



SCURLOCK'S WASHINGTON

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The year is 1944. A woman poses with her husband for a portrait after his return from a war fighting fascism overseas to find racism alive and well at home. She is dressed in a two-piece outfit with scalloped trim and three large buttons—her fashionable Sunday best. Her hair is neatly coiffed into a finely manicured crown. The gentleman wears his dress uniform, proudly displaying his lieutenant's bars. They both have thinly pierced smiles, and their eyes softly gaze toward the camera, hers slightly dreamier and more distant than his straightforward gaze. With her hands resting softly in her lap, either at the suggestion of the photographer or on her own volition, the woman slightly leans back into her husband in a posture that betrays a hint of relief, while one of his arms protectively embraces her shoulder. The carefully crafted studio lighting provides a soft glow on their faces, offering promise of brighter tomorrows made more resonant by the subtle glimmer of their wedding bands. The photographers, Addison Scurlock and George Scurlock, a father and son team whose names are synonymous with respectability in Washington, have been recommended to the woman by many friends in the community (fig. 1).¹

In another photograph, two young boys stroll down a suburban-looking sidewalk. The surroundings and their attire suggest that it is spring in the early 1950s. Unlike the previous image, taken in a studio with meticulous attention to detail, this one is taken outdoors and appears more candid. The reliability of studio light is abandoned for natural light. Instead of a plain backdrop behind the young boys, telephone wires crisscross the street, running to houses adorned with television antennas and wide front lawns. The boys wear well-worn high-waisted dungarees and Keds, with a baseball, bat, and glove in hand. The pair appear absorbed in conversation—perhaps about the previous night's boxing score or what local ballfield they could use for the day's game. The image by photographer Robert Scurlock offers a different aspect of hope and promise: two seemingly carefree Black boys enjoying a walk in their new Washington housing development in Eastland Gardens, across the Anacostia River, close to an area where Robert's father, Addison, had photographed a Black-owned amusement park, Suburban Gardens, decades earlier (fig. 2).

One family and three photographers—Addison and his sons, Robert and George—shared nine decades of documenting Black life. These two mid-twentieth-century images, although distinctly different, are still remarkable, but not because of their iconic status as depictions of the Black elite or aesthetic and compositional qualities of dramatic light and shadow perfected by

Detail, fig. 14



1. George H. Scurlock, Lieutenant Ulysses S. Ricks and Gloria Ricks, 1944, negative

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

2. Robert S. Scurlock, Larry Arnold and Jerry Porter in Eastland Gardens, 1951, negative

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



Addison Scurlock that became known as the “Scurlock look.” Finely crafted, they are important mainly because they epitomize qualities for which the Scurlocks came to be beloved by their community for the better part of a century: their reliability, insight, and loving care in depicting Black people, spaces, and places through the lenses of their cameras for those who mattered most—the African American citizens of their home city. These images also are representative of the Scurlocks’ oeuvre and reveal the crucial dialogic relationship between the Washington Black community and the long-standing success of the Scurlock Studio: a success that experienced different iterations as the cultural and political landscape shifted over the years.

From 1904 to 1994, the photography of the Scurlocks captured and captivated their city. Because of segregation and a fear of not being able to establish a large customer base on the famed “Photographer’s Row” on Pennsylvania Avenue, they operated their family business in the midst of the historic Black neighborhoods surrounding U Street and Howard University in Northwest Washington. Often called “Black Broadway,” U Street was considered the nexus of Black culture, art, business, and intellect, second only to Harlem on the East Coast. People shopped on this thoroughfare, found refuge in the local pubs and theaters along it, and enjoyed a vibrant community whose identity was made even more pronounced by the many hundreds of thousands of photographs created in the famous Scurlock Studio. Though this area existed a short distance from the White House and the Capitol, segregation imposed a racial divide in the city throughout most of the twentieth century. The photographic art of the Scurlocks highlights both a rich and tight-knit population that had been overlooked—or dismissed—as a result of racial discrimination and white supremacy, and a family adept at recognizing, creating, and capitalizing on the art that grew out of this milieu.

For decades the Scurlocks photographed individuals, families, groups, and businesses at weddings, graduations, and meetings. Despite the racial injustice that confined their world,

African American families and business owners like the Scurlocks were resilient and successful in the spheres of business, education, science, arts, and entertainment. They were residents of a city whose Black middle class refused to be defined or held captive by racial segregation and discrimination, even as it sometimes instilled divisions of its own. Widely known for dignified, mature, and sophisticated likenesses of Black sitters, the Scurlock Studio expanded upon and pursued multiple avenues of photography, creating portraits of an entire city. This powerful alchemy, which fused artistry with business and community with politics, begs our attention because it provides us with a compelling look into the dynamic and changing nature of Black art and aesthetics through the decades-long work and legacy of a single extraordinary family. An examination of their work and its impact on Black Washingtonians, shows how often photography by Black artists serves as a mode of representation and intervention.

The presentation of Black images is rooted in the history of photography as a “troubling vision,” to borrow a phrase from visual theorist Nicole R. Fleetwood.² Nineteenth- and many early twentieth-century images located Black subjects in relation to physical labor or some other subservient or stereotypical, racialized imagining. The work of Addison Scurlock and his sons offered a counternarrative that transformed historical images of Blackness and Jim Crow-era depictions of African American life. Examining the cultural and aesthetic significance of the Scurlocks’ output allows for a greater understanding of their work. It also situates their artistic practice within a pantheon of other Black photographers who, during the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century, showcased aspects of Black life that resonate beyond the boundaries of the nation’s capital. The sustained rise, transformation, and demise of the Scurlock business, along with the way in which its body of work has been accepted and incorporated into the narrative of the city as well as national institutions, also suggests an important chronicle of race and representation within Washington that illuminates complex issues of gentrification and disenfranchisement, belonging, value, and changing notions of community, especially for African Americans.

Addison Scurlock: Positioning the Race

The second of three children of George Clay Scurlock and Nannie Saunders Scurlock, Addison Norton Scurlock was born in Fayetteville, North Carolina, in 1883, six years after Reconstruction had ended and during a moment when in North Carolina, as in most of the South, African Americans were experiencing extreme social, political, and economic disenfranchisement. The family moved to Washington around 1900, shortly after George lost a political contest on the Republican ticket for state senator and the horrific Wilmington, North Carolina, race riots of 1898 further strained race relations and disempowered African Americans in the Tar Heel State. Once in DC, the family settled near the elite LeDroit Park neighborhood, which housed many professors from Howard University. Here the members of the migrant family began to pursue their dreams: the patriarch, George Scurlock, trained to become a lawyer while sustaining the family with his job as a messenger for the US Treasury. He eventually set up his law practice on the famed U Street in Northwest Washington. Addison’s older brother, Herbert, became a physician, and his younger sister, Mattie, entered school to become a teacher in Washington’s formative and formidable Black school system. Addison knew he wanted to be a photographer by the time the family arrived in Washington, and he declared himself as such on the 1900 census at the age of seventeen (fig. 3).

To hone his skills, in 1901 Addison began a three-year apprenticeship with white photographer Moses P. Rice. Even in a segregated city, this connection was not unique. The first

3. Unidentified photographer, Addison N. Scurlock in Fayetteville, North Carolina, 1900, gelatin silver print

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

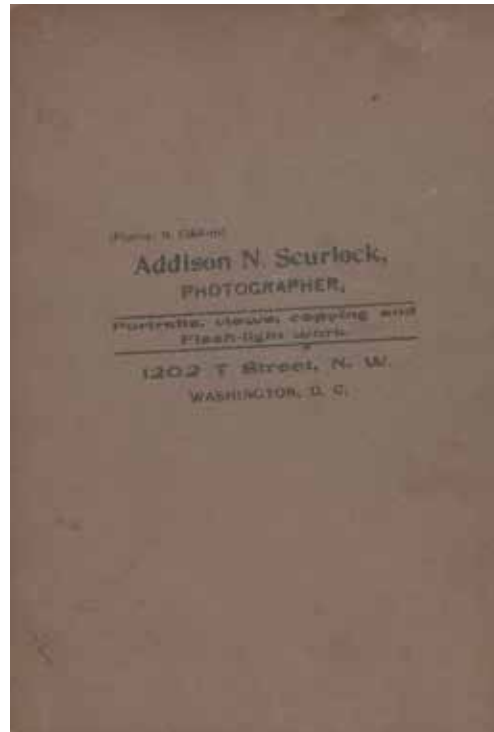
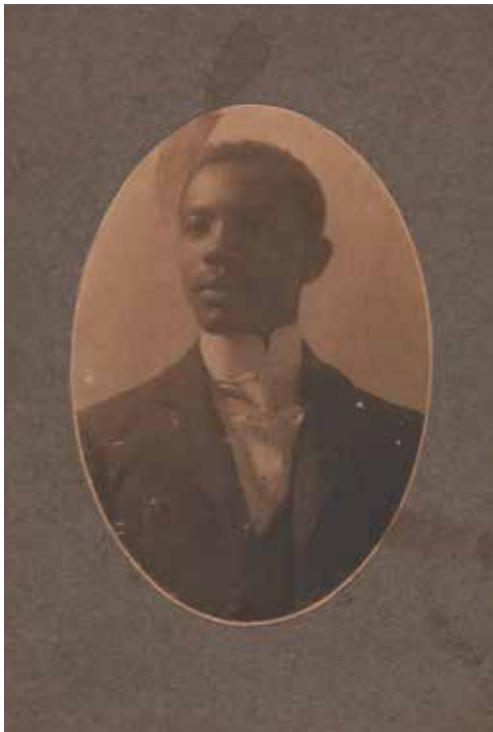
4. Moses P. Rice, cabinet card of Addison N. Scurlock, c. 1901, collodion silver print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of the Scurlock Family



Black photographer to open his own studio in DC in 1885 had also apprenticed with a white photographer.³ Rice was originally from Nova Scotia, Canada, which may explain why he did not share the sentiments of most whites during this time and influenced his decision to work with Scurlock. While apprenticing with Rice, Addison learned portraiture as well as the techniques of lighting and negative retouching, skills that became signature components of his photographic practice.

