
observed. And McCausland’s writings on their journey provide the first narrative glimpse of what could have been one of the most remarkable books to come out of the blossoming of documentary photography and creative reportage in the 1930s.

Certainly, Abbott and McCausland were not without contemporaries who shared similar goals of employing photography as a tool for raising awareness, and as an impetus for change. What is remarkable is that they appear to have beaten them to the punch, or so they would have had they been provided the funding to do so. Shortly after the two women’s first attempt at creating a portrait of America ended in rejection, the photography division of the Farm Security Administration would begin to send photographers out into all corners of the country, their collective aim similar to Abbott’s individual goal of creating a photographic record of America. The FSA’s Historical Section, led by Roy Stryker, was created to photograph the work being done by President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal programs to aid poverty-stricken farmers during the devastating years of the Depression. Stryker, an economics professor at Columbia University, was brought in to lead an all star team of photographers, including such documentarists as Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein and Ben Shahn.

Unlike Abbott and McCausland’s lofty plans, Stryker’s goal began simply enough: “I wanted to do a pictorial encyclopedia of American agriculture,” he would later write. To that end, Stryker would name in his instructions specific items he wanted his photographers to capture, from farm equipment to laborers at work on certain tasks.3 The plan of a simple laundry list of items for documentation quickly dissolved, however; Stryker soon found that to send two dozen photographers out into the field with little direct contact meant that he would have to give up some control over what they would be inspired to capture on film. The photographs that immediately resulted, though, led him to encourage even further forays of creative license.

Stryker’s desire to produce the best possible record of the times had led him to gather a number of skilled photographers, artists who had long seen the value of photography as a way to tell the world about what they saw. For many of them, the steady government paycheck, and the free range inherent in working on the road with relatively little direction, provided their first real opportunity to apply the tenets of documentary photography theory they had built up in their minds, and the resulting explosion of images was unparalleled. In effect, the FSA photographers were granted much of the freedom Abbott had hoped for, though Stryker still held control over where the FSA team members were supposed to travel, and what, in general terms, they were supposed to seek out.

Stryker had been amazed by what he saw daily coming across his desk. “We helped open up a brand new territory of American life and manners as a legitimate subject for visual commentary,” he later said.4 The photographs that came in captured a portrait of the country full of destitution and poverty, people who had lost their livelihoods – or sank further into hardship – since the advent of the 1930s. Yet a sense of humanity prevailed, and the images often showed the public a hopeful front, where people were making due with what very little they had, and often surviving despite the troubles that surrounded them. The FSA photographers, rather than simply chronicling the state of agriculture in the second half of the 1930s, set out, as Stryker stated it, to “introduce Americans to America.”5

Though not part of this team, Abbott and McCausland must have felt a bond with those photographers employed by the FSA. They certainly were familiar to Stryker, who agreed to serve as a reference for them when Abbott and McCausland made a second attempt at seeking

---

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid, 9.
funding for their own America project in 1938. Stryker’s team produced photographs that would have fit well within the project Abbott and McCausland proposed and vise versa; the products of the FSA team matched, in principle, what Abbott and McCausland had hoped individually to achieve on their own. The FSA photographers “accomplished a lot more than the depiction of American anguish; they created a record of American life,” certainly a statement the two women would have hoped would one day be applied to their own proposed work.

However, it is misleading to state that the products of the FSA efforts meant that the America series would have been a needless and redundant project. Though the FSA in the end produced roughly 270,000 images in the space of eight years from late 1935 to 1943, the photographers’ goals rarely went beyond making a contribution to this stockpile of images. To be sure, this is not to say that they went about their task with anything less than complete sincerity; indeed, some produced their best work while in the FSA’s employ. Rather, none sought to encompass the entirety of the American scene in their images, and none – with the notable exception of Evans – aimed to produce as the end result of their work a volume of images and text that would help define the era and educate the viewer. In this way, then, Abbott and McCausland’s proposed America series was a challenging work, the likes of which had never before been undertaken by two people.

---

6 Berenice Abbott and Elizabeth McCausland, “Plans to Document the Portrait of Contemporary America,” application to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 1937, McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll D368 frame 116. Obviously, this fact causes one to wonder why Stryker did not convince Abbott to join the FSA team. However, Abbott was working with virtually no supervision – a situation she highly preferred – on her government-funded project to photograph New York at the time, and would likely not have had any interest in forfeiting that independence. This second funding application was to a private source, the Guggenheim Foundation, which would have provided at least an equal amount of creative control had her proposal been approved. There is also evidence that Abbott disagreed with the ways in which Stryker set about creating his photographic portrait of America, as demonstrated in a 1975 interview in which she somewhat bitterly described the differences that had arisen between her and Stryker in the intervening years. This conversation can be found in the McQuaid and Tait interview referenced in the bibliography.


8 Stryker, 7.
Later efforts by other photographers and writers would turn out books of similar makeup, constructed to present the 1930s in a form that included both text and images. In 1937, Margaret Bourke-White and Erskin Caldwell teamed up to produce *You Have Seen Their Faces*, a collection of photographs by Bourke-White and text by Caldwell that examined the poverty of the Deep South. This early successful attempt at the type of combined photographic and textual volume Abbott and McCausland had hoped to produce two years earlier paved the way for similar books in the next few years. Perhaps the most well known, Evans and James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, told the story of three poor sharecropper families, though the amount of text far outweighed the relatively small number of photographs. The book was published in 1941 and contains 31 of Evans’s FSA photographs, compared to the more than 400 pages of text in the initial printing. That same year Richard Wright published *12 Million Black Voices*, a book similar in its use of collected FSA images throughout. The text is a first-person account of the hardships African Americans had gone through – and continued to go through – from the beginnings of the United States to the present day. Still more books, such as Archibald MacLeish’s *Land of the Free* (1938), Herman Clarence Nixon’s *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* (1938), and Lange and Paul Taylor’s *An American Exodus* (1939), to name a few, were added to the growing list of photo books in the late 1930s Abbott and McCausland had themselves hoped to found a few years earlier.

Following the rejection of their proposals for funding, Abbott would go on to create her portrait of New York, along with, in 1954, a series of photographs taken while traveling the length of U.S. Route 1. Both projects would contain echoes of the ideals that inspired the 1935 America series. In this research paper, I will perform the first in-depth exploration of the original products of the *America. The 48 states* efforts, reassembling the extant elements of the series to
bring out a picture of what Abbott and McCausland hoped to produce with their efforts. What did these two determined and ambitious people hope to produce on the road together? What did they find on their trial run, and how might that portrait have looked had it been expanded to cover the entire nation? And most importantly, exactly what did Abbott and McCausland believe photography could do to reveal the ways in which their fellow countrymen were living at this momentous time in the history of the United States?

To provide this picture, I have divided my thesis into four chapters. The first chapter will explore Abbott’s life to 1935, and how she came to meet McCausland, her life’s closest relationship. In the first part of chapter two, I will explore the proposals Abbott and McCausland composed for the series, revealing the concepts of America on which they hoped to shed light, and the way in which they planned to go about exploring that vast and varied land. The second half of the chapter will delve into Abbott and McCausland’s theories on the value and purposes of documentary photography, and the ways in which they believed it was the best medium for creating this portrait. Chapter three will discuss the results of their May and June trip, looking at both the numerous photographs Abbott produced that summer, and the essays McCausland composed pondering what they found. The final chapter will look at two subsequent Abbott series, Changing New York and the Route 1 photographs, seeking similarities in these kindred projects that provide greater detail on the ways in which Abbott would go on to depict America.

What I hope will be clear to the reader by the end of this paper is the extent to which Abbott and McCausland planned to present the face of the country to its own citizens. In America. The 48 states., Abbott and McCausland strove to demonstrate the power of documentary photography as a tool of public awareness and social change. It could be said that perhaps they were just a bit too early, their book on the contemporary face of America being
proposed almost two years before the first book of a similar nature was published. The *America* book, had it ever seen the light of day, would have been timed so that today it, rather than *You Have Seen Their Faces*, may well be remembered as the first major work of Depression-era documentary photography. Unfortunately, it was not to be. Regardless, an exploration of Abbott and McCausland’s intentions reveals much, not just about the plans of these two women, but about what led them and many others to use the camera to an extent it had never been used before, to chronicle the state of the country, and to educate all citizens about what their fellow citizens were going through at the time.
In the fall of 1934, Berenice Abbott’s apartment building stood along a series of blocks bordered on either end by landmarks of New York City history, one an early triumph of civic design, the other a monument to modern man’s technological achievement. Central Park was a short six blocks north of her apartment at 56 West 53rd Street, sitting at what had once been the northernmost inhabited border of the city when New York was first growing into a center of true metropolitan culture. Two blocks to the south rose Rockefeller Center and its showplace of both hi- and low-culture, the Radio City Music Hall.

Abbott had spent the past four years working on a project of her own design and undertaking, photographing the vibrant city with a passion matched by few others in the metropolis’s history. In New York, living as she did in the center of American cultural and economic life, Abbott had found a subject for her photos that inspired her like nothing had before. The project was not something Abbott had stumbled into by chance. After having suffered through what, by all accounts, was a miserable childhood, followed by a brief and uninspiring attempt at seeking a college education, and testing her fate and succeeding, finally, abroad, Abbott had moved to New York a few short years before in what was perhaps her boldest act of independence. She had spent years working to define herself both as an artist and as an individual, struggling to rise above one poor situation after another. But instead of resigning herself to the fate that seemed so
apparent at each stop in her life, Abbott had continuously sought out new and better circumstances, situations that would inspire her to tap some new creative outlet. And now, living in a small apartment in midtown Manhattan, she was finally surrounded by a place that beckoned and excited her. Understanding how she got there reveals why Abbott, for all of her life, was proudly self sufficient, defiant to the point of, at times, loneliness, but forever confident in her own abilities despite a near-never ending lack of financial or general support. Seeking that place of comfort had taken her across the country, across an ocean, and around Europe before she finally returned to her native country a very changed person.

Abbott’s life to 1934

Abbott’s wanderlust as a young adult was inspired by a lonely upbringing. Born on July 18, 1898 in Springfield, Ohio, her parents were to divorce soon after, and Abbott would rarely see her father. This distance also affected her sibling relationships; her two brothers, Earl Stanley and Frank, were sent off with her father, and Abbott would later say that her older sister, Hazel, was “kidnapped” and taken along with the men of the splitting family away from young Berenice. This fracture left Abbott in the care of her mother, Bunn, a relationship that provided little nurturing, and years of tumult. As Berenice grew up, her mother would remarry and divorce

---

3 As my thesis does not aim to tell Abbott’s life story, the following brief biographical sketch is not meant to be in any way comprehensive. Rather I strive here to provide the reader an outline of Abbott’s life to 1934 for the purpose of providing context, and would direct those interested in a more detailed examination to read the biography, Berenice Abbott: American Photographer, by Hank O’Neal; Bonnie Yochelson’s introduction to Berenice Abbott: Changing New York; and, for a comprehensive description of Abbott’s development as a photographer, Peter Barr’s dissertation, “Becoming Documentary: Berenice Abbott’s Photographs, 1925-1939” (all referenced in the following pages).


5 McQuaid and Tait, 5. Most likely, based on the lack of further talk of a forceful removal, Abbott’s statement that her sister was “kidnapped” by her father came from her bitterness at losing the company of her sibling, rather than an actual illegal act.
once more, and the two of them would move frequently, eventually ending up in Cleveland where Berenice attended Lincoln High School.

It was never easy for Abbott to discuss her childhood, and little record exists in her personal papers of these unhappy times. “[My youth was] just grizzly,” she would state decades later, “and I don’t like to talk about it… It was just not a family to boast about.”\(^6\) She recalled it only as an extremely lonely time that taught her how to depend on no one but herself. Abbott’s adolescence became a waiting game, stuck in an uninspiring and occasionally inhospitable environment until the opportunity arose to break away. The opening came soon after graduating from Lincoln, and Abbott left her mother’s home at the age of 18, departing for Columbus to enroll at Ohio State University in early 1917.\(^7\) Despite the opportunity to finally strike out on her own, the results were not what she had hoped; though the situation was different in Columbus, misery seemed to follow, and Abbott found new cause for her unhappiness. Pursuing a major in journalism, Abbott felt uninspired by the offerings of the program, and soon realized that Columbus was not any better of a place for her than Cleveland had been. The campus and the country were engaged in training young people for war and national service, and it seemed to her that the educational environment at Ohio State had become regimented to the point that classes were more stifling than enlightening. Not long after her arrival at Ohio State, according to Abbott biographer Hank O’Neal, young Berenice “decided that the compulsory courses offered there would not help her realize her goal of becoming a journalist. She also rebelled against the dullness of the classes and the lack of dedication on the part of the faculty and chaffed at the suffocatingly structured life.”\(^8\) Seeking to remove herself from another bad situation, she would

\(^6\) Ibid. 4-8.
\(^7\) O’Neal, 8.
\(^8\) Ibid.
leave Columbus after just one year. “I really wanted an education, but on my own terms,” Abbott would later say.9

Despite the disappointment she felt at Ohio State, friendships Abbott forged in Columbus would have an important effect in the coming years, providing her with the opportunity to leave the oppressive environment she had felt in her home state, and starting her down the road that led her to a life in art. Grasping at an opportunity for a fresh start in early 1918, Abbott packed up and joined a small group of friends moving to Greenwich Village in New York City. Almost instantly the young Ohioan was finding new creative outlets that had never been available to her before. She won bit parts in Eugene O’Neill plays, spent time with friends at bohemian jazz clubs, and generally sought out the fun she felt had been denied her in her adolescence.10 With encouragement from her artist friends, she took up sculpture as a hobby, her first attempt at artistic expression on her own time.11 Abbott was both proud and amused by her own newfound independence; ruminating on this new chapter in her life, she later stated, “I was a bit of a nut, an eccentric, and I dressed just the way I felt, you know, horrible. But talk about beatniks, I think I was the first one.”12

Abbott’s life in New York was for her a revelation. Living in the heart of American bohemia in the Village, Abbott gravitated toward eccentrics, seeing other nonconformists both as sources of kinship, and as associations which would validate her casting off of the conservative and constrictive life she had left behind. “I know as a kid,” Abbott said in 1975 of her early days in New York, “I liked people who were far out. And it was a form of rebellion against the

---

9 McQuaid and Tait, 25-6. Discussing her disappointment with the education she received, Abbott would state later in this interview (page 29) that she felt the American system of public education to be a less than ideal place for students who cared about more than just memorizing dates and simple concepts. “When [students] go to school, they know they are being fed some kind of hogwash. The get mad, and they have a right to be…. If they don’t get mad, God help them.”
11 McQuaid and Tait, 53.
12 Ibid, 58.
Midwest and everything it stood for and all the values the people had. To me, they had some very weird values.”

Abbott’s social circle was decidedly outspoken and political, taking up causes ranging from feminism to anarchy, and included artists and performers such as Djuna Barnes, Malcolm Cowley, Hippolyte Havel, Holger Cahill, Norma and Edna Millay, Eugene O’Neill, Man Ray, and Marcel Duchamp, many of whom were veterans of the American side of the Dadaist artists’ movement. Duchamp and Man Ray were among the founders of the American circle of Dada artists, and proponents of this absurdist, nihilistic art form, which professed to eschew traditional forms of beauty and artistic expectations of form and content in favor of oppositional “anti-art.” The movement flourished chiefly during the First World War, its spiritual headquarters in New York City being Alfred Stieglitz’s gallery, 291. Perhaps the most eccentric of all of her acquaintances, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, a sculptor and poet who often wore a kitchen pot atop her shaved head and, according to biographer O’Neal, “appear[ed] scantily clothed at important functions.”

This newfound freedom inspired her to rethink her stationary position in New York, where she had been settled for two years, and once again restlessness began to set in. Her personal life’s momentum also took a hit, as Abbott was hospitalized for nearly two months in a serious bout with virulent influenza in early 1919, part of an epidemic that claimed the lives of more than 12,000 New Yorkers that year. Regaining her health after that near-death experience,

13 Ibid., 62.
15 “Dada or Dadaism,” Dada Online, 19 March 1998. <http://www.peak.org/~dadaist/English/Graphics/index.html> (29 May 2006). Though Abbott never professed an interest in carrying on Dadaist traditions in her later work, the documentary photography that would one day become her chosen art form has often been celebrated for sharing similar traits, in that she ignored traditional concepts of beauty in an effort to present the world as it really was.
16 O’Neal, 9.
17 Yochelson, 10.
Abbott’s burgeoning independence was re-energized. Her life in New York was providing her little money, and jobs working as an artist’s model, waitress and wool dyer were paying too little for her to live comfortably.\(^{18}\) She began to hear from friends who had traveled to Paris that France was a far more receptive place for young artists. “I had friends who went over there [Paris], and they said, ‘Oh, you belong in Europe.’ And I believed this,” Abbott said later. “I thought I may as well be poor there as here.”\(^{19}\)

Little else was ever said or written about Abbott’s choice to leave a place where, by all accounts, she seemed happy. Arguably, Abbott simply did not feel that she had yet found her permanent home. While she did indeed seem comfortable in New York, it does not appear that she ever involved herself with anything that hinted at a plan for long-term residency. Likely, Abbott set sail for France on the \textit{Rochambeau} on March 21, 1921, for no more logical reason than to further exercise her self-sufficiency.

While the personal logic for her move may have been clear to her, the financial soundness of the decision appears illogical in most any light. Abbott arrived in Paris with six dollars and virtually no knowledge of French.\(^{20}\) As she had in America, she found little patronage for her sculpture, and though she saw some increased recognition for her work in her new home, Abbott was unable to earn a livable income. She briefly tried moving to Berlin, but once again found that her personal and financial situation did not change with the scenery. And so by late 1923, Abbott was back in Paris, penniless and fearful that soon she would be living on the street.\(^{21}\) While she may have been achieving progress in constructing a contented identity for herself, her life’s journey had yet to provide a means of sustainable financial support.

\(^{18}\) Barr, 17.
\(^{19}\) McQuaid and Tait, 118-9.
\(^{20}\) O’Neal, 9.
\(^{21}\) Ibid.
Luckily, the relationships she had forged in her first two years in Paris began to pay dividends upon her return. Her fortunes turned during a meeting with an old friend from New York, Dadaist photographer Man Ray, who had moved to Paris around the same time Abbott had and set up shop as a fashion photographer and portraitist. Unlike his fellow American expatriate, Man Ray was succeeding handsomely as an artist, working as a celebrated portrait photographer for as much as 1,000 francs per sitting, and immediately agreed to take in his old New York acquaintance as his assistant. From this fateful alliance would Abbott soon be given cause to take up a camera for the first time in her life.

Before she could define herself as a photographer, Abbott had to learn the ropes. To this point in her life, she had spent no time around cameras or photographic development equipment, but for Man Ray this was a plus; he liked Abbott’s prospects as an assistant precisely because of her lack of experience. His reasoning was that Abbott would not come into the job with any preconceived notions of the way a photograph should be taken or developed, a setup that suited the exacting Dadaist quite well. According to their arrangement, Abbott spent all of her time behind the scenes, never appearing in the room when Man Ray was shooting, always in the backroom with the exposed film. Her absence was not a requirement, but rather, as Abbott would later say, “I was just doing a colossal job, really overworking,” and she had no time for observing her boss. She spent her days making prints, hanging them up, aligning their framing, and correcting and spotting flaws on the negatives. For her services, Abbott was soon earning 25 francs a day, no great sum, but enough to pay for her housing and expenses, and the first steady salary she had earned in a long time.

22 Barr, 18-9.
23 McQuaid and Tait, 144.
25 Ibid, 147.
The salary, however, did not seem to either her or Man Ray to justify the overwhelming amount of work she was doing, especially in light of the fact that Man Ray was receiving such a large amount of money from his patrons. Rather than raising her salary, Man Ray proposed a novel idea: he would allow the inexperienced Abbott to schedule her own appointments, using his equipment to take portraits and earn additional income. She in turn would repay him for the cost of the materials she used. Early in their working relationship, Man Ray had lent Abbott a Brownie camera, which she carried around without using for weeks. On a brief visit to Amsterdam in 1925, Abbott finally decided to try out the Brownie, aiming across a canal at three small apartment buildings bunched together at the end of a bridge. This picture, taken when she was 27, was her first photograph (illustration 1-01). Now, with little subsequent experience, Abbott was to set out as a photographic portraitist in addition to her other duties. While the task was intimidating, for Abbott it presented her first opportunity at a sustainable form of creative expression, and so her lunch hours soon became her time for shooting portraits.

