For students and scholars of the history of photography, it is perhaps commonplace to point out the importance of context to a photographic subject, particularly for the evaluation of its cultural and political significance, especially when the photographer has clearly taken pains to avoid the context. Commonplace or not, an excellent example of a fundamental concept is valuable in every discipline, and it is in this spirit that an analysis of two Pennsylvania collections is offered here: the Pennsylvania German farm photography of H. Winslow Fegley taken around 1910, and the Pennsylvania photographs taken by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) from 1935 to 1938.¹

These two collections lend themselves to a study of subject, context, and agenda by virtue of their similarities as well as their differences. Both collections were taken in Pennsylvania during the first half of the twentieth century, both have a distinctly humanistic agenda, and both reflect a profound sensitivity to cultural detail. Though they are separated by World War I, the
stock market crash of 1929, and the Great Depression, each collection records a period in which things were exceedingly tough all over. Prior to 1929, Pennsylvania, like the rest of the nation, was reeling from rapid and chaotic industrialization, the panic of 1873, the transition from iron to steel, a dramatic downturn in the steel industry, massive unemployment, and a long series of strikes. Each collection offers its own window into this past. Together they offer a chronology of sorts, not only of people, places, and changing times in Pennsylvania, but also a history of the state's desire to shape its public perception. Finally, the striking contrast between these collections fairly demands that each be examined in its larger historical context. They serve as sharp reminders that historical photographs can reflect the photographer's motives more vividly than any past reality.

Fegley's agenda sprang from a growing corpus of laudatory, filiopietistic literature of the Pennsylvania Germans.2 His pictures of Pennsylvania German farmers were taken during the "Pennsylvania-German or Pennsylvania-Dutch Debate," first launched in 1970 by Albert Bushnell Hart, and thirty years into a veritable blossoming period in the articulation of Pennsylvania German ethnic identity.3 The flavor of this discourse is captured in an address delivered by Thomas C. Zimmerman, then president of the Pennsylvania German Society, on Pennsylvania-German Day, July 17, 1893, titled "Ancestral Virtues of the Pennsylvania German," a reprint of which is pasted into the Fegley scrapbook in the Schwenkfelder Museum.4 In this address, the Pennsylvania Germans are praised repeatedly for their "pervading spirit of conservatism," to which their survival is attributed, their patriotism, forebearance, thrift, honesty, sobriety, piety, love of liberty, religious toleration, "respect for domestic virtues," and "sweet simplicity of character." Zimmerman describes them as stable, sturdy, "slow and long-suffering," well to do, eminently respectable, and idyllic, living lives of "happiness, innocence and peace." Time and the focus of this paper prevent the author from pointing out Zimmerman's historical inaccuracies, but as one might guess from his title, Zimmerman has traced these ancestral virtues from the Pennsylvania Germans to the early Germanic tribes as chronicled by Caesar and Tacitus.

Rending this description into a graphic image must have come naturally to Fegley. He was an early member of the Pennsylvania German Society, founded in 1891, and a neighbor of many other members, including I.D. Rupp who reprinted Benjamin Rush's 1789 essay, "An Account of the Manners of the German Inhabitants of Pennsylvania," in 1910, probably the same time that Fegley was working on this collection.5 Like many of his rural Pennsylvania
German neighbors, Fegley was a country boy who made good in the city. As a successful entrepreneur in Reading, Fegley had the wherewithal to afford an automobile and photographic equipment, which he used to make postcards for a growing tourism industry. Interest in Fegley's subject matter was high. The Amish decision to be visibly different from their neighbors had attracted significant public attention, heaps of praise for their agricultural practices, and nostalgia for an idyllic rural past, while the general public simultaneously confused the Amish and Mennonites with everything Pennsylvania German.  

