

JOSEPH REPLOGLE: AN UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER OF MODEST TALENTS

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Abstract: A review of the life and work of an unknown and modestly talented photographer from rural Central Pennsylvania offers an opportunity to contrast a social approach to the history of photography with the more common art historical paradigm.

Keywords: Photography, social history, Pennsylvania

Introduction

History is what we chose to remember, what happens to get saved, and how we make sense out of the past. The history of photography was first conceived by art historians, curators of museums, and collectors. It was constructed from a nineteenth-century notion of the lone genius creating masterpieces. The images floated outside of time, place, and the economic and social realities of production and use. There was a strongly felt need to legitimize photography as an important art form. As a consequence, the social practice of photography as experienced by the vast majority of people was ignored, neglected or dismissed as unworthy of serious contemplation.

In 1938 Beaumont Newhall, as the founding curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, produced a fundamentally important history of photography as

art based upon the museum's collection. It was the beginning of a canon that has dominated discussions of photo history ever since.¹ About the same time, an alternative paradigm was being constructed by a professor of chemistry who was an advocational historian of photography—an interesting parallel to Heinz Henisch, a physicist and also an advocational historian of photography. Robert Taft's *Photography and the American Scene*, originally published in 1938, was among the earliest attempts "to trace, however imperfectly, the effects of photography upon the social history of America, and in turn the effect of social life upon the progress of photography."² In this pioneering study there is no discussion about whether a particular photograph is successful as an artistic expression; instead, readers find an examination of topics like the effect of the photo album on family life and the halftone process's impact on newspapers. From Taft's point of view, photographs become interesting because of the way in which they are made and used.

In 1977 Heinz Henisch's journal, *History of Photography*, was founded following the tradition started by Taft and became a place where the earliest traces of daguerreotypy in downtown Riga were discussed along with arguments about why the prominent place given to Alfred Stieglitz in the history of photography may not be justified. The Henisch social approach to the medium culminated in the publication in 1994 of *The Photographic Experience*, cowritten with his wife Bridget, the logical heir to the tradition started by Taft and which extends this examination beyond the United States to the entire world.³ This approach relies upon an intrinsic interest in learning about how photography manifested itself on the local level throughout the world rather than being supported by an articulated theory of photography. Social historians remind us of how many different kinds of people made and used photographs—an important counter to the Eurocentrism of many art histories of photography. It is in this tradition that my essay is founded.

I am concerned here with Joseph Replogle, a turn-of-the-century American photographer from rural central Pennsylvania. I want to make it clear that I am not discussing Replogle because he is important in the conventional sense of the word; nor am I claiming that his photographs represent some sort of undiscovered treasure trove of photographic art. On the contrary, my interest in these images and the social circumstances of their production and use is precisely because of their ordinariness.

Biographical Sketch

The record of the life of Joseph Replogle is sufficiently well documented in newspapers and photographs to get some sense of the man and his life. Here is how the *Juniata Star* described him in their “Special Port Royal Issue” of September 9, 1898:

For more than ten years Mr. J. W. Replogle, the subject of this sketch, has wielded the camera and dry-plate in this county, operating much of the time in Port Royal and adjacent territory, where he has built up a fine patronage. His fair dealing and skill has made him many friends and admirers. . . . He is now building a new portable gallery which he hopes to have completed in time to bring out at the Port Royal Fair next week. It is to be complete and up-to-date, and we predict for it a successful career.

Mr. J.W. Replogle, of Walnut, Pa., was born in Bedford county, January 6, 1860, removed to Mattawana, Mifflin county, in 1872 where his mother yet resides. He received his education in Juniata College, of Huntingdon, Pa. Taught in the public schools of Mifflin County five winters, and in Juniata county one winter.

He had three brothers—an engineer, a lawyer, and a doctor. He actually attended what was then called the Normal College from 1883 through 1885. He did not graduate but obtained a teaching certificate. At that time, a teacher’s course was two years in length. As many as fifty-eight Replogles have attended Juniata College. It is clear that Replogle came from a solidly middle-class and well-educated family.

