Forgotten Pictures of Jessie Tarbox Beals

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Introduction

The years between the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876 and World War I were a period of dramatic change in the United States. People were eager to understand what was happening around them. Suddenly the world seemed much bigger. The United States had conquered the West and extended its territory to the Philippines. Strangers from Eastern Europe and from Asia were pouring in, bringing totally new culture with them.

In this paper I will focus on Jessie Tarbox Beals, the “first woman news photographer”, as her biographer, Alexander Alland called her. Her photographs brought essential information to a public seeking to comprehend the changes swirling in its midst. Her debut in this important role was the St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904. There she was praising the emerging power of the United States on the one hand; on the other she was taking pictures of Ainu from Japan and Native people of Philippines. She was interested in extreme comparison between the rich and powerful and the poor and exotic. By depicting these contrasts, she was supplying the information needed by Americans to comprehend the tumultuous period their country was entering.

Her career, however, was forgotten for a very long time and she died
in 1942 in obscurity and poverty.\(^{(2)}\) Reconstructing it is difficult because her photographs are scattered among many locations across the country and she left very little written commentary on her work.\(^{(3)}\) A biography of Beals by Alland published in 1979 is one of the few written sources of information available. Alland asserts that she sank into oblivion for two reasons: that she was a loner in her work and that the subjects of her photographs were diverse and varied. Working alone she did not join any of the movements of photographers and was thus denied lasting recognition. Equally important to her work being forgotten, he explained, was that her photographs did not focus on a specific group or category. This diversity was in sharp contrast to the selective and limited focuses chosen by her contemporaries.\(^{(4)}\)

I am arguing in this paper that it is precisely these two aspects of her life that provide the key to understanding Jessie Tarbox Beals and the generation that produced her. She worked as a loner but always in the midst of different groups of people. Through photographs she was connecting them to each other, making them publicly visible and so informing outsiders about their activities. Beals was unable to focus on a single, specific topic or category, because reality for her was this very diversity and variety.

In concluding remarks I will look at personal dimensions of her exuberant life—at the choices she made. That

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Figure 1 *Portrait of Jessie Tarbox Beals standing on a city sidewalk with her camera, working.* (Creator, unknown), Visual Information Access, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, PC60-5-8, schM15151.
perspective adds to understanding the working environment and problems faced by a first-generation professional photographer. (Figure 1)

Jessie Richmond Tarbox was born in 1870 into a well-to-do family in Hamilton, Ontario. Jessie's father was a machinist and earned a fortune when he invented a compact sewing machine. When she was seven, however, her father suffered a series of business reverses and by the time she was 16, she had to face the prospect of making her own living. Her sister eventually became a missionary to Caracas, Venezuela. The limited choices available for a young woman at that time included becoming a primary school teacher. Her brother, a retail merchant, had immigrated to the United States and she applied for a teaching position there, in Williamsburg, Massachusetts.

It was while at Williamsburg that she read and responded to a magazine's offer. She got a prize camera. Soon photography became an outlet from the drudgery of her teaching responsibilities. Converting a closet into a darkroom and using the backyard as a shooting area, she opened up a neighborhood portrait studio. To her surprise, she earned more as a photographer than as a teacher. She now stood at the threshold of a life radically different from that of a New England schoolteacher.

New technology did not automatically influence women to be radical. In The Positive Image: Women Photographers in Turn of the Century America, C. Jane Gover discussed a group of women photographers who were fascinated by this new toy as a means of preserving the customs and ways of their genteel lives.

For Tarbox, I argue, it worked out differently. She decided to make a sharp brake. Looking back on her teaching days, she said, "My teaching was a genteel, sheltered, monotonous and moneyless work having nei-
ther height nor depths. *(7)*

She was fortunate to meet Alfred T. Beals, an Amherst graduate, who was willing to embark on the adventurous gamble with her of making a living through professional photography. His role would include doing all of the vital darkroom work. They married and became a team of itinerant photographers. They were itinerant in several ways—in space, from Massachusetts to Louisiana and Texas and to New York, and in the focus of their subject matter. Let's see how they moved around—how in failing to concentrate on any one area, they portrayed the complexity and diversity of their surroundings.