“[Man Ray] knew I should get more money,” Abbott later said, “and I knew I should get more money; but he said, ‘why don’t you take a few pictures?’ So I took a few pictures of people – not for his business… and unexpectedly and strangely they were good.” Soon, Abbott’s success began to drive a wedge between her and Man Ray. Within a few months, she was paying him more for the tremendous amount of materials she was using than he was paying her in salary for her work as an assistant. Tension mounted as Man Ray realized that, rather than an employee, Abbott was becoming a competitor. In his dissertation on Abbott’s early career in photography, Peter Barr writes that Man Ray’s patience ran out when Abbott’s list of clients began to impede on his own: “their relationship [ended when] Peggy Guggenheim, whom Man Ray considered to

26 O’Neal 10.
27 Barr, 41.
28 McQuaid and Tait, 147.
be one of his clients, telephoned him to arrange for a sitting with Abbott. The next day Abbott was unemployed and forced to open her own, competing studio.”

29 Her star rose rapidly, as people came to quickly appreciate her straightforward, naturally posed portraits. Soon, Abbott’s reputation was such that it was considered a mark of legitimacy in Paris to have sat before her lens. To be photographed by the transplanted American meant that you had arrived in the Parisian art and social world. In time, she would photograph such key members of the Paris scene as Jean Cocteau, James Joyce, Coco Chanel, Djuna Barnes, Sylvia Beach, Andre Gide, and Edna St. Vincent Millay, among numerous others.

Aside from inadvertently setting Abbott up as a professional photographer and as his chief competitor in the Parisian portrait photography field, Man Ray was also responsible for introducing Abbott to an artist who would become one of her greatest photographic inspirations, Eugene Atget. Abbott immediately took a liking to the aging Atget, who had long sustained himself by taking photographs of Paris meant to serve both as portraits of the city, and as visual tools for painters looking for backgrounds for their compositions. From the start, Abbott was fascinated by Atget’s extensive body of work. The Parisian photographer, about 70 years old at the time of their introduction, had spent his life carrying around bulky photographic equipment to make a visual record of his home city, toiling all his life in virtual obscurity. While Atget’s photographs would soon help to inspire Abbott to move from portrait to documentary photography, Abbott in turn is perhaps the single person most responsible for Atget’s future, posthumous popularity. It would be Abbott, following Atget’s death in 1927, who would buy the bulk of the Parisian’s photographs and negatives, 30 and take it as one of her duties as the

29 Barr, 20.
30 According to Barr’s research, the Atget items Abbott purchased cost 10,000 francs, or “$700.00, money that Abbott ‘borrowed’ from her silent partner and studio manager, Mrs. Julia Oppenheim Reiner.” (page 126). Years
collection’s curator to see that Atget’s life’s work be honored. Any time her photographs were shown, Abbott insisted that Atget’s be displayed alongside. She would later go on to write a book about his photographs and life, and see to it that Atget is today regarded as one of the early masters of documentary photography.31

By the late 1920s, Abbott had established herself as a respected artist. Her photography was paying well enough for her to support herself, even if her living situation was by no means lavish. For the first time, she was not only out on her own, but she had little need to worry how long she could sustain herself independently. Abbott’s success promoting the work of her mentor, Atget, was also progressing, and so in January of 1929 she set sail for New York, intending to make a short visit and drum up interest in a book which would introduce America to Atget. What she found upon her arrival in New York instead was an unexpected muse, and a cause for the most important move of her life.

Looking at New York with new eyes

Fresh on Abbott’s mind when she arrived in the United States was the extensive portrait of Paris Atget had amassed during his lifetime. Equally fresh was what she called a “creeping nostalgia” for America she had felt during her years away in Europe. Upon landing in New York, Abbott was surprised by the effect the city had on her, seeing it as she had for the first time in nearly eight years. “New York floored me,” she would later say. “[It was] fresh, absolutely

---

31 Barr devotes chapter four of his dissertation to the relationship between Atget and Abbott, and Abbott’s efforts to pursue recognition for Atget’s works. Rather than rehash a rather comprehensive chapter from Barr’s work, I offer the preceding brief summary, and recommend reading “Becoming Documentary,” along with the O’Neal biography, to find a detailed description of the Abbott-Atget connection.
fresh…. By the time I returned, [the feeling of nostalgia] was extremely strong. In fact, it was a very powerful thing. New York City excited me very much.”

For Abbott, her excitement upon seeing New York for the first time in eight years came in part from her having been gone for so long, and from her youthful wonder about the place.

The American scene, it just fascinated me. I was like a stranger. I could have been from Mars almost. When you are very fresh, impressionable, sensitive, and you are away for years, and then you come back and you see this whole strange land and it’s your own and it fascinates you… It did me. As I say, [America] just bowled me over.33

The city and the country were both familiar and brand new, and she was so taken that she felt a need to stay on in New York and further delve into her newfound fascination.

It came as no small surprise to her European acquaintances when, shortly after landing in Manhattan, she wrote to her Parisian compatriots and announced that she had decided to stay on permanently. Her reignited sense of excitement for the metropolis and the country led her to move back to America, turning her lens away from the faces of the artistic and the elite, and toward what she felt was the towering, gleaming city at the heart of a great society on the verge, in her mind, of potential utopia. By the fall, Abbott had taken up permanent residency in New York. What had started as a short trip to visit her former home became the beginning of a fascination with the sights and people of America that would last for decades.

Establishing herself permanently in Manhattan, Abbott immediately set out to photograph the city. She figured that the best way for her to earn a living would be to continue working as a portraitist, charging enough to allow herself to roam the city at will and discover what there was

32 McQuaid and Tait, 238.
33 Ibid, 238-9.
to be photographed. Unfortunately, as her biographer, O’Neal, explains, Abbott’s plan was not the success she had hoped it would be. “…[I]f she had possessed the slightest business acumen, life might have been much easier. She reckoned her expenses to be five times what they were in Paris, and so she quintupled her fees, making her one of the most expensive portraitists in the city.” Due to her lack of an established reputation in America, her unwillingness to advertise, and her discomfort with the idea of working on commission, this setup quickly failed. Before long, she was reduced to setting aside Wednesdays for her jaunts around the city, while the rest of the week was devoted to making ends meet through what few portrait clients she could find, along with a job she took at Vanity Fair photographing the subjects of some of their stories. She earned irregular paychecks by selling her photos of New York to magazines and collectors as well, but the crash of the stock market in October of 1929 meant that the pool of wealthy portrait clients would only continue to dwindle.

Along with the odd photographic assignment and occasional sale of a photo to a magazine, Abbott was slowly gaining more and more notoriety in New York by participating in joint exhibitions and publications. To sustain her dream of visually documenting the entire city, the photographer set out to find a willing source of funding for the project. She approached the Museum of the City of New York, the New York Historical Society, Anne Morgan (daughter of J.P. Morgan), and others with little luck. An attempt in 1933 to contact 100 of the Museum of the City of New York’s wealthiest supporters was an especially crushing disaster. She had hoped to get as many as 75 of them to contribute $250 each - $15,000 total – to fully fund a photographic exploration of the city. The letters she sent out included statements of support from the Museum’s director, along with prominent architect Philip Johnson. To her surprise, the only

34 O’Neal, 14.
35 According to O’Neal, her photographs showed up during that time in publications such as Vanity Fair, The Saturday Evening Post, The Saturday Review of Literature, Theater Guild Magazine, and Fortune (Ibid).
responses she received came from a number of the Museum’s donors who angrily stated that they had already funded similar projects for the museum, and did not like to hear that the works they had previously funded were shortly to be replaced. The letter writing campaign netted not a single cent.\textsuperscript{36}

\textit{Advent of a shared “passion”: Abbott and McCausland meet}

Severely disappointed but undeterred, Abbott pressed on. On October 8, 1934, Abbott’s growing series of photos of the city went on display at the highly respected Museum of the City of New York, a one-person show that for Abbott represented both her first major showing in the city, and a “slight beginning of what could be done with the city” were she to find the funding she sought.\textsuperscript{37} The show, titled \textit{New York Photography by Berenice Abbott}, included 46 prints of the photos she had taken on her own time. The exhibit included few photographs of common scenes and familiar sights. Rather, Abbott chose for her exhibition works that presented the unique aspects of New York City she found most interesting, including shots of street activity on the Lower East Side, various storefronts, and photos depicting the enormous undertaking of Manhattan construction projects. Images of the massive, hammer-scarred cliff walls of granite unearthed during the setting of Rockefeller Center’s foundation hung from the same walls as photos of ornamental statuary decorating office block facades. Reviews were favorable; critics were pleased that Abbott had eschewed postcard-ready scenes in favor of views that captured the reality of the city: the dizzying heights, the crowded streets, and the constant forward march of

\textsuperscript{36} Yochelson, 16.
\textsuperscript{37} Abbott, letter to Miss McCausland, dated October 29, 1934, Ibid.
construction. The exhibit earned such positive reviews that its run was extended by three months, finally coming down in February of 1935.  

On October 23, 1934, Abbott received a letter from one enthusiastic critic, Elizabeth McCausland of the *Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican*, who had been so taken by the exhibit that she forwarded to Abbott a copy of the glowing review she had written, to assure that the photographer had a chance to see an “out of town” appraisal. In her review, McCausland wrote that Abbott’s photographs presented a view of New York City based on a simple contrast between man and technology:

One sees in black and white the city of today, the skyscraper, the tremendous technical and engineering skills required for its erection, the elaborate machines and enterprises, the rugged thrusting into basic rock for foundations sturdy enough to withstand the shock and tremor of a thousand feet of superimposed steel and glass. One sees, too, set forth in a simple and unemphasized style the incredible paradox of the city, the irony of the contrast between the shoddy thing created and the amazing human intelligence and solidarity which created it.

McCausland, aware of similarly minded documentary photographers of the time, saw in Abbott’s skill the potential to raise art to the level of a catalyst for social change in all aspects of American life. McCausland had been encouraging this kind of proactive photography in the art world for years, and felt that Abbott, like Lewis Hine – who photographed the harsh realities of child labor in the first decades of the 20th century – and those who would soon join the FSA team, was possessing of the kind of keen eye necessary to put photography to a political, social use. It was through her career in journalism that McCausland had developed this awareness of

---

38 Yochelson, 18.
the contemporary photography scene. Born in Wichita, Kans. on April 16, 1899, McCausland had been with the Republican since 1923. She was educated at Smith College, having earned both a bachelor’s degree (1920) and master’s degree (1922) in English. Her career in journalism began soon after, and helped to form her into the politically and artistically conscious citizen she would be for the rest of her life. Gifted as an excellent, often-times extravagant writer and storyteller, McCausland spoke about artistic and societal issues through her varied and numerous types of work with the Republican, from writing features and book reviews to heading the Sunday art page and contributing numerous opinion pieces to the editorial page. McCausland had by the mid-1930s formulated a very definite and socially conscious view on the role of art – and, specifically, documentary photography – through her work. Few at the time wrote with such conviction on the need for art to become a vehicle for political action.

Art historian and McCausland researcher Susan Dodge Peters states that the critic’s strong beliefs in the power of art as an instigator of social change derived from her wide-ranging tastes in – and knowledge of – varying forms of art, a belief that aligned with the Social Realism movement of the time. “The breadth of her commitment to all the arts was absolutely in keeping with her belief that they are indivisible from life,” Peters writes. “Ultimately, McCausland’s criticism became a forum for her commentary on contemporary culture.” To McCausland, then, Abbott’s images were a special kind of discovery, as she felt that few others had ever shown such potential to execute photography in a way that documented aspects of American society she found most important. The images McCausland encountered in Abbott’s

40 Elizabeth McCausland, untitled biographical notes, McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll D369 frame 931.
41 The works of both Abbott and McCausland, to varying extents, shared some similar ideals with the Social Realist movement. It is easy to assume that they likely saw said movement as one important field in which the ideas of “art as social catalyst” were being put to good use. Neither Abbott nor McCausland, however, ever stated a specific allegiance with the movement. Rather, it is instructional to note that, while Abbott and McCausland very much believed the idea that art could inspire social change, they were both, in that sense, products of their times.
In her article on Abbott’s exhibit, McCausland praised the photographer’s ability to depict reality by presenting to the viewer unaltered, “honest” prints of her images. To the reviewer, Abbott’s photographs were “a convincing demonstration that the camera does not need to strive to be anything except itself.” McCausland was particularly impressed with the way in which Abbott depicted the “spirit of the city” by simply capturing images of the town as it was:

… [I]n precisely this rich and compact yet objective use of subject matter Berenice Abbott proves herself as an artist… [P]recisely by this realistic and objective approach to the city does she succeed in creating the spirit of the city…. [Her photographs] are well aware of the nuances of their theme. …This is, in fact, probably the function of art, to preserve the ephemeral moment without passing an ultimate judgment on the moment’s moral or social status, yet withal by its very detachment and quality of being outside moral and social judgment constituting a more biting and drastic indictment than the purely topical word can be.

McCausland wrote that Abbott’s “ability to see the life of [her] time clearly and coolly,” and her skill in discovering “in that life subjects capable of being molded to art’s eternal intentions” – i.e., in McCausland’s mind, seeking out and striving for depictions of “moral and social” issues – fit well into the hope on the part of the reviewer for the potential of American art as a tool for
social betterment. In her letter that accompanied the clipping, McCausland thanked Abbott “for
the pleasure [her] photographs gave,” and expressed a desire to see more of her work.

Abbott’s response, sent October 29, demonstrates that the artist was clearly thrilled by
McCausland’s article. Praising her “splendid” and “most encouraging” review, Abbott stated “It
is truly with a deep sense of gratification that me finds, even rarely an intelligent understanding
of my work from my own countrymen, of all things!” To the photographer, McCausland’s
review was “the first intelligent one on my work that has appeared in this country.” One-upping
McCausland’s request to see more of her photographs, Abbott stated her desire to meet with the
reviewer the next time she found herself in New York.

Confirming McCausland’s assumptions, Abbott wrote, “To put it mildly, I have and have
had a fantastic passion for New York, photographically speaking.” To McCausland, this
statement was exciting, proving that she had found a photographer who truly understood New
York as she, McCausland, saw it. Demonstrating her own increased delight both in Abbott’s
work and the artist herself, McCausland’s November 5 reply dropped all sense of formal,
professional tone, and expressed her feeling that in Abbott, through her photographs and letter,
she believed she had found a kindred spirit:

… [I]t seems to me there is very little in life except solidarity between human
beings where there is some understanding of the common thing sought. That is, I
have a passion for a number of things, too, for all kinds of things with capital
letters, Life, America, Nature, Man, all those beautiful 19th century concepts
which… probably represent inescapable truths for all time.

McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll D384 frame 855. PB
44 McCausland, letter to Miss Berenice Abbott, dated October 29, 1934.
45 Abbott, letter to Miss McCausland, dated October 29, 1934.
McCausland was thrilled to have her belief in Abbott’s photographic goals confirmed, writing, “I’m glad you have a fantastic passion for New York… and probably it was intuition of that passion which made me write as I did of your work. For only from passion and fantastic passion does any sense of reality in art, or in life, come, I think.”

McCausland, whose body of work proves that she was never one to shy away from rich and idealistic prose if given the opportunity, keyed on the word “passion,” and the rest of her letter serves as a statement of her own passions. Thinking far beyond the boundaries of New York, McCausland listed numerous sites and figures that incited her own passions, including small New England towns, “the court house in Bolivar, Missouri,” and “some funny facades in Troy, N.Y.” “But most of all,” she wrote, “I have a fantastic passion for AMERICA. (One needs much larger capitals.) America in a desolate and disorganized sense, those dreary lands one sees from the train en route to Chicago. A straight concrete road outside St. Louis. Kansas prairies.”

What neither woman could have guessed at the time was just how much, and how quickly, this sharing of passions would change both of their lives. These short letters, and the quick turn from notes of professional courtesy to excited statements of shared interest, heralded the beginning of the closest relationship Abbott would ever know. To the artist, McCausland was one of the first people who saw what she was trying to accomplish with her photographs. “She understood,” Abbott would say of McCausland nearly 41 years later. “She really knew what I was trying to do, which I don’t think many people did.” Within a few short months, Abbott and McCausland were formally introduced by Marchel Landgren, at the time director of art

---

46 Elizabeth McCausland, letter to Miss Abbott, dated November 5, 1934, Abbott papers, Commerce Graphics collection, “McCausland” folder. PB
47 Ibid.
48 McQuaid and Tait, 431.
49 Yochelson, 19.
activities on the New York City Municipal Art Committee. They hit it off in person, as well, and by the fall they had moved in together, sharing a loft at 50 Commerce Street in New York where they would stay until McCausland’s death in 1965. “Elizabeth is certainly the best friend I ever had in my life,” Abbott would later state.

In the intervening time between their meeting and their moving in together, the two enthusiastic women would discuss and attempt to execute a collaborative project which revealed the full nature of their shared passion for America. Over the next two chapters, I will discuss the details of that project, entitled *America. The 48 states*. In chapter one I have worked to explain the circumstances that led Abbott and McCausland to come together, and exposed the feelings both shared regarding the fascination they felt in regards to their home country. But to fully understand their intentions, and to have a clear picture of the environment in which they hoped to produce this work, I will delve in chapter two into Abbott and McCausland’s theories on documentary photography, and look at the ways in which both women sought to spell out a proper definition of what “America” meant to them.

---


51 Yochelson, Ibid.

52 McQuaid and Tait, 430.
CHAPTER 2: FROM FRIENDSHIP TO COLLABORATION TO LIKE-MINDEDNESS

The history the camera can write is the visual record of the present.

-Berenice Abbott

As the relationship between Berenice Abbott and Elizabeth McCausland grew, so too did Abbott’s interest in the United States beyond the borders of New York City. Clearly, the letters shared between the two during their initial introduction demonstrated a shared “fantastic passion” for the concepts – both grandly American and simply human – that they saw in the external world. For McCausland, her consideration of these concepts was infused with a desire to put them to use in correcting social ills. McCausland had long considered herself a political person, and cited her writings on numerous and varied cultural and social topics as evidence of her activism. Discussing her political bona fides, McCausland once listed the numerous people who had been subjects of her *Springfield Republican* stories, including “Florence Kelley, long the hero of the National Consumers League…. Henry J. Allen, former governor of Kansas and United States senator…. Mary Donovan, prominent in the Sacco-Vanzetti defense. Gov Trumbull of Connecticut…. Joseph B. Eastman, federal coordinator of railroads.”2 The list goes on for a full, typewritten page. “Besides personalities,” McCausland wrote, “social themes have always interested me.”3 The list again goes on again at length when she discusses the specific topics she had covered, and demonstrates McCausland’s acute awareness of the social issues and

---

2 Elizabeth McCausland, “Plans for Work,” application to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 1935, McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll D368 frame 71. PB
3 Ibid.
crises of the time. In addition to her writing, McCausland would serve throughout the 1930s in a number of high-ranking positions in socially conscious artists’ groups. For example, she worked on the advisory board of the politically active Photo League, and would compose articles for such groups through the 30s and 40s on topics ranging from the anti-fascist work being done by New York artists, to “Why artists should vote for Roosevelt.”

For Abbott, however, her interest in the causes McCausland held dear was, until their acquaintance, relatively low. Though Abbott certainly was aware of the suffering of Americans enveloped in the labor crisis of the Depression, her work prior to 1935 suggests that she gave little consideration to the economic troubles found all around her when choosing her photographic subjects. Though she extolled the work of socially conscious forebears such as Lewis Hine, it appears Abbott simply did not see themes of social injustice as playing any major role in her early New York work. The exchange of ideas she shared with McCausland, then, appears to have been a revelatory period for her. Abbott’s photos quickly took on a more overt social and political bent once McCausland entered her life; as Peter Barr has pointed out in his 1997 dissertation, the pair’s fast moving friendship instilled in Abbott a “new consciousness of the social and economic plight of many Americans outside New York.”