Whatever his purpose in taking these pictures, Fegley approached his subjects with the eye of a cultural anthropologist. His scope is sweeping and detailed. He documents the division of the countryside for agricultural use with fences, farms, mills, houses, and public buildings. He shows men, women, and children, at home, at work, and at play, and traces the processes of farm work, including planting, sowing, reaping, threshing, making bread, butter, apple butter, soap, even Easter eggs, raising barns, and butchering hogs. The sheer number and thoroughness of Fegley's images generates the impression of a solid, carefully executed study, and that impression in turn generates the illusion that what we see in the pictures is historically accurate. We feel that we are seeing the past just the way things really were.

FIGURE I
In Fegley’s case, however we see only a tiny slice of his reality. His is a highly selective microcosm within a highly industrialized and commercialized Pennsylvania that had been reacting to enormous social and economic pressures for sixty years. His pictures do not betray the fact that Reading, Allentown, Lancaster, and Harrisburg, the cities on the perimeter of his photographic domain, had industrialized in leaps and bounds since the 1850s in a dizzying life cycle of companies. According to Philip Scranton, “between 60 and 80 percent of new firms disappear(ed) every decade,” an overwhelming rate of change. In addition, Fegley’s entire area was peppered with manufacturing as well as industry of all kinds from garment factories lined up along the railroad tracks of small towns near his birthplace to sprawling industrial wastelands of steel, brick, glass, and filthy mud. In Reading, where Fegley lived, nineteenth-century canals and railroads had given rise to rail car and boat works that had further generated a booming commercial sector. In Allentown over two thousand people worked in the silk mills and another two thousand found needed employment in Lancaster’s largest industry, tobacco. In other words, it is likely that most of Fegley’s farm subjects lived in households partially or fully supported by employment in manufacturing and industry, and that they came into contact with the industrial-commercial world frequently.

But Fegley’s photographs give no hint of this industrialization, nor of the thousands employed in steel or coal. Neither do they hint at the great disparity between the social classes, or of the ethnic mix that had characterized Pennsylvania from the early eighteenth century and increased with the influx of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. His photographs may, in fact, have been intended to distinguish his people from these new “others,” to claim their place as the real “Americans” lest their accents suggest otherwise. The pictures may well have been intended to preserve a place and time that he felt to be threatened by thundering economic and social forces. Like Edward Sheriff Curtis, photographing American Indians at the end of the nineteenth century, Fegley may have been attempting to capture on film what he felt was being lost in life. A Pennsylvania German community with its own distinct culture had materialized by 1910 no matter how fluid, ephemeral, real or exaggerated it might have been, and Fegley was doing his best to set it down on paper.

In contrast to Fegley, the FSA photographers working twenty-five years later demonstrated no wish to preserve the past. Their agenda flowed directly from the progressive, future-oriented rhetoric of President Franklin
Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, a re-allocation of the nation’s assets that would make amends for the wrongs of the past. Through direct assistance, massive low-interest loans, and the creation of employment, America’s wealth was to be spread more evenly, and in this mission the photographs had an important role to play. Their job was to encourage the Congress to continue its support of Roosevelt’s new programs, to assure congressmen that federal monies were being well spent. The photographs were to highlight exploitation and injustice, and to present America’s poor as noble: men and women down on their luck, hard-working, and deserving of a helping hand. The style was consistent, unambiguous, and reflects the fact that Roy Emerson Stryker, chief of the historical section of the FSA and the director of the project, had studied “Utopian Socialism” at Columbia University under Rexford Tugwell, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture and Stryker’s immediate supervisor in the FSA.¹²

The pictures deliver the message. They show us Pennsylvanians in need in rural and urban settings all across the Commonwealth, from the steel mills of Pittsburgh and Bethlehem to the coal regions of Westmoreland and Schuylkill Counties and the isolated hinterlands in between. They record the