A portrait from Rice Studio of a young Addison Scurlock, made in 1901, looks as if it could have been included in W. E. B. Du Bois's presentation at the 1900 Paris Exposition, the landmark exhibit that showed the "small nation within a nation" striving and achieving, despite years of discrimination and white supremacy. The cabinet card of a dapper and clear-eyed Addison has a floral display in the background, matching the aesthetic approach taken by other Black photographers during this period (fig. 4). Photographers like Thomas Askew, J. P. Ball, C. M. Battey, the Goodridge brothers, P. H. Polk, and Augustus Washington, as well as the aspiring photographer Addison Scurlock, understood their role as critical in combating negative perceptions of Black people. Studio portraits of the time were often taken with floral backgrounds, draperies, pillars, or showing the sitter holding a book. The props were devices to counterbalance negative perceptions and "shape people's ideas about identity and sense of self."⁴ This approach can also be seen in the work of New York-based photographer James Van Der Zee. Like Scurlock in DC, Van Der Zee became famous for his extensive documentation of the Black community in and around Harlem in the mid- to late 1910s. As the designated photographer for Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), Van Der Zee was busy presenting Black life in New York as urbane, dignified, and cultured, while Scurlock was busy doing the same in Washington. Like other Black photographers throughout the country, they understood their work not merely as a commercial enterprise but as a rebuttal to negative perceptions of self and the Black community writ large. The image of a dignified



5. Addison N. Scurlock, cabinet card of Herbert Scurlock, c. 1908–1911, platinum print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of the Scurlock Family

6. Verso of Herbert Scurlock cabinet card, c. 1908–1911

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of the Scurlock Family

and determined Addison serves as a harbinger of the careful approach that he and the Scurlock Studio would take with clients for years to come.

Employing skills learned during his training days, Addison established his own photography business in 1904. At the time, the only known African American photographer with his own studio in Washington was Daniel Freeman. Freeman’s studio was on Fourteenth Street NW, near T Street.⁵ In addition to working in proximity, Freeman and Scurlock often shared (or competed for) their clientele, middle-class Black Washingtonians. Fifteen years older than Scurlock, Freeman had also apprenticed with a white photographer, E. J. Pullman, and both were known for excellent fine art photographs. Freeman and Addison saw a model and an opportunity for establishing their businesses on documenting African American life through photographs. Freeman died suddenly in an automobile accident in 1919. Considering they obtained work from the same client base, it is difficult to ascertain what impact Freeman’s untimely passing had on Scurlock’s business, but one can speculate that reduced competition allowed the Scurlock Studio a stronger foothold in the African American community.

The slim and soft-spoken Addison Scurlock initially opened studios in his parents’ homes, starting his practice on S Street NW and then moving with them to Florida Avenue NW. In 1907 he moved to 1202 T Street NW, where he would later make a home with his wife, Mamie Estelle Fearing, and he began taking portraits in his home photography studio. An early image by Addison Scurlock of his brother taken between 1908 and 1911 in his home studio shows Addison’s incipient photography skills (fig. 5). This early portrait of Herbert Scurlock, wearing a high stiff collar, ascot, and blazer nicely frames his distinguished-looking face and epitomizes the Victorian-era dignity and respectability for which Scurlock’s photographs would become known. Herbert’s distant gaze, away from the camera, offers a slight profile that is accentuated by his straight posture and the exquisite studio lighting that offered little to no shadows—all conventions that would serve as Scurlock’s signature aesthetic techniques in the future.

A critical element of Addison Scurlock's photography was the "Scurlock face," which he wanted to look as close to nature as retouching would allow.⁶ This photograph of a young Herbert presents a young man, focused and determined and showing his "best face forward,"⁷ which Scurlock understood as one of photography's powers and was a trait particularly important for his African American clients. The image's verso also offers further insight into Scurlock's business approach: "Addison N. Scurlock, photographer: portraits, views, copying, and flash-light work" (fig. 6). From the start of his professional career, it appears the training received from the Rice brothers afforded Addison a technical acumen that helped to define the "Scurlock look."

Before stepping behind the portrait camera and slipping under the hood, it was Addison's style to sit and talk briefly with the sitter. Addison was a dandy and always smartly dressed, perhaps to help instill a confidence in his sitters that he would render their likenesses in a way that dispelled the racist caricatures that adorned movie posters and minstrel stages of the city's white neighborhoods or repelled the insults hurled at them while strolling the city's streets. The knowing look between artist and subject helped make the sitter feel at ease, while tools of the trade were positioned systematically, like scientific instruments, around the studio. Addison, a master of light and shadow, would adjust the lighting once more to make absolutely sure he was capturing the subject as best he could. The rest of the work would take place afterward, retouching the negative or perhaps hand coloring the print itself (fig. 7).

Understanding that portraits of middle- and upper-class Black life provided what Deborah Willis considered a "New Negro visual aesthetic," Scurlock saw photography as both an aesthetic enterprise and social endeavor.⁸ While there are few documented records of Addison Scurlock's words, a presentation he made in 1909 to the National Negro Business League on the topic "Creating Business" offers some useful insights. Like African American educator, orator, and community leader Booker T. Washington, Scurlock believed entrepreneurial endeavors would create equality for Black people. Scurlock's address to the business league called for understanding racial segregation as a "point in our favor" and emphasized the importance of establishing a confidence on the part of the consumer that "possess[ed] a spirit higher than mere commercialism."⁹ In other words, focusing on serving the Black community could be something positive, as long as aesthetics remained impeccable and relationships with clients unflappable. This notion is supported by scholars who explain that

People trusted him. He was allowed in all their homes, and he entertained people in his home. He didn't need a calling card. He had to establish that he knew what he was doing and be accepted in Washington society, and because of his skill, his talent and his personality, he was taken seriously.¹⁰

He was taken so seriously by early clients like Howard University and "colored" high schools—M Street (later known as Dunbar) and Armstrong—that by 1911, at age twenty-nine, Addison opened his first photography studio outside the family home. The green brick two-story building sat at the corner of Ninth and U Streets NW, in the heart of Black Washington. Here, he realized his goal of a shop window to display his work to the public and attract an aspiring clientele. His son George would later remember:

Our father would put photographs of famous people and not-so-famous people out there, and people saw this nice display and just walked in and asked if you could make *them* look as beautiful as the people in the case. . . . There'd be a picture of somebody's cousin there, and they would say "Hey, if you can make *him* look that good, you can make me look *better*."¹¹ [Emphasis in original].



7. Scurlock Studio, Addison N. Scurlock posing a client in Scurlock Studio at 900 U Street NW, c. 1951, gelatin silver print

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

From statesman Frederick Douglass to historian Carter G. Woodson to educator Anna Julia Cooper and countless others, Scurlock recorded and pictured African American progress. At a time when the predominant images of African Americans were demeaning and stereotypical, Addison's shop window served as a site of aspiration, inspiration, congregation, and resistance, and his business would do so for the next half century as Addison and the Scurlock Studio promoted and supported Black political movements, education, businesses, families, and the local community through photography (fig. 8). Throughout the decades, the Scurlocks did not just portray the social, political, and community life of Black Washington; they actively participated in it, like hundreds of other Black Washingtonians. Addison joined the exclusive all-male Mu-So-Lit (music, social, literary) club, whose membership included Black intellectuals from across America. He was an active participant in and documenter of activities of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and established a professional relationship with scholar, activist, and author W. E. B. Du Bois that extended to the pages of *The Crisis* magazine and a variety of Black-owned publications.

Centering the Family

To know better how the Scurlocks conducted a successful business in Black Washington for nearly a century, it is important to understand the role family played in making this possible. Segregation and white supremacy had deeply divided the country; Washington was not immune to this racial and social sickness. Home and family became critical sites for race-building and refuge. The Scurlock family was very close-knit and often the subject of Addison's photographs. However, they were not merely subjects for him to hone his skills for future clients; they were

8. Addison N. Scurlock, interior of the first Scurlock Studio at 900 U Street NW, 1911, gelatin silver print

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



also crucial members of the business. Mamie Fearing, Addison's wife, a "strikingly beautiful woman, petite with long brown hair and soft, patient eyes,"¹² played a critical role in ensuring the viability of the photography studio (fig. 9). During fifty years of marriage, they shared a home and a livelihood. While Addison stayed behind the camera artfully composing photographs, Mamie managed the business and its finances.¹³ She meticulously kept the invoice logbooks—numbering customer orders, entering negative sizes, listing print sizes ordered—and maintained the petty cash account (usually about \$40). Addison Scurlock trained assistants (often relatives and community members) and later his sons to meticulously retouch negatives and hand color prints to minimize any imperfections. Their eight-room place on T Street was the site where friends and family members met for social gatherings and special occasions. The commitment to be everywhere taking pictures while opening their house to friends and family within their social circle undoubtedly helped their business, as it solidified their standing within Washington's "Secret City,"¹⁴ a moniker given to the segregated city whose vibrant African American society was virtually unknown to most white Washingtonians (fig. 10).