---

4 Ibid, 71-2. The long list of socially-themed stories she wrote for the Republican includes stories that “deal with the abolition of capitol punishment; unemployment insurance; book censorship; movie censorship; the D.A.R. [Daughters of the American Revolution] black list; Ford Hall Forum, the first open forum in the country; the New Bedford strike of 1928; child labor in the tobacco plantations of the Connecticut valley; sweatshops in the Massachusetts textile industry; minimum wage laws enforcement; the right of married women to work in the industry; birth control; free speech; feminism;…modern housing and slums[;]… the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; the U.S. Children’s Bureau…”


she shared with McCausland would quickly take her far away from New York, into the rural areas where the suffering of the Depression was being felt on every farm and in every small town.

A plan for collaboration

Within a few months of their introduction, McCausland had convinced Abbott of the value of taking her skill with the camera and her highly observant eye on the road, and the two began discussing a collaborative project of creative reportage. Outlined simply, Abbott and McCausland hoped to secure funding that would allow them to travel the length and breadth of the continental United States, Abbott shooting photographs and McCausland writing about what they saw. They hoped to produce a book, as McCausland would write,

Not a picture book, not a treatise or a burst of splendid rhetoric with illustrations, not a series of beautifully reproduced plates with tabloid captions and tricks of montage, but a book with words and photographs marching along beside each other, complimenting each other, reinforcing each other…. It could be the great democratic book, the great book for the masses of people conditioned by reading newspapers and tabloids…. Such a book… might be of inestimable value for educational purposes, purposes of adult education, purposes of awakening millions of adult Americans to themselves.9

Abbott, too, wrote briefly about the proposed book, “a document which should be made before the changing aspect of the country has altered too much. A document which should be put into permanent form. This form I think of as the photographic book, a form much more widely used

---

and appreciated abroad than here [in the United States].” She cited two books in particular, *U.S. Camera: 1935* and *Eyes on the World*, as examples of America’s first attempts at such tomes.

*Eyes on the World*, a particularly interesting book, was an odd choice for comparison. Despite Abbott’s reference, the book, which featured nearly 300 pages of collaged photographs, drawings, newspaper headlines, article clippings, and pictures cut out from catalogs and fashion magazines, appears to be the antithesis of what she and McCausland hoped to accomplish rather than an example they planned to follow. *Eyes on the World* attempted to create a picture of the world of 1935 by hitting the viewer with literally thousands of only loosely-related images with scant captions and no interpretive commentary. Compared to the book on which Abbott and McCausland collaborated in 1939, *Changing New York*, along with the descriptions both wrote of a book about America which would feature solitary images and extensive captions laid out in a rational format, *Eyes on the World* was a very different kind of book, indeed. Perhaps this difference, and Abbott’s citation of it in spite of that difference, proves just how little these “photographic books” had actually penetrated the American scene by 1935.

But the descriptions Abbott and McCausland later gave of their proposed book only touch on the full scope of what the two women hoped to accomplish in creating what, at the time, would have been the most thorough photographic portrait of the continental United States to ever be created. Working as they were prior to the release of similar books that would begin to be published a few years later, Abbott and McCausland were proposing an idea of an original

---

11 Though, certainly, it appears that she had little else to chose from when searching for precedents.
12 which I will discuss in Chapter 4
nature, and something that was radically different in scope than anyone had attempted to accomplish before. And while funding for the trip never materialized, the wealth of documents created around the proposed venture are worthy of exploration, as this collection of materials create a picture of a grand view of the country that presages the work of the FSA and other contemporaries, reveals much about Abbott and McCausland’s views on America, and would, in the end, play a major role in redefining Abbott’s photographic aims for decades to come.

*Joint funding proposals*

The plan would be carefully explained the following fall of 1935 in two separate applications to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation of New York – one composed by McCausland to discuss her writing, the other written by Abbott to cover her photographic plans. The potential significance of creating such a portrait of the country during perhaps its greatest ever economic crisis was not lost on either woman. Their work was to be of a nature that would facilitate exposure of the economic hardships of the time, social and labor issues that were threatening the livelihoods of millions of Americans. Proposed before any of the other extensive Depression-era photographic portraits of America were underway, Abbott and McCausland were some of the first to see the value in visually exposing the true scale of the hardships felt around the country in such a graphic format.

At the same time, however, the proposals demonstrate a desire also to go beyond the goal of social justice and simply seek out the “truth” of the contemporary American condition, a goal which lines up exactly with the beliefs Abbott and McCausland espoused regarding the purpose and value of documentary photography at the time. The destitute and downtrodden would have a prominent place in their series, but so too would the remnants of past American accomplishment
and, indeed, failure. Abbott and McCausland’s democratic portrait of the country would incorporate all aspects of what, in their mind, made America “America.”

They chose a simple title, one which defined plainly the subject of their collaboration, but left much to the imagination: *America. The 48 states.* The title implies a dichotomy between the country and its summary parts, prioritizing the concept of a cohesive nation able to be depicted as a singular body, but also promising to seek out the essential differences found in the parts that make up that national whole. Dealing with these separate but related concepts of nation-versus-state played an important role in the composition of both proposals, and though the dichotomy is more implied rather than suggested outright, both Abbott and McCausland took care to incorporate considerations of both.

Thinking out in writing her own understanding of this dichotomy, McCausland pondered the differences between citizens of the country and citizens of a state in her proposal. “What are the component parts of this portrait of America?” she wondered about their project. “Is it 48 states added up together to make 48, or 48 states added up together to make 1, the Union? Is a Kansan greater than an American, or less than an American? Is an American equal to a Kansan? So the questions go on.”¹⁴ In the proposal, she meditated on the importance of their journey to the future of the country, while stressing the specifically place-based inherent differences within the nation. Under the heading of “Purpose,” McCausland’s grandiose prose reveals a confidence in both the potential value of such a project, and her belief in her own fitness to fully realize such potential in a democratic way.

Awareness of America is needed so that America may realize its destiny. This not in the mood of nationalism, not in the mood of chauvinism. But the soil of Missouri is not the soil of Kansas. One harvest will grow from one soil, another

harvest from another soil. So Americans must know their own potentialities, their own resources.\(^{15}\)

For Abbott, too, the *America* project was to serve as a nudge to her fellow countrymen, a statement which she hoped would encourage change and push the United States toward a more prosperous destiny.

[T]his is a moment in history, …a great and terrifying moment. The tension of economic forces, the political crisis of the world, do not leave us reason to believe that the United States is to be exempt from historic movements swaying the world. We can go backward or we can go forward, but we cannot stand still, rooted in time and space.\(^{16}\)

To provide that nudge, Abbott advocated for a project that would present an in-depth review of the current status of the country. “Who knows what America looks like, or who has seen more than a fragment of its face?” Abbott asked. For her, the documentary aspects of the trip were especially valuable in that they would be making an historical record of the country as it appeared at the time, a book which could immediately be presented to the American public as a report on the status of their fellow countrymen all over the troubled continent. In her application, Abbott stated the need for a record of the “face” of the country as a way to show contemporary citizens what existed beyond their daily plain of vision. Her goal was to capture that face before it was irrevocably altered by time. “The country stores of 20 years ago are almost gone,” she lamented. “Rural sections like northeastern Tennessee may be obliterated when great hydroelectric projects like the TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] are completed. A city changes,

\(^{15}\) Ibid, 60.

\(^{16}\) Abbott, “Plans for Work,” 78.
a village “modernizes” itself, the essential fact of the countryside alters overnight.” 17 Her hope was that the book, aside from its contemporary value as a cause for social betterment, would also one day be seen as a valuable record to historians seeking to know what 1930s America looked like. “Suppose we had photographs of the first puritan settlements on Massachusetts Bay, the first frontier town in the winning of the West? Suppose we knew what the great plains looked like when the first explorers reached them?” 18 She felt that her and McCausland’s book would keep future historians from having to ask such questions.

McCausland saw a very similar purpose for their trip. “The American childhood is ended. Now what?” she inquired. “Of this nation at this critical moment in history should there not be a portrait, so that the future looking at such a portrait may know what manner of people we were in 1935?” Assuming the answer to be affirmative, she pushed herself for clarity: “What is that portrait to be?”

The faces of its people, the external aspects of its cities and villages, the wide sweep of its plains, the wastelands of its deserts, the eroded watersheds of its mountains, the smokeless chimneys of industrial centers, slagheaps and dumps outside a lead mine, the miserable hovels of miners, the false front (tin, two-story) of a country general store. 19

To both women, for the America series to accomplish the lofty goals they had set, the project first and foremost had to be a portrait work on the grandest scale. Traveling the country with camera and pen in hand, their goal was to create a portrait so thorough, so representative, that those viewers in both the present and the future would be able to see the resulting book and be keenly aware of the harsh circumstances, the drastic changes, and the historic movements that

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 McCausland, “Plans for Work,” frame 60.
were taking place all around the United States. The scope of such a trip would have been enormous; their proposal inferred an intention, even in its title, to visit every state in the union, driving tens of thousands of miles through areas that would not only be unfamiliar to their viewers, but also quite new to Abbott and McCausland, as well. Yet in spite of the grand and massive subject they planned to cover, neither appeared daunted by the task. Rather, their applications were both written with a high degree of confidence. Neither questioned the possibility of actually completing such a project. Rather, both Abbott and McCausland approach the proposal as if the trip was an accomplishable task just waiting for someone to provide the money necessary to fund two very capable people in their execution of the plan.

Doubtless such bravado is necessary when requesting large sums of money, and hesitancy and questioning of their own abilities would have led, likely, to immediate dismissal. But it is still difficult to ignore the fact that, despite the odds against the success of such an all-encompassing portrait – issues such as the ability of two people to sustain themselves on the road for a year or more, with little money and being dependant on the willingness of strangers to take them in on a nightly basis – Abbott and McCausland wrote of their plans with the self-assurance of two people who had shed all pretense of self-doubt. As I will now explore, one of the greatest reasons for this confidence came from both women’s well-formed beliefs in the purpose of documentary photography, and how the art form could be of great importance to the society in which the images were to be created.

*On documentary photography*

By 1935, Abbott’s experiences in New York City, and her familiarity with the work of Eugene Atget, had made major impressions on her as a documentary artist. In his 1997
dissertation, Barr discusses at length the influences which set in motion Abbott’s transformation from portraitist to documentary photographer, citing Abbott’s increasing awareness of American society and social issues, along with her building belief that photography can play a role in inspiring social change in a country devastated by the Depression. Because Barr has gone to such all-encompassing lengths in his description of the factors that led to Abbott’s evolution during the period, I will not attempt to duplicate his work. Rather, in the following pages I will explore the concepts of documentary photography Abbott and McCausland espoused in the 1930s and 1940s.20

Following the decade in which she first gained a reputation in America, Abbott published *A Guide to Better Photography* in 1941,21 a book that served not only as a textbook for aspiring artists, but also as Abbott’s most extensive ever statement on her personal beliefs of the purpose of documentary photography. The majority of the book was, as the title promises, a far-reaching look at the technical side of photography. Abbott attempted to pass on to the novice camera owner her views on the best ways in which to choose proper equipment, shoot the best images, and develop pictures that demonstrated to the viewer the essence of the subject. Yet among this guidebook’s myriad tips and suggestions regarding good technique, Abbott sprinkled her own philosophies on the artistic, expressive side of photography, philosophies developed over more than 15 years spent almost constantly with a camera in her hand.

---

20 It should be noted that the works that I explore by both women come from the period immediately following their collaboration on *America, The 48 states*. This is being done for two reasons: first, to the best of my knowledge both Abbott and McCausland wrote much more extensively on their own documentary theories after 1935. Second, and more importantly, I feel that their writings following their joint collaboration in 1935 best explain the nature of their thinking toward photography and photographic purpose at the time. By reviewing their thoughts on the goals and importance of documentary photography post-1935, I believe I can cull from these works a detailed picture of what both women thought was the purpose of the art during the period in which they were formulating and working on *America*, and thereby build for the reader a more full understanding of Abbott and McCausland’s goals with the project.

One chapter in particular, “Documentary Photography,” is a virtual statement of purpose, Abbott’s summary of her years of thought on the subject and its relevance in the world. In this chapter, she stressed the importance of content as the single most significant factor in a photograph created to make record of its subject, a factor that topped even proper technique in her mind.

I believe content to be the raison d’être of photography. The importance of content is demonstrated by the fact that the photographs which have survived from the past and which ever increase in value and prestige are those endowed with content and documentary interest, as well as beauty.22

Abbott stated that she saw documentary photography as a way to finally incorporate people and humanity into the record-making ability of photography. To her, documentary photography “was a necessary revolt from the lack of human content of much straight photography.”23 The idea of making a record of humankind’s status in the world without the inclusion of people – or at least some kind of record of actual human influence within the frame – was pointless in Abbott’s mind. To be sure, this was not an indictment of such photographers as Ansel Adams, whose nature photography Abbott greatly admired. Rather, Abbott was pushing for a high degree of truthfulness in photography’s capturing of the human condition; a documentary photograph existed specifically to capture the society within which it was created, and must therefore include humanity itself.

The documentarists of the 1930s saw this depiction of humanity as a way in which the field could play a major role in society, not just as an expressive art form, but also as a source of change within that society, depicting the realities of people’s situations and thereby transmitting

22 Ibid, 166-7.
23 Ibid, 164.
to the rest of the world the conditions in which people lived. By making this transmission, the hope was that observers would then be so affected by the images that they would understand the issues and work toward improvement. Beaumont Newhall, founder of the photography department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and a documentary theorist Abbott quoted at length in her own work, shared this belief in social awareness and change as documentary photography’s highest goal. He cautioned, however, that a creeping need for naïve photographers and observers to produce only effortless, thoughtless depictions of the economically challenged was becoming a troubling hindrance to the work that this expanding field of photography could accomplish. To Newhall, simply depicting the poor was not enough to create a true record of the times, or one which would cause any kind of social change. In a 1938 essay for the journal *Parnassus*, Newhall wrote:

> Because the majority of [the] best work has been concerned with the homes and lives of the under-privileged, many pictures of the down-and-out have been made as “documentaries.” The decay of man and of his buildings is picturesque; the texture of weathered boards and broken window-panes has always been particularly delightful to photograph…. These things, taken for their picturesqueness, may and often do form photographs of great beauty. But unless they are taken with a serious sociological purpose, they are not documentary.24

McCausland, like Abbott and Newhall, held the view that photography had the power to induce social change, and championed that idea throughout the 1930s and 1940s. “[A] conscious and purposive esthetic of documentary photography is evolving in response to the rapid change in social and economic forces [of the 1930s],” McCausland said in a speech in 1938. Still, McCausland cautioned those listening that putting too narrow a definition on the purpose of the

---

documentary art is to constrain it unnecessarily. Simply put, documentary photography was defined only in her mind as a field that “presents a well defined content, in a context of contemporaneous reality…. By its nature, it is a realistic medium, dedicated to the presentment of external reality, vowed to record the objective world.”

What Abbott likewise hoped to avoid was pigeonholing the form into the category of “work[s] of sociological purpose” only, or in other words the type of art bent solely on lifting up the impoverished class. There was certainly a place of vital importance for such photographs, and Abbott points out the work of Hine and the Farm Security Administration as examples of projects where such a purpose was executed to powerful ends. In her estimation, however, it was just as vital for documentary photography to capture the other forms of human life so that comparisons could be made, giving as much time proportionally to the wealthy upper class as was given to the poor. These photographs of the well-to-do would provide a standard against which images of poor conditions could be compared. This need for photographs to serve as a counterpoint meant that photographs of those living in relative comfort were “no less interesting as a revelation of human life than” images of the downtrodden. In capturing a proper picture of the quality of human life in a given situation or area, then, Abbott firmly believed that balanced time must be given to depict all aspects of that life, and thereby create a full and complete picture of the subject.

Still, it was a proud fact that much of the documentary photography produced during the 1930s was created with the specific intention of addressing impoverished-class issues. McCausland pointed out that the times in which they lived, rather than the nature of the art form

---

27 Ibid.
itself, necessitated an increased attention given to subjects dealing with the poor and disadvantaged. This proliferation of needy subjects, in turn, caused photography to grow and expand as a critical form of reportage. “[P]erhaps only in [an] era, sobered by economic tragedy and so recalled from introspective meditations, could photography really flower…. [I]n the ‘30s, the documentary school comes into its own, consciously and with mature intentions. That is a measure of the speed of the history and the powerful impact of social forces.”

Promoting this expansion of photography’s function in society was McCausland herself, an enthusiastic champion of photography’s potential role as an impetus for social change. By presenting the viewer with a true picture of the world in which they lived, McCausland believed that the documentary photographers could inspire this kind of change. “Now documentary photography most emphatically does not mean all the ugliest spots in town,” she wrote. “It means reality. If reality is peace and beauty, documentary photography means peace and beauty. But, if reality is war, slums, starvation, then documentary photography means war, slums, starvation.

…[F]acing the truth we summon up forces to change the facts and make them consonant with the dignity of human life. Refusing to face the truth, we become responsible for the ugly facts and perpetuate them in a dangerous focus of infection…. For we must believe that the truth, properly stated and understood, will prevail.”

Beyond this drive to present the current condition to contemporary citizens, McCausland believed this genre of photography was equally useful as a way in which to make a record of the present so that it could provide lessons for the future. “…[P]recisely because it will be incredible to future ages that human beings lived in squalor and filth, congested quarters, under-fed,

29 Ibid, 12.
illiterate, sickly with anemia and venereal disease, do we need today to record these facts.” McCausland believed that this ability to portray truth – whatever that truth might be – and make it available both for contemporary viewers and the historians of the future was the most vital aspect in the growth of documentary photography.

This sense of a need for an encompassing communication of truthfulness in the image was on McCausland’s mind again when she wrote an essay for the January 1939 edition of *Photo Notes*, also titled “Documentary Photography.” In this article, McCausland believed herself to be writing at what might best be called the tail end of the first formal era of documentary photography, an era which saw the rise of both individual photographers such as Abbott and Adams, and also the photographers of the Farm Security Administration, and the team of visual artists from *Life* magazine. It is not, of course, that the form had not flourished in isolation in the past; such pioneers as Mathew Brady, Eugene Atget, and the aforementioned Hine were recognized by 1939 as early masters of the field. Rather, as Newhall pointed out less than a year earlier, the formation of groups like the photographers of the FSA in 1935 heralded the first steps toward a formalized, institutionalized “school” of photographic documentation, which introduced a loose set of unwritten principles that guided many workers in the field.

While truthfulness in depiction was the highest priority, McCausland and her contemporaries recognized the importance of visual appeal as a valuable partner to content in the construction of an outstanding, truthful image. Seeing documentary photography and, as Abbott called it, “straight” photography – images produced for the sake of beauty, rather than record-making – as separate but equally important forms of photographic expression, Abbott advocated

---

30 Ibid.
for a joining of the two, stressing the benefits both forms of visual expression can lend to the other.

From this point, we may proceed to a definition that the photography which best expresses the interplay of forces in our period will be a synthesis of straight and documentary, in which the excellent photogenic technic\textsuperscript{33} of the former school and the human emphasis of the latter will be fused.\textsuperscript{34}

In essence, this fusion would create for her the ultimate form of documentation, one which allows for beauty of photographic execution, while at the same time recording for all to see the realities of the subject before the lens. “Photography is to communicate the realities of life,” Abbott wrote, “the facts which are to be seen everywhere about us, the beauties, the absurdities, the achievements, the waste, of contemporary civilization.”\textsuperscript{35} Newhall as well placed factuality ahead of artistry, but refused to deny artistry its place as an important aspect of the work. The “results [of documentation] are often brilliant technically and highly artistic, but primarily they are pictorial reports.”\textsuperscript{36} This reporting, above any other consideration, was still the most important goal.

For McCausland, photographic record-making reached the important plateau it did in the 1930s primarily because it held close to its ideological heart a sense of reality desired by the contemporary viewer. “Today,” she wrote, “we want the truth, not rationalizations, not idealizations, not romanticizations…. That truth we receive, visually, from photographs recording the undeniable facts of life today.”\textsuperscript{37} Abbott agreed in a 1936 article for \textit{Art Front},

\textsuperscript{33} Both McCausland and Abbott borrowed the spelling “technic” (technique) most likely from Lewis Mumford, whose theories on the eras of urban development in the United States influenced Abbott’s own interest in New York and other metropolitan areas. Barr traces this connection in his dissertation.