FIGURE 4 African-American steelworker on steps of tarpaper shack. Arthur Rothstein 1938
rich ethnicity of groups that worked side-by-side, but often lived in enforced
separation from one another in patch towns built by early steel and coal com-
panies: Germans (that is newly arrived Germans), Croats, Serbs, Slovenes,
Slovaks, Lithuanians, Hungarians, Ruthenians, Bohemians, Romanians, Poles,
Ukrainians, Russians, Italians, Greeks, African-Americans, and more. The
photographs show us families living in humble comfort, those close to the
end of their means, and other subsisting in staggering poverty. Finally, they
capture Pennsylvanians engaged in all manner of employment, including:
farming, with and without Fegley’s romantic view, manufacturing, coal
mines, and in steel, and, of course, in various stages of unemployment. On
extremely rare occasions, the photographers managed to take a swing at the
opposition, as in Walker Evans’ haunting portrait of a Legionnaire taken in
Bethlehem. This portrait, so reminiscent of a George Grosz cartoon, captures
the menace that Legionnaires posed in the war between big business and labor
as they policed patch towns, escorted strike breakers into work, and discour-
gaged labor activists with unbridled violence that on some occasions ended in
death. Walker Evans must have been aware of these activities when he shot
this Legionnaire, who, from the expression on his face, was less than pleased
with the intrusion.

FIGURE 5 Legionnaire Walker Evans 1935
FIGURE 6  Larry Valentine and part of his family. Arthur Rothstein 1937

FIGURE 7  Joe Gladski, miner, setting dynamite in tunnel 29 in Maple Hill mine. Sheldon Dick 1938
The dynamic Pennsylvania reflected in the FSA photographs could not have been more foreign to the conservative, traditional community than interested Fegley. Indeed, in contrast to the profusion of locations, social stratification, ethnicities, and activities recorded in the FSA photographs, Fegley’s farm community appears almost surreally provincial, a microcosmic enclave in a post-modern labyrinth. On top of that, the greater number, breadth, and inclusivity of the FSA photographs create again the impression that here, finally, it is the true window into the past. Here is the real Pennsylvania, the unvarnished Commonwealth of blood and guts. But, were we to believe this, we would be deceived once more. When we put these photographs into the historical context of 1937 and 1938, we find equally glaring omissions.

For example, the FSA photographers surprisingly ignored the cities of Philadelphia and Harrisburg. Stryker’s photographers documented a blast furnace in Pittsburgh, the bottom of a coal mine in Shenandoah, a cemetery in Bethlehem, and a chicken shed in Lancaster county, yet they overlooked Harrisburg and Philadelphia. Did these cities fail to interest Stryker? This seems hardly possible. In fact, both cities offered fascinating and abundant subject matter tailored to his purposes. Both had enormous, long-standing problems with poverty, racism, public health, safe housing, homelessness, and unemployment. Public sanitation and drinking water in Philadelphia were a national disgrace. There could have been no end of potential FSA clients to pose for the cameras in Philadelphia and in Harrisburg, which as the state capitol nestled on the Susquehanna River, had to be at least as photogenic and engaging as Pittsburgh.

A far more compelling reason for the absence of these cities in the collection lies in the politics of the thirties. In a truly heartless and wasteful political stand-off, Philadelphia’s arch-conservative mayor, J. Hampton Moore, refused over a period of five years to approve the thirty percent funding required to bring in public assistance programs and employment through the Civil Work Administration (CWA) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) initiated by the federal government. Unsympathetic and indifferent to the plight of the poor and the 300,000 unemployed people in the city, he steadfastly hindered all relief and improvements that might be attributed to the Democratic party. His successor, the liberal, flamboyant, and unpredictable Mayor S. Davis Wilson, also a Republican, who astonished his party by bringing the Democratic convention to Philadelphia, alienated both parties when he expedited federal spending in Philadelphia by bypassing
Harrisburg completely and working directly with Washington. In so doing, he frayed nerves across Philadelphia’s entire political spectrum.

In Harrisburg, Governor George H. Earle III, who had achieved the first Democratic sweep in Pennsylvania since 1871, ardently supported Roosevelt with his own ‘Little New Deal’ for Pennsylvania—in the face of uninterrupted opposition from a Republican state senate. Each attempt on his part to finance the ‘Little New Deal’ with taxes on utilities, gasoline, personal property, corporate net incomes, chain stores, amusements, and cigarettes launched a well publicized battle. In the city of brotherly love and in the capitol, then, the major parties locked horns over controversial new programs, and the fighting was protracted and ugly. Under these circumstances, how could Stryker send FSA photographers into Philadelphia and Harrisburg? The mere presence of the photographers would have been perceived by opponents as the “eye of Washington” upon them, would have further inflamed their arguments, and made the already difficult job of New Deal supporters even harder. Pittsburgh, with its large Catholic community, growing immigrant population, and solid Democratic support, must have seemed a more hospitable environment for the FSA.

