

# Windows and Touchstones: A Photograph Album from Connecticut, 1890–1910

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**T**hirty early portrait photographs, saved in an album at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), depict sitters peering from arched-window mats, gazes directed toward the camera and the future. All but one or two appear to be people of color.<sup>1</sup> Most are unidentified. The album's early provenance is unknown, but it was originally purchased at a stationer's store in Waterbury, Connecticut.<sup>2</sup> Of the twenty-five cabinet cards bearing a studio label, six were taken in Waterbury, and ten in the nearby city of New Haven. Four of the five people firmly or tentatively identified in the album are also closely tied to Waterbury between the years 1890 to 1910. The album at the NMAAHC is remarkable because it is rare and represents black people who lived in Connecticut, where they were a tiny minority. Perhaps because the African American community in Waterbury was so small, it has been overlooked in city histories and in studies of African Americans in Connecticut.

This essay has multiple objectives. First, it uses the photograph album as a means of restoring this African American enclave to its rightful place in history. Second, it explores the album as an object whose original purpose was to use photographs to shape family and community memory and to share and pass down stories, lessons, and values. Cheryl Finley describes this function as 'the construction and reconstruction of identity, the formation of the social group in relation to a larger history of humankind'.<sup>3</sup> This essay considers the album in light of the scholarship of Deborah Willis, who argues that African Americans, often denigrated in a blizzard of popular images and texts, used photography to seize control of their images and create their own narratives.<sup>4</sup> It further approaches the Waterbury album by imagining what the compiler would have intended in the context of what is known about the sitters and their community.

## Historical context

The decades between 1890 and 1920 have often been called the 'nadir of African American history'. These years fall in the middle of the 'long war for civil rights', which began in the 1870s and continued for decades.<sup>5</sup> Following Reconstruction, African Americans had the protections of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which respectively outlawed slavery, provided citizenship rights, due process and equal protection under the law, and prohibited the denial of a citizen's right to vote based on race, color, or

previous condition of servitude. But white supremacist policies made getting ahead difficult, especially in the South.<sup>6</sup> Equal protection and due process for black people were often ignored, and violence against African Americans was widespread.<sup>7</sup> African Americans also struggled financially. In the 1890s, the vast majority were employed in low-wage agricultural and service jobs, and thousands of families were trapped in sharecropping arrangements that were little better than slavery.<sup>8</sup>

Despite challenges and injustices, African Americans did not give up hope for better lives for themselves and their children, and overall, they made gains in literacy, health, and self-sufficiency. A very few, such as scholar W. E. B. Du Bois, journalist and activist Ida B. Wells, scientist George Washington Carver, and educator Booker T. Washington, achieved notable triumphs and nationwide recognition. But between the vast number of poor people at the bottom and a small band of leaders at the top of society, was a group of African Americans that often goes unnoticed. This group, as the Waterbury album suggests, included those who never became famous or wealthy, but aspired to and achieved middle-class lives. Those depicted in the Waterbury album seem to have prospered by assimilating, and their will and success in adapting to an overwhelmingly white environment is confirmed and reflected in the conventions of photographic portraiture.

In the 1890s, Waterbury was ‘a small city, which was just beginning to realize that it was destined to become an important manufacturing center’, a promising place for African Americans to settle.<sup>9</sup> The 1790 census counted only fourteen free and ten enslaved African Americans. Even by the early nineteenth century, only slightly more than one hundred African Americans, free and enslaved, lived there.<sup>10</sup> But Waterbury grew rapidly in the nineteenth century, and growth created opportunity. By 1900, the city, with manufacturing as its base, was thriving. Jobs were plentiful, and life for black people was relatively safe. Although widespread employment, housing, and other discrimination against black people in the North certainly existed, in Connecticut they were at least able to exercise voting rights, accumulate property, and attend integrated public schools.<sup>11</sup>