When and how Replogle learned photography is unknown. According to the late photohistorian William Darrah, many colleges and even high schools taught the principles of photography as a practical demonstration in physics and chemistry classes. Figure 1 is the earliest photograph I have located of Replogle. The man on the left is unknown.

There is no evidence that Replogle practiced photography professionally, even part-time, before 1889. Figure 2 is the only surviving “genre” photograph I have located. It is signed, “J.W. Replogle, Mattawana, PA.” As Replogle moved to Juniata County in 1887, this is the oldest-known Replogle photograph. The picture has the appearance of an art photograph



FIGURE 1: Joseph Replogle and friend.



FIGURE 2: Genre photograph. Signed "J.W. Replogle, Mattawana, Pa."

taken for the pleasure of its composition. The commercial demands on a professional photographer seldom allowed people like Replogle the luxury of a personal style or vision. Clients want their portraits or views of their farms to resemble those photographs they were already familiar with. Was Replogle simply learning his craft and the picture we see an exercise, or did he at one time see photography as a means of self-expression as well as a business? We shall never know, but this is evidence that the aesthetic trends found in places like Philadelphia did diffuse into rural communities. There is no doubt that this image was made in a pictorialist or painterly style.

When Replogle moved to Walnut in Juniata County in 1887, he married a woman from that vicinity. But when he did, it was an event noted in the newspaper, the *McVeytown Journal*:

September 22, 1887 — A SENSATIONAL MARRIAGE — A beautiful Juniata county girl of twenty-five summers, daughter of a wealthy colored farmer captures one of Mattawana's prominent citizens [fig. 3]. The topic of conversation in our town is a marriage that has just come to light, which took place on the 8th, at Juniata county. . . . Mr. Replogle is a school teacher by profession and has passed twenty-seven summers. He is a man of good standing and has

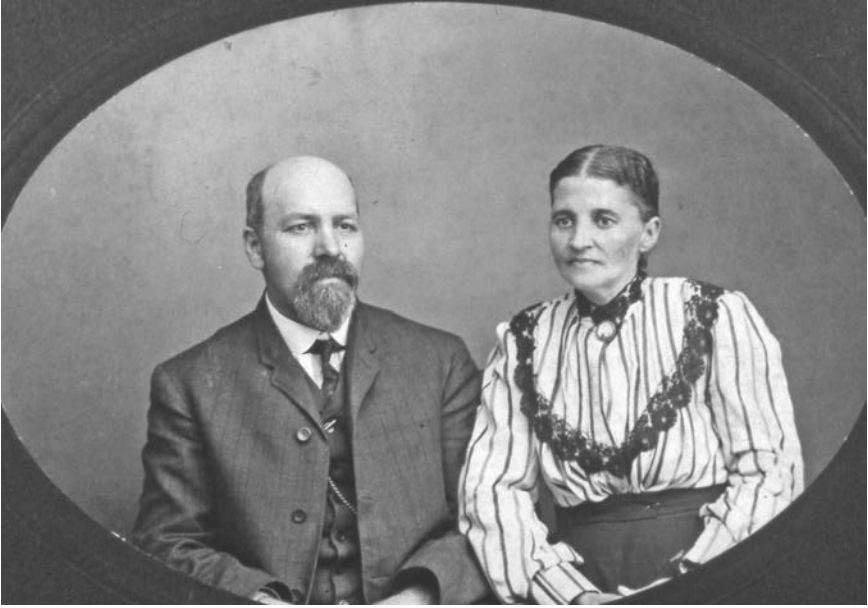


FIGURE 3: Joseph Replogle and Mary Imes Replogle.