\textsuperscript{34} Abbott, \textit{A Guide to Better Photography}, 169.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 167.

\textsuperscript{36} Newhall, “Documentary Approach to Photography,” 5.

\textsuperscript{37} McCausland, “Documentary Photography” (1939 Photo Notes essay), 172.
stating that “The trend away from romanticism of whatever sort, whether of the emotions or of the intellect, creates a need for a medium which can deal adequately with the complexity of 20th century life, which can convey with fervor and completeness the present’s social and documentary emphasis.”38

The role of the photographer

These times in which Abbott and McCausland lived did not, of course, make it any easier to create a photograph, despite the ample subjects; the photographers themselves played a vital part in the process. In this new realistic format, McCausland saw the role of the photographer as a kind of behind-the-scenes editor of this picture of reality – not by altering the subjects within the image, but rather by finding the subject that best communicates the reality they perceive, and shooting a photograph that encapsulates this reality. While warning against the overt influence of the photographer’s tastes in the composition of the image, McCausland at the same time espoused the necessity of being selective and creative in choosing the subject itself.

The fact is a thousand times more important than the photographer; his personality can be intruded only by the worst taste of exhibitionism; this at least is reality. Yet, also, by the imagination and intelligence he possesses and uses, the photographer controls the new esthetic, finds the significant truth and gives it significant form.39

McCausland saw this objectivity within the frame as a “new spirit of realism,” stating that “photography looks now at the external world with new eyes, the eyes of scientific, uncompromising honesty.” In her vision of photography, the image created must reproduce its

38 Berenice Abbott, “Photographer as Artist,” Art Front 2, no. 9 (Sept.-Oct. 1936): 4. PB
39 McCausland, “Documentary Photography” (1939 Photo Notes essay), 171.
subject with dogged pragmatism. “Documentary photography [is] an application of photography direct and realistic,” she wrote, “dedicated to the profound and sober chronicling of the external world.”

For Abbott, however, the relationship between the photographer’s personal point of view and the subject being depicted was a more complex one. Her thoughts on the subject seem more realistic, as she allows for some restrained subjectivity as an element of the photograph that is virtually impossible to avoid. “I aim to express visually the things around us to give form to the things that move me,” Abbott said in a 1939 interview. “You don’t impose [your point of view] on the machine [the camera]. The object seen imposes itself upon your will. In other words, you call on your technical ability to carry out the idea of the final effect you desire.” Yet this refusal to “impose” did not relegate the photographer’s point of view to the wayside. In a 1937 speech to the Art Students League, Abbott stated clearly that the point of view was indeed important, in the sense that it guided the photographer to find the most representative image, one which best represented the artist’s perception of the situation depicted.

…[I]t would be unjust to the photographic medium to imply that the photograph is only a mechanical replica of external reality. In the hands of the intelligent and sensitive photographer the photograph will have further content added, the content of point of view, esthetic and intellectual as well as spatial, from which he observes reality.

---

40 Ibid, 170.
For Newhall, it was essential for the documentary photographer to have a strong grasp of what they were photographing, to understand the subject more fully than someone who was simply taking snapshots of interesting scenes. The goal of such preparation, he insisted, was to produce “pictorial reports.”

First and foremost he [the documentary photographer] is a visualizer. He puts into pictures what he knows about, and what he thinks of, the subject before his camera. Before going on assignment he carefully studies the situation which he is to visualize. He reads history and related subjects. He examines existing pictorial material for its negative and positive value – to determine what must be re-visualized in terms of his approach to the assignment, and what has not been visualized.43

The documentary photographer, then, was important to the genre in the sense that they would act as the ultimate filter through which the viewer would view the “truth.” The filter the photographer provided had to be clear of personal tastes which would block out the aspects the artist might not feel desirable. Yet at the same time the photographer performed this filtration by selecting the aspects of their chosen subject which best represented this unvarnished truth. In the documentary image, then, it is important not only to recognize the supposed reality being depicted, but also the selectivity with which that reality was chosen by the photographer.

To the photographers of the 1930s, the goals of documentary photography went far beyond the creation of an esthetically pleasing image; these artists felt a sense of duty to the subjects they recorded on film, to document the truth as they saw it, and to broadcast that truth to the world. Their photographs were an attempt to depict the world, forthrightly and unchallenged by subjectivity, through the mechanical medium of photography. The images these

photographers created to them represented an essential truth in depiction not found in other art forms like painting and sculpture. This reality came from an ability inherent in photography to capture the subject through an unparalleled means of direct transfer: light enters the camera lens, reflected off the subject, and transferred directly onto the film, burning forever an exact duplication of what the photographer witnessed through his or her lens. This impression is then again transferred, this time to paper, and again with no loss of that original reality or addition of outside elements, meaning that photography could retransmit a slice of reality with more claims to direct, unencumbered representation than any other form of communication or art. Holding this kind of power in their hands, photographers and documentary theorists like Abbott and McCausland championed photography as a record keeping tool matched by none, able to depict the world as it existed for the split second the shutter opened, and transmit that reality to anyone willing to look.

Testing their beliefs on the open road

Abbott and McCausland had these thoughts on the artistic and above all social value of documentary photography when they set out on their ultimately truncated journey to record their America. In building up the beginnings of a portrait of their country through the photographs and writing produced on their travels together, the two women produced a picture that testified to the desolation felt in all corners of the United States. “Today, photographers have a world… profound and dreadful to record,” Abbott wrote. “In this crisis of world history, it is important to understand clearly the potential function and value of the photographer as the historian of human life.”44 Though they were never able to complete their portrait of human life in America, Abbott

and McCausland produced a body of work together in the early summer of 1935 that
demonstrates just how descriptive and important that portrait might have been.
CHAPTER 3: THE EXISTING PIECES OF *AMERICA. THE 48 STATES*.

*America,*  
*I salute you!*  
*From this safe and sheltered*  
*backwater of life I*  
*greet you,*  
*Great prairies and rolling*  
*wheatlands whose vast-ness is as the ocean’s,*  
*mountain peaks whose*  
*lofty altitudes reach*  
*no higher than the depths*  
*of the nation’s ruin.*

- Elizabeth McCausland  
excerpt from her poem, “Salute”

Berenice Abbott and Elizabeth McCausland presented their request for funding for the *America. The 48 states.* series with a high degree of confidence in their own abilities to see the project succeed. The self-assurance with which they wrote and submitted their proposal was not, however, based entirely on nothing more than their beliefs in both their abilities and the value of documentary photography to society. Abbott and McCausland, in fact, had proven sufficiently to themselves in two separate journeys within the 18 months prior to the submission of both proposals in November of 1935 that such a trip was not only feasible, but could be productive, as well. In this chapter, I will first briefly explore a 1934 trip Abbott took to see 19th century architecture to illustrate the work of a friend. Following that, I will delve into the practice run Abbott and McCausland made for their proposed collaboration, a fast-paced run that would prove to be the impetus for the most illustrative documents to come out of the *America. The 48 states.* endeavor.

---

A precursor to the America series: Abbott’s work with Henry-Russell Hitchcock

The first trip, undertaken during the summer of 1934, was a trip Abbott embarked on to visit eastern American cities with architectural historian and champion of the modernist style of design, Henry-Russell Hitchcock. Abbott and Hitchcock appear to have met through mutual associations, their social circles crossing through mutual friends like Julien Levy and Holger Cahill. Likely, Abbott’s growing status in New York, along with her constant search for employment that interested her more than did the magazine portraiture, led her to become the right companion for Hitchcock’s trip. Visiting both major metropolises and the smaller cities in between, Abbott shot photographs to illustrate a traveling museum exhibit with Hitchcock titled, *The Urban Vernacular of the [Eighteen-] Thirties, Forties and Fifties: American Cities before the Civil War*. On this trip, Abbott photographed buildings Hitchcock believed would prove his thesis on modern architecture, which “was that a simple vernacular style, stripped of columns, ornament, and archaearological quotations, flourished in America at the same time as the Greek Revival.” By providing evidence for this thesis, Hitchcock – and, by extension, Abbott – hoped to establish proof of an American historical lineage for modern architecture, the type then being produced by modernist architects Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright.

In 1993, Wesleyan University, which in 1934 was Hitchcock’s employer and source of funding, showed a restored exhibition of the Abbott-Hitchcock project, producing along with it a book that discusses the details of their collaboration.

---


3 Janine A. Mileaf, Constructing Modernism: Berenice Abbott and Henry-Russell Hitchcock: A re-creation of the 1934 exhibition *The Urban Vernacular of the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties American Cities Before the Civil War* (Middletown, Conn.: Davidson Art Center, Wesleyan University, 1993), 8.
The exhibition was divided into eight sections. Five of these represented individual cities – Boston, New York, Baltimore, Charleston, and Philadelphia – each treated as a distinctive entity with unique characteristics. The exhibition also included a section on vernacular architecture in other cities, a section on hotels, and a small group of architects’ drawings reproduced from the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Boston Public Library.4

The fifty photographs chosen for the exhibition were shot under strict guidelines set down by Abbott and Hitchcock. As the 1993 exhibition book notes, Abbott chose to photograph each building from roughly the same distance and from only a select few different angles. In doing so, the photographs give “the impression of regularly proportioned buildings within surprisingly similar compositions.”5 This served Hitchcock’s purposes perfectly, as Abbott’s illustrations lend a strong sense of collective, conscious resemblance and design choices on the parts of each building’s architect. Through this depiction of similarity and uniformity (see Illustrations 3-01 through 3-05 for representative examples), the photographs go a long way to lending credence to Hitchcock’s argument for an American vernacular architecture.

As a relevant stage in Abbott’s career, the American Cities series serves as a precursor both to her America. The 48 States. work with McCausland, and also to Abbott’s later work on the Changing New York series. In terms of its relationship to the America work, American Cities can best be seen as Abbott’s first serious photographic expedition outside the confines of New York. Seeing and participating in the studied and measured way in which Hitchcock planned the trip and chose the exact buildings he wanted to use as examples,6 Abbott likely recognized both the necessity of a concrete course of action, and the feasibility of such a seemingly formidable

---

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid, 18.
6 Ibid, 8.
undertaking. And while the photographs look much more similar to the ones she would produce for *Changing New York*, the value of the practical experience of partnering with an equally enthusiastic collaborator to Abbott’s future work on the *America* series cannot be overlooked.

Having spent the summer of 1934 on the road with camera in hand, Abbott was well prepared for the next traveling project she would undertake, this time with her new friend McCausland by her side.\(^7\)

*Abbott and McCausland hit the road*

The time following the journey with Hitchcock was an important period for Abbott, for two primary reasons: she had her first solo show of New York photos at the Museum of the City of New York, and, as already noted, met McCausland shortly thereafter as a result. In May and June of 1935, Abbott and McCausland decided that their inquisitiveness about the rest of the country would best be sated by taking a practice run for what would become the proposed *America. The 48 states* series. When the two women set off on their own road trip, it was planned as a trial run for the *America* series. Imagining the proposed journey as both a duty and a reawakening of her own passion for the country, McCausland saw the trip as the ultimate journalistic assignment. “Suppose an editor says, ‘McCausland, go out and see your America,’” McCausland writes in her proposal. “‘You have been remembering America too long, dreaming

\(^7\) As I described in Chapter 1, Abbott and McCausland would meet in the fall of 1934, only a few months after Abbott’s exhibit with Hitchcock went on tour. Hitchcock, in fact, may have played a role in introducing the two, or at least hastening their introduction. On October 30, 1934, Hitchcock sent a short letter to McCausland filled with high praise for her review of Abbott’s Museum of the City of New York exhibition, and inviting the critic to view and possibly review the *American Cities* exhibit for the *Republican*. I am unsure as to whether McCausland ever attended or reviewed the *American Cities* show, but Hitchcock’s letter, arriving during the period of McCausland and Abbott’s initial correspondence, certainly must have given them something more to talk about, and may well have helped inspire in McCausland’s mind the idea of taking the photographer on the road for her own pet project, the proposed *America* series. The letter can be found in the McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll D382, frame 290. PB
about America too long. Go and see America now!”⁸ And so the two women decided a practice run was in order, to test their ability to survive on the road.

From “the middle of May [to] …the middle of June”⁹ of 1935, Abbott and McCausland climbed into an automobile and set off on a drive that would take them, as Abbott would later recount in the November Guggenheim proposal, “from New York to Memphis, to St. Louis, and back again to New York.”¹⁰ In reality, the trip was much more extensive than that. All told, Abbott and McCausland would visit 12 states before returning to New York, traveling an apparently spontaneous route.¹¹ Their trip followed highways that led them through Pennsylvania, Maryland, and West Virginia, briefly into Kentucky, and then on to Virginia. From there they drove further south, seeing Tennessee, the northern tip of Mississippi, and then Arkansas. Turning back north, the pair drove into Missouri, and then crossed the border into Illinois outside of St. Louis. The last leg of their trip took them to Abbott’s home state of Ohio, and then back through Pennsylvania and Maryland, before finally returning to New York by way of New Jersey.¹² All told, they covered approximately 2,600 miles in the space of a few weeks, traveling in a “second-hand Ford.” To McCausland, it was necessary on such a trip to understand the essence of those people and places they saw.

You sleep in tourist camps, eat in white tiles, talk to farmers along the road, stay in the remote homes of rural Americans. You listen to the sound of their lives.

⁸ Elizabeth McCausland, “Plans for Work,” application to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 1935, McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll D368 frame 61. PB
¹⁰ Ibid, 79.
¹¹ There is no evidence that Abbott and McCausland had more than a general idea for the route they planned to take on this trip, especially when one considers the spontaneous nature of the way in which Abbott chose her subjects. While they certainly may have outlined some of their destinations prior to embarkation, the statement that the trip was to take them “from New York to Memphis, to St. Louis, and back again to New York,” appears the closest thing to an actual plan for their journey ever written down.
¹² The exact route of their trip can be gathered from a series of maps McCausland kept in her files, gas station maps on which she plotted out the exact route she and Abbott drove on their trip. The maps can be found in the McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll D371, frames 1035-9.
You get the feel of their heartbeats in your blood. You see what is going on here and there and everywhere. You think about it. Try to find the word for the hidden secret heartbeat. Try to find the cadence in written and printed words for the way people walk and talk and eat and sleep.13

“We thought that America was worth seeing,” McCausland wrote of their spring trip, “was worth living, was worth writing about and worth photographing. So we went off with a Ford and cameras and went as far as we could in a month, with the amount of physical energy and strength we had.”14

Aside from testing the viability of such a journey as a way to document the country, Abbott and McCausland’s whirlwind trip more importantly led to what would turn out to be the most tangible products of the entire America endeavor, as Abbott shot “about 200 photographs,”15 and McCausland wrote at least two articles based on their observations. In her proposal that fall, McCausland wrote at length of what they saw. In his 1980 article, “Berenice Abbott’s Work in the 1930s,” Michael G. Sundell describes McCausland’s extensive accounts of their trip as “convey[ing]” Abbott and McCausland’s “desire to find a meaningful pattern in various examples of suffering, as well as their experience of the journey across the country as a journey into the soul of America and thereby into itself.”16

“We went through eastern Pennsylvania and looked at the beautiful stone barns,” she recounted.

We went to West Virginia and looked at the subsistence homesteads at Reedsville. Then we looked at coal mining villages and coal miners, at filthy

14 Ibid, 67.
shacks where miners have to live, at miner’s children broken out with running sores from lack of proper food and hygiene. It was not pleasant; and we were not happy looking at these things and seeing how people live. But that is part of the portrait of America, nevertheless.17

Far greater than even the proposals, this journey would, for Abbott and McCausland, be all the proof that they needed that such a trip could and would be a success. Despite the fact that the America series never reached fruition, their trip to “see a little part of America”18 produced an extensive and enlightening body of work.

Abbott’s May 1935 photos

On their trip through a dozen states that May and June, Abbott shot photographs for what could best be described as a study or sketch of what she hoped to cover in the fuller, year-long journey for which she and McCausland were jointly applying for funding. In traveling to only a quarter of the states in the country, and progressing down the road at likely a much faster pace than they would have in the later trip, the photographs that were taken that spring must be considered both experimental on Abbott’s part, and incomplete in terms of their ability to serve as a representation of what Abbott and McCausland hoped to produce while seeing the entire country. Nevertheless, time and Abbott herself have provided the 21st century viewer with a kind of filtering of the 200 or so photos taken on the journey. Through my research and discussions with those familiar with Abbott and her work, I have been able to track down 22 of the original photographs taken that May, all published in two places: Sundell’s 1980 article, and O’Neil’s 1982 biography of Abbott. In a sense, though, one can postulate that this paring down of the May

18 Ibid.
1935 photos was done under the direction of Abbott herself. The photographer was instrumental in the selection of photographs for the O’Neil biography, and so likely only chose to see published the photographs which she felt were worthy. Sundell’s article admittedly does not claim any editorial selectivity on Abbott’s part, but its publication during her lifetime, and the fact that Abbott, to my knowledge, never objected to the publication of the photos that accompany the article, lead me to believe that the photographer at least implicitly approved of their release.19

A number of the photos taken on the May-June 1935 trip demonstrate visual common ground found with the photographs taken during Abbott’s recently completed travels with Hitchcock. Two photographs, especially – *Main Street, Chillicothe, Ohio (1)*20 (illustration 3-06) and *Pulaski, Tennessee* (illustration 3-07) – focus on rows of buildings that would have fit comfortably within Hitchcock’s treatise, but the images themselves contain a few key dissimilarities that reveal the great difference between Abbott and McCausland’s focus, and the goals of the Hitchcock project. The variance lies in what Abbott chose to include in the frame. Despite the fact that Abbott and Hitchcock had very specific documentary goals in mind, and that those goals included expressing the importance of built structures as defining human space and location identity, Abbott’s photographs from the May-June 1935 trip intentionally include those numerous elements that would have been contrary to Hitchcock’s intentions.

---

19 In explaining the great difference between the number of published and unpublished photos from this trip – and my own belief that the 22 published are representative or even stand above the approximately 180 other shots taken – one need only look at the total number of negatives shot during, for example, Abbott’s years working on the *Changing New York* series. The Museum of the City of New York has in its collection over 4,000 negatives from that project. The official published *Changing New York* series, however, contains only 307 photos, selected for publication by Abbott herself.

20 I have taken the liberty of numbering this photo (1), as a second photo, bearing the same title, appears in Hank O’Neil’s biography, and will be discussed later in this chapter. This number does not, however, appear next to the title given the photo in Sundell’s article, the only place the photo has ever been published to my knowledge.
By including such elements as the light and service poles, cars, people, statues and construction scaffolding, Abbott was taking special care to place these images specifically in a contemporary context. As stated previously, Hitchcock’s straight-forward intention was to document the buildings, ignoring modern modifications to the surrounding landscape in an effort to focus the viewer on the subject of their project, pre-Civil War architecture. But Abbott and McCausland were concerned with the whole place – city, town, homestead and the like – and its status in the year 1935.21 By placing these aging buildings in their contemporary context, and revealing to the viewer the condition of the area around them and the people and activities for which they set the backdrop, Abbott was overtly stating her goal of showing the viewer both these human structures of the past, and the way they have been employed for modern usage, or surrounded and in some cases modified for contemporary activity. As Sundell wrote, the photographs “suggest the dignified fixity of cultural monuments.”22

In *Main Street, Chillicothe, Ohio (1)*, a second-story view of downtown Chillicothe shows Main Street in full action, sidewalks filled with people standing or walking in groups. The street is lined with diagonally parked cars, suggesting further activity within the stoic two-, three- and four-story commercial buildings. The left side of the image is dominated by the 1858 Rose County Courthouse, a grandly appointed building with a two story central core fronted by columns, arches and pediment, and topped with a four-sided clock tower that rises above all else.