The intimate views of Addison Scurlock and his young son Robert; the portrait of his three sons, Addison Jr., Robert, and George: these images demonstrate the care with which the Scurlocks composed their photographs to emanate cultured respectability, family stability, pride, joy, and love (figs. 11 and 12). They instilled these same exacting qualities in many of their portraits of clients, such as a portrait of Esther Popel Shaw and her daughter, Patricia, taken in the 1930s. Shaw was an accomplished teacher, author, activist, poet, and a sometime member of Georgia Douglas Johnson's "Saturday Nighters," the Washington Renaissance literary salon whose members included Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, and poet Jean Toomer. When Addison crafted this portrait, he was well aware that his sitter wrote searing poems that highlighted the American system and its injustice toward African Americans, like the one



9. Addison N. Scurlock, Mamie Fearing Scurlock in Great Falls, Virginia, c. 1912, gelatin silver print

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



10. Scurlock Studio, wedding of Addison N. Scurlock and Mamie Fearing, 1912, gelatin silver print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of the Scurlock Family

11. Scurlock Studio, Addison N. and Robert Scurlock, c. 1920, gelatin silver print

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

12. Addison N. Scurlock, Robert, Addison Jr., and George Scurlock, 1924, gelatin silver print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of the Scurlock Family



published in *The Crisis* with the title “Flag Salute.” *The Crisis*, a publication established in 1910 and edited by leading African American thinker W. E. B. Du Bois, was dedicated to exposing the dangers of racial prejudice and its impact on the African American community. Shaw’s poem starkly juxtaposed the voices of schoolchildren reciting the pledge of allegiance with a blistering news account of a lynching and riot that occurred in the town of Princess Anne on Maryland’s Eastern Shore.¹⁵ Despite her searing prose, in Scurlock’s portrait we see “his knack for capturing the softness of every woman.”¹⁶ Shaw wears a lace dress, drop pearl earrings and necklace that accentuate her profile, cropped hair, and keenly shaped nose. Patricia looks angelic while posing “face forward” wearing a light-colored cotton dress. Her head gently lies on her mother’s shoulder, and her hand delicately rests inside her mother’s hand. The image is both softened and deepened by the poignancy of Shaw’s words in “Flag Salute” and the desire to protect young people who look like her child (fig. 13).

Perfecting the Look and Capturing the City

Addison founded his business and developed his art in an environment of enormous flux on the one hand but increasing rigidity on the other. With the Black population nearly doubling each decade since 1880, resulting in a population of well over one hundred thousand Black residents by 1920 and more migrants pouring in from the rural South each year, Washington held the third largest African American population in the country, after only New York and Chicago.¹⁷ Higher education combined with economic and culture activities reinforced the status of the Black middle class in the nation’s capital. As Black lawyer Archibald Grimké claimed, the District of Columbia contained “more wealth, more intelligence, and a much larger number of educated and refined colored people than any city in the country.”¹⁸ In this environment, Scurlock portraits constructed a vision of Black Washingtonians that was urban, urbane, and modern for a wide range of the Black middle class. They turned the derogatory label of race into a source of dignity and self-affirmation for African Americans.



13. Addison N. Scurlock, Esther Popel Shaw and her daughter Patricia, c. 1930, negative

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

Scholars and family members described Addison Scurlock as meticulous and a perfectionist who saw each subject as extraordinary, and he attempted to document that in his work. Historian Jeffrey John Fearing writes that “technically speaking, Addison’s son George attributed the Scurlock style to three qualities—posing, lighting, and retouching, where the final image was fine-tuned on the negative itself.” Fearing concludes that these techniques, along with the

14. Addison N. Scurlock, W. E. B. Du Bois, c. 1911, gelatin silver print
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution



rapport built by the family with the studio's largely Black clientele, meant that they "could sit before cameras in complete confidence that the resultant images would capture them accurately and in the best light possible."¹⁹ George Scurlock also explained his father's aesthetic and photographic style this way: "His brush was his camera and his techniques firmly establish his work as a part of art."²⁰

In one of Addison Scurlock's most famous early portraits, that of Du Bois, we see the results of this signature technique, which mirrored the political ideology of racial uplift through education and community cohesiveness espoused by African American leaders like Du Bois. Both men recognized the power that visual culture could play in crafting a modern Black self. In an academic paper of 1897 entitled "The Conservation of Races," Du Bois rhetorically wondered, "What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my



15. Addison N. Scurlock, Lillian Evans Tibbs (Madame Evanti) as Lakmé, c. 1925, gelatin silver print

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

duty to cease to be a Negro . . . and (just) be an American?”²¹ The effect that Addison Scurlock attained through the combination of light, shadow, posing, retouching, and chemical reaction contended that African Americans could be both “American” and “Negro.” It is no surprise, in fact, that some of the first issues of *The Crisis* edited by Du Bois prominently featured Scurlock photos on the interior and its covers—and that the magazine would continue to do so for more than a decade (fig. 14).

As Scurlock’s reputation for portraiture grew, his studio at Ninth and U Streets became a ritual stop for celebrities and local residents alike. The distinctive use of a dignified soft focus, artful bust-length compositions, and color-conscious lighting soon attracted this important clientele. A portrait of Washington native Lillian Evans Tibbs (who adopted the stage name Madame Evanti in Europe, where she was widely celebrated) posing in character in the opulent bejeweled costume she wore in the opera *Lakmé* is an iconic representation of Scurlock’s craft that captures the tenderness he often conveyed in his photography, and Evanti’s grandeur as a grande dame of the stage (fig. 15).



16. Addison N. Scurlock, Lillian Evans Tibbs with her son Thurlow at McMillan Reservoir, c. 1930, gelatin silver print

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

While Addison perfected his signature look for portraiture in the studio, he brought many of the same qualities to his work outdoors. In a second photograph of Evans Tibbs, he presents her with the same dignified air as in her *Lakmé* portrait, but in full length, promenading at McMillan Reservoir adjacent to the campus of Howard University in Washington with her son, Thurlow Evans Tibbs Sr. (fig. 16). Scurlock photographs them in a seemingly carefree moment, both looking away from the camera. She wears a flapper-style dress and hat, with white gloves, walking stick, necklace, clutch purse, and fur stole. She is the epitome of style and sophistication. Thurlow, cupping his mother's hand, wears saddle shoes, argyle socks, jodhpur shorts, button-down shirt, and a dark blazer. Thurlow points at something in the distance, and both he and his mother are caught in mid-

conversation about the discovery. Natural as it appears, it was undoubtedly carefully crafted by the man described as knowing exactly what he wanted.²² The subjects' demeanor and posture also demonstrate how the visual image as constructed by Scurlock was both a private and a public performance in which various identities of race, class, and gender were negotiated. We as viewers are invited to ask, perhaps: Is this mother and wife Lillian Evans Tibbs, or the international diva Madame Evanti?

Portraiture often promoted and historicized people from an elite class. And Scurlock images such as these reveal a great deal about the fears and needs of the Black middle class in twentieth-century Washington. Longtime residents, so often photographed by the Scurlocks, developed a social hierarchy that left little room for less affluent members of the community. Black Washingtonians who enjoyed access to education at elite schools, including Dunbar High and Howard University, often saw themselves in a category distinct from those of a more modest background. One of the most complex qualities was the role of skin color in determining status within the African American community. The lightness of one's skin or the straightness of one's hair was often a multifaceted and highly prized marker that could constitute "beauty," signify class, and reaffirm status in an intraracial hierarchy. This skin color stratification, or colorism, is a by-product of internalized white supremacist notions of what constitutes beauty. Over the years, these standards have normalized whiteness and deemed everything that strayed from that standard as "other."

Although Scurlock portraiture did not invent class divisions based on colorism, one wonders if his penchant for retouching reinforced some of these ideas—if not for himself, perhaps for his clients. Emphasizing Scurlock's mastery of lighting and shadow, nothing in the scholarship indicates that his retouching or hand painting work included lightening a person's skin tone. He would remove a blemish, or smooth out crow's feet—maybe even slightly straighten a nose or a lip a little bit.²³ It is difficult to project if these "creative flourishes" by Addison suggest a penchant for adhering to a white beauty standard; yet, it is likely he was quite aware of the intraracial complexities apparent within the Black community. Scurlock attempted with his work, like many of his photography peers from that era, to challenge racist beliefs about Black people

by reinforcing and capturing a middle-class ethos that too often smoothed over the rough edges of Black life in the District.