I am aware that we must take into consideration the demands of the market—of patrons, sponsors, buyers and consumers, when we talk about the subjects chosen by photographers. However, I am trying here to read the narrative eye of Beals’ photographs without going into a discussion of demands and pressures on her.

The first picture here was taken at the St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904. (Figure 2) Jessie and Alfred Beals had arrived St. Louis without previous arrangements or any connections that might open doors for them. She kept pleading with the officials and finally managed to get a Pre-Exposition Permit. Her biographer writes, “Most of the other photographers there concentrated on the sumptuous exhibit of the industrial nations: Jessie was drawn instead to the scenes of the daily lives of exotic, little-known peoples in their native habitats.” *(8)*

One day while she was photographing the Ainu of Japan, the “Patagonian Giants” of South America arrived. “Jessie was the only photographer on the spot. When other photographers showed up, an old Patagonian woman issued an edict that no black boxes were to be pointed at
her people and she chased the camera men over a barbed wire fence.”(9) It is important to remember that those villages were set up by the fair exactly like the native habitats. These exhibit areas were fenced so that the “primitive” people would not run away.(10) But Beals had already made her images and they were exclusives. Juxtaposition of “Patagonian Giants” next to pygmies as a comparison by size was discussed recently by Laura Wexler in her Tender Violence: Domestic Vision in the Age of U.S. Imperialism. It presented, she wrote, “the anthropometric premise of the fair---the belief that the essential information about where a group of people fell on the evolutionary ladder could be gleaned from their physical characteristics.”(11) The picture brought an instant recognition to Beals. The next day the St. Louis newspapers carried the headline: “Woman Gets Permit to Take Pictures at the Fair.”(12) She enjoyed this position enormously.

With this success she felt ready to tackle New York as a professional photographer. That, she soon learned, was not easy. In her words, “Thank God, I had abnormal strength. Mere feminine, delicate, Dresden−china type of women get nowhere in business or professional life. They marry millionaires, if they are lucky. But if a woman is to make headway with men, she must be truly masculine.”(13) The strategy of using feminine charm to gain recognition, represented by her dress and hat,
did not seem to work in New York.

One of the most famous pictures she took during this period was taken inside tenement houses. It was when she worked for the Community Service Society. (Figure 3) “I am photographing tenement house conditions for the purpose of reform---work that I could not do a year ago, but which I have grown up to,” said she.\(^{(14)}\) She was working in the line of Jacob Riis, but considered she did not concentrate in that area.

She also took many New York scenes. (Figure 4) She tried to document New York, according to her words, in its many “moods and tenses.”\(^{(15)}\)

The variety of these photos, taken collectively and their artistic sensitivity and technical excellence are striking. Yet Beals was not given the professional recognition or stature received by contemporary male photographers. It was said that her work never equaled that of pictorialist

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**Figure 3** Family Making Artificial Flowers, New York City Slums, 1910, Alexander Al-land Sr. Jessie Tarbox Beals: First Woman News Photographer, New York: Camera / Graphic Press, 1918, Plate 40.

**Figure 4** Washington Square, Museum of the City of New York, # 58.346.3, Copy print. Washington Arch facing north, as seen at night, winter, Visual Information Access, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute Harvard University, PC60–5–8, schM16320.
king, Alfred Stieglitz, whose studio was once across from hers. It is unfair, however, to call Beals a career failure when she had to compete with the like of Jacob Riis, for the sake of reform and with Alfred Stieglitz for the sake of art.

Where then, and how do we locate Beals among her contemporaries? In his book on pioneers in urban photography, Silver Cities, Peter Bacon Hale said that photographers, (male photographers in his reference) tried to find order in the developing cities. In his words they were creating an urban Utopia for the new age. White City at Columbian Exposition in 1893 and its photographs were presented as the best example of their endeavor.\(^\text{16}\) Beals was not on that track. We know that she was in the Village of the St. Louis with “exotic little known people.”\(^\text{17}\)

As I quoted earlier, Laura Wexler said that the early female photographers helped male imperialistic endeavor by taking pictures of captains of the sea in domestic scenes. Wexler thought that these depictions helped to curb the violence inherent in their endeavors to soften and legitimize their goals. Beals was among these female photographers.\(^\text{18}\)

But we know that she also took many other subjects. In his book, Reading American Photographs: Images as History--- Mathew Brady to Walker Evans, Alan Trachtenberg called attention to the pioneer photographers struggling to define a national identity.\(^\text{19}\) They helped in the end to create a new consolidated, corporate America, an American Utopia. Was Beal’s America the same? Did she support this male vision of Utopia as a strong, masculine, unified America? What kind of a collective vision did she project through her camera?