## Photography albums and photographs commissioned by African Americans

By 1861, the first photo albums appeared, and compilers proudly shared them with friends and family.<sup>12</sup> Margaret Langford argues that the experience of an album was a performance that combines oral storytelling with photographs; she suggests that enacting that performance unlocks the album’s meaning.<sup>13</sup> With the notable exception of Cheryl Finley, who writes powerfully about an extraordinary album containing tintypes of fifty unidentified African Americans, scholars have published little about albums compiled before 1910 by people of color.<sup>14</sup> The Waterbury album’s portraits are intentional; the sitters present what Tanya Sheehan calls ‘their best selves for a friendly camera’.<sup>15</sup> When African Americans commissioned photos in the 1890s and early 1900s, they wanted flattering, well-focused, evenly lit portraits that exuded middle-class respectability through dress and comportment – just as most Americans did. For African Americans, though, more was at stake. Deborah Willis writes that, from the time photography arrived in America,

‘African Americans, in particular, used photography to focus on the goal of racial uplift and the notion of being seen as they desired to be seen. They recognized immediately that they could communicate a sense of self-worth and counter prevailing stereotypes with photographs that celebrated their dignity and achievements’.<sup>16</sup>

Among the ways that African Americans presented a proper façade of respectability was to adopt portrait conventions and fashions that were already recognized universally as middle class. At the same time, portraits celebrate individuality and personhood, which was particularly meaningful for black people in the decades following Emancipation.<sup>17</sup> While generic, the straightforward, hard-focused vernacular images in photo albums make it easy to tell people apart. And while most everyone conformed to fashion, the styles of the day allowed some personality to emerge in a particular fabric, the cut of a jacket, the length of a watch chain, height of a sleeve, the shape of an earring, or the tautness of a bow tie.

## The NMAAHC’s photography album

The Waterbury album is about the size of a cigar box and closes with a gilded clasp, like a family bible.<sup>18</sup> The album’s brown paper covers, now in tatters, protect interior covers decorated in emerald green, gold gilt, and white. Floral motifs and a scroll banner spell out the word ‘ALBUM’ in gilt letters. As a group, the photos within suggest a multigenerational story of black, middle-class respectability. The babies are adorable, everyone is fashionably dressed, the children are tidy and well-scrubbed, and the men are literally upstanding. The photos were a point of departure, and the narrative each time was spontaneous and variable. Because of this flexibility, the storyteller could tailor the lessons and values passed down to family and community history to his or her audience each time.

The four photographs examined in this essay were chosen because they provide different windows onto the community the album represents. It is possible to imagine how the compiler might have used each photo as a touchstone within a larger, open-ended frame of reference. The first, a photograph of a baby, opens the album. It is one of several of infants, who were clearly important to the compiler. The baby stares intently at the camera, its mouth partly open, head slightly tilted and topped by a generous halo of woolly hair. The baby’s chubby hands are creased at the wrists and clasped on top of a billowing white christening gown. The snow-white dress symbolizes the child’s welcome entry to the church, probably Mount Olive African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Waterbury.<sup>19</sup> All six of the infants in the album are posed in the same way: alone, propped up, and enthroned in chairs covered with blankets or furs. Most are in gowns. The pictures are taken straight on, at the babies’ eye-level, and they preside like tiny, well-fed kings and queens. Splayed chair spindles hover above one baby’s head like an enormous crown, completing the regal effect. From the outset, then, the album stakes a claim to the future, celebrating a healthy birth and emphasizing family and religion. Infant mortality in general was high, and it was higher for black babies.<sup>20</sup> A newly christened baby was worth a visit to the photographer’s studio.

FIG. 1

The second photograph is of Ida Allston, who was born in Connecticut and lived in New Haven.<sup>21</sup> Ida is one of the few people in the album who is firmly identified. She and her husband Richard W. Brown lived in New Haven. They had several children – Cora, Annie, James, Alvin, and Kermit – and owned a home. Her story, and the stories of her grandparents, parents,

FIG. 2

Fig. 1  
 Photograph by Adt & Brother Portrait Studio, cabinet card of an unidentified child wearing a christening gown, 1890–1910, albumen and silver on paper on card mount, 16.5 × 10.8 cm, Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, gift of the Family of Keith M. Jones in honor of Lonnie Bunch.