---

21 Obviously, this demonstrates somewhat of a contradiction in intentions between Hitchcock’s and Abbott’s visual styles. The Hitchcock project, however, was more of an illustrative assignment for Abbott, as her photographs would be attached to text which would further explain the ideas behind the image, while her subsequent work was meant more to capture somewhat similar ideals virtually entirely within the image. I believe their partnership, then, took place for two reasons; first, as stated earlier, Abbott was seeking employment at the time more interesting to her than the magazine portraiture she was doing. Second, Abbott believed in Hitchcock’s work, and likely felt honored to help further it by contributing her photographic skills. See the discussion of Abbott’s use of urban theorist Lewis Mumford’s ideas on the development of cities in chapter four. As Hitchcock’s work champions the same era of urban development that Mumford’s does – and Abbott wholeheartedly agreed with Mumford’s theories – I would argue that Abbott surely felt that her work with Hitchcock served to further a set of architectural and urban theories in which she believed.

22 Sundell, 280.
in the shot. Tools of civic service also play prominently on the left side of the photograph; Abbott framed the photo in a way that included a service pole on the same corner as the window from which she shot, bisecting the courthouse with this odd Victorian item of unspecified use. Behind the pole in the middle of the intersection below stands a traffic light. As neither the pole nor the traffic light serve to add beauty to the shot – and, in fact, obstruct the onlooker’s view of the unique courthouse – it is obvious that their inclusion was intentional on Abbott’s part, and easily explained. In this overlapping of new with old, Abbott captures the way in which modern alterations to the landscape of the town – in this case, the advent of the automobile on Chillicothe’s streets – has worked its way into the fabric of the city’s historical layout.

On the right side of the picture, however, we see signs that the modern era is equally willing to push aside the products of the past in favor of contemporary styles and needs: against the façade of a building whose street-side face is not visible due to the perspective Abbott chose, is a wooden scaffolding, causing the viewer to ponder the potential that the structure was put up by workers who were about to remodel or replace the face of another historic building. In this simple contrast between modern compatibility and modern intrusion, we see one of the most basic but most important goals of Abbott and McCausland’s work. Showing the various levels of structural and visual integrity of these pre-automobile-era commercial and government buildings, the photograph demonstrates at the same time the structures’ easy adaptability to the relatively new form of transportation, and the at-times uncomfortable existence that old and new forged. Taken as a singular image, *Main Street, Chillicothe, Ohio (1)* shows how humankind controls and interacts with its own structures in ways both constructive and destructive, depicting a built environment whose status as a temporary thing is demonstrated in the visible work being done to replace the façade down the street from Abbott’s lens.
Pulaski, Tennessee (Illustration 3-07) makes a more understated critique of a similar small town, taken as the first Chillicothe photo had been, from above. In this view of one corner of Pulaski’s downtown, Abbott captured a row of 19th century two- and three-story commercial blocks facing an open town square. Here, Abbott contrasts 19th and 20th century means of conveyance, including in her photo both automobiles and horse-drawn carts. The square itself appears to have been impeded upon by the advent of automobile traffic, as a portion of it has been paved over to make way for a parking lot. In a humorous depiction of this grudging coexistence of old and new forms of transportation, Abbott has captured a “parked,” unmanned cart, two horses tethered to a very 19th century four-wheeled wagon standing across two facing parking spots, a few feet from a Model T resting in a single space. Very simply, Abbott has forced us to consider the ways in which the former, animal-powered world has been overtaken – but not yet obliterated – by the engine driven society. In the middle of this parking lot stands a small, fenced in square of grass surrounding a monument to Sam Davis, Confederate spy hanged by advancing Union troops in 1863.23

In Main Street, Chillicothe, Ohio (2) (illustration 3-08), Abbott steps a half-block back from the previously discussed Chillicothe photo, standing just off the sidewalk and facing the buildings lining Main Street to give the viewer a look at some of the storefronts that make up downtown. In this street level view we are shown the details of a crowded shopping district. The

---

23 It would be helpful to my own examination of the photograph to be able to say that the advance of cars had left the life-sized statue of Davis marooned in the middle of a parking lot, cut off from his former home in the town square by the need for space for downtown shoppers to leave their vehicles. According to the Web site located at http://www.rootsweb.com/~tngiles/cvlwar/samdavis.htm, however, it appears that the Davis statue was erected in 1910, and it is quite conceivable that the parking lot already existed by the time the monument was put in place. Considering its subject matter, Abbott may well have intended the inclusion of Davis’s memorial as one more demonstration of the encroachment of new upon old. But Abbott’s practice of understanding her subject matter as thoroughly as possible before taking a photograph leads me to believe she may have read the monument prior to taking the photo, and could certainly have found an inscription dating the statue to the 20th century. Whether she intended for the viewer of the picture to be aware of the statue’s date or not adds yet another wrinkle to the question of the statue’s inclusion in the shot.
bottom left-hand corner of the photograph shows the front ends of a number of cars lining the streets, just enough detail to demonstrate, as the previous Chillicothe photo did, the sheer number of visitors to the downtown area. The most outstanding detail in the photo is the array of signage lining the street, covering and, at times, blocking the view of a long line of commercial buildings. At this spot alone, shoppers are asked (twice) to consider purchasing five cent hamburgers, shoes, beer, and clothing, while another sign, its relevant product unseen from this angle, promises “quality service.”

Through the most heavily laden area of signage walks a tidy looking family of father, mother and child. The father wears a clean white hat and casual suit, and the child is dressed in a bright white linen shirt and shorts. The mother, the one member of the family who is seemingly aware of Abbott’s camera, wears a fashionable hat, as well, and a coat that hangs open. This photo highlights the action of the city’s residents passing through the world which they and their forebears have created. By taking the camera down to the street, Abbott has complimented the previous two photographs discussed, thereby following the shots of downtown shopping districts shot from above and showing the entire context with a more personal depiction of a family navigating the street environment below. And it is in this comparison we first start to see Abbott’s renewed focus on human subjects in her photos, something that had virtually disappeared upon her return from Paris. But unlike the Paris photos, which were portraits taken in a studio – the subjects very aware of the camera’s presence – the photographs described so far depicted residents of the cities, towns and rural areas to which Abbott and McCausland traveled going through what can only be assumed to be their typical, daily activities. Some of those people who made their way in front of Abbott’s lens were indeed aware of her presence, but only in a passing way. Much like the woman in *Main Street, Chillicothe, Ohio (2)*, there are
occasional glances directly at the camera, but the positions of the bodies are natural, seemingly unaltered by Abbott.

This was not, though, the case in every photograph, and in fact at times Abbott persuasively uses human subjects posed nonchalantly—suggesting that Abbott has asked them to pause, though not directed them in exactly how to stand before the camera—to speak directly to the work and living conditions to be found in the Depression-reeling south. At stops in West Virginia and Tennessee, Abbott shot a number of photographs that depict people standing outdoors, either posed or pausing and standing momentarily for the camera. Quite similar to the Farm Security Administration photos shot only a short time later, Abbott’s photographs show mostly working class, rural laborers engaged in or fresh from their tasks. Unlike perhaps the most famous of the FSA photographs, Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother* (Illustration 3-09), Abbott’s are more subtle, falling more closely in line with the straightforward, on-the-fly portraiture typical of the majority—and the lesser known—photographs of human subjects the FSA collected in large quantities. In these few photos, Abbott seems to have beaten the FSA photographs to their own subjects, producing a handful of images that could easily and comfortably fall right in beside the government-sponsored photos. While none of the tent homes featured so prominently in Lange’s photographs make an appearance in the published Abbott shots, the people and situations are decidedly similar.

*Miner’s Family, Greenview, West Virginia* (Illustration 3-10) provides perhaps Abbott’s best commentary on the poor living conditions found on her travels. Grouped together in the foreground is the miner’s extended family: the mother with baby in arms, four young boys standing at front, two older men—likely grandfathers or uncles—and a dog, with the miner standing tall and square-shouldered in the middle. A sixth child, perhaps no more than two, runs
past on the right hand side, fast enough to translate as a blur on film. Behind them lies a yard of mostly crabgrass and dirt, a full line of laundry supported by a tree branch stuck in the ground, and a meager wooden house – likely one of the “filthy shacks where miners have to live” McCausland described in her Guggenheim proposal – surrounded by a picket fence with missing slats. The shack appears to have no glass in its windows, and stands a foot off the ground on blocks to avoid flooding, and give animals and bugs a harder time getting in. Without any visible trees or shade, the sun beats down harshly on the entire scene.

At first glance, the photo is rather uncomplicated, presenting us with a portrait of a family making do with little money in substandard living conditions. As a record of typical living conditions found in the rural south, Miner’s Family leaves little doubt that the photographer found less-than-suitable conditions on her journey. But Abbott discovers in this grouping a sobering commentary on the future, as well, a lack of upward mobility for such a family, and the expectation and resignation on the family’s part that their continued existence as low wage, poorly sheltered laborers is a given. The miner stands in overalls and a work shirt, probably his mining uniform, covered in dust. The older man to his right, likely his father, wears jeans and a work shirt as well. In a nod to their own destiny, the four boys wear the same outfit as their father, each in a weathered pair of overalls, two boys with shoes and two boys without. By lining up these three generations of the family, captured all in the same labor-necessitated garb, Abbott deftly depicts the fact that each generation of this family has been shouldered with the same fate,

---

24 In Sundell’s article, the photograph has been enlarged and cropped so that only a solitary portrait of the miner/father remains. In the background of this cropping is a more clear view of one of the shack’s windows, which appears to show no reflection typical of a glass windowpane. I have chosen not to single this cropped version of the photo out for discussion for two reasons: first, as stated, it is a section of a larger photograph published in full in another location. Second, the full photograph was published in the O’Neil book, a publication where Abbott had direct control over the reproduction of her photographs, as evidenced by her commentary on many of the images, her close relationship with O’Neil, and her participation in other aspects of the book. Because Abbott herself chose to publish the photo in full when given the opportunity, it is unclear whether she ever intended for the shot to be cropped as it was in Sundell’s work.
working a physically demanding job for little pay. The children wear work clothes, as well, as if they are already dressed to travel down the same road soon enough. The clothesline behind them shows, supporting as it is a row of hanging boy’s overalls, that the outfits are their daily wear; the boys, despite their young age (none appears older than eight years of age), must already be laboring daily either on their parent’s small parcel of land or in some other physical task nearby.

Another photograph, *West Virginia Family* (Illustration 3-11), focuses tightly on a young girl held on the knee of an elderly woman – presumably, based on the apparent age difference, her grandmother. The child’s dress is frayed and soiled, and her face, spotted around the mouth with the pockmarks of some sickness, appears to be the one McCausland was thinking about when she wrote in her proposal of “running sores from lack of proper food and hygiene.” In O’Neil’s biography, *West Virginia Family* is placed opposite of a shot titled *Miner’s Wife, Greenview, West Virginia* (Illustration 3-12) which shows the same mother from the photograph described in the preceding paragraphs, holding her infant child. More than any other published photographs from the 1935 trip, these two shots strongly relate to the simple and profuse FSA portraits of mothers holding their children. What is notable in both photographs is the weariness implicit on the adults’ faces; set off against each other as they are in O’Neil’s book, the pairing suggests that the hardships these two women face change little with age. Like the boys in *Miner’s Family* wearing the outfits of hard labor, the children in these photos appear locked into an impoverished future in the adults’ caring grip. This eventuality is further reinforced by the generational difference between the mother in *Miner’s Wife* and the grandmother in *West Virginia Family*. By placing the two side-by-side, we see three generations in the growing impoverished class, none of them appearing hopeful for the future that awaits them.
On the same swing through the state, Abbott and McCausland stopped to photograph a solitary African-American rural laborer in *Dirt Farmer, Hertzel, West Virginia* (Illustration 3-13). The farmer pauses in the front yard of his property, a fence made of sticks standing between him and Abbott’s lens. The house behind him appears to be propped up much like the shack in the *Miner’s Family* photo, though the instruments used to hold up the house appear to alternate between bricks, stone blocks, and stumps or heavy logs. Chief in the photo’s acknowledgement of the dirt farmer’s poor economic state is the prominence of the fence; the materials for its construction reveal a lack of money for more typical materials, yet the existence of the fence itself demonstrates the farmer’s desire to stake claim to what little property he is able to call his own. Here, Abbott captures an image that, on its own, hints at the rampant poverty among black southerners and, taken as part of the series, demonstrates a notion of racial equality, albeit an unfortunate equality of shared poverty. In essence, the photo does little more – and little less – than suggest the idea that for rural working class laborers of all races, the economic playing field was uniformly absent of opportunity.

In *Sunday Afternoon, Colliersville, Tennessee* (Illustration 3-14), the viewer sees perhaps the first comment by Abbott in what might have become a larger exploration of racial separation in the south, had the *America* series ever come to fruition. In this photograph, which was later featured prominently in O’Neil’s biography of Abbott,25 we see two young African-American men passing the time outside of Colliersville’s City Hall. The frame is bisected by the massive, gnarled trunk of an old tree, against which one man sits and the other leans. On the right side of

---

25 I point this out to suggest that its placement in the book at the head of the collection of Abbott photos titled “American People and Places” may well have been done at the behest of Abbott, demonstrating that she was particularly proud of this photo. If she indeed had this much say in the placement of photos throughout the book, it stands to reason then that Abbott chose this photo to lead off the chapter because she felt it was the best of this category.
the photo, parked for shade underneath the tree, sits a worn Model T\textsuperscript{26} with a broken headlight and frayed seat. Considering its proximity to the men leaning on the tree, the car may well be theirs. Another detail suggests that they may well be stranded at that spot, as both the passenger-side door and the door to gain access to the engine sit open. Based on the car’s apparent condition, and the look of frustration on the men’s faces, they may have arrived at the Colliersville City Hall due to chance and mechanical failure.

Whatever their reasoning for being at that spot at the time Abbott turned the camera on them, Abbott’s composition suggests that she was chiefly concerned with creating a picture that juxtaposed the African-American men with the seat of city political power in the near distance. Both men stand outside the City Hall, suggesting the relegation of non-whites to the fringes of society. Further ostracization is implied when the viewer notes the existence of a sidewalk and wooden chairs outside the entrance to the City Hall, leading one to question why neither person has chosen to sit in the more comfortable area. Did they not feel welcome? Or were they not allowed? Whatever the reason, Abbott’s framing of the picture, and her inclusion of these details, suggests that she had hoped to explore the uncomfortable coexistence between blacks and whites in rural America through her photographs. Still, it is difficult to tell through these few images what, if anything, Abbott and McCausland had hoped to say regarding race. Soon after, the FSA would cover in detail issues of race, particularly in the Deep South, and these images would form the visual record contained within books like \textit{12 Million Black Voices}.

Interestingly, what McCausland did write demonstrates that both women were surprised at the extent of racial divisions in the South. In her description of the trip for the Guggenheim

\textsuperscript{26} On page 213 of “Becoming Documentary,” Barr suggests that perhaps this car is Abbott and McCausland’s “second hand Ford.” One would be hard pressed to tell, but its extremely deteriorated condition suggests that its most road-ready days are behind it; its fitness for a 2,600-mile trip is questionable. However, the fact that others have argued that Abbott may have placed, intentionally or not, a prop within the frame, is worthy of some note.
proposal, McCausland delves briefly into the race-based divisions she and Abbott found on their travels through the south.

We were always coming to a town with a square dusty in the summer sun. There would always be mules standing hitched to hitching posts. There were Negroes lounging against store-fronts or playing guitar. There were signs “Negro comfort stations.” And when a battered Ford came tearing up with a Negro woman who had been seriously injured in an accident, there was the problem of finding a Negro doctor immediately.27

For the two northern women, seeing the much more pronounced general segregation and Jim Crow laws in the South was a startling revelation. Certainly, racist policy would have been alive and visible in New York, but with the majority of African Americans residing in the southern part of the country, Abbott and McCausland saw racism to a degree they had not before witnessed. “I had been born and brought up in Kansas, Berenice in Ohio,” McCausland wrote. “We had always lived away from the South and knew nothing about the South, not even the intermediate South which does not seem to be so authentically South as the deep South. So we learned about America, about Jim Crow laws.”28

Both Abbott and McCausland appear to have been affected by what they saw, as the photographs and writing demonstrate. McCausland’s writings show that the prevalent racism they discovered did indeed stand out to them, and therefore those issues may have played a larger role in their work had the project been given funding to continue. Because the series was never completed, it is impossible to say if this would have actually been the case, though the political views of both women, and their desire to depict issues of social injustice in their work,

27 Perhaps, then, the men in the aforementioned photograph were waiting anxiously for news of the woman they had just brought into town for medical attention.
28 McCausland, “Plans for Work,” frame 68.
lead me to believe race likely would have played a larger role in subsequent journeys as they
gained a greater understanding of the many additional hurdles African Americans faced
throughout the country.

In their search for injustice and poverty, however, the materials both produced related to
the spring 1935 trip show that they felt that the economic devastation the Depression had
wrought stretched far beyond the important borders of race, touching most everything and
everyone with whom they came into contact. *Familiar Country Decoration: Pennsylvania*
(Illustration 3-15) juxtaposes fading signs of hope with evidence of desolation. In front of an
outcropping of rocks covered in weathered graffiti that reads “Jesus Saves” and “Jesus Saves
Sinners” sits an abandoned car. The derelict feel of the scene is completed by the remnants of a
broken fence atop the rocks, twisted at expressionist-like angles by age and decay. Abbott’s title
plays on the idea that, more than the graffiti itself, all of the elements in the photograph are
common “decorations” along rural roads, as people abandon property and machinery too
expensive or far gone to fix, and rain and wind wash away spontaneously posted messages of
optimism and faith. One could read the photograph as either a simple commentary on the
desolation of the country’s current woes, or an observation of the ways in which the destitute
have nothing left to turn to but faith in a higher power.

Two photographs stand out to Sundell in the ways in which they present people at work.
*Coke Ovens, Cascade, West Virginia* (Illustration 3-16) and *Primitive Cultivation, Arkansas*
(Illustration 3-17) represent to Sundell Abbott’s “most forceful indictment of the oppressive
economic order,” showing laborers “wholly defined by their toil.” In both photographs, the
workers pictured are dwarfed by the environment in which they work. The coke ovens in the first
picture seem to sit within a vast wasteland of rock piles, train tracks and black smoke, while the

---

29 Sundell, 280.
solitary worker shovels with a tool too small to ever reach the bottom of the hill of stones on which he stands. A harsh and shade-less light, combined with the furnaces all around him and the worker’s own rolled up sleeves and pant legs give the viewer a sense of extreme and unforgiving heat. The three field laborers in *Primitive Cultivation* toil in an equally unwelcoming environment, hunched over side-by-side in a vast expanse of dirt.

Of the workers, McCausland wrote about her longing to see the world through their eyes, not only revealing a desire to better understand the people they were meeting, but also admitting a limitation in her own knowledge of the subjects of her and Abbott’s journey.

We talked a little with sharecroppers and farmers. We looked at the land and had a sense that we were learning about something we did not know before. We wanted to learn about these Americans. We wanted to know what thoughts beat behind their smiling and gentle faces. We wondered if resignation was their only mood, or if despair had beaten them to the ground. We wanted to be inside them instead of outside them. But we could only watch from the outside and look at them and wonder and imagine.30

Other pictures from the trip reveal the transitional period in which Abbott’s photographic sensibilities existed at the time, more closely aligning with her earlier photos that were less overtly socially conscious. In these, Abbott attempts to capture the essence of the subject itself, leaving out details that would graphically call into play questions of a social or political bent. *Weaver’s Store, near Marshall, Illinois* (Illustration 3-18), for example, seems to be both a record of varying and interesting signage, and a study in contrast between dark shades and light, rather than a comment on any social issues in particular. Much like later shots Abbott would make of sign-covered store fronts, *Weaver’s Store* highlights and perhaps even intensifies hand-

---

lettered signs, in this case painted on the side of a gas station and general store. The light painted building features darkly colored trim, and tall, dark gas pumps in front. What stands out most is the sharp level of focus Abbott was able to achieve; it is as easy to discern each pebble in the gravel drive in front of the store as it is to read the many signs.