I will discuss some of the pictures which are not usually associated with her. If we add these to the ones we have seen so far, a more complicated picture emerges of her time and what she had to go through as the first women documentary photographer.
Three years after she moved to New York, in 1908, she was heading for Woodstock with Poultnay Bigelow, a lawyer and writer, on an assignment to take pictures of Byrdcliffe Colony of Arts and Crafts to accompany his article. Byrdcliffe Colony was founded in 1902 by Ralph Whitehead, British, son of mill owner and his American wife Jane in 1902. According to Tom Wolf, Whitehead had already articulated the concept of the colony in his Grass of the Desert, a book of meditations he published in 1892. Its title was derived from one of his literary idols, Walt Whitman and its content reflected the philosophies of his mentors, Wiliam Moris and John Ruskin. Nancy E. Green adds that Ralph Whitehead was enamored to the teaching of Morris and Ruskin, while he did not follow the socialist view of Morris, nor humanitarian moralizing approach of Ruskin. The colony started with a three fold mission: to produce beautiful handmade objects that, when sold, would finance the colony; to offer classes in all the crafts so that the colony’s success would go forward for future generations; and to lead a healthful life on a working farm that would help to support the inhabitants and provide the best of a rural environment in terms of beauty and simplicity of life style. In other words, it reflected artists’ rebellion against the technological advance of the Industrial Revolution. In Bigelow’s words, “The idly curious are not invited, and, thank God, automobiles are barred as well; also, all merely mechanical forms of progress, intellectual or otherwise.” The colony attracted people like John Quincy Adams, who hired Whitehead while Adams was a member of the New York Civic Art Committee and Charlotte P. Gilman, a friend of John Quincy Adams. John Dewey, Jane Addams and Ellen Gate Starr and many of the residents and workers at Hull House went to Byrdcliffe during its formative
years. There was also John Burroughs, the naturalist, who lived close by and was a friend of Bigelow. Burroughs visited Byrdcliffe many times and praised its experiments. One of the bungalows located in Byrdcliffe was named after his first book, Wake Robin (1871). With these people the colony formed an independent entity.

In 1909 Jessie’s pictures of Byrdcliffe were published in American Home and Gardens. They were considered the best archival images of the colony in its early days of operation. (Figure 5)

Among Beals Byrdcliffe photos, though not included in Bigelow’s article, Exercise Class taken in 1908 (Figure 6) stands out in depicting the colony’s practices for children. They are seen doing exercises on a field in front of the Byrdcliffe house. The scene illustrates the colonists’ desire to create a cooperative educational center for physical fitness as
well as for their children’s future mental and artistic well-being.

After her Byrdcliffe sojourn, Beals developed a strong interest in photographing gardens and houses in the line of images she had started at Byrdcliffe. Indeed, she became best known among her contemporaries for her garden pictures.\(^{(24)}\)

Another group of pictures taken during her earlier days in New York needs to be called attention to here. Around 1911, a book was published by Kate Sanborn. The title of the book was Hunting Indians in a Taxi–Cab.\(^{(25)}\) Kate Sanborn, whose mother was a relative of Daniel Webster, was a popular lecturer who became known for presenting literary topics in a humorous, entertaining manner. She traveled extensively but in 1888 she bought a dilapidated farm and wrote a book about how she managed that farm. It seemed to sell well, because other farming books followed.\(^{(26)}\) Hunting Indians in a Taxi–Cab was an effort of Sanborn to preserve images of vanishing Native Americans through photographs of the wooden statues of Native Americans commonly found in front of Tobacco shops. Sanborn asked Beals to take these pictures. (Figure 7)