Acknowledging the power of visualization, Scurlock—like many African American photographers of the early twentieth century—also understood how people from all socioeconomic backgrounds found respite in fashioning and displaying images of themselves. And even though many published images that showcase his significance as a photographer tend to focus on “the best and the brightest” from the African American community, it is important to recognize that Scurlock and the 900 U Street NW photography studio were institutions in the community. The archive of Scurlock images numbers in the hundreds of thousands and includes people from all walks of life, from the most notable to the anonymous—beauticians and busboys, cooks and clergy members, waiters, porters, conductors, and teachers—all featuring a diverse range of looks, classes, and complexions. The Scurlock reputation as the city’s premier photographer reached well beyond the so-called Black elite and extended across a wide-ranging population. It is in this relatively wider-angle (though problematic) view that we can see how Scurlock images also created a visual archive of African Americans that not just shaped but, importantly, corresponded with and responded to the realities, hopes, and aspirations of their own lives.

As Washington was developing into a twentieth-century metropolis of massive contradictions, Addison began to document its vibrant Black life. Primarily focusing on the burgeoning Black neighborhoods that surrounded the studio at 900 U Street NW, Addison realized the need to position the African American community itself, creating portraits of a city. He recognized the power that these images wielded in constructing a visual record of accomplishment. With his Cirkut Panorama camera in tow, deftness with flash photography and lighting, and the keen sensibility of a film director, he carefully crafted depictions of successful businesses, such as the Underdown Family Delicatessen or Murray Brothers Printing; churches, like the construction of the Lincoln Temple Congregational or Shiloh Baptist Church; high schools, including Armstrong, Cardozo, and Dunbar; leisure events, at the Suburban Gardens Amusement Park, Club Prudhom, Bohemian Caverns, and the Howard and Lincoln theaters; and a myriad of street scenes and of protests outside and inside venues. All demonstrate Addison Scurlock’s equal interest and expertise in creating a powerful image of the city as a site of working middle-class culture. By doing this, he made the city of Black Washington as respectable as the middle-class people he photographed in his studio (figs. 17–22).

Rooted in his community, yet reaching beyond its geographic borders, Scurlock had a booster mentality that served his own and his city’s interest. He took advantage of print media to advance his business and publicize his vision of Black success and aspiration on the pages of various African American periodicals, including the DC-based *Afro-American* and *Washington Bee*, *Norfolk [Virginia] Journal and Guide*, *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Cleveland Call and Post*, and *Amsterdam News*. Of his many professional relationships with Washington businesses, organizations, and institutions, the largest and most beneficial link Scurlock forged was



17. Addison N. Scurlock, Alexander and Margaret Underdown with employees at Underdown Family Delicatessen, c. 1904, gelatin silver print

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

18. Addison N. Scurlock, Elder Solomon Lightfoot Michaux holding a mass baptism in the Potomac River, 1933, gelatin silver print

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



19. Addison N. Scurlock, Suburban Gardens Amusement Park, c. 1925, negative

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



20. Addison N. Scurlock, Club Prudhom dancers, c. 1930, negative

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution





21. Addison N. Scurlock, Midwinter Ball of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Baltimore, 1912, negative

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

22. Addison N. Scurlock, Howard University Law Library, 1933, negative

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution





23. Robert S. Scurlock, Marian Anderson's Easter concert at the Lincoln Memorial, 1939, negative

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

with nearby Howard University. Decade after decade, Howard retained the Scurlock Studio as its official photographer. The Scurlocks depicted all aspects of life at the university—intellectual, athletic, social, and political. The photographs range from portraits of presidents, deans, and faculty members to group shots of academic departments and social clubs to candid views of classrooms, graduations, and campus landscapes. Addison applied the Scurlock look wholesale at Howard, positioning and portraying the university as one of the nation's finest institutions of higher learning. Much like his visual constructions of Black middle-class men and women, his careful presentation of Howard's activist intellectual and artistic community showcased the university's promise to the Black community, the nation, and the world. The resulting body of work verifies the unique role that Howard played in shaping Washington and the struggle for racial and social change in America. It also provided a carefully constructed vision of Howard vetted by the administration, one that forms the capstone in a uniformly positive, noncontentious vantage that was often strictly divided along gender lines.

The “look” crafted by Addison Scurlock is an important portrait of African American life in the nation's capital, and although it is not the only look of a deeply racially and socially stratified city, it is a crucial one. At a moment when dominant forms of racism reduced the African American community to caricature, Addison Scurlock's camera became an instrument to advance racial pride and justice. His portraits emphasized the dignity and integrity of individuals, families, and communities, giving richness, depth, complexity, and deep meaning to

Black Washington. As the 1930s and 1940s unfolded, Scurlock passed these values, talents, and skills on to his sons, who struggled with, challenged, made sense of, and sometimes rejected and refashioned them for a later generation that was quickly changing with the advent of war, the evolution of the civil rights movement, and the explosion of Black publishing and attendant opportunities afforded to and seized by Black photographers in Washington's changing world.

Robert and George Scurlock: A Changing Studio and World

Easter Sunday, 1939. The photographer feels as if he is bearing witness to history in the making. A crowd of what looks to be nearly one hundred thousand has gathered at the base of the Lincoln Memorial to listen to her sing. His city. His people. His father, Addison, has provided him with this assignment, just a mile from the studio but a world away. He knows the location, having lived his life here, and he has assessed the many different angles. But still, the crowd and her voice perhaps take his breath away. He likely works with a large-format camera, perhaps a Speed Graphic 4 × 5, which requires changing both plate and bulb with every shot. It is not easy to lug around, but capturing this moment is what he has come here to do. She wears a full-length fur coat covering an orange brocade blouse that his black-and-white film will never pick up. She steps to the array of microphones assembled before her. Her eyes close and she begins to sing from her soul to the nation. The aperture is set to allow the correct amount of light. The shutter opens and closes. When Robert Scurlock returns to the Scurlock Studio and develops the film, it looks as if you can see her soul and hear the song all over again. He has begun a new journey on a path he feels well prepared for. He's twenty-three years old. Robert's 1939 image of the internationally renowned singer Marian Anderson on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial illustrates his deftness at blending his father's training in portraiture with his photojournalistic ambitions. Taken as a whole, the series of images serves almost as a kaleidoscope or a flip picture book of the historic occasion and tells the remarkable story of a photographer's unencumbered access (fig. 23).

Robert and George Scurlock apprenticed with their father during high school; and as college students at Howard University, they both maintained interest in the family business. At a young age, Robert had demonstrated a keen photographic sensibility and by fifteen was already an expert in negative retouching.²⁴ Addison had spent decades establishing the Scurlock reputation as reliable for the quality of its product and for creating beautiful images of Black Washington. His craft was unmatched and his perfectionism well known, but he was never considered cutting-edge or avant-garde, nor was his work aligned with the growing social realism and documentary ethos of the Farm Security Administration photography program born from the New Deal.²⁵ The next generation of Scurlocks, however, would be influenced by these movements, along with the burgeoning opportunities brought by the rise of Black business in the publishing industry. World War II was a turning point for the Scurlock Studio.

Robert, the elder of the Scurlock brothers, was a highly creative personality.²⁶ Although he majored in economics, in 1937, while he was in college, some of his photographs of the Fort Howard ROTC appeared in *FLASH!* magazine. And on his graduation from Howard, Robert received a Voigtländer plate camera, which he took with him while he served in the military during World War II.²⁷ George failed the military health examination and was denied entry into the armed forces but served his community and country in a different way. He stayed in Washington and helped Addison in the studio. He honed his portraiture skills and covered much of the commercial side of the business, photographing weddings, commencements, and special programs throughout the city; he also began to develop a specialty in retouching,



24. Robert S. Scurlock, General Benjamin O. Davis Jr., c. 1944, gelatin silver print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of the Scurlock family.
© Robert Scurlock

hand coloring, and creating portraits. It was here that he had the opportunity to photograph a young Lieutenant Ulysses S. Ricks and his wife, Gloria, amid photographing hundreds of individual soldiers and sailors, couples, and families on the home front (see fig. 1).

Robert, on the other hand, honed his photographic skills in Europe as a member of the Tuskegee Airmen. While stationed in Ramitelli, Italy, he photographed his fellow airmen, including commanding officer General Benjamin O. Davis Jr. His images of them at work on their planes and resting and relaxing on base reveal how this segregated unit lived on a daily basis. In Robert's evocative depictions of the valor of the Tuskegee Airmen, one can see all of the techniques of his father's portraiture on display in crafting a new likeness of a modern American hero. Like his father, Robert captured images of subjects typically not represented in mainstream imagery at the time. As a result, he helped create a collection of moving American patriotic imagery that reflected a segment of the population often overlooked and discounted simply because of their racial identity. Some images shared the traditional Scurlock aesthetic established by Addison, but there were also some distinctions.

One familiar element of Robert's portrait of Davis is the family tradition of the "Scurlock face." As in thousands of Scurlock images, the subject's gaze looks away from the camera beyond the horizon.

However, Robert's use of natural light and a fairly close-cropped photograph of the soldier in his work uniform with a fighter jet in the background creates more shadows than typically seen in a photograph from Addison. The mise-en-scène of bomber jacket, goggles, and airplane in the background demonstrates an assertive self-determination typically absent from Addison's portraits. Robert Scurlock strives for a fine balance, however. While the soldier reveals self-possession and a sense of confidence, there is also a pride that was a constant feature of Addison's work. Looking at the future of the Scurlock Studio business, one imagines this photograph could easily have been licensed to an advertising firm or as a promotional tool, as the "new face of patriotism": the competent, capable, and charming Black aviator as American war hero. Robert's photographic aesthetic was perhaps mimicked in several war bond poster illustrations that focused their attention on Tuskegee Airmen and other Black military heroes (fig. 24).

