

Photography as Freedom

At the turn of the 20th century, having one's picture taken was still uncommon, relatively expensive and an activity that demonstrated a higher level of social standing. Being photographed also came with many decisions, such as:

- Which photography studio to visit
- What clothing to wear
- Which accessories, props and backgrounds to use
- How best to pose

Because Black Americans lacked autonomy (the freedom to make personal decisions) during enslavement, post-emancipation photography was more than a simple social activity. It became a powerful symbol of freedom and a tool of resistance to persistent and pervasive discrimination.



Think about how you use photography. Are posed, seated portraits your go-to picture style? Or, do you usually take quick snapshots and selfies? Digital cameras and smartphones allow us immediate access to photo technology. Through social media and photo-sharing platforms, we can easily inform others about our daily activities and create specific – even altered – versions of ourselves. Today, taking pictures is much more casual and routine than it was when this exhibit's photos were taken. In fact, picture taking is so engrained in today's culture that more photos are taken every two minutes than even existed 150 years ago!

Digital copies of the Missouri State Museum's collection of historic African American portraits can be found at: https://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/mdh_splash/default.asp?coll=aa_portrait.



Group discussion questions

- What role does photography play in your life?
- Have you taken any pictures today? What do those images say about you?

Analyze a Photograph

Meet the photo.

Quickly scan the photo. What do you notice first?

Type of photo (check all that apply):

- Portrait Landscape Action Architectural
 Event Family Posed Candid Selfie Other

Is there a caption? yes no

Observe its parts.

List the people, objects and activities you see.

PEOPLE	OBJECTS	ACTIVITIES

Try to make sense of it.

Answer as best you can. The caption, if available, may help. Keep in mind, all of these photos were taken in Missouri between the 1890s and the 1920s.

- **How are their clothes different from what you are wearing? How are they similar?**
- **What occasion does this photograph document, if any? How can you tell?**
- **What do the clothes and objects in the photograph say about the subject's position in society?**
- **Who was this photo taken for? Who was supposed to see it?**

Use it as historical evidence.

Photographs can tell a story about people and their communities. Look closely at your photograph, using all of the details you noted above. What kind of story does it tell? Write one sentence summarizing this photo.