The *Home of J. A. Sanford, Frankfurt, Ohio* (Illustration 3-19) makes record of a large, fine-looking house with a big and well-manicured lawn. The image could well have been planned to be juxtaposed opposite of, for example, another photograph taken on the trip, *Log Cabin in Tennessee* (Illustration 3-20), exploring the gap between rich and poor. The existence of these two photos, found as they are in this unfinished series, makes one wonder what Abbott had hoped to explore, but they remain largely unelaborative without any kind of editorial commentary from the photographer, or descriptive details. For Sundell, *Home of J.A. Sanford* and *Log Cabin* are best seen as further development of Abbott’s study of architecture on the trip and its “rooted permanence.”

Abbott and McCausland also stopped in Tennessee to view the building of the TVA’s Norris Dam. While there, Abbott shot a number of photos of the work-in-progress (Illustrations 3-21 and 3-22), documenting on that day by far the largest and most grandly scaled subject of their journey. According to Sundell, these photos were meant to illustrate a series of articles McCausland was writing during the journey about the dam for the *Republican*. The photos show the dam as a massive concrete structure, parts of wooden casts and scaffolding clinging to its sloping sides. Here and there, a worker can be seen, small enough to go unnoticed on first glance. The relatively small number of workers, and their very small stature aside the massive

---

31 The similar angles and distance from the subjects suggest this possible comparison, though no other evidence exists to suggest that this was actually Abbott’s intention.
32 Sundell, 280.
33 Ibid, 281.
dam, demonstrate the ability of man to collectively create for itself works of staggering size that an individual could never hope to construct. In this way, Abbott has used scale comparisons to comment on the impressive work that can be accomplished through the efforts of many people working together.

While in the state, Abbott shot two more photos that have since been published, *Lynchburg, Tennessee* (Illustration 3-23) and *Tennessee Portrait* (Illustration 3-24). In *Lynchburg*, Abbott photographed two men sitting on chairs on the sidewalk outside a storefront, idling with seemingly little direction and little interest even in each other. Though Abbott apparently never spoke or wrote about the purpose of this photograph, it could stand as a visual response to *Sunday Afternoon, Colliersville, Tennessee*; in Lynchburg the white males are welcome to sit on the chairs, but can find little to do with their time. In *Colliersville*, meanwhile, the black travelers are seemingly not welcome on the porch, and appear quite anxious for something productive to do with their time. *Tennessee Portrait* is a more straightforward portrait, shot from of a low angle of a middle aged white man in a straw hat and tie. Because the photo shows no context but a blurry tree in the background, and because it was published in O’Neal’s biography with no adjoining caption, it can only be assumed that Abbott’s simple intention with this photograph was to provide a portrait of a proud-faced, well-dressed man of the day, nothing more.

While they represent only a small sampling of what might have been taken had Abbott and McCausland received funding for a full scale trip, and while it remains only speculative as to whether Abbott would have ever considered these photos good enough to include in the final book, the photographs taken on this trip nevertheless provide a glimpse into Abbott and McCausland’s conception of their *America* project, and what they hoped to capture along the
way. Through these photographs we can see the development of two distinct and important details: first, we see developing in Abbott’s photography for the first time an awareness of and attention for social and economic issue facing her fellow countrymen. Never before this trip had such issues played any great role in her photographs; the greatest intrusion of economic issues in her photographs previously may best be seen in her portraits for *Vanity Fair* of successful business men, and her personal shots of towering New York City skyscrapers built by industrial giants. In the *America* photos, Abbott seeks out the country’s human face, finding a landscape of both resigned and resolute faces, rather than a cityscape of buildings old and new. For the first time, Abbott’s photographs explicitly sought to convey to the world what suffering was taking place in the most remote reaches of her home country.

Second, the photographs, collectively, are descriptive examples of what Abbott and McCausland saw in America, and what they hoped to portray in their proposed book. The photographs give the viewer a strong impression of rural and small town life in 1935, or at least what Abbott and McCausland believed and saw it to be. Through these images we see with our eyes the America that both women found, the signs of economic devastation all along the road, the profusion of class and racial divisions, and the sense of, at times, hopelessness felt in the face of so little promise for the future. In this handful of views is contained the outline for what would have been, at the time, one of the most plainly descriptive, consciousness-raising tomes to be produced in the mid-1930s. The photographs seem to fit McCausland’s definition of documentary photography perfectly, as Abbott attempted to produce images full of information and description, yet devoid of the overt creative license of the photographer. While one could certainly argue that all photographs, by the nature of their subjects having been chosen by a conscious photographer, are subjective, it is hard to argue that Abbott’s technique did not strive
to eliminate this subjectiveness as much as possible. If nothing else, her technique at least so
dehumanized the subjective role of the photographer in creating the image that the viewer is free
to contemplate the subject, rather than the creator. Based on the theories both Abbott and
McCausland espoused on the subject of the purpose of documentary photography, this was
exactly what both women had worked for, the most realistic depiction possible of what they saw
in America.

McCausland’s “Dusk Over America” and “The Barn Travels West”

While Abbott photographed, McCausland wrote. During the spring trip or shortly
thereafter, McCausland composed at least two essays, including a poetic piece of prose, an essay
titled “Dusk Over America”34 that Sundell surmised was written as a draft of the introduction for
the planned America book.35 In her 1935 proposal to the Guggenheim foundation, McCausland
briefly discussed the concept of creative reportage, and the way in which she and Abbott planned
to combine photographs and writing into a singular product. “Reportage is a fine art, perhaps,”
McCausland wrote, “at least reporting can be a form for the future, assuming the reporter
provides creative continuity and mood….You put the two [photography and writing] together,
and you get the photographic book.”36 In “Dusk Over America,” McCausland took this concept
of artistry in writing to heart, crafting an essay that, far from a typical journalistic piece, aims to
create a mood in the reader through dramatic, at times stream-of-consciousness-like prose.

34 McCausland’s unpublished essay, “Dusk Over America,” is dated 1935, and can be found in the McCausland
Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll D372 frames 1103-11.
35 Sundell, 279.
“Dusk falls over America, O my country paradoxical and bewildering,” McCausland began. She lists anecdotes about the decaying American dream, pondering factories shut down for want of customers, or laborers on strike for better wages at cash-strapped industrial plants. Her essay aims to depict America as a place of both suffering and fading possibility, defined not just by its people, but its locations, structures and machinery. In one passage, McCausland explores the juxtaposition between new farm equipment and old manpower. “The Alleghenies… have felt the ruthless axe,” she wrote. “Once they were covered with forest growths. But, now cleared, are cultivated by a tractor, 20th century machinery functioning on plots too large for a one-mule plow.” Throughout the essay, McCausland’s aim is to show that, despite the potential for economic prosperity and equality, a vast number of Americans are suffering on a daily basis as their work is devalued, and their lives are taken for granted in the American economic machine. Much like Abbott’s photographs, the anecdotes McCausland relates here provide glimpses that as a whole present a view of America in decline.

In another passage, McCausland describes a particularly discouraging scene she and Abbott encountered in St. Louis, a landscape built of trash to house the city’s most destitute workers. “This is St. Louis’s Hooverville, last refuge of the outcast and homeless unemployed, a six-mile line of shacks built of tin cans flattened out and of odds-and-ends of wood, said to house 14,000 people.” This sad scene and many others like it are repeated wherever they go.

37 McCausland, “Dusk Over America,” frame 1110.
38 Ibid, 1109. McCausland goes on to tell a related story: “In West Virginia, on ravished mountain slopes, there is nonsense about using modern methods of cultivation. On a hillside whose angle is surely more than 45 degrees, an old man in faded denim overalls plods along, at the strangely artificial pace of one whose posture is adjusted to the fact that one foot is six inches lower that the other. He carries a staff in his hand and with it punches holes in the earth. A step to the rear, as a dutiful wife should be, marches an old woman in a faded dress…. She drops the seed in the hole he has made. They move on, with a tempo archaic and weary, as stiff and stylized as the hieratic figures in an ancient fertility dance.”
39 Ibid, 1108. Further details are included: “The railroad tracks have preempted the right of way along the river, as they have in practically every American city. But a tiny strip of land along the shore has been left free. Railroads do not want their tracks washed out when floods come. Yet this is suitable building-ground for the castoff. The
“Everywhere there is this chronicle of wasted land,” McCausland continues, “of soil put to wrong uses, of human labor expended where returns cannot possibly repay the investment of effort and material.” 40

“Dusk Over America” explores, as well, the problems of overproduction, and the ways in which this unchecked productivity, mismatched to the amount of consumer demand – or, indeed, the ability of equally impoverished consumers to purchase so many goods – has further devalued the lives of those who produce goods for a living. While some areas are unable to find customers to purchase their goods, others are unable to even make a little profit from their drought-ridden land. Even on farms where workers are able to tease a few fruits and vegetables from the arid soil, McCausland perceives a hidden and sobering truth, a reality just below the surface of this scant growth and production. Coming across a melon stand, McCausland considers the low cost of the produce, and high cost to the farmers who produced the fruit.

Here is something to be saved…. At dusk melons smell sweetly. Their odor is a poem, like the remembrance of all past and forgotten pain, wistful and youthful nostalgia. A crate of melons costs 25 cents; can two bits buy romance? Yes, two bits can buy even the son of a fruit-grower. Rent for water, cost of cultivation, cost of picking, cost of crating, cost of a man’s life invested in labor and hope,--- these items do not enter into the cost-accounting which sells a dozen melons for one quarter. This is economics of abundance,---of food for which there is no “market,” of beloved children for whom there are no shoes, no blue jeans, no schooling.

40 Ibid, 1109.
“Yet how sweet the melons smell,” McCausland writes. In the activity of human labor, she perceives an imbalance, one that forces laborers to work much harder than the pay and results they earn would justify.

Referencing a scene Abbott photographed in *Abandoned Fox Farm, near Calfax, Ohio* (Illustration 3-25), McCausland writes of the desolation that has taken over many places of former prosperity, describing the quaint architectural detail that signaled the hopefulness of the builder, and revealing the reality that has since overtaken the old optimism.

Dusk falls on an abandoned fox farm, fantastic white shape in the twilight. Wooden box with false façade copied in wood from a baroque church, the fox farm is haunted at dusk. Here is the portrait of America we have been searching for through the day and on into the falling night. A ghostland whose population has withdrawn from observation and fled away, a country where the beating of the heart has stopped, a continent in suspended animation,---this is America as one travels in the failing light of dusk.42

Near the end of the essay, McCausland realizes that the familiarity she feels in these places, despite her oftentimes having never been there before, makes the poverty and devastation she finds all the more sad. “These are new states I travel through, new soils I see; but they are all the states, towns, earth of America I have known from my birth,” she writes. “…[T]hey are the fulfillment of my inner knowledge of the homeland I have been searching for.”43 Had this essay ever appeared at the beginning of the proposed book, it seems McCausland was trying to prepare the reader for what they were about to see. The images on the pages that would have followed would have been, as those cited above, filled with signs of cultural and societal decay, of the

---

41 Ibid, 1110.
42 Ibid, 1103-4.
43 Ibid, 1110.
slow death of America brought on by drought and economic devastation. In “Dusk Over America,” McCausland uses words to describe what the reader is soon to see in pictures – often for the first time in such great detail – telling stories of a country she personally has witnessed destroying itself from within.

In a second essay, titled “The Barn Travels West,” McCausland takes a different tone, providing a more factual, straightforward journalistic history of the Swiss/German barns of Pennsylvania, and the style’s migration throughout the rest of the country. The article describes the beauty and the functionality of the barns. Referring to them as “organic economic units,” McCausland explains their vital position to both the individual farm and to American agriculture.

“…[T]hey house under one roof all the varied and complicated functions of a diversified agriculture, providing shelter for live stock, horses, cattle, sheep, swine, and at the same time storing hay, grain and sometimes even straw, as well as housing the wagons, carriages and farming implements,” she relates. In her vision of the American farm, the barn serves as both the spiritual and the literal center of agriculture. “Here then was a compact and integrated plant for the cultivation of the earth, around which grew up a sturdy and solid bourgeois culture, practical and efficient, not too concerned with fantastic imaginings, struggling hard to find a word (“beauty”) for the thing it created, the barn.”

But more than a simple history piece, McCausland discusses the ways in which this sturdy building at the center of agricultural life in the United States had left its Pennsylvania roots (shown in an Abbott photograph from the trip, Illustration 3-26) and made its way around the country (for example, to Tennessee, in Illustration 3-27). To her, the Swiss/German barns of Pennsylvania, originally a unique feature to a specific area, had become a unifying architectural

---

element around the country, and a catalyst in better economic times for the growth and expansion of American farming. “The barn,” she wrote, “carried the technics of their [the farmers’] economy westward so that American agriculture (till the days of chronic depression) might be said to be the child of the Pennsylvania barn.”

The differing writing styles of “Dusk Over America” and “The Barn Travels West” leave open to speculation the tone and composition McCausland hoped to employ in the book version of the America project. The strategically crafted and singular nature of the images, along with the rich text McCausland wrote, show that the book would have been more educational and descriptive than the frantic, collage-filled look and feel of what Abbott claimed was their book’s ideological predecessor, Eyes on the World. Based on the evidence that exists, then, most likely the book would have been of a creative reportage-type construction, Abbott’s photographs either sharing the page with McCausland’s writing, or following relevant passages with related images. A few short years later, when Abbott and McCausland were given the opportunity to produce a book composed of similar elements called Changing New York, this is exactly the layout style they chose.

One last try: The 1937 application

Despite their preparation and firm belief in the logistical possibility of the trip, Abbott and McCausland were denied funding for the ambitious project. “When [we] applied [in the 1930s] they were always giving Guggenheims for people to go to Europe,” Abbott would state later in life. “They weren’t giving them to do work in this country and they weren’t giving to

photography.”

Abbott returned to New York and refocused herself on photographing that city. Within a short period of time, she would be hired for a job she proposed to the New Deal’s Federal Arts Project, serving as photographer and director of a small troupe of researchers who would work to build up one of the most comprehensive photographic records of the city ever made, and would eventually become Abbott’s most recognized work, *Changing New York*.

Two years following the first application to the Guggenheim Foundation, however, and while *Changing New York* was still being executed, Abbott and McCausland decided to give it one more go, proposing the same project of capturing America, but addressing what they saw as the aspects which might have caused their proposal to be denied the first time. Filing one proposal jointly, Abbott and McCausland likely attached a copy of the 1935 application, and in the new proposal referenced the old and reaffirmed their belief in the original plan, while at the same time discussing new ways in which the *America* series could be approached.

…[T]he joint plan submitted in 1935 spoke of the photographed and written portrait in vast and comprehensive terms. The authors of the idea still believe that the idea is a good idea and a possible idea. However since there may be skepticism as to the physical possibility of encompassing a whole continent in a year’s time, the following plan is submitted as being the beginning of the portrait.

Instead of the original proposal for traveling wherever roads and personal whims might take them, the two women laid out a plan that featured much more structure, hoping to convince the

---


foundation of the practicality of such a trip by suggesting they begin with a smaller sample of the country.

…[I]f the portrait cannot be done in the grand manner with the great sweep and air of distance of the American lands, it can be approached from another point of view, with… [more] methodical care…. The [new] plan for photographing and writing about contemporary America,… is to restrict the first year’s researches to about ten major American cities.48

They would travel to these cities in a manner similar to the way in which Abbott and Hitchcock did in 1934, choosing their destination prior to embarking, and arriving with a set plan of attack. The proposal goes on to cite Abbott’s work in New York City, as well as an upcoming show of her New York photographs at the Museum of the City of New York, as proof that such an undertaking would be feasible.

Aside from the intimidation they believed the Guggenheim Foundation felt in relation to the scope of the trip, It appears that Abbott and McCausland also saw the possibility that the financiers may not have understood the full value of such a journey, or how it might have differed from a mere picture book.

There is a reality [in documentary photography] superior to guidebook wisdom, an observation far more profound than the postcard view of the Empire State Building.49 It is the contrasts, the paradoxes, the anomalies, the illogicalities of life today which contain the most vital and interesting material for future historians to examine…. Such reality should be recorded… in all American cities. Also in American towns and villages, in rural areas.

48 Ibid.
49 A building which, due perhaps to this belief that it would be seen as a “postcard view,” is never featured in any way in the hundreds of shots Abbott published of New York.
Striking a slightly bitter tone, one which seems to say that the Guggenheim missed an opportunity to break new ground by turning them down two years previously, the proposal continues: “Since the Resettlement Administration has gone extensively into this latter field [of rural America], since our original plan was submitted in 1935, this realm can be postponed till later.”50 Likely, they felt they would have to wait until the Resettlement Administration was finished, and the rapid change they so often described had once again altered the view, before they could return to the towns, villages and farms of rural America and produce anything new and original there.

Finally, the 1937 proposal spends a good deal of time discussing the importance of presenting the finished product in book form, and further elaborates on the usefulness of text to accompany the photographs. “The former [1935] plan states the proposition that it is possible to make books in which the writing is not mere captions for the photographs nor the photographs mere illustrations for the text,” the 1937 application stated. They argued that text and image must go hand-in-hand for the reader to form a complete conception of the scene being recorded.

Certainly it is true that although a photograph may exist purely and singly as a work of art, it takes on added meaning when information of a sort not capable of being stated in a picture is used with the photograph…. [The text] does not detract from the ultimate and singular beauty of the work of art; it does, however, serve to place that work of art in its historical context of time, place and events.51

Unfortunately, despite efforts to answer what they perceived as the main reasons the first proposals had been turned down, Abbott and McCausland were again denied funding. “We would have made a great team,” Abbott said later, lamenting the missed opportunity to head out

50 Ibid, 122.  
51 Ibid, 123.
on the road with her closest companion. In a 1975 interview, Abbott talked about how McCausland’s passion for America helped to fire her own. “Instinctively, I loved [America], too. [McCausland] was just not one of those flag waving what-do-you-call-it, but truly dedicated. Somebody who really loved America and would also fight about it.”

Two subsequent Abbott projects were heavily influenced by both the experience and the ideas that came out of the *America. The 48 states.* project. The first, *Changing New York,* would become Abbott’s most highly regarded work, and would feature contributed text from McCausland. The second, a 1954 series for which Abbott traveled the length of U.S. Route 1 from Maine to Florida and back, perhaps best bears out the ideas she and McCausland hoped to incorporate into the America project, though the intervening decades would see a change in the way Abbott shot both the American scene, and the people who inhabited it.

---

52 McQuaid and Tait, 462-3.
CHAPTER 4: ABBOTT’S SUBSEQUENT WORK: IN THE IMAGE OF THE AMERICA SERIES

…I mean, what if we had pictures like that of the fall of Rome?

-Berenice Abbott
viewing the documentary work of a fellow photographer in 1988

Following the failure of their funding request for a portrait of America, Berenice Abbott and Elizabeth McCausland did not go their separate ways; rather, the two moved in together to a loft at 50 Commerce Street in Greenwich Village, a place they would occupy together until McCausland’s death in 1965. The coming years would, for Abbott, be much more productive than her Guggenheim foundation rejections would suggest. In this chapter I will look at two subsequent series Abbott produced, both of which employ many of the same subjects and ideological themes she and McCausland had hoped to cover in the America series, though in very different ways. The first, Changing New York, was Abbott’s portrait of her adopted home city. The second, an untitled series chronicling her 1954 trip on US Route 1 from one end in Maine to the other in Florida and back again, was her second – and nearly as little known as the America series – attempt to capture a portrait of America. By exploring these two series, I hope to further demonstrate the view of America Abbott had in mind when she took her camera out into the country, and thereby more fully develop this depiction of Abbott and McCausland’s goals on the road in 1935.

---

1 Edie Clark, “The Black and White of Berenice Abbott,” Yankee, December, 1988, 112. PB
The Changing New York series

At the same time Abbott and McCausland were attempting to get the America. The 48 states. series off the ground, Abbott would apply for and receive employment from the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project to continue and expand her photographic portrait of New York City. Abbott’s application for WPA funding signaled a shift in the type of funding source she was willing to court; aside from the America project proposals, she had twice – in 1932 and 1934 – been turned down by the Guggenheim Foundation for funding to work on the New York City project. The solicitation of government funding was something new for Abbott, and led for the first time to fulltime employment as a photographer strictly of a subject she herself had chosen.