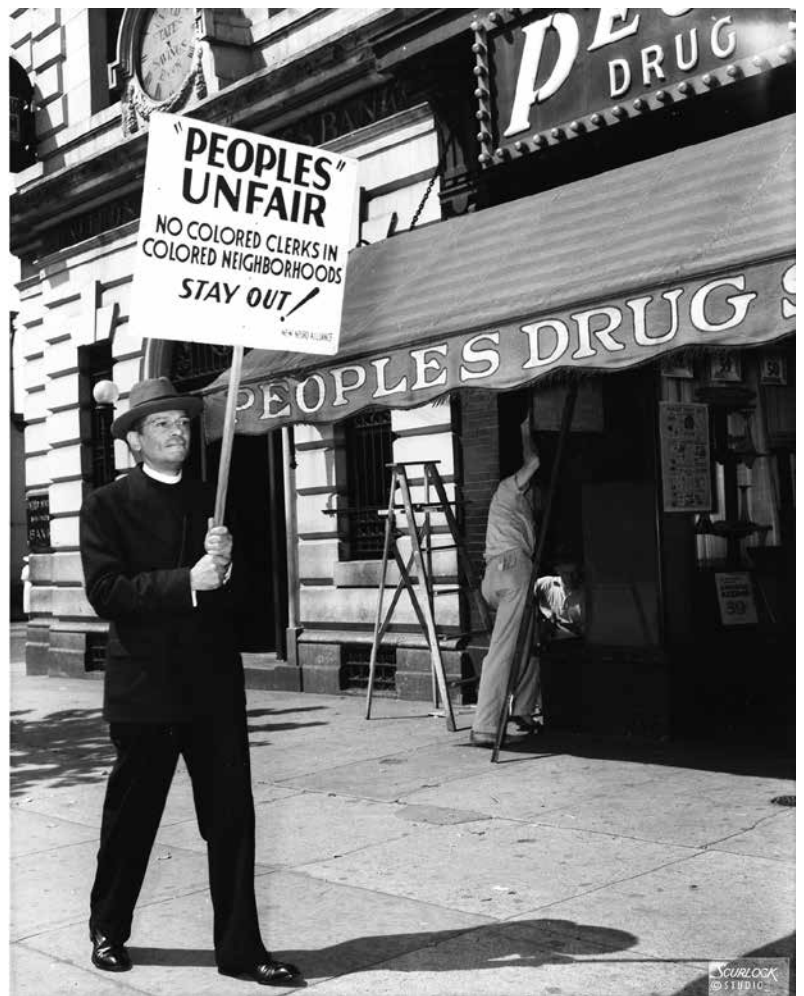
Back in Washington after returning from war, Robert organized his first solo exhibition at his alma mater in 1947. In Howard's art gallery, he exhibited approximately thirty photographs that he took of airmen while he was in the military.²⁸ In addition, he became increasingly interested in the burgeoning field of photojournalism and stock photography. The desire for commercial success was apparent not only in his exhibition but also in a renewed sense of loyalty to the family business. Competition was growing; the Scurlocks were no longer the only photographers dedicated to serving the African American community. Photographers like Robert

H. McNeill, with his studio at 13th and U Streets NW, were also actively photographing DC's Black community. Others attempted to poach the Scurlocks' long-standing clients like Howard University. And loyal customers were growing impatient with the studio's labor-intensive photographic process, finding the immediate gratification and lower expense of quick photo processing desirable. To adjust to the changing demands of the business, Robert expanded the Scurlock reach by licensing images to various press and media outlets, engaging more widely with the publishing world, Black news outlets, and newspapers. This was a practice that started before Robert served in the war, but it expanded after his return.

Before the war, as a generation of African Americans insisted on pursuing the constitutional rights guaranteed to all Americans, the Scurlocks depicted faces of the long prewar movement for civil rights. Directed by their father, Robert and George began documenting activities close to home in the nation's capital, such as the March on Washington Movement of the late 1930s and early 1940s, local Don't Buy Where You Can't Work campaigns at Peoples Drug Store (fig. 25), *Gone with the Wind* protests on U Street, gatherings of A. Philip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters at the Twelfth Street YMCA, rallies of the Scottsboro Mothers, and the changing face and makeup of the National Council of Negro Women following the death of civil rights icon Mary McLeod Bethune.

In 1948, taking advantage of the GI Bill, which enabled large numbers of veterans to pursue educational opportunities, Robert left the Scurlock Studio on U Street to open a new business, the Capitol School of Photography. Addison disapproved of the new venture. He felt the school would end up training their competition and thought that Robert should focus purely on portraiture in the African American community. Robert, however, was influenced deeply by his personal experience during wartime and by the changing face of publishing and photography at midcentury, which seemed to offer new and growing opportunities for Black photographers and cultural workers. He opened the school in Northwest Washington, decidedly on the edge of the historically Black community at 18th and Swann Streets NW (fig. 26). The location of the school, with its expansive mindset and its mission to train a new generation of Black photographers, all demonstrated an optimism perhaps partially born from the "Double V" idea that many African Americans shared during World War II—a victory against fascism abroad and a victory against racism at home. It signaled an aspiration to a business model that could reach beyond a portrait-based or even African American clientele, while still serving a broader notion of Black community and representation.

Both sons were deeply involved in the school, developing its curriculum, instructing, and even documenting its operations photographically. While Robert strived to reach out on his own,



25. Scurlock Studio, Picketing for equal employment at Peoples Drug Store, c. 1940, gelatin silver print

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

26. Unidentified photographer, Capitol School of Photography, c. 1947–1952, gelatin silver print

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



the younger George bridged the gap between his elder brother and their father, attempting to keep a foot in each world. Robert taught classes during the day, and George taught at night while also continuing to work with their father at 900 U Street NW during the day. Classes embraced topics such as color photography, lighting and makeup for African American subjects, and training in more commercially based forms of photographic portraiture including modeling. Since Addison had received training and apprenticed early in his career, as well as trained his family, it is difficult to believe he was simply opposed to the kind of mentoring and training in which his sons were engaged. It is more likely that his reluctance was a by-product of the shifting times in the marketplace. Addison's career started with a call to picture the increasingly segregated Black world and to prove its rightful place within American citizenry. With greater social integration and the advent of smaller, cheaper cameras in Kodak's Instamatic line making photography more accessible, the need and demand for formal portraiture decreased. Addison's Scurlock Studio, geographically less than ten blocks from the new Capitol School, might have seemed a world away from the new business in terms of its outlook. Despite its long-standing reputation in the community, the studio would naturally be affected by these social changes, which would explain the father's reluctance to train the real or perceived competition.

Gains and Losses

The Capitol School was short-lived, unfortunately, and closed in 1952. However, it made a lasting impact and maintains a storied legacy in the world of African American photographers in Washington. Many of the students were veterans who wanted to start new careers and used their GI Bill benefits to pay for their studies. The school accepted Black and white students, male and female. Some of the most notable included Ellsworth Davis, the first Black staff photographer



27. Scurlock Studio, George and Robert Scurlock in front of Scurlock Studio, c. 1965, gelatin silver print

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

28. Unidentified photographer, Custom Craft Studios, c. 1970, chromogenic print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of the Scurlock Family

for the *Washington Post*; the photojournalist George Clifton Cabell; Bernie Boston of the *Los Angeles Times* Washington bureau; Maurice Sorrell, the first Black member of the White House Photographers Association; and Jacqueline Bouvier, who was the “Inquiring Camera Girl” for the *Washington Times-Herald* before marrying John F. Kennedy.

The closing of the school, however, merely rerouted Robert’s aspirations for charting a new path for himself and for Black photography. Both Scurlock brothers recognized the incipient but inevitable shift in social, cultural, and market forces and understood that the Scurlock Studio’s power and greatest economic strength—maintaining a diverse and growing client base for portraits—was increasingly at odds with expanding opportunities for Black photographers engaged in freelance work (albeit in a racist economy that structurally favored white picture makers). Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, somewhat chastened by their failed business endeavor, they tried to maintain the business on both fronts, staying true to their client base while reaching new corporate and institutional clients and beginning to explore the worlds of fashion and commercial photography, especially color photography (fig. 27).

In 1952, the year he closed the school, Robert kept the physical location and expanded into commercial photography, realizing the field was offering increasing (but still limited) opportunities for African American photographers. At the time, a New York-based photographer named Gordon Parks was becoming known for his spreads in *Life* magazine. Other African American photographers, such as Roy DeCarava and even Pittsburgh-based Teenie “One Shot” Harris, among others, were also gaining recognition for their images. In a postwar era on the cusp of the modern civil rights movement that was focused politically on “shocking the conscience”²⁹ through photography, on the one hand, and culturally on showcasing Black creativity, professionalism, and entrepreneurship on the other, Robert understood it was important to find a way to capitalize on the long-standing reputation of the family’s name while also expanding his reach.