But the cities of Philadelphia and Harrisburg only begin the list of truly compelling subjects that could have, perhaps should have, appeared in the FSA collection, but do not. The collection documents no labor union meetings or rallies, striking workers, social or political activists, of which there were many among the Catholic priests in Pittsburgh, no political parties like the Communist party, which was large and very active, no pictures of fascist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, the German-American Bund, the Silver Shirt Legion, the Italian Black Shirts, or the Christian Front, all of which were present in the state. Amid all the pictures of ethnic groups and their churches, there are no pictures of Jews or synagogues. No pictures show filth or squalor, particularly astonishing since Arthur Rothstein and Ben Shahn spent quite a bit of time in southwestern Pennsylvania where people were found living in caves, abandoned coal mines, and coke ovens, where conditions were reported to have been worse than among the peasants of China. Nor do we find pictures of poorly cared for fields or animals. We see nothing of the idle unemployed, of hoboes or gangs, no drunk or disorderly people, and there were plenty. Strangely, there are no pictures of sick people in charity clinics, no bread lines, soup kitchens, or homeless shelters, no evidence of local or regional relief, though there was much of it. One photograph includes a mural done by the Fine Arts Program, but nothing shows the
CWA or WPA at work though 9,000 of these projects employed 320,000 people in Pennsylvania.24

The list of omissions from the Pennsylvania collection is rather long, and in the context of the Pennsylvania that it represents, the photographs bring the agenda of the FSA photographers sharply into focus. Most of what might have been politically or socially inflammatory has been left out, and a careful balance has been struck between hope and despair. Social deprivations appear serious enough to generate public sympathy, not so overwhelming as to discourage approval for funding. No one looks lazy or dishonest. Instead, the poor, exploited, and needy are portrayed as hard working people sure to make good if given a chance. If the photographs do not always portray a Pennsylvania of beauty, it is one of relative order, a degree of order indispensable to insure a solid return on a social investment. Upon close examination, the photographs have a very cleaned up look, many suggesting in the spirit of Roosevelt's campaign song, that if happy days are not here again, they could be and soon. For this reason and rather ironically, the FSA photographs have more in common with Fegley's microcosmic enclave than might at first appear. Each collection presents a cleaned up, narrowly focused, somewhat idealized, and biased version of Pennsylvania.

Herein we find one significant problem of interpreting historical photographs exemplified, namely, the viewer sees only what was photographed. Each of these collections gives the decided impression that we are seeing 'the way things were.' But in both cases, the overall flavor of the collection has been determined clearly by the agendas of the photographers, and, for this reason, the photographs have the potential to mislead the viewer. This is not to say that the viewer is entirely unaware of an agenda when studying photographs. It is clear that Fegley was interested in Pennsylvania German farm life, but his pictures do not show us the single-mindedness with which he pursued and staged targeted subjects while avoiding others with equal determination. The conscious, willful adherence to a prescribed agenda only becomes fully apparent when the photographs are set into their larger historical context, a context of which many contemporaries as well as later generations may not be aware.