a large circle of relations in this section and Morrison's Cove, Bedford County. The bride is a beautiful daughter of a prominent and wealthy colored family, David Imes of Juniata County. . . . Born a freeman, David began life as a teamster, and married a mulatto girl, who was descended from Thomas Jefferson's private secretary. He continued in prosperity and settled on a small farm in Maryland. His first wife died after giving birth to several children. He then moved to Juniata County, Pa., where he married his second wife who was the daughter of a negro father and a white mother. He is the father of thirteen children and provided each of them with a handsome start in this world's goods having given each son the value of \$2000 in real estate and the daughter the same amount in cash [fig. 4].⁴

Mr. Imes was clearly a wealthy man if he had access to \$26,000 in real estate and cash for his children. The story of the Imes family is rich, complex, and worth a book-length treatment by itself. David Imes wanted his children to marry outside of their cultural and physical identity and disappear into the mainstream. According to local legend, he offered his children farms or

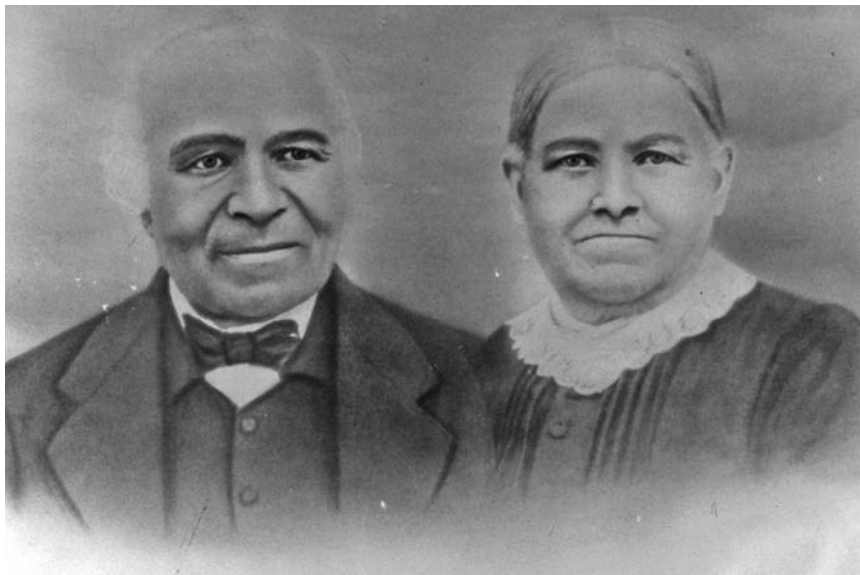


FIGURE 4: David Imes and wife, Sarah Wilson.

money as the wedding announcement states, but only if they would marry “white.” Mary Imes Replogle used the money her father gave her to purchase a farm in Walnut from John McNouser for \$1,300 cash on March 31, 1888. On May 7, 1891, she purchased an adjoining parcel for \$400 cash from her father (see figs. 5 and 6). In 1900 Replogle purchased the photographic studio of Joseph Hess, his chief rival. It was located on the second floor of a building on Water St. in Mifflintown (fig. 7).

The Replogles stayed in Walnut until 1904. His old studio became a mail-order house and his photographic business was sold to a local man from Port Royal. Joseph moved his children to Philadelphia where he became first a time-keeper and then a photographer for the Navy Yard, then called Hog Island. Mary Replogle died in 1905 and Joseph remarried in 1906. With Mary Godshall, he raised four children: Joseph, Margaret, John, and Benson. He retired from his position in 1932 and moved to Florida where he died in 1955 (fig. 8).

Before I discuss Replogle’s photographic practice, let me provide some additional information about his various roles in the community as it deepens our understanding of his life. They come from the small “Items of Local Interest” columns that still fill the pages of rural newspapers.



FIGURE 5: The Replogle farmhouse in Walnut, PA.



FIGURE 6: The springhouse that served as Replogle's darkroom.