The work of both women in Hunting Indians in a Taxi–Cab reflects a sympathetic concern to preserve evidence of the indigenous Indian culture. Sanborn wrote nostalgically and with well-intentioned commentary expressing support for that culture. Indeed, she herself bought a couple of Native American statues, which placed on her farm next to a constructed fake tepee.\(^{(27)}\) (Figure 8)

Beals’ photographs show such respect for her subjects that they can be seen as an effort to restore pride to their existence. The angles she chose to take her pictures of the statues enhanced their magnificence. To borrow from Alan Trachtenberg’s term, you could say that she was “ennobling of the savage.”\(^{(28)}\) My speculation is that neither mere curiosity nor moneymaking motives explain her efforts to take as many pic-
tures for the book as she did.

The book became a collective item—perhaps because of Beals’ photographs. Certainly the two women must have welcomed this reception, but ironically the reasons for that success probably had little to do with their motives in producing the book. America needed proof that no Native Americans who had survived their conquest were threatening. The larger American public needed to feel that there was no more resistance from the Indians, that “the West was won.” The public seemed to find comfort in Hunting Indians in a Taxi–Cab. Hunting them in a taxi cab with a camera instead of a gun, would seem to underline the defeat of the Native Americans, and so reassure the public of its power and security.

The direction of Beals’ camera to Byrdcliffe and on the figures of a vanishing people show her interest in taking pictures not only of spec-

Figure 7 Cigar Store Statuary, 1910, in Alland, Jessie Tarbox Beals, Plate 42.

Figure 8 Kate Sanborn, Hunting Indians in a Taxi–Cab, Boston: the Gorham Press, 1911, p.27.
tacular news worthy events, but also of scenes of diverse groups who represented ways that were disappearing. On the one hand, she captured, the deliberate efforts of the Byrdcliffe community, trying in its own way to preserve vanishing patterns. On the other hand responding to Sanborn’s initiative, she presented lasting images of passive wooden figures, as an attempt to at least portray with honor a disappearing way of life.

We have traced the course of Beals’ professional life through the time of her move to New York and now will examine how living and working in New York changed her both artistically and personally.

In her personal life she chose a distinctly unconventional path. Although Beals did not leave any specific remarks about her time at Byrdcliffe, they appear to have led to events that had a profound impact on her. Her professional relationship with Bigelow developed into a personal one and in 1911 she gave birth to their daughter. She became the sole supporter of their child. In 1924 she and Alfred were divorced, following seven years of separation.29 One can only speculate on how the different path she chose affected her. Beals made another unconventional choice in her life style when she moved to Greenwich Village. There she found artistic nourishment. She wrote: “I found all sorts of earnest, creative young people making sacrifices to accomplish their dreams. I used to meet them in the modest restaurants of the neighborhood and in their inexpensive apartments and rooms, and just to be among them and talk with them inspired me to strike out and do the kind of work I had been yearning to do. I had never known intimately artistic folk before. They gave me confidence in myself and a wonderful optimism, which no disappointment since has been able to rob me of.”30
People at Village supported her life styles.

In 1917, she opened her own Village Art Gallery at Sheridan Square. She immersed herself in her Bohemian life of Greenwich Village, although not in its political activities. She took pictures of Village scenes and sold them as postcards.\(^{(31)}\) (Figure 9)

When looked at collectively these scenes demonstrate, again, that her narrative eye ignored images of a strong, aggressive, industrial, expanding America. Instead her eyes were consistently set on a group outside the mainstream, the artists of Greenwich Village. They like others outside, were facing a rapidly changing America, trying to absorb the many layers of new cultures and even in the cases of the artists of Greenwich Village to experiment with them.

Later, when the First World War changed Greenwich Village and the depression hit her profession, she left New York to join friends in California. New generation of photographers who stayed in New York did very well, presenting vivid and powerful images of new building constructions of the day. Bernice Abbott’s photos contrasting skyscraper construction and demolition and the pictures of Samuel H. Gottscho, filled

![Figure 9 Polly’s Restaurant](image)

Figure 9 **Polly’s Restaurant**, Museum of the City of New York, #91.583.5
with glowing signs towering over the city, proclaiming the names of banks and publishing companies, brought fame and commercial benefit to these two professionals. The public welcomed their images of power and growth. Characteristically, Beals did not choose that focus, despite its potential financial benefit. Instead, we find her traveling across country with her daughter, Nanette, helped her mother to handle the heavy camera equipment and accessories on their long trip.