Fig. 2  
 Photograph by Cramer & King Photographers, cabinet card of Ida Allston 1890–1910, albumen and silver on paper on card mount 16.5 × 10.8 cm., Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, gift of the Family of Keith M. Jones in honor of Lonnie Bunch.



and sister, provide vivid examples of Northern, black, middle-class aspiration and success. In her portrait, Ida seems self-assured and proper, but approachable, with a hint of a smile. Her hair is done up, which shows off her earrings. Over a dark-colored bodice, she wears an impressive white, ruffled lace collar. Nothing remarkable distinguishes this conventional photo from any other studio photograph. And, as noted above, that was exactly the point. Another portrait of a female sitter is intriguing because, unlike the other photographs, it has something written on the back: ‘Sarah Robinson’ and a number – perhaps a negative or order number. Sarah Robinson is known; she was Ida Allston’s sister. The accomplishments of Ida’s and Sarah’s grandparents and parents may have encouraged them to expect a middle-class lifestyle and hope that their families would escape working-class service or unskilled-labor jobs.<sup>22</sup>

Mount Olive Church was the center of black Waterbury’s religious, social, and cultural life. W. E. B. Du Bois noted in 1898 that ‘the Negro population of the United States is virtually divided into Church congregations, which are the real units of race life’.<sup>23</sup> A sample of activities at Mount Olive include a talk about a ‘visit to the old world’, an ‘Old Folk’s Concert’, and a visit from Honorable John C. Dancy, recorder of deeds in Washington DC, during which children sang ‘national songs and plantation hymns’. Union Picnics at High Rock Grove in nearby Naugatuck were common, and drew up to a thousand African Americans from area churches.<sup>24</sup>

The minister at Mount Olive in Waterbury from 1892 to 1895, and between 1899 and about 1901, was the Rev. George Henry Service Bell, described as ‘a man of high Christian character and greatly beloved by his people’.<sup>25</sup> Although not identified on their cabinet cards, Rev. Bell and his wife Susan Bell are in the album. The glass plate negatives for the same photographs were discovered in the collection at the Library of Congress.<sup>26</sup> In Rev. Bell’s photograph, his

FIG. 3  
 FIG. 4



Fig. 3  
 Photograph by C. M. Bell Studio, cabinet card of Rev. G. H. S. Bell, February-March 5, 1894, silver and collodion on printing-out paper on card mount, 16.7 × 10.8 cm., Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, gift of the Family of Keith M. Jones in honor of Lonnie Bunch.

Fig. 4  
 Photograph by C. M. Bell Studio, cabinet card of Susan Bell February-March 5, 1894, silver and collodion on printing-out paper on card mount, 16.7 × 10.8 cm., Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, gift of the Family of Keith M. Jones in honor of Lonnie Bunch.

collar identifies him as a man of the cloth, and it positively glows. He has closely cropped hair, a walrus-like mustache, and a generous chin beard. His eyes seem to twinkle. Susan Bell, by contrast, is completely serious. She peers through spectacles, impassive, as tightly buttoned as her bodice with its double row of fasteners. Her fine dress, with its sleeves fashionably puffed at the shoulders, the small gold watch that dangles from her pristine white collar, and her very solidness, speak to her role and status. One can imagine the compiler saying how blessed they were to have Rev. and Mrs Bell at Mount Olive; many people had joined the church since they had arrived and it was a hive of activity. Susan Bell's memorial card is also in the album. She died within weeks of having her photograph taken, and her passing was likely a blow to the congregation.