Curiously, however, this change in potential funding sources did not follow a successive timeline. Abbott applied for the Guggenheim funding for the America series after being hired by the WPA. In fact, according to Bonnie Yochelson’s book, Berenice Abbott: Changing New York, Abbott received word that her proposal to the WPA had been accepted in September of 1935, two months prior to her application to the Guggenheim Foundation. This suggests that Abbott was likely more interested at the time in the cross country trip than she was in staying in New York, though she never commented on a preference. Regardless, it is impossible to say that Abbott was not fully committed to her work with the WPA; in less than four years in their employment, Abbott produced an exceedingly thorough portrait of the city, capturing images that represented the transition of the city from 19th- to 20th-century, demonstrating through photographs of the city’s architecture and landscape that New York had indeed changed a great deal in the first decades of the 1900s.

3Ibid, 15.
Abbott had by 1935 been photographing New York on her own time for over five years, driving around the city as a one-person crew with camera in hand and capturing the scenes she felt best depicted the essence of the metropolis. Now, with funding provided by the government, Abbott was able to hire a small staff, and live on a $145-a-month salary. Unlike her previous efforts to capture the city – when lack of money forced her to relegate her photographic forays to one-day-a-week affairs – Abbott could now go out daily, take her time, and produce the photographs she had always wanted to take. The staff, as Yochelson wrote, would be able to assist in “carrying sixty pounds of equipment through the city’s streets,” and Abbott would now have government backing when seeking permission to enter non-public areas, such as rooftops and office suites.4

What can be seen in the resulting 307 images is a passion for visual documentation very similar to that felt in the photos from the America series. To be sure, Abbott’s photographs of New York City are not in any way a mere re-application of the America perspective in a smaller location. As Peter Barr describes in his dissertation, Abbott at the time was very much influenced by the urban development theories of Lewis Mumford, whose views on the eras of technological development in American history cast an extremely harsh eye toward the urban construction of the era loosely marked by the end of the Civil War and the end of World War I. In her New York photographs, then, a great deal of influence from Mumford’s work can be found in the ways in which Abbott chose to photograph the city after 1935. Abbott’s agreement with Mumford’s distaste for the fading post-Civil War era can be seen in the ways in which she photographed

buildings of the era. Those tallest buildings of the era that were built from around the 1890s on were shot by Abbott in compositions that made them look, often times, downright menacing.\(^5\)

The *Changing New York* series was both a continuation of the ideals of the *America* work, and a decidedly new project with additional, unique goals. In simplified terms, Mumford theorizes in his book, *Technics and Civilization*, that technical development in the Western world can be divided into three eras, each overlapping slightly with the next. The first, defined as the period leading up to the Civil War, is referred to by Mumford as the “eotechnic” era. As Barr relates, the eotechnic era was “a golden age in the history of the Western world,… in which ‘medieval’ man harnessed cheap and sustainable resources such as wood, wind and water to improve their social environment.” The “paleotechnic” era followed, “represent[ing] for Mumford a precipitous decline in human civilization… [in which] a growing trend toward militarism, nationalism, monopoly and the concentration of populations” led to, as Barr quotes from Mumford, a “sharp shift in interest from life values to pecuniary values.”\(^6\)

The “neotechnic” era, which according to Mumford was, at the time of *Changing New York*, just beginning to assert itself on the American landscape, “would be characterized by a planned economy, collective thought, regionalized industries and the synthesis of the mechanical and organic realms.”\(^7\) The developing neotechnic era signaled for Abbott the beginning stages of the United States’ move toward a potentially utopian society. As Barr has argued, Abbott’s photographs of New York City in the second half of the 1930s strove to visually demonstrate the

\(^5\) Abbott’s reliance on Mumford’s theories is explored in great detail in Barr’s dissertation. The information in my very brief summary here is drawn from Barr’s work; I do not intend to discuss this relationship in great detail, as it has been previously done well in Barr’s essay, and only plays a peripheral role in my own work. Credit should also be given to Barr for being the first – and so far only – person to explore the influence of Mumford’s work on Abbott’s in any detail, and I would direct the reader to that dissertation for a rather interesting look at the ways Mumford’s urban theories guided much of the work done in the *Changing New York* series.


\(^7\) Ibid.
three eras Mumford described, and the photographer’s choices in regards to framing and subjects were often times made with Mumford’s ideas very much in the forefront of Abbott’s mind.

Barr points toward one particular photograph, *De Peyster Statue, Bowling Green, Looking North to Broadway, Manhattan* (Illustration 4-01), as especially emblematic of the visual style of critique Abbott employed. Here Abbott captures the three eras of American development as described by Mumford: the statue of De Peyster, a colonial mayor of the city when it was still known as New Amsterdam, sits surrounded by skyscrapers of various vintages, sizes, and styles. What is notable in the composition, as Barr describes it, is the ways in which Abbott photographs the buildings that represent the paleotechnic era so that they literally loom menacingly over the street. The sheer faces of the buildings, shot from a low angle, appear to lean out over the scene, creeping up on the viewer and blocking out the sky. The neotechnic buildings, however, are shown in a much more non-threatening, almost-peaceful way: with the multiple setbacks and stepped construction of these post-World War I structures, Abbott is able to show them in a positive light, stepping back to reveal the sky, climbing higher without looming over the scene.8

Other photographs capture this same feeling of claustrophobia mixed with signs of better design. Abbott’s most affecting photos, at least in cases where she is overtly referencing Mumford’s eras, include a number of jarring images such as *Wall Street District* (Illustration 4-02), a nightmarish view looking down at the city’s financial neighborhood. In this acrophobic view, the skyscrapers of Wall Street and its adjoining thoroughfares jut jaggedly out of the lower Manhattan landscape like oversized stalagmites. In this scene Abbott “condemn[s] the absence of human scale, rationality, order and planning in the city,”9 reducing the inhabitants to black dots

---

8 Ibid, 238.
9 Ibid, 234.
at the bottom of deep and terrifying canyons, filled with shadow and traffic. Abbott again finds a scene through her lens that visually recreates Mumford’s theories in *General View Looking South from 32 East 57th Street* (Illustration 4-03). In this photograph we see numerous contrasts between old and new, tall and short, voluminous and minute. The jagged skyline of Manhattan’s middle east side shows the ways in which the paleotechnic and neotechnic eras have collided. Abbott’s photograph here demonstrates exactly what the *Changing New York* project’s title expressed; in *General View* is witnessed the ways in which old New York is giving way to new construction, and massive edifices are crowding out tenements and shops.

Abbott was hoping to reach as large an audience as possible with her photographic commentary on the city, and obviously she could not expect the majority of that audience to be aware of Mumford’s work and theories. What Abbott hoped to do instead was to create her portrait of the city in a way that was accessible to every viewer, providing images that communicated her critique of New York through both the kind of photos exemplified by those discussed above, and also by including numerous shots of both the positive and negative aspects of everyday life in the city. It is in these more unambiguous photos that we can see the most direct correspondences with the photos of the *America* series.

In *Seventh Avenue Looking North from 35th Street* (Illustration 4-04) Abbott creates this more readily discernable mood, producing an extremely claustrophobic and dark image with obvious intent. Peering down 35th Street, she photographed the bright sliver of street between two imposing shadowy walls of eotechnic skyscrapers in a way that gives the viewer the sensation that the buildings are closing in on the pedestrians below. The facades along the street are all darkened to the point that their features almost indistinguishable, while the ant-like people below scurry around beneath this daunting cliff wall. The anonymous appearance of the
menacing buildings makes for a feeling of rapidly closing space, as if soon the buildings will be pressed firmly together, crushing the people walking by on the street.

Though the Mumford-inspired thematic approach prevails throughout the series, there can be seen at times a more direct sense of the same type of photographs Abbott had taken on her trip with McCauslan in May and June of 1935. The consistency with which Abbott depicted human subjects on that earlier trip is not repeated with any regularity in the Changing New York photographs; rather, due to the shift in focus to landscape and architectural subjects, the types of themes in the America photographs simply were not the central motifs of the New York photos. That is not to say that Abbott no longer cared for these earlier ideas; indeed, we will see in the Route 1 series I will discuss later in this chapter that Abbott’s strength in capturing the human condition would only improve as time went on. Instead, Abbott’s focus on visually exploring Mumford’s theories led her in a different direction than the one in which the America series had taken her.

The final product of the Changing New York series – a book similar to the one planned for the America project – was to bring in those elements of social commentary not made obvious by the photographs. It was intended that the captions for the photographs, a job taken up by McCausland herself, would provide the reader with a greater context for the photos being shown. McCausland in fact wrote long captions for 100 of the shots, intending for the book to be a treatise on “architecture, politics, art and photography.” Unfortunately for Abbott and McCausland, the publishers had different ideas, hoping to put together a book that celebrated the city, rather than critiquing it. Wishing to produce a book which would serve as one of the numerous New York guidebooks being produced in anticipation of the 1939 New York World’s Fair, Changing New York was released as a simple photo book, a work for tourists which had no

---

10 Yochelson, 29.
place for McCausland’s often critical views. McCausland’s captions were thrown out, and
replaced with a few lines for each photograph that did little more than note the location and the
purpose of the buildings and activities in the adjoining image.\footnote{Ibid, 28-9.} Interestingly, McCausland is still
credited as the author of the text for the book, despite the lack of any resemblance of the printed
captions to her original work, or lack of evidence that the replacement captions were authored by
her.

Still, an important few of the images created during the course of the *Changing New York*
project demonstrated Abbott’s continued desire to photograph the ways in which people lived
their lives in contemporary America, and a look at McCausland’s original captions further
develops some of the ideas Abbott hoped to present. Admittedly, those images of people in the
series are not imbued with the same overt judgment that similar photos in the *America* series
were, and instead seem to more often be matter-of-fact records of various types of human
activity within the city rather than any kind of condemnation of the society in which those people
live. By looking at McCausland’s accompanying original text, however, we can catch a glimpse
of what the two had planned to express. Unfortunately for posterity, the images presented in the
original, 1939 publication of *Changing New York* are devoid of any real commentary, and the
majority of people chosen by the publishers for inclusion in the book are not suffering, but
instead simply going about their business. Much like Abbott’s application for Guggenheim funds
for the *America* series stated, then, these figures were captured on film so as to show that “face”
of the times she saw as emblematic of the era, but she had hoped to express more with the help
of accompanying text.

Due to this deemphasizing of themes of poverty in order to produce a view of the city
that did little more than celebrate America’s largest city, the rare image of obvious destitution
stands out all the more. Two photos, *Shelter on the Waterfront, Coenties Slip, Pier 5, East River* and *Tallman Street between Jay and Bridge Streets* (Illustrations 4-05 and 4-06) depict particularly grave situations. According to Yochelson’s notes (which were based on the notes originally compiled by the research team associated with the *Changing New York* project), the shack featured prominently in *Shelter* was actually the pier caretaker’s office, though its connotations as a contrasting element to the towering skyscrapers of the wealthy in the background cannot be mistaken.12 Like Yochelson, the 1939 publication of *Changing New York* does not try to hide the true purpose of the building. McCausland, however, sees the composition as a way to meditate on the homelessness and destitution found on New York’s streets, and does not discuss the true nature of the shack, banking on the idea that the viewer will assume that the small building is a makeshift home.13 McCausland’s original caption read,

> The archaism of the tar paper shack is in striking contrast with the Cities Service and the Bank of Manhattan buildings. The life of the unemployed along the New York water front is not as blissful as the somnolent forms suggest. There is always the struggle to keep one’s place in the sun. The physical combat here recorded arises from the fact that one man has taken more than his share of the space. In the inclement weather the extemporized huts of water front flotsam and jetsam are not the tightest, driest shelters. Indifferent to their inelegant neighbors, the skyscrapers are in the same picture, but another world.14

12 Yochelson, 341.
13 There exists, of course, the possibility that McCausland herself was unaware of the fact that the building was in fact a watchman’s shack. Because she worked closely with Abbott’s research team during the composition of her captions, however, this is unlikely.
14 Elizabeth McCausland, unpublished captions for *Changing New York*, dated July 14, 1938, from the archives of Peter Barr, by way of Bonnie Yochelson and the Museum of the City of New York, No. 78.
When Changing New York arrived at booksellers, the new caption read: “Not a Hooverville shanty, but a watchman’s home is this shelter on the waterfront at Coenties Slip. Thirty years old, the shelter has seen death eddy around the pier; for the watchman now in charge is reputed to have rescued no less than 200 people from drowning.”

The tiny building also serves as a backdrop to the group of men who appear to have little more to do with their time than, as McCausland wrote, fight for a place in the sun. The scene of one man striking another from behind, and the wincing man sitting next to them, add a dangerous energy to the photo. Notice that the man seated farthest to the left appears to have been equally caught off guard by the violent act, his hat having fallen off behind him when he sat up to see the commotion. One can only imagining the trepidation Abbott must have felt setting up a camera to take in this violent scene. While none of the men appear to realize she is there, her presence apparently so close must have left her feeling a bit unguarded.

In Tallman Street, we see a much more subdued scene, though the desperation that pervades is no less tangible. A mother and her two children sit among the rubble that lines the streets of a weathered Brooklyn neighborhood, Irishtown. In the book, the simple caption tells a muted tale of the poor conditions along the street: “The condemned old-law tenements of ‘Irishtown,’ Brooklyn, have no hot water, no central heating, no bathtubs. Negro families now share the neighborhood with the earlier Irish settlers.” McCausland’s original caption elaborates:

…The subject shown is particularly interesting, because it represents an advanced degree of social decay. Although the photograph does not simulate the miasma of old and unsanitary dwellings, it faithfully reproduces the physical evidence of

---

16 Abbott, Changing New York, 190.
deterioration. It is plain that these houses are habitable only by grace of lax building law enforcement. Some of these houses have been condemned, some of them are uninhabited, some are occupied by families on relief…. Rents are around fifteen and sixteen dollars a month, for which the tenant gets a broken-down house with no bathroom, no heat, no hot water.\(^{17}\)

While both captions touch on the obvious desolation of the scene, the effect of the longer commentary is noticeably greater.

This photograph’s inclusion in the *Changing New York* series calls for two interpretations of its relationship with the series’ title. First, one could see the photograph’s existence as ironic, as it seems quite obvious that the rundown houses that line Tallman Street have not at all changed in their long existences, other than a slow and steady decay that has left them in a squalid state at the time the photograph was taken. However, the viewer might also notice that some change has indeed taken place. The bare, windowless wall of the white house on the right side of the photograph attests to the presence at one time of a close neighboring structure, as does the rubble that fills the empty lots on either side of the street. The change, then, appears to be a gradual decay that is destroying some buildings, damaging others, and affecting the residents of the street, as well.

In *Roast Corn Man, Orchard and Hester Streets* (Illustration 4-07), Abbott photographs a seemingly unaware street vendor engaged in his daily business of selling roast corn from a smoking metal cart. The image is exactly the kind of visual record Abbott so strongly desired to make. Here we see the state of this man’s labor, the type of street upon which he would position himself, and the condition of his work clothes and cart, all encapsulated in a single photograph. Certainly, the vendor by his appearance is likely living on a meager income. But unlike a

\(^{17}\) McCausland, unpublished captions for *Changing New York*, No. 80.
photograph from the *America* series such as *Miner’s Family* (Illustration 3-10), we are asked by the nature of the photograph to contemplate the subject’s labor and stationing within the city as part of the fabric of the community, rather than asked to consider the squalor into which that labor has propelled him and his dependants. *Roast Corn Man*, then, is as successful as *Miner’s Family* in expressing its lesson, but the lesson learned in the two photographs is quite different.

Once again, some of this can be blamed on the caption changes. The matter-of-fact caption from the 1939 publication discusses only the facts that recent drives have begun to “remove [street vendors] from the streets and place them in city-controlled markets,” and that carts like the one depicted are rented each day by the vendors for 25 cents.\(^\text{18}\) McCausland once again pressed for more details to be included, albeit this time in a more indirect fashion as from the point of view of an artist viewing the scene.

…[S]uch humble street vendors play [sic] their trade only where the streets are populous and booming with human life and activity. For the artist not only the sense of picnicking operates here, but the sheer sensuous love of materials- the newness and cleanliness of the wooden basket, the slicked-up cart with aluminum paint hiding rust, the worn shoes and clothing of the roast corn man.\(^\text{19}\)

Other photos such as *Tri-Boro Barber School, 264 Broadway* and *Blossom Restaurant, 103 Bowery* (Illustrations 4-08 and 4-09) attest to the economic hardships felt by some city residents by showing their idleness. McCausland’s original text for *Tri-Boro*, for example, went on at length describing the decline in customers and the prohibitive costs of new health regulations that were shutting down such barber shops all around the city, putting even more

---


\(^\text{19}\) McCausland, unpublished captions for Changing New York, No. 76.
residents out of work\textsuperscript{20} (the 1939 publication stated that the shop in the picture went out of
business due to the cost of the regulations, but painted a cheerier picture by stating that barber
schools were profuse in the Bowery\textsuperscript{21}). Still, Abbott chose these photos more than anything to
demonstrate the general state of the city and its storefronts – the standing people in the frame,
though important to the scene, become part of the general landscape of these poor
neighborhoods, and not part of anything more than a superfluous consideration of their
individual situations. Again, this appears to come more from Abbott’s intention to show the state
of the entire city rather than a lack of care for these specific people.

In its attempt to capture the spirit of New York, Abbott’s series succeeds. Abbott “sought
to create a broadly inclusive collection of photographs.” Barr wrote.

It was intended to empower people by making them realize that their environment
was a consequence of their collective behavior (and visa versa). Moreover, she
avoided the merely pretty in favor of what she described as "fantastic" contrasts
between the old and the new, and chose her camera angles and lenses to create
compositions that either stabilized a subject (if she approved of it), or destabilized
it (if she scorned it).\textsuperscript{22}

Ultimately, a comparison between \textit{Changing New York} and \textit{America. The 48 states.} can
be both rewarding and frustrating. Abbott and McCausland were keenly aware of the social
problems that existed in the city, and strove to depict and write about those issues along with
many others, but were prevented to a certain extent from expressing those ideas when their
preferred book text was removed. In \textit{Changing New York}, we therefore see that Abbott’s

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, No. 38.
photographic subject became almost exclusively the man-made, built structures and the way they had changed in the proceeding decades, rather than the people who lived and worked in and around those structures – this being due both to Abbott’s own creative choices, and the design of the editors.

Along with the changes made by the publishers, this difference can be attributed to a slight shift in the goals of her portrayal of America from one project to the next, an understandable occurrence when Abbott chose to factor in Mumford’s reading of urban development in the Western world. The greatest similarity that exists between the two, then, is the goal of both projects to document the subject at hand in the most thorough and representative way possible. Though the abortive America project never fully realized this goal, Changing New York could be said to be one of the most painstaking visual catalogs of the city ever created, and goes a long way toward doing exactly what Abbott, McCausland and their contemporaries felt was the purpose of documentary photography at the time.23

Returning to the road: US Route 1, 1954

On a business trip from New York to Florida in 1952, Abbott witnessed from the window of her train the way “the local color still changed perceptibly from town to town and state to state,” even as nationwide improvements in transportation in the 1940s and early 1950s had led

---

23 In 2005, Princeton Architectural Press published New York Changing: Revisiting Berenice Abbott’s New York. In this book, photographer Douglas Levere precisely recreated Abbott’s photographs during the late 1990s and early 2000s, re-shooting over 200 of the original images from the same vantage points to show how the scenes had once again changed in the intervening decades. Levere’s efforts do much for early 21st century New York as Abbott’s shots did for the city in the 1930s. In his review referenced in footnote 22, Barr writes, “one imagines that Abbott would be pleased that [Levere’s] photographs are able to tell us much about the culture of late twentieth-century New York. By comparing his work to hers, we are repeatedly reminded that New York is, like all vital cities, an ever-changing manifestation of the people who live there: their enterprise, love and fashions as well as their dereliction and spite.” Levere’s work is referenced here in the hopes that it provides some benefit to future Abbott researchers. The full citation of this book follows: Douglas Levere, New York Changing: Revisiting Berenice Abbott’s New York, text Bonnie Yochelson. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005.
to more and more cultural homogenization throughout the county.\(^{24}\) Her mind surely wandered back to the *America* trip she and McCausland had taken nearly two decades before. The views she saw caused her soon to begin considering another road trip, this time from the northern tip of Route 1 on an inland path tracing the east coast to the southern end of the highway, from Fort Kent, Maine, to Key West, Florida, and back again. Funding and transportation were scarce; Abbott’s biographer O’Neal recounts the fortuitous meeting that finally put her back on the road in 1954:

In 1953 Abbott met a young man named Damon Gadd who ran a ski lodge in Vermont. He was interested in photography and offered to drive her along Route 1 in exchange for her teaching him the craft of photography. In early June, 1954,… Abbott met Gadd and his wife in New York and the three headed south, reaching Key West in August. At the end of Route 1 they turned around and drove north, arriving in Fort Kent… at the end of September.\(^{25}\)

“I talked a young man into making the trip,” Abbott said in 1988. “He wanted to be a photographer. I said ‘Go with me on this trip – you pay for it – and you’ll learn photography.’”\(^{26}\) Thus, a deal was made to the satisfaction of both parties.