The new business, Custom Craft, was Washington’s first custom color lab (fig. 28). Robert had learned custom color and dye-transfer printing while serving in the military. As



29. Scurlock Studio, Poor People's Campaign Headquarters, 1968, gelatin silver print

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

a photographer he excelled at color photography and night lighting. Adapting to the shifts in technology and the realities of running a photography business in an increasingly competitive marketplace, Custom Craft began specializing in color and night views of Washington landmarks, monuments, and political institutions (fig. 29). Eventually the studio's commercial clientele included government agencies, IBM, and Westinghouse; they also began providing other photographers and studios in the area with color processing and printing.

Meanwhile, Addison remained committed to presenting a vibrant Black middle-class Washington experience and instilling that ethos in his son George. Robert and George worked diligently at maintaining the empire Addison had built; they continued their long-standing sole-provider contract with Howard University. At the same time, they wanted to build on their father's early experience of placing Scurlock images in *The Crisis* magazine and in the social pages of Black newspapers by creating images of everyday Black American life and selling them to the national Black press and other publications, such as *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Tan*.³⁰ Over the course of the ensuing decades, Robert pitched successful photo-essay projects to various glossies, profiling African American Gold Star Wives, young Black professionals, and the expanding new Black suburbs east of the Anacostia River—where he captured two young boys in Eastland Gardens in 1951 for the pages of *Ebony*—just to name a few images (see fig. 2).

By the early 1960s, Addison was in his late seventies. He still worked with longtime clients, such as Howard University, but his son Robert was becoming known as a photographer

superior to his father and considered “one of the best in the business.”³¹ Just before his death in 1964 at eighty-one, Addison sold the business to his sons. Robert’s interest in photojournalism continued, and he published images in *Look*, *Time*, *Fortune*, *Ebony*, *Our World*, the *Afro-American*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *Amsterdam News*, the *Norfolk [Virginia] Journal and Guide*, and the *Chicago Defender*. And his photograph of the 1968 DC uprisings received a two-page spread in *Life* magazine.

While Robert continued exploring the worlds of documentary and commercial photography as well as color printing, George steadfastly took over the task of carrying forward their father’s business to a new generation of clients. He maintained relationships with many major schools in Northwest Washington, taking their class and individual student photos for decades. He nurtured the relationship with Howard University and continued to maintain and build the client base. The Scurlocks later incorporated Scurlock Studio and Custom Craft, and each brother ran a division, George continuing with portraits and photography assignments and Robert doing more corporate and color work, as well as printing and processing.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were a time of transition in Washington—as they were throughout the United States—which led to changes in African American businesses like the Scurlocks’. The 1968 uprisings in Washington damaged or destroyed thousands of businesses, but more often than not the Black-owned ones were salvaged. After the riots, there was even an uptick of Black-owned shops because more white business owners left downtown for the outskirts.³² Images from the Scurlock Studio throughout this time illustrate how race was deeply intertwined with issues of class in Washington. For all its ills, racial segregation created an environment in which Black elites, as well as members of the middle and working classes, lived, worked, went to school together, and played alongside one another. Professors and police officers, poets and plumbers forged a way for themselves and for the greater community—not without tensions, rivalries, and social stratification; but still, together. As legal segregation ended and white flight followed, the economically and socially diverse Black community that was Scurlock’s Washington—and that, ironically, had been held together in part by the limitations imposed by a racist society—started to unravel.

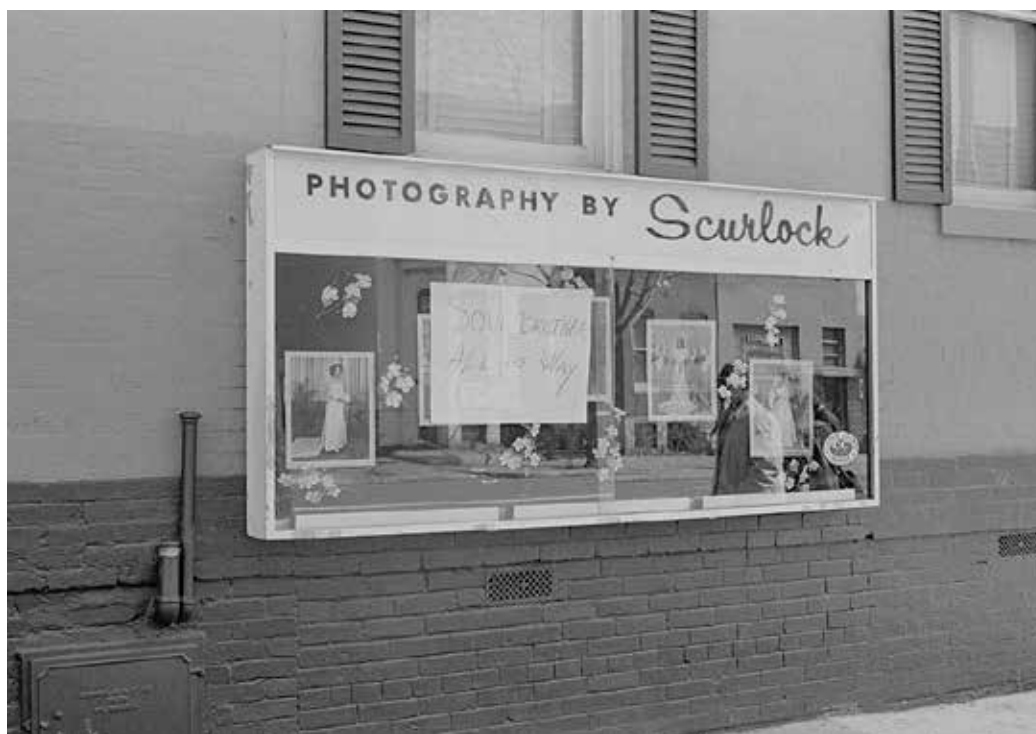
Business for the Scurlocks fluctuated in the 1970s. George left to pursue another career as an automobile salesman. Robert eventually closed the Connecticut Avenue location and consolidated all the businesses at the 18th Street address. U Street was forced to shutter its windows by the development of a Metrorail station. Robert worked hard to cement the family’s legacy. He created and proposed traveling exhibitions featuring his father’s work. His efforts resulted in an exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1976, the first show dedicated to his father in all of his time working as a photographer, as well as a 1981 show in Chicago.³³ And although he tried to avoid portraits, Robert kept taking them because of demand and business needs.

The Scurlocks: A Changing Same

It is early April 1968, days after the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The shop window at 900 U Street NW reads “Photography by Scurlock.” Inside the encasement are artificial cherry blossoms accentuating nearly a half dozen photographs of beautiful brides dressed in fashions of the era. From the paint that has chipped away from the siding and the style of typography advertising the business, it is apparent the studio has been a site of aspiration for decades. According to photographer Robert McNeill, “It was said that if Scurlock didn’t take your picture . . . at a wedding, you weren’t married.”³⁴ But two of the wedding photos are obscured, covered by a hastily written sign affixed to the window with tape that reads “Soul

30. George H. Scurlock, “Soul Brother All the Way” sign at Scurlock Studio, 1968, negative

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



Brother All the Way.” The juxtaposition of the well-composed bridal images carefully placed in the storefront window, as others had been for the past half century, with the handwritten sign is a poignant, if not jarring, visual. The sign’s placement on a glass window feels as precarious as the moment it reflects. Its message is repeated up and down the Black-owned businesses on the U Street corridor, as a hopeful inoculation against the rage and destruction of rioters being visited upon the neighborhood in the wake of the assassination (fig. 30).

George Scurlock, the photographer whose reflection appears in the window, left his home and family in Southwest Washington to travel to the studio to ensure its safety. “Soul Brother All the Way” may be a mantra he repeats to himself as he shoots a roll of film, the shutter clicking with the exhalation of each word. The streets around the studio appear quiet, almost ordinary, as is reflected in the image captured in the shop window. The reflection of light bouncing off the glass serves as a powerful metaphor for not only the long-standing studio, which is experiencing a fractured but prismatic sense of community—racially, locally, nationally, and politically. It is drastically different from the image taken by the photographer’s brother that *Life* would choose to publish, of looters swarming over a business less than half a mile away. This would be the image that would be fixed in people’s minds: a picture of a community destroying itself. Not the quiet, strangely ordinary scenes captured in this single example from a roll of George’s film. George does not stop to consider the totality of what his and his brother’s cameras are each capturing, and what it might teach later generations about the complexity of his city’s history. Maybe he’s thinking about his father, now four years passed, and what his reaction to the situation would have been. Maybe he’s thinking about getting home to his young children and what the future holds for them. Within the next ten years, he will leave his family business behind.

Scurlock Studio: Lasting Impressions

It is tempting to write the history of the Scurlock Studio in the post-World War II era as one of decline and fall. We must be careful of mining the historical era of segregation, however, with an eye toward pure nostalgia. It is important to examine the work of the three Scurlock men individually, as well as part of a longer continuum of photographic history. Addison Scurlock was uniquely influenced by the era in which he came of age, as were his sons by theirs. These varied effects swayed their aesthetics, business decisions, and goals. Addison clearly strove to make his statements about Black life and culture in subtle and refined ways through portraits focused on the individual and the beauty of the Black image. During Robert and George's period as proprietors, the "Black is beautiful" ethos was popular, and during the 1960s and 1970s it was being fully realized, chanted, and embraced. If the world of Addison was an Ellingtonian Black-and-tan fantasy, it was riven with a vibrant and seemingly immutable racism. The Chocolate City that Robert, George, and later generations inherited was in part structured by the struggles that their parents and grandparents' generations enacted and by the afterlives of segregation and the failed promises of integration.