Can the picture of an African-American steel worker sitting on the steps of a labor union office tell us that he was part of the Great Migration of southern African-American workers who streamed by the thousands into the industrial centers of the north?25 Could we know that he might have been sitting in a coffee shop and been asked by the photographer to walk across the street
to the labor union for the photograph? Can the picture tell us that he might
have been recruited by a steel company from South Carolina to Pennsylvania
to break a strike by immigrant European workers, or that after having served
as a strike breaker in one mill, he might have been busse halfway across the
state to repeat this dangerous business again? Who would guess from the
picture that African-Americans were rarely allowed to join the union, or that
their chances for advancement declined sharply when southern and eastern
European workers were recruited into the mills? No picture can tell us what
was next to or behind the photographer, what the photographer arranged or
omitted, or why. What, then, is the value of historical photography to the his-
torian? Obviously, it is an invaluable tool for providing documentation of
fragments of historical reality, and when the historian is familiar with the
agenda and context of the photographs, they can be highly enlightening. But
historical photographs are surely most valuable when they reveal the hitherto
unknown, and both Fegley's and the FSA collection do this.

Only one of Fegley's pictures, a rare photograph of a manufacturing facility
shown in Figure 8, shows an African-American working at a carpet-weaving
machine. Until very recently, the histories of Lancaster, Berks, and Bucks
Counties were written without a single mention of African-Americans. It was
widely assumed that their small numbers had joined the nineteenth-century migration of the rural poor to the cities in search of work, thereby leaving a pristinely Anglo-Saxon, protestant and middle-class Pennsylvania behind them. But recent social histories concur that African-Americans had been employed in rural and urban areas in all manner of work throughout the commonwealth in the eighteenth century, and it hardly makes sense that none would remain at the end of the nineteenth century. Fegley’s photograph testifies to their presence and unleashes many unanswered questions as to his residence, family, household, education, employment, religion, and so on. Where had he come from? How many more like him had sought employment in manufacturing after being let off from a steel mill, having lost his job to a new European immigrant as was so often the case? Did he earn enough to live on? Did he have a social network to fall back on in times of need? Did he, like so many others, rotate seasonally between the north and the south?

The FSA collection has its own counterpart to this surprise—photographs of the Westmoreland Subsistence Housing Projects. Who knew, without seeing the pictures who would have believed that the Resettlement Administration, a branch of the FSA, used federal funds to underwrite the costs for an experimental community for 250 to 300 families of stranded miners near Greensburg, Pennsylvania, in 1934? Less than a dozen pages have been published on this homestead project, including four that serve as a misleading summary of the rest. Westmoreland had always been overshadowed by the Subsistence Homestead in Arthurdale, West Virginia, which was the first of only five such communities founded to support families by balancing industrial employment with subsistence farming. Yet, here is the visible proof of Eleanor Roosevelt’s Camelot in Pennsylvania, a great social experiment in government assistance that included surprisingly stylish housing and commercial cooperation for farms, dairies, greenhouses, poultry, hog, and cattle enterprises, orchards, a barbershop, store, restaurant, filling station, fair ground, and school. See FIGURES 9 and 10 for two examples.

Optimism must have been high when these pictures were being taken because the homestead had just received a federal loan to build a pants factory expected to provide desperately needed part-time employment. But by 1945, the experiment had failed for all sorts of reasons, and the homestead was sold to an association of its residents. Again, the pictures provoke unanswered questions. Who applied to become a homesteader? How were the homesteaders ultimately selected? What did the community actually cost?
FIGURE 9  Prospective homesteaders for the Westmoreland Homestead in front of the post office.
   Ben Shahn 1935

FIGURE 10  A game of skill at the fair.  Arthur Rothstein 1936
Who did the work and how was it allocated? What were the actual family economics? Did the community ever enjoy a spirit of cooperation?

We cannot answer the questions provoked by these pictures or by Fegley's picture of the African-American carpet weaver at this time because we do not yet have enough information about the interior of the Commonwealth during this period. The social history of Pennsylvania for the first half of the twentieth century has not yet been written. In fact, it is something of any irony that, thanks to the impetus generated by the Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, we know more about life in Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century than in the twentieth. The social history of the twentieth century is off to a spectacular start with studies of the urban, suburban, and industrial development of many Pennsylvania cities and a growing collection of oral histories. Most notable among this new research are the studies of African-American communities in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. But the social history of Pennsylvania in the first half of the twentieth century, one that considers patterns of ethnic populations and migration, family and household composition, education and employment, particularly for the interior of the state in the valleys between the cities, has yet to be written. And herein, of course, lies the real value of historical photographs. They can serve as a springboard for fruitful research and direct us to the gaps in our knowledge. One picture may be worth a thousand words, but we will need much more data to put the pictures into their story.