As O’Neal states in the 1982 biography – a statement which still holds largely true today – the Route 1 photographs “represent the largest and most important body of ‘unknown’ work by Berenice Abbott,”\(^{27}\) but the collection is little deserving of such an ignominious fate.\(^{28}\) In many

\(^{24}\) O’Neal, 26.
\(^{25}\) Ibid.
\(^{26}\) Clark, 112.
\(^{27}\) O’Neal, 26.
\(^{28}\) The one important exception that has developed since the biography was published is the set of Abbott-produced prints of the Route 1 series obtained by the Syracuse University Art Collection in the 1980s. Though not regularly on display, the photographs are available to be viewed, and are maintained by a staff both knowledgeable of Abbott’s works, and respectful of the fact that they hold a rare, important, and as yet unpublished series of photographs.
ways, the Route 1 photographs represent a return to the foundational ideas of the *America* series. In a description of the project reminiscent of the *America* proposals, Abbott wrote that her goal in making this new portrait of America, one which she again wanted to turn into a book, was to depict the country on film as it existed at the time, before it changed again. “We wanted to capture visually the character of an historic section of the United States, its beauties and incongruities and all,” she wrote. “If visible evidences of the past survived, we wanted to photograph them before bulldozers and derricks moved in.”29 Equally reminiscent of the *America* writings was the way in which Abbott described the places she saw on the trip, this time using color as a metaphor for the intrinsic differences found in each location, and the shared thread that wove them all together.

The cities and towns along U.S. 1 have color, sometimes related to natural objects, sometimes to the objects men have made. The white steps of Baltimore are repeated in the white houses, white fences, even white horses. The lavender windowpanes of Boston’s Beacon Hill are another accent of color. The primitive log construction of Fort Kent and the shrimpers of Key West are at opposite ends of the gamut…. Greenest of the states explored is Virginia, its trees taller and more brilliant in color. As one travels south, the trees are shorter and deeper in hue.

To Abbott, the theme of this particular journey into America would be the way in which the automobile – the “mechanized magic carpet” as she referred to it – had “changed the American scene.”30 By traveling along one of the country’s oldest highways, Abbott would be able to shoot

---

30 Ibid, 2.
photographs that captured the essence of post-World War II America, a high-speed land replete with tourist attractions, adapted history, and roadside (low)culture.

At the southern end of the highway, Abbott’s camera turned to the tourist attractions and entertainment options available to travelers and residents in the Sunshine State. In Daytona Beach, Florida, she found teenagers at an amusement park, behind them two towering Farris wheels that themselves looked like the spinning wheels of the cars Abbott’s route was chasing (Illustration 4-10). Further down the beach she encountered a woman sitting with her cow under the shade of a big umbrella, a sign in front of them reading, “Have your picture made in one minute on Ferdinand – 35 [cents]” (Illustration 4-11). Later the beach yielded yet another picture, this one showing a man with his foot up on the wheel of a Jeep bedecked with signs advertising dog races. Behind him stands a smiling woman in a bathing suit, waiting for her order from a hot dog trailer (Illustration 4-12). Further along the road Abbott found a “Bus Motor Court” in a field outside St. Augustine, Florida, a long row of cabins for tourists made out of old busses parked permanently and converted for temporary living (Illustration 4-13).

Though Abbott captured numerous scenes of kitschy tourist recreation such as these on the trip, it appears she did so because she found the deluge of entertainment-above-natural-beauty attractions distasteful. “Florida is a place where they say people should go to play,” she later wrote. “So there are all these amusements around to keep the northern visitors occupied. Dog races, amusement parks, the beach, vulgar postcards and so forth. I found much of it appalling but I’m afraid it was typical of what many people wanted.”31 Perhaps as a way of attaining a bit of photographic revenge for the damage she felt tourist traffic had done to the state, Abbott included in the series a shot she took in West Palm Beach, a stack of junked cars crumpled and piled in an otherwise non-descript field (Illustration 4-14).

31 O’Neal, 204.
Despite this stated distaste for some of the places she found, the remaining photographs in the series prove that Abbott’s journey also provided her with numerous scenes of both magnificence and homely charm. In Maine, for example, Abbott’s camera captured scenes of immense beauty. In *Portland Headlight, Portland, Maine* (Illustration 4-15), she photographed a view of the lighthouse there, sitting on a rocky peninsula extending out into the ocean – perhaps the closest thing to a “postcard view” she would ever record. Another Maine photograph, *Wooden Bridge, York, Maine* (Illustration 4-16), presents another idyllic view, this of an old river crossing leading to a boathouse and cottage on the opposite bank. And though its intentions are somewhat more indecipherable, her photo of Miami (Illustration 4-17), taken from miles away across a vast expanse of water, shows in the far distance the skyscrapers of downtown, surrounded by trees and open space all around, with a massive cloud looming above.

But for all these documentations of both good and bad, ugly and beautiful locations, Abbott paid special attention to the people who inhabited these places, focusing on human subjects like she had never previously done in her many other projects. In the intervening 19 years since the road trip with McCausland in 1935, Abbott’s views on how to photograph people had evidently changed. In the Route 1 series, the people photographed rarely are stationary, or noticeably aware of the camera’s presence. Those few who are were still captured with a kind of vitality almost never seen in the *America* photos. By 1954, Abbott had apparently discovered for herself the value of capturing not just people, but human performance, or people in the act of living, working and playing, something seen in few prior works.

Examples abound. In Daytona Beach (Illustration 4-18), Abbott captured a young fisher in mid cast, an assemblage of bold straight lines and arcs that recalls the work of her first employer, Man Ray. Abbott shot another photo, location unknown (Illustration 4-19), of couples
swaying in a small dance hall. Yet another photograph, *Woman on Steps, Baltimore, Maryland* (Illustration 4-20), actually depicts two housewives, at work in front of their row houses, one kneeling with her head obscured by the doorway to wash the steps, another sweeping the sidewalk further down. In a photograph taken inside a drug store (Illustration 4-21), a teenage boy stands behind the service counter, talking with a customer beneath signs that read “No Cursing No Drunks Allowed” and advertise ice cream and dairy products. Other photographs like *Peach Pickers* (Illustration 4-22) and *Man With a Lobster* (Illustration 4-23) show people engaged in their jobs, Abbott capturing them going through the motions unique to their employment.

A photograph of a man wrestling an alligator (Illustration 4-24) blends the realms of work and play Abbott covered so hungrily on her trip. Such photographs simply did not exist in her earlier work, and lent themselves to a greater exploration of the people whose homeland she was hoping to record. Past shots, notably those taken for the *Changing New York* series, did indeed include people, but by and large the people shown in those past photographs were not the focus of the work. Instead, they served as part of the city landscape, revealing little about their nature beyond their outward appearance. Certainly, notable exceptions like *Roast Corn Man* (Illustration 4-07) exist, but even the vendor in that shot is captured in a stationary moment, and his body language and pose reveal little about the actions and motions he goes through on a daily basis. The *America* photos are more descriptive, yet still show the subjects involved pausing for the camera, or small enough in the frame as to be rendered part of the scenery. By including in the Route 1 series these shots of people at work and at play, focusing on the people themselves rather than their surroundings and depicting them fully engaged in activity, Abbott reveals a great deal about the specific ways in which these people lived in the America of 1954.
While this push to photograph more descriptive shots of people was one Abbott appeared to want to develop, a number of notable photographs exist in the series that resemble more her previous shots of human subjects, though the portrait-like photographs in the Route 1 series still bear more descriptive elements than her previous attempts in *Changing New York* and at least as much as in *America. The 48 states*. For example, one photo of a boy standing with his bicycle along the side of the highway (Illustration 4-25) contains numerous descriptive elements. We learn much about his life in the clothes that he wears – including the straw, drawstring toy cowboy hat on his head – and his location along the road, where Abbott and the Gadds must have encountered him riding along. The basket on his bike is empty, suggesting he was out for a leisurely ride. Another posed photograph of two boys (Illustration 4-26) shows up in the series. They appear to be friends at some kind of outdoor gathering, one boy with his arm over the shoulders of the other, standing in front of a crowd of people. In another shot, a woman stands in front of her simple-but-pleasant looking home (Illustration 4-27), admiring her front yard garden. Though she gazes away from the camera, her positioning so close to the lens, and the fact that the rest of her body aside from her head faces the frame, demonstrates that she was well aware of Abbott’s presence.

Much like the *America* series, the Route 1 photos present a tantalizing but incomplete look at social and racial problems in the country. Two photos, shot in Augusta, Georgia and displayed in tandem in O’Neal’s biography, illustrate the segregation still very much present in the south of the 1950s. An apparently all-black Baptist Church with fading paint and rotting boards (Illustration 4-28) is juxtaposed with a photograph of 1411 9th Street (Illustration 4-29), the home of an African-American family who sit on their front porch on a bright day. In the
caption Abbott provided for the O’Neal book nearly 30 years later, she talked about the poor conditions she found in Augusta.

…This town was quite a place; there were many things I would have liked to take [photograph] but I didn’t have the nerve. The house was just down the road [from the church]. A miserable little house, with the beautiful sunflowers in front. I tried to play them up to give the photograph a little hope. I tried to be friendly with the people, but it was hard; they just distrusted you so much. It was a time of great tension with the school desegregation thing going on.32

In the same book, two other shots, these being portraits, are again juxtaposed to great effect, revealing a bit more about the poor race relations Abbott found. One photograph shows a barefoot, elderly white man in overalls sitting on his front porch, his dog in his lap, squinting at the viewer and apparently in mid-sentence (Illustration 4-30). Abbott’s caption beneath reads, “Here is one of the people who made for the tension in the South. He felt vastly superior to any black man out doing all the work, sweating in the sun. It was so dreadful I don’t even like to talk about it.”33 On the facing page is a portrait of an African-American man, leaning back from his seat and gazing off to his right (Illustration 4-31) – in the book, it almost appears that he is staring back at the man on the previous page, his own squinting gaze seemingly revealing a feeling of exasperation at the statements of his “neighbor.” In what may well have been a way of demonstrating disrespect for the aged racist, the titles provided for the book read “Old Man on Porch” for the white man, “King Baitman, Florida” for the African-American man. In doing so, Abbott shows respect for one by displaying his name, disrespect for the other by refusing to extend the same courtesy. Certainly, there also exists the possibility that Abbott simply did not

32 O’Neal, 211.
33 Ibid, 206.
feel comfortable staying around long enough to record the elderly white man’s name. Either way, the effect is the same.

Little else is evident in the Route 1 photos that dealt with racial issues. Likely, the topic was for Abbott merely one aspect of the America she was trying to capture on this trip, and therefore did not play a major role in her choice of subjects. What is evident is that Abbott, more than was felt in the practice run for the America series in 1935, found on Route 1 a series of people, places and objects that to her fully encapsulated that long stretch of America as it stood in 1954. To follow the series of photographs that documented her trip that year is to get a sense of what Abbott considered representative of her country and the locales she visited. Like America, the book she hoped to produce as a result was never published. It is a surprise, given the continuing growth in popularity and scholarly consideration being given to Abbott’s work, that this series of photographs she considered completed has never been fully investigated or discussed at any great length – the only discussion of it beyond a passing mention I could find was contained within a few paragraphs of O’Neal’s biography. Hopefully someday more will be done to fully develop the collection of knowledge and information surrounding this important work, but in the meantime the series exists unexplored and, largely, undocumented.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION: A LOST CAUSE, AND PERHAPS A LOST MASTERPIECE

The repeated denials of funding, along with new opportunities for work in New York and other venues, doomed the planned *America. The 48 states* project to end without ever truly getting off the ground. As I have attempted to show in this paper, the *America* project would have been a ground-breaking book, an accomplishment unrivaled at the time it was first proposed in 1935. The success of subsequent efforts like Bourke-White and Caldwell’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* demonstrates that a thoughtfully produced book focusing on the plight of Americans would in fact raise awareness and cause more people to seek ways to cure the depicted ills. *You Have Seen Their Faces* serves in this discussion as a strong comparison piece to what Abbott and McCausland had hoped to accomplish. The format of the book, images of the American condition in tandem with text, fits the same basic outline of what *America. The 48 states* would have used.

Differences between *You Have Seen Their Faces* and *America*, though, abound, and while they do not prove that there exists any greater value in one approach over the other, these differences do help to illustrate what kind of book *America* might have been, and how the concept Abbott and McCausland designed would have made it a unique effort among the documentary photography publications of the 1930s. The simplest comparison, of course, is in scale of subject; Bourke-White and Caldwell’s book discusses only the Deep South, a kind of narrow focus many other similar books of the day repeated. To cover the 48 states, Abbott and McCausland obviously would have had to travel much greater distances. What this reveals is that, likely, America would not have featured the same kind of in-depth exploration found in *You Have Seen Their Faces* – for example, nowhere do Abbott or McCausland state in their
discussions of the project an intent to interview the people they photographed, or at least allow them to tell their own stories like Caldwell did in his text. Bourke-White and Caldwell spent 18 months gathering photographs and data for their book, while Abbott and McCausland proposed a journey of only “at least a year.”

Rather than revealing a lack of careful effort on Abbott and McCausland’s part, however, I would argue that, based on the thoroughness with which Abbott approached her own efforts in New York City beginning the next year, the facts described above reveal what would have been the fundamental difference between the proposed *America* book, and the other documentary texts of the 1930s: the book Abbott and McCausland hoped to produce would have necessarily been a more impressionistic piece, short on quantifiable data and long on the prosaic kind of text McCausland provides in “Dusk Over America” and “Barn Travels West.” This style would have fit well with the talents of the two women involved. As “Dusk Over America” reveals, McCausland had little problem with attempting to relate the status of the country she saw on their trip through impressionistic prose, rather than a more straight journalistic format of recounting facts only. Considering the scale of the project they proposed, the relative speed with which they hoped to put it together, and the broad style with which both Abbott and McCausland worked on their month-long trip in May and June of 1935, I would argue that the *America. The 48 states.* book would have attempted to educate more through emotional response than anything else. In the end, they would have had little time to do anything else.

This style fits well within the scope of McCausland’s belief in the power of art to encourage social change. There is an artistry inherent in the type of book they were proposing, a book that would have been a unified artistic piece in and of itself. The product of their efforts would have been a book that combined their individual talents to produce one single volume, a
book that gave the reader a specific impression of the country as it existed at that moment through the eyes of its two authors. Their plans to educate their fellow citizens required that a full picture of the country must emerge out of their efforts. In their work, Abbott and McCausland hoped to convey to the reader the feelings of desperation that had overtaken many parts of the nation, and the poverty that played a central role in later similar books.

Many of Abbott’s photographs and much of McCausland’s writing from the trip reveal that poverty and decline would have been the most important aspect of the work; but important, too, would have been other movements going on in the country at the time, signs that there were actually ways for the country to pull itself up again. The images of small town Main Streets reveal a desire on their parts to explore the continuing modernization of America into a 20th century country. The photographs of the TVA dam suggest that Abbott and McCausland hoped to pair explorations of poverty and decline with signs of hope and building for the future. And their 1937 proposal reveals that neither wished to confine the project to rural areas. As McCausland stated in the opening line of her 1935 proposal, “Awareness of America is needed so that America may realize its destiny.” It was this “awareness” – an awareness of all aspects of the American scene – that Abbott and McCausland felt would best encourage the reader to help put the country back on the right track, to “realize its destiny.”

Within a few short months after their first proposal was denied, the Roy Stryker-led photographers of the Farm Security Administration would begin to produce works that fulfilled ideological goals very similar to the ones Abbott and McCausland shared. The subsequent success of the FSA photographers, and the fame that to this day is attached to many of the images that came out of the FSA work, lends credence to the notion that Abbott and McCausland had constructed a concept which would have produced vitally important and perhaps even
historic results. In the FSA photographs we see the same kind of depictions of poverty and decay as Abbott and McCausland sought. At the same time, in both Abbott and McCausland’s work and the FSA photographs, we also see images of strength in the face of this desolation, and progress being made with the aim of pulling the country out of the Depression. The depiction is not entirely hopeful, yet not entirely desperate. As the goals of documentary photography would have demanded, the overall picture of America that results from the FSA efforts, and likely would have come from Abbott and McCausland’s work, presents the country as truthfully as possible, with aspects both good and bad, promising and discouraging. This is the America the photographers saw on the road, and transmitted back to the public.

Without a doubt, it would be mostly conjecture to state that such an undertaking as Abbott and McCausland proposed could have ever been truly possible, or could have reached the lofty goals they had set, considering the sheer enormity of the subject they hoped to cover. Though their photographic and awareness-raising aims were remarkably similar to those achieved by the FSA, the obvious fact cannot be overlooked that Stryker’s team encompassed a large number of photographers, and had the financial backing of the United States government at a time when federal money was being poured into the arts like it never had been before – or since.

Still, it is also hard to doubt the possibility that such a trip, however difficult, was indeed feasible. That Abbott and McCausland had the personal motivation and passion to complete the journey there can be no doubt. The fact, too, that Abbott was able to produce 22 photographs in the space of one month that would be fit for publishing lends further credence; assuming such a pace could be kept up, one year’s worth of funding would have returned more than 260 ready-for-print images. Considering that her later Changing New York series, which was shot over the
course of more than three years, produced “only” 307 photographs – a large number for such a
series by any standards – even a reduced pace for the America project could have easily
produced a satisfactory number of images. Likewise, it is not difficult to assume that
McCausland, a seasoned writer, would have had little trouble producing the text for such a series
– something she of course did a few years later for Changing New York, subsequent edits
notwithstanding. While Abbott’s output could not have come close to matching the output of
Stryker’s team in terms of sheer number of photographs produced, I believe it both possible and
likely that, had they been given the opportunity, Abbott and McCausland would have produced a
book of photographs and writings which would have at least rivaled any other similar collection
ever produced; most all the elements – talent, desire, ability and even time – were there. All that
was missing, unfortunately, was the necessary funding. What remains of Abbott and
McCausland’s 1935 collaboration hints at the scale and scope of what would have been a truly
major achievement.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


______. letter to Miss Elizabeth McCausland, dated October 29, 1934, Abbott papers, Commerce Graphics collection, “McCausland” folder. PB

______. “Photography: A Challenge,” speech given to the Art Students League, 1937. Manuscript found in the Archives of Berenice Abbott, Kurtz Collection, Commerce Graphics (New York), Correspondence “A” Folder. PB

______. “Photographer as Artist,” Art Front 2, no. 9 (Sept.-Oct. 1936): 4-8. PB

______. “Plans for Work,” application to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 1935, McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll D368 frames 78-95. PB


______ and Elizabeth McCausland, “Plans to Document the Portrait of Contemporary America,” application to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 1937,


Library of Congress, untitled page (Migrant Mother photograph).  


______, “Plans for Work,” application to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 1935, McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll D368 frame 71. PB

______, “Salute,” from Return to Life, an unpublished manuscript for a poetry collection, undated, McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll D373 frame 399.

______, untitled biographical notes, McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll D369 frame 931.


Syracuse University Art Collection (SUART), photograph scans provided to the author.

Illustration 3-06
Illustration 3-13
Illustration 3-14
Illustration 3-16
Illustration 3-19
Illustration 4-11
Illustration 4-24
Illustration 4-25
Illustration 4-26
Illustration 4-27