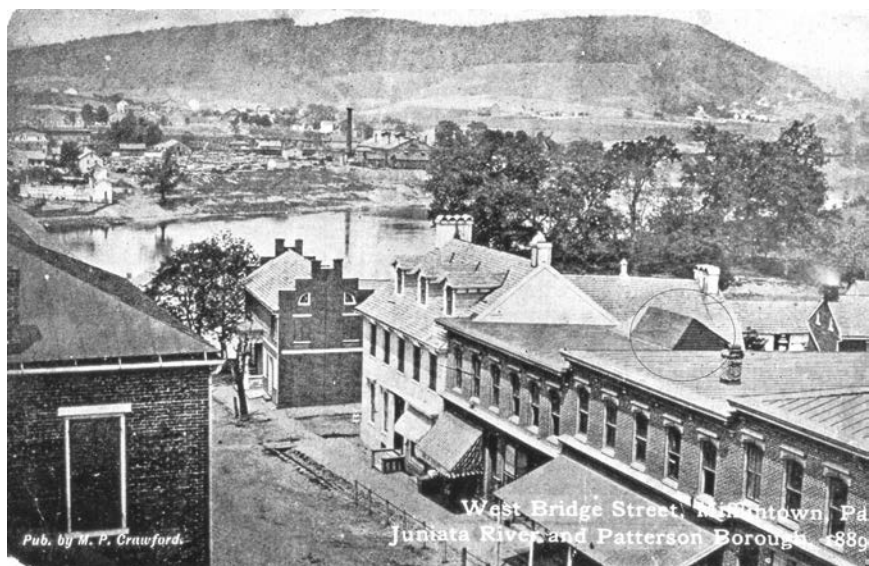


FIGURE 7: Replogle's second-floor studio on Bridge Street, Mifflintown, PA. Note skylight on roof.



FIGURE 8: Replogle and family in front of their Philadelphia home.

From 1887 onward, Replogle taught school and in addition functioned as a photographer by traveling the countryside taking portraits and views. It is uncertain when he stopped teaching to devote his full time to his photographic business. He was an excellent “advertisement for himself” and was always able to catch the attention of those who wrote for the newspapers. His activities were immediately noteworthy and remained so until he left the area. He overshadowed the other photographers in the area and became Juniata County’s most “newsworthy” photographer. Here are some of his activities:

He was active as a teacher. In 1889 he served on a committee to select books for the school and was actively involved in Teacher’s Institutes in 1889 and 1890, once being the president of the Institute, another time, giving a lecture on free textbooks and taking the affirmative position in a debate about whether or not a compulsory school law should be adopted.

Replogle was a prohibitionist and active in the local party where he was a delegate to the 1889 county and state conventions. It is interesting to note that his chief rival in the local photographic business, Joseph Hess, was also a delegate.

Replogle was apparently well regarded as a singer and performer in skits, gave “public entertainments” at Christmas and other occasions, and offered singing lessons.

He sometimes substituted for a local minister with a lecture and once delivered a talk on “What to Do with Loafers.”

He clerked at sales that may have been a source of additional income.

Replogle’s Life as a Photographer

Having now learned something of the life of Joseph Replogle, let us turn to his photographic practices. Using dry plate glass negatives, Replogle produced cabinet card photos and crayon enlargements. His photo kit was relatively simply—a view camera, negative plate holders, a focusing cloth, a tripod, printing frames, the chemistry to fix the images, and some props such as a chair and backdrops. For most of his professional career he carried them in a portable studio.

Manufactured dry plate glass negatives were a recent invention and a vast improvement over the older wet plate or collodion glass negatives that had to be prepared immediately before being used and developed soon after exposure. The dry plate technology meant that photographers like Replogle could purchase them by the box and use as needed. For most of his career,

Replogle used albumen printing-out paper for his prints. The paper was prepared using egg whites and then placed in a printing frame with a negative and exposed to the sun. When the image looked good, the print was then fixed. Some of the albumen images are yellow-brown or purple-blue in tone, a result of the common practice of gold toning. Finally, the print was placed on a precut cardboard mount, such as the one shown in figure 9.