NOTES

1. The Pennsylvania German farm photographs of H. Winslow Fegley are housed in the Schwenkfelder Museum, 105 Seminary Street, Pennsburg, Pennsylvania. The photographs are numbered in a catalogue of xeroxed copies, and filed in a cabinet by theme: butchering, baking, street scenes, etc. Very few of the photographs are labeled; it is not clear by whom. Only two photographs are dated, #90 The Hartz Goose Bone, 1906-7, and #107 Baking Christmas Bread, 1903, so that we may reasonably assume that the photographs were taken some time in the first decade of the twentieth century. On May 29, 1952, the then Director of the Schwenkfelder Library, Andrew S. Berky, wrote a thank-you letter to Miss Daisy Gery for her gift of the photographs and glass plate negatives to the museum. The letter also makes reference to a similar but smaller collection apparently donated a few months earlier by Mr. Fred Huber.

Fegley's photographs were first made available to the public two years later in a small publication by the Schwenkfelder Library, The Countryman's Family Album: a Collection of Photographs Depicting the Good Life in a Small Rural Village before the Turn of the Century, Pennsburg: Schwenkfelder Museum, 1954, with a forward by Andrew S. Berky. This small booklet contains twenty-four of Fegley's plates,
each with an extended caption describing the subject in the vernacular, using expressions, proverbs, and bits of folk wisdom from the Pennsylvania Germans. The photographs were not made available to the public again until the Pennsylvania German Society selected the photographs for its annual publication in 1987. The spirit and captions of this publication do not deviate from The Countryman’s Farm Album, though it offers considerably more photographs 304 in all. Farming, Always Farming: A Photographic Essay of Rural Pennsylvania German Land and Life, intro. Scott T. Swank, captions Alan G. Keyser and Frederick S. Weiser, (Birdsboro: The Pennsylvania German Society, 1987).

The Pennsylvania photographs taken by the Farm Security Administration are housed in the Reading Room of the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress (Madison Building 337, 101 2nd Avenue SE, Washington, D.C.). The photographs referred to in this paper were taken by FSA photographers between 1935 and 1938, and can be found on reels 79–81 under the heading, “Pennsylvania.”

2. The term filiopietistic is not used here to impress or terrorize the reader. Meaning “praise one’s ancestors,” it is frequently employed to discuss literature on the Pennsylvania Germans printed between 1880 and 1960.


4. Thomas C. Zimmerman, “Ancestral Virtues of the Pennsylvania-Germans,” Proceedings and Addresses of the Pennsylvania-German Society 4 (1984): 133–150. The scrapbook referred to in the text, labeled 040 HF in the Schwenkfelder Museum, was donated to the collection in 1952 by Mr. Fred Huber as the “Fegley Scrapbook.” It is neither dated, nor signed, nor are the pages numbered.

5. According to Scott Swank, Fegley was a member of the Pennsylvania German society from 1902–44 (Farming, Always Farming 3). Benjamin Rush, An Account of the Manners of the German Inhabitants of Pennsylvania, 1789, Theodore E. Schmauk and I.D. Rupp, eds., (Lancaster: Pennsylvania German Society, 1910).

6. The Amish had visibly departed from contemporary farming practices in 1870, from which point until 1920 they were extolled in the press as distinctive and different. John P. Deeben, “Amish Agriculture and Popular Opinion in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage 15:2 (1992): 21–24.


15. Coode and Baumann, 55.

16. Coode and Baumann, 188–90.


20. Heineman, 370–76; Coode, 57–60; Jenkins, 31–49.


25. The photograph referred to, but not printed here is "Steel worker sitting in front of the union office" by Arthur Rothstein, 1938. LC USF 33–2820-M2, reel 80, lot 1354.


27. Coode, 91.


33. Conkin, 45, 208, 213, 232.