With the album in hand and the history of Waterbury in mind, it is possible to suggest where Waterbury fits into the American national story. In some ways, the lives of black families in and around Waterbury were parallel to those of African American strivers around the country. They were literate; men worked hard, their wives stayed home, and their children attended school. They found support in their families and in their community, which was centered on the church. But in other ways, their experience was not typical, because African Americans were a small minority, associated with a modest, but rapidly growing, industrial area in southern New England. Local factors seem to have allowed more upward mobility than in other places. Waterbury and much of Connecticut enjoyed an industrial boom. Non-agricultural jobs were plentiful, and a few African Americans, such as Richard W. Brown, even attained coveted skilled positions and, like Foster Marshall Robinson, Ida Allston's brother-in-law, owned their own businesses. Even those like Ida's Father James Allston, who worked in lower-paying jobs as

janitors and cooks, were able to buy homes and build wealth. Children in Connecticut attended integrated public schools, which provided an opportunity for black children to receive a quality education. Their parents could exercise their right to vote; they were active in politics, and this gave them some power. Because relatively few African Americans lived in Connecticut, they were forced to assimilate. This, in addition to their desire to be recognized as proper, middle-class people, encouraged them to adapt and understand how to make their way in a white world. At the same time, because their numbers were so small, they posed little threat to the rest of the community and were largely left alone.

This essay seeks to fulfill the Smithsonian Museum's charge to document African American people and communities that have been misrepresented, marginalized, or erased. Black people in and around Waterbury at the turn of the twentieth century deserve to be remembered for what they achieved. The documentation of local history enriches our understanding of the period, and enhances and complicates the national narrative. It is likely that the lessons and experiences of African Americans living in and around Waterbury, in combination with family histories and other stories, were transmitted naturally, if not systematically, through performance of the NMAAHC album. The album inspired the community's rediscovery, and it likely served its compiler's purpose. But it is also illuminating for us in its vivid revelation of the aspirations and values of African American people at this time, and of the community they represented.

#### NOTES

Note: The author thanks Laurinda Dixon for her assistance with this essay and for her patience.

1. Seven infants (2009.31.1/Waterbury; Eselma Allston/2009.31.2/Waterbury; 2009.31.4/New Haven; 2009.31.11/Philadelphia; 2009.31.12/Waterbury [same as 2009.31.2]; 2009.31.17/New Haven; 2009.31.30/Greenfield, MA); three children (2009.31.6/Waterbury; 2009.31.20/Unknown; 2009.31.27/Waterbury); ten women (I. Alexander/2009.31.3/New Haven; 2009.31.5/Susan Bell/New Haven; 2009.31.8/Washington, D.C.; Ida Allston/2009.31.14/New Haven; 2009.31.16/New Haven; 2009.31.18/New Haven; 2009.31.19/Philadelphia; 2009.31.22; FORMAT? 2009.31.23/Hartford; 2009.31.28); ten men (Rev. George Henry Service Bell/2009.31.7/Washington, D. C.; 2009.31.10/New Haven; 2009.31.13/New Haven; 2009.31.15/New Haven; 2009.31.21/Philadelphia; 2009.31.24/Unknown; 2009.31.25/Unknown; Bishop James W. Hood/2009.31.26/Unknown; 2009.31.29/Philadelphia; 2009.31.31/New York); one memorial card for Susan Bell (2009.31.9). None of the studios seemed to have been owned by African American photographers.
2. The album measures 10 ½ × 8 × 3 inches. Keith M. Jones purchased it 1978 at a trade fair of the New York Photo Historical Society, and his daughter Wanda M. Corn obtained it from him. Corn donated it to the NMAAHC in 2009. A label pasted inside the album reads 'J. H. McKinnon & Company / STATIONERS PRINTERS / and Blank Book MANUF'RS / Waterbury, Conn.'
3. Cheryl Finley, 'Postscript: M. is for Memory', in Deborah Willis, *Let Your Motto Be Resistance: African American Portraits* (Washington, D. C.: National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2007), p. 175.
4. Willis, *Let Your Motto Be Resistance*, pp. 15–27.
5. See Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, "'Somewhere' in the Nadir of African American FORMAT? History, 1890–1920", <<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1865-1917/essays/nadir.htm>> (accessed 13 October 2018).
6. See Femi Lewis, 'African-American Timeline', <<https://www.thoughtco.com/african-american-history-timeline-1890-1899-45425>> (accessed 13 October 2018).
7. Gilmore, "'Somewhere'".
8. See Lorenzo Green and Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro Wage Earner* (Washington, D. C.: The Association for the Study of Negro Life in History, 1930), pp. 24–27, 36–47.
9. Wm. J. Pape, *The History of Waterbury and the Naugatuck Valley Connecticut* (Chicago and New York: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1918), p. 2.
10. Slavery in Waterbury, <<http://www.fortunestory.org/slaveryinwaterbury/>> (accessed 2 September 2018).
11. Frank Andrews Stone, *African American Connecticut: The Black Scene in a New England State; Eighteenth to Twenty-first Century* (Deland, FL: Global Research Center, 2008), p. 154.
12. See Elizabeth Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 3, 113–55.
13. Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal & Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), pp. vii–viii, 122–57.