One constantly changing theme through the various permutations, tragedies, and successes on scales small and large was the commitment that the Scurlocks maintained to depict their beloved community in its best possible light, to create a record that would speak forever to the hopes and dreams of those pictured, and how they wished to be remembered. In the first half of the century, Addison Scurlock's work epitomized the development of a Black photographic aesthetic that fused artistry with a strong sense of business acumen, respectability, and deep community engagement that began literally at home. It was the powerful awareness and blending of business, art, and community that made the Scurlocks' work and the work of many Black photography studios so powerful and important in crafting and sustaining Black communities from the early to well past the mid-twentieth century.

The Scurlocks' lasting commitment to these elements is evidenced by a document from 1942 titled "Our Obligation—as Portrait Photographers," which they kept and used in various formats throughout the years.

It is by no means an idle assumption when, in these days of anguish for many and uncertainty for all, we speak of "our obligation" as portrait photographers. Millions of American men—and even women—are leaving their homes to join the armed and auxiliary forces of War.

We, as professional photographers, are being called upon to portray these men and women with our camera. With patriotic fervor we are happy to dedicate every detail of our service to a full sense of the responsibility thus imposed.

Therefore, we pledge to give wholeheartedly of our best to every subject; to do our utmost to make every negative a true characterization of the subject; to never fail to remember that for the period of these dark hours our portraits will be the cheer for many hearts.

All of this we consider our obligation. By fulfilling it truly, when the light dawns of the better day that is to come, we shall be able to hold our heads high—our duty well done.³⁵

A cynical reading of this statement might view it as a typical marketing ploy, a way to remind customers they are still open during a difficult period when many families were facing



31. Addison N. Scurlock, Young George Scurlock and friends enjoying cake, c. 1925, gelatin silver print

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of the Scurlock Family

32. Robert S. Scurlock, Children enjoying Popsicles, c. 1970, chromogenic print

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



uncertainty during a time of war and increased competition for the same clients. This interpretation contains some truth. The Scurlock Studio, like all portrait photography studios, was a business in the midst of a segregated city with a striving Black middle class and necessarily developed a dialogic relationship with its clientele because of it. The Scurlock aesthetic was necessarily and directly tied to its entrepreneurial values and ethos. But when we look across the long arc of the studio's life, through the many years of portrait sittings, operating a family-run business six days a week, year after year, and recording thousands of graduations, weddings, and birthdays, as well as taking grade school, high school, and university photos, we can discern a deep and abiding demonstration that the Scurlock aesthetic was wedded to something more than peerless photographic technique and business acumen. The Scurlock signature "look" was also developed from and sustained by a deep commitment to service to the community through ongoing and direct representation and participation. This is apparent and initially expressed by Addison as early as 1909, when he addressed the National Negro Business League about being a business that took pride in offering more than "commercialism" to the Black community. It is also evidenced by the wartime manifesto, later refashioned by his son and reflected on the handwritten storefront sign for a new generation: "Soul Brother All the Way." A simple juxtaposition of images from the first and second half of the century provides powerful evidence that this continuum of professionalism and commitment to community was perhaps the fundamental characteristic of constructing the visual aesthetic for which the Scurlocks became famous and in turn provided a powerful portrait of their city throughout its changes.

The gelatin silver print of children, including a young George, in their Sunday best on the front lawn of a large home in a well-manicured neighborhood as they enjoyed homemade cake and ice cream is replaced by its 1970 equivalent: a color photograph of three unknown, shirtless young boys surrounded by high-rise buildings as they try to combat the sweltering DC summertime heat with Popsicles likely purchased from the neighborhood ice-cream truck (figs. 31 and 32).

Aspiring educators finely dressed in stylish overcoats, stockings, and sensible shoes that match their carefully pressed hair carefully descend the steps of Miner Teachers College, an institution of higher learning on Georgia Avenue whose mission was to educate Black teachers. Up the street and fast forward fifteen years is the campus of Howard University, where Robert photographed a group of young women who have replaced mid-calf-length skirts with thigh-high peacoats, stockings with jeans, and straightened hair with Afros (figs. 33 and 34).

The panoramic majesty showcasing a crew of Black newsboys in front of the Howard Theatre with owner Shep Allen in the 1930s is reseen in 1965 as a cast of young boys and girls running toward the camera at child's-eye level in an updated advertisement for a different Black-owned business, Bison Bus Lines (figs. 35 and 36).

The carefully composed 1915 family photograph celebrating Addison Jr.'s first birthday becomes a celebration of the family and their commitment to each other, the craft of photography, and all the dignity and sacrifice that come with fifty years of matrimony in this 1962 gelatin silver image of Addison and Mamie's anniversary gathering at their home on the 1200 block of T Street NW (figs. 37 and 38).

33. Scurlock Studio, Students at Miner Teachers College, c. 1950, negative

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



34. Robert S. Scurlock, Students outside Founders Library, Howard University, c. 1965, gelatin silver print

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution





35. Addison N. Scurlock, Shep Allen (center) with newsboys at Howard Theatre, 1936, negative

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



36. Robert S. Scurlock, Children in Bison Bus Lines advertisement, c. 1965, negative

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

37. Unidentified photographer,
Scurlock family celebrating Addison
Jr.'s first birthday, 1915, gelatin silver
print

Collection of the Smithsonian National
Museum of African American History
and Culture, Gift of the Scurlock Family

38. Unidentified photographer,
Scurlock family celebrating Addison
and Mamie's fiftieth wedding
anniversary, 1962, negative

Scurlock Studio Records, Archives
Center, National Museum of American
History, Smithsonian Institution



Coda: Gains and Losses Revisited

The year is 2009, months after the inauguration of the country's first Black president. A woman steps into a special exhibition gallery in a museum on the National Mall, sixty-five years after she and her husband left the Scurlock Studio following their portrait session. The exhibition is an inaugural foray for the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) as it begins its process of conceptualizing, collecting for, and constructing a new museum on the National Mall. The woman has never been to this museum, the National Museum of American History (NMAH), but she has heard about an exhibition of the work of a famous Black photographer from Washington who took a portrait of her and her husband when he returned from war in the 1940s. Though in her words it was a "lovely photograph," she destroyed her print and threw it away soon after it was taken.³⁶ Being newly pregnant, she was self-conscious about how she looked. Contemplating images of a city she partly remembers but largely has not known, she is fascinated by a history and culture she did not expect to see on the walls of a national museum. She is then more than surprised to see a younger version of herself and her husband staring back at her. Gloria and her husband, Ulysses S. Ricks, return another day and meet two gentlemen, Larry Arnold and Jerry Porter, who are also there to have their picture taken next to ones taken of them decades before. After admitting that she discarded the original portrait in a pique of self-doubt, she admits that she now loves the photo. When she receives a new print she claims, "I'm never throwing this one away."³⁷ She's proud to be celebrated in the nation's museum and to be part of a story that celebrates her community and her life (figs. 39 and 40).

The journey of the Scurlock portrait of Gloria and Ulysses S. Ricks is a circuitous one that upon reflection reveals layers of depth and complication. Created during a time of war and segregation, in part to illuminate the complex patriotism of many Black Americans in the face of injustice, it reflects an ethos of self-fashioning on the part of subject and photographer that portrays the resolve and attitude of Washington's and America's Black community to embody and display pride simultaneously in their Blackness and their Americanness. Unseen for decades until showcased in the exhibition *The Scurlock Studio and Black Washington: Picturing the Promise*, the photo—much like the construction of the new museum—is on one level a metaphor of arrival and reappraisal and on another level an embrace of a story seemingly lost, repressed, or unacknowledged, now reintroduced to a national and international audience.

The embrace of the Scurlock Studio by the Smithsonian is not just reflected in the arrival of NMAAHC, a museum dedicated to telling the American story through the African American lens, but is also evidenced by the acquisition of the studio's multigenerational archive by the NMAH, as a result of negotiations with Robert Scurlock that concluded in 1997 after he passed away. The archive consists of hundreds of thousands of photographic prints and negatives along with equipment and business records, saved by a national institution at a time when they might have been lost. Of course, the life and memory of Scurlock's Washington was never lost on the Black community of Washington. Even though the exhibition highlighted only a tiny fraction of the trove that the NMAH acquired from the family a decade prior, visitors flocked to the exhibition, demanding to have their voices heard by participating in leaving memory cards in a small comment box and an accompanying display case entitled "Remembering Black Washington." Hundreds of notes flooded the gallery box. Some messages focused on identifying people in the photographs on display, some corrected errors of fact or offered words of praise and thanks, and some deposits were whole packages containing photocopies of old Scurlock photographs with stories connected to them. Others were meditations that reflected a wide

39. Hugh Talman, Ulysses S. and Gloria Ricks at the exhibition *The Scurlock Studio and Black Washington: Picturing the Promise*, 2009, digital file

Courtesy the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



40. Hugh Talman, Larry Arnold and Jerry Porter at the exhibition *The Scurlock Studio and Black Washington: Picturing the Promise*, 2009, digital file

Courtesy the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution



range of memories of Black Washington, or events related to life in historic Black communities in cities and towns across the United States. It is this process of a community laying claim to its own history that led Gloria and Ulysses S. Ricks, Larry Arnold, and Jerry Porter, along with hundreds of others, to reclaim and give voice to their histories, just as the Scurlocks had done for decades and before the Smithsonian preserved the collection or NMAAHC was established.