Replogle purchased these decorative artwork mounts from a manufacturer like Collins of Philadelphia who offered hundreds of designs with the photographer's imprint. While Replogle moved into a studio for four years before he quit the business, all of the photographs I have located have the Walnut, PA, imprint. Being a good frugal Pennsylvania German, Replogle probably had purchased enough mounts to last him for some time. Cabinet cards are 6×4 inches in size and designed to be placed in photo albums. Some scholars believe cabinet cards were invented in the 1880s because the sales of carte de visite photos and their albums were on the wane. Carte de visite photographs were the size of a calling card and started the photo album craze.

Replogle charged \$1.25 to \$1.50 per dozen for the cabinet cards and also offered to copy or enlarge old photographs. He offered fifteen visiting card photos for twenty cents. As a promotion, he gave a life-size portrait free with a dozen cabinet photos. While I have not recovered any, Replogle's ads offer photo buttons in gold frames. In an attempt to broaden the market, he placed ads for Christmas and Easter photos as presents.

Replogle was incredibly successful in getting local papers to take notice of his activities. Here is an example:

February 21, 1889 — Port Royal Times — .W. Replogle photographed the Pine Grove school in Beale on the 15th inst. Mr. Replogle is an artist second to none in the county. He does good work, hence is kept very busy.

It is unclear to me whether these announcements that appeared with regularity in all of the surrounding local papers were paid ads or not. Two more examples:

July 10 and 17, 1889 — Juniata Democrat and Register — VIEWS AND FAMILY GROUPS — J.W. Replogle of Walnut will come to your home and take photos of anything you want and any size desired and give you entire satisfaction. The weather makes no difference. Prices very low.



FIGURE 9: Precut decorative cabinet card mount.

February 25, 1891 — *Juniata Democrat and Register* — Now in the early springtime is the best time to have your home photographed. J.W. Replogle is now prepared to do such work in the very best style. Cabinets and family groups are also taken right at the house by him. He will be glad to correspond with any who desire his services. Post Office Walnut.

Most of the images I have recovered were taken on location and not in Replogle's studio. Many are portraits. While it is clear that the pictures were taken out of doors, the model for the look of these images is the studio. Attempts are made to have some sort of background even if it is only a blanket in imitation of the painted backdrops most studios had. A chair is frequently present (fig. 10).

Babies were a frequent subject (see fig. 11). Photographers carried sheepskins so that they could wrap the child in the skin and literally stuff him or her into the chair, making it hard for the child to move and spoil the picture.

Figure 12 is a portrait of Francis Cooper, a medical student who came to Juniata County to hunt, fish, and take artistically intended photographs. Eventually Cooper married a woman from McCoysville and moved to the Spruce Hill area.⁵ His photographic practice is virtually nonoverlapping with Replogle as he was free to pursue his artistic interests without any concern with making a living from his photographs. A comparison of a Cooper family portrait (fig. 13) with one of Replogle's (fig. 14) makes clear the aesthetic differences between photographic artists who employed pictorialist conventions with those of a commercial photographer whose job it was to please his or her clients.

In addition to portraits of individuals and families, Replogle took groups. Such images have the potential of a greater return than portraits of individuals in that everyone in the picture could purchase a photo. This remains the basis of many professional photographers' practice today—for example, baseball teams. These images were enlargements and relatively uncommon at least among those photographs that have survived (fig. 15). Occasionally Replogle would take photographs that were not imitations of studio conventions such as this photograph of H. G. Patterson, veterinarian (fig. 16).

In the spring of 1889 the infamous Johnstown flood came to central Pennsylvania, destroying lives and property. Many professional photographers took photographs of the survivors and of the damage. Replogle took at least seven images and then offered them for sale (fig. 17). He ran the following ad in the *Juniata Democrat and Register* July 17 and 31 and August 7 and 14, 1889—



FIGURE 10: Cabinet card of an unknown woman with chair.