14. Finley, 'Postscript', p. 175; and Cheryl Finley, 'No More Auction Block for Me!', in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, ed. by Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 329–48.
15. Tanya Sheehan, 'Vernacular Photography: A Plurality of Purposes,' in *Pictures with Purpose: Early Photography in the National Museum of African American History and Culture*, ed. by Laura Coyle and Michèle Gates Moresi (Washington D. C. and London: Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and D. Giles, Ltd.: forthcoming 2019), p. 20.
16. Willis, *Let your Motto Be Resistance*, p. 15.
17. Deborah Willis and Barbara Krautheimer, *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2013), p. 8.
18. Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame*, pp. 116–22; Finley, 'No More Auction Block,' pp. 336–37.
19. *The Town and City of Waterbury, Connecticut, from the Aboriginal Period to the Year Eighteen Hundred and Ninety-Five*, ed. by Joseph Anderson D. D with the assistance of Anna L. Ward. (New Haven, CT: The Price & Lee Company, 1896), vol. 3, pp. 735–36; and *1906 Waterbury, CT, Directory*, p. 775.
20. See Forrest E. Linder and Robert D. Grove, 'Vital Statistics Rates in the United States 1900–1940', Washington, D. C.: Federal Security Agency, U.S. Public Health Services, National Office of Vital Statistics, 1947 <[http://www.nber.org/vital-stats-books/vsrates1900\\_40.CV.pdf](http://www.nber.org/vital-stats-books/vsrates1900_40.CV.pdf)>
21. 'Ida Allston' is written on the back of photograph 2009.31.14, taken at Cramer and King Photographers, New Haven, CT. 'Ida Alston' [sic] is also written on the page where the photograph was inserted. Ida Allston is the same person as Ida O. Brown (b. Connecticut 1872–d.?). *1900 New Haven, CT, Census* (Enum. Dist. 383, Sheet 8A); *1920 New Haven, CT, Census* (Enum. Dist. 367, Sheet 24A).
22. Ida's family is documented in the Smithsonian museum's files.
23. *Report of an Investigation under the Direction of Atlanta University; together with the Proceedings of the Third Conference for the Study of Negro Problems, held at Atlanta University, May 25–26, 1898*. ed. By W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, Ph. D., corresponding secretary of the Conference, Atlanta, Atlanta University Press, 1898, 4; Mary M. Donohue and Whitney Bayers, 'Fortresses of Faith, Agents of Change: AME and AME Zion Churches in Connecticut', in *African American Connecticut Explored* 2008, pp. 89–92.
24. *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), 13 April 1898, p. 6; *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), November 15, 1907, p. 7; *Waterbury Evening Democrat* (Waterbury, CT), 7 May 1898, p. 8; *New York Age* (New York, NY) 14 July 1910, p. 5; *New York Age* (New York, NY), 12 July 1890, p. 4; *New York Age* (New York, NY), 26 July 1890, p. 1.
25. James Walker Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (New York: A. M. E. Zion Book Concern, 1895), pp. 320–22.  
 FORMAT? 26. Rev. Bell: <<https://www.loc.gov/item/2016698737/>>; and Susan Bell: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016698739/> (accessed 30 September 2018).