The hunger on the part of Black Washingtonians to remember, give voice to, and attempt to reclaim this history came at a time when Washington was drastically gentrifying. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the U Street corridor and surrounding neighborhoods of Shaw and

LeDroit Park were quickly being economically revitalized. With that came a continued and hastened removal of Black-owned businesses, institutions, and families from that neighborhood, as well as from the city as a whole. The Black culture and community that had given shape to the neighborhoods where the Scurlock Studio stood and that it lovingly documented was systematically being disappeared by the engines and practices of redevelopment and divestment. Scurlock's Washington began to be seen through a prism of nostalgia: a rich Black world that could be remembered and capitalized upon, and one that, except in increasingly rare exceptions, would be relegated to the past and placed on new construction fences or as civic education through public heritage trails.

Placing the archives, objects, and photographs of one of Washington's longest-standing Black businesses in the corridors of what some lovingly and others suspiciously label "America's attic" marks a complex transition in the life of the nation's capital, one that traces both gains and losses. The power of Black cultural production and the simultaneous arrival of grand-scale Black representation in the halls and on the walls of national institutions comes at a time of devastating loss of Black representation on the streets and neighborhoods of what, for much of the twentieth and part of the twenty-first century, was the nation's "Chocolate City." This transition demands that we embrace and explore complex themes of loss and irony when charting trajectories of progress and change. As with the long-anticipated and much-celebrated arrival of a new national museum dedicated to telling American history through an African American lens, it is important to stay cognizant of simply celebrating "arrivals" or gains without acknowledging losses.

It perhaps also demands a concerted response from the large cultural institutions that become the ultimate repositories of these archives and histories. Beyond the preservation of collections or display of exhibitions and their accompanying catalogs, what is the role of institutions as they collect and represent businesses like that of the Scurlocks or of other Black archives? What are their responsibilities to the communities that are represented therein? Charting the changing cultural, political, and racial landscape of Washington also means grappling with the responsibilities that cultural institutions now hold when preserving and representing Black history and culture. In other words, institutions must move beyond simply exhibiting Blackness and toward an ongoing and vigilant advocacy for and relationship with the local communities whose histories are a shared stewardship. In this regard, there may be important lessons for us to learn still, not just in analyzing the Scurlock look and oeuvre, but from also heeding the family and studio's long-lasting commitment to their community.

Alma Thomas's Washington, DC

Lauren Haynes

- 1 Eleanor Munro, "The Late Springtime of Alma Thomas," *Washington Post Magazine*, April 15, 1979.
- 2 Ian Berry and Lauren Haynes, "Alma Thomas," in *Alma Thomas*, ed. Ian Berry and Lauren Haynes (New York, 2016), 15.
- 3 Berry and Haynes, "Alma Thomas," 15.
- 4 "Unidentified Broadcast about Alma Thomas, Including a Biographical Account," Alma Thomas papers, 1894–2000, bulk 1936–1982, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, published in Berry and Haynes, *Alma Thomas*, 217. Biographical information about and several quotes from Thomas in this essay are drawn from this same interview, the transcript for which is archived with no date, location of interview, or interviewer name. Additional archival documents related to Thomas's career have been transcribed and published in Berry and Haynes, *Alma Thomas*.
- 5 "Unidentified Broadcast about Alma Thomas," 217.
- 6 "Unidentified Broadcast about Alma Thomas," 217.
- 7 "Unidentified Broadcast about Alma Thomas," 218.
- 8 "Unidentified Broadcast about Alma Thomas," 218.
- 9 "Unidentified Broadcast about Alma Thomas," 218.
- 10 Alma Thomas, "Artist Statement," 1972, published in Berry and Haynes, *Alma Thomas*, 216.
- 11 Thomas, "Artist Statement," 216.

Scurlock's Washington

Rhea L. Combs and Paul Gardullo

We are indebted to the assistance, hard work, and goodwill of many people from within and outside the Smithsonian in carrying out this project. Special thanks to Loren E. Miller of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), whose support and dedication have been priceless. Additional gratitude to Douglas Remley at NMAAHC and to Maggie Wessling, formerly of NMAAHC and currently at the National Gallery of Art. Special recognition also to Kay Peterson and the staff at the Archives Center, National Museum of American History (NMAH); the National Portrait Gallery; and Lonnie G. Bunch III and Michelle Delaney, cocurator of the exhibition *The Scurlock Studio and Black Washington: Picturing the Promise* (Washington, DC, 2009).

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all Scurlock images are scans of original Scurlock prints from Smithsonian collections. When a print was not available, a scan from an original Scurlock negative was used.
- 2 Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago, 2011).
- 3 Jeffrey John Fearing, "African-American Image, History, and Identity in Twentieth-Century Washington, D.C., as Chronicled through the Art and Social Realism Photography of Addison N. Scurlock and the Scurlock Studios, 1904–1994" (PhD diss., Howard University, 2005), 67–70.
- 4 Deborah Willis, "The Sociologist's Eye: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Paris Exposition," in *A Small Nation of People: W. E. B. Du Bois and African American Portraits of Progress*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York, 2003), 55.
- 5 Fearing, "African-American Image, History, and Identity," 65.
- 6 Peter Perl, "The Scurlock Look," *Washington Post Magazine*,

December 2, 1990, 25, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

- 7 Perl, "The Scurlock Look," 24–25.
- 8 Willis, "The Sociologist's Eye," 55.
- 9 Addison N. Scurlock, "Creating Business: A Paper Read before the February Meeting of the Local Negro Business League," *Negro Business League Herald* 1, no. 1 (April 1909): 7, Accessible Archive.
- 10 Perl, "The Scurlock Look," 25.
- 11 Perl, "The Scurlock Look," 24.
- 12 Jacqueline Trescott, "Love of the People, Control of the Craft: The Scurlocks' Heritage," *Washington Post*, June 13, 1976, K3, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
- 13 W. Brian Piper, "'To Develop Our Business': Addison Scurlock, Photography, and the National Negro Business League, 1900–1920," *Journal of African American History* 101, no. 4 (Fall 2016): 436–468.
- 14 Perl, "The Scurlock Look," 27.
- 15 Esther Popel, "Flag Salute," *The Crisis* 47, no. 11 (November 1940): cover.
- 16 Trescott, "Love of the People, Control of the Craft," K3.
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- 18 Bruce D. Dickson Jr., *Archibald Grimké: Portrait of a Black Independent*, Southern Biography Series (Baton Rouge, 1993), quoted in Genny Beemyn, *A Queer Capital: A History of Gay Life in Washington, D.C.* (New York, 2015), 50.
- 19 Paul Gardullo et al., *The Scurlock Studio and Black Washington: Picturing the Promise* (Washington, DC, 2009), 30.
- 20 Trescott, "Love of the People, Control of the Craft," K3.
- 21 W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," *The Crisis* 41, no. 6 (June 1934): 183.
- 22 Perl, "The Scurlock Look," 23.
- 23 Perl, "The Scurlock Look," 25.
- 24 Trescott, "Love of the People, Control of the Craft," K3.
- 25 Perl, "The Scurlock Look," 20–27.
- 26 All three Scurlock boys, Addison Jr., Robert, and George, showed an interest in photography. Addison Jr. served as president of Dunbar High's photography club and, like his younger brothers, attended college at Howard University. He died in 1933 from scarlet fever during his sophomore year in college.
- 27 Trescott, "Love of the People, Control of the Craft," K1, K3.
- 28 Jane Freundel Levey, "The Scurlock Studio," *Washington History* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 102; and Jane Freundel Levey, "The Scurlock Studio," in *Visual Journal: Harlem and D.C. in the Thirties and Forties*, ed. Deborah Willis and Jane Lusaka (Washington, DC, 1996), 154.
- 29 Simeon Booker with Carol McCabe Booker, *Shocking the Conscience: A Reporter's Account of the Civil Rights Movement* (Jackson, MS, 2013).
- 30 Deborah Willis, "The Picture Maker," *Washington Post*, January 8, 1995, F1, F4, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
- 31 Trescott, "Love of the People, Control of the Craft," K3.
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37 Gloria Ricks, conversation with Paul Gardullo.

Emancipation through Art: The New Negro, the Hueman, and the Social Sculpture of Ed Love

Jeffrey C. Stewart

1 Alain Locke, "Harlem," in *The New Negro Aesthetic: Selected Writings*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart (New York, 2022), 5.

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22 Stuart Morgan, "Beuys, Joseph," in *Makers of Modern Culture*, vol. 1, ed. Justin Wintle (New York, 1981), 52. See also Tom Holert, "Learning Curve: Radical Art and Education in Germany," *Artforum* 46, no. 9 (May 2008), <https://www.artforum.com/print/200805/learning-curve-radical-art-and-education-in-germany-19963>.

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BEAUTY
BORN OF
STRUGGLE

THE ART
OF BLACK
WASHINGTON

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