FIGURE 11: Cabinet card of an unknown child.



FIGURE 12: Cabinet card of Francis Cooper.



FIGURE 13: A family portrait by Francis Cooper.

Views of the flood, at Patterson, Pa., can be seen at the baggage room windows at the depot, taken in seven different ways. Mr. W.C. Brown, baggage master is agent for them, and will take orders at reasonable rates for these fine photos. They were taken on June 1 when the waters were at highest point by J.W. Replogle of Walnut, Pa.

Since the halftone process was not yet available to newspapers, this was the only way for people to obtain images of the disaster. I assume they found their way into albums and some were mounted on the wall. This is the beginning of photojournalism. Earlier images such as those of the Civil War were usually converted into line drawings and published in journals like *Harpers'*.

Like most professional photographers of his time, Replogle went to people's homes to make post-mortem portraits (fig. 18). Most often they were of children and were likely to be the only photographs the parents had of their children.⁶ When Replogle did move his practice into a studio, the images look remarkably like those he took outdoors (fig. 19).



FIGURE 14: A family portrait by J. W. Replogle.



FIGURE 15: Walnut Cornet Band.



FIGURE 16: Cabinet card of H. G. Patterson, veterinarian.



FIGURE 17: View of 1889 Johnstown Flood, Mifflin, PA.



FIGURE 18: Cabinet card of post-mortem portrait of unknown child.



FIGURE 19: Cabinet card of Replogle's son Mark and wife Lillian.

In 1895 Replogle offered a new type of image making, as this ad in the *Juniata Herald* indicates:

Photography by flash-light is one of the new departures by Replogle, the artist, of Patterson. We were lately shown a reasonably good photo of the members of Victoria Lodge of Odd Fellows in full regalia, which was taken in their hall in Patterson at a regular Friday night meeting. It is now possible to have your weddings, receptions, and other night gatherings photographed in good style. [fig. 20]



FIGURE 20: View of a minstrel show by flashlight.

Conclusions

Joseph Replogle was like thousands of rural and small-town photographers who practiced their profession at the end of the nineteenth century. He struggled to make a living in an area of low population and had to supplement his earnings by teaching and even clerking at sales. Eventually the struggle became too much and he moved to Philadelphia where he could more easily make a living being a photographer. His images follow the dictates of

conventions invented elsewhere and before his time. His goal was not to be innovative or original but to please his clients. They wished the images of themselves to resemble those they had seen before. Being artistic is not a way to make a living in professional photography then or now. The professional photographer who makes a living taking portraits of individuals and groups dominated the practice of photography from its inception until George Eastman made it possible for all of us to be our own image makers. Logically an accurate history of photography should focus on the Joseph Replogles of this world more than it has.

NOTES

This essay was delivered as a lecture on September 26, 2006, at the Penn State University Library as a memorial to the memory of Heinz Henisch. I wish to thank Bridget Henisch and Sandra Stelts for inviting me to give this lecture. All images in this article are from the Jay W. Ruby Collection at the Pennsylvania State University Archives and Special Collections.

1. Beaumont Newhall, *Photography: A Short Critical History* (1962; New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938).
2. Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene* (New York: Dover, 1938), viii.
3. Heinz Henisch and Bridget Ann Henisch, *The Photographic Experience, 1839–1914: Images and Attitudes* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).
4. This is a crayon enlargement popular in the 1880s and 1890s. An image was imprinted on a photo-sensitive canvas. The image was then outlined usually in pencil and then the emulsion was removed, leaving only the pencil sketch, then filled in with charcoal or color crayons. This process provided the masses with a portrait that did not look like a photograph but rather a painting.
5. Jay W. Ruby, *The World of Francis Cooper: Nineteenth Century Pennsylvania Photographer* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).
6. Jay W. Ruby, *Secure the Shadow* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).