In 1928 Beals published a collection of poems, Songs of a Wonder. The original poems were written on the backs of menus from Greenwich Village restaurants. The opening poem quotes John Burroughs' dying words: "Are We Very Far From Home?" Most of the poems were expressive of her melancholy and of her sense of romance. She depicted herself as a homeless wonderer, who, as one of the poems declares, failed to choose the right door.

"Doors"
Life has so many doors that open and close.
Through one I catch a breath of lovely rose,
Through one a glimpse of joy beyond belief,
Then to my grief
I see it close

Life is so bitter, yet so very sweet---
Today while passing in a busy street,
I caught a glance that changed the world for me.
I could not be,
It was too sweet.
Perchance some day I shall pass through the door
Where happiness doth dwell for evermore---
To find the joy I’ve missed---to lose the pain,
Never again
To close the door.\(^{(33)}\)

Perhaps Beals is speaking of her personal life in this poem. In her professional life, I would say that she opened many doors through the images in her photographs. She was at the center of activities of different communities of people struggling in the face of transformation and transition. Her pictures of them informed the mainstream public about what was happening in those circles. Byrdcliffe, Greenwich Village, the Lower East Side—artists, Bohemians, social workers, nurses who were trying to overcome social and geographical boundaries, were suddenly and keenly visible and real.

She stood at the crossroad of ideas and practices in rapid transition. She was unable to specialize—there were too many doors to open. The fact that she was not able and almost refused, to limit her subjects, shows the impact on her of the years of turmoil in the United States. Caught in the confusion, she yearned for home in one of her poems.\(^{(34)}\) But was home her Utopia? What did she want to go back to? Her move does not tell us.

Beals used to present herself in collage constructs of her own image. (Figure 10) Perhaps their construction was part of an attempt to find answers to such questions. By putting multiple aspects of her life into one picture, she tried to comprehend who she was. There were more choices and options for her generations to choose from in finding answers to this question than there had been for preceding generations. Perhaps the collages brought an order to those choices for her. Her mul-
tiple images of America, however, did not produce one collective image of the nation.

The last picture is a picture of Beals’ daughter, Nanette, with a nurse. (Figure 11) Nanette was not strong when she was little. She was hospitalized for almost five years as the result of complications caused by polio and needed special care afterwards at home.

After her mother’s death, Nanette disclosed that the woman seen as a nurse in this photograph was actually an actor from Greenwich Village, not a real nurse. Her real nurse as a matter fact was a black woman. (Figure 12)

These strategies of Beals showed the world that she lived. She was “hustling,” her favorite word for her actions, when reality was on her
back. Picture of her daughter with a black rather than a white nurse would have reduced its commercial value. We have seen Beals as a groundbreaker, trying many new ways, some outrageous, some unacceptable by conventional standards. Nevertheless, even though one must have had trusted the black nurse, she could not reveal her race to the public.

Conclusion

For 50 years Beals photographed the process through which America was seeking itself. She was forgotten because she was not able to produce one collective image of America. She was forgotten because, as we saw, she was drawn to people outside the mainstream. She was forgotten because she refused to define one unifying identity.

Yet in conclusion, it is that very range of subjects that marks her as a first-rate documentary photographer, a witness to the breadth and diverse complexity of an era. She was seeking her own Utopia as the first woman news photographer. In so doing she portrayed herself and Amer-

Figure 12 a531, July 3, 1912, Jessie Tarbox Papers, Harvard University, 69: 1: 3, 91–M154.
Notes


(2) She died in a charity ward at Bellevue Hospital in New York City.

(3) Her papers are located in Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University. They include personal correspondence, drawings, poems and other writings of Beals. *Jessie Tarbox Beals Photograph Collection in Department of Prints, Photographs and Architectural Collection at The New−York Historical Society* holds her portraits photographs. *Jessie Tarbox Beals Collection at Museum of the City of New York* holds her Greenwich Village photos. Community Service Society Collection at Rare Book Collection at Columbia University has some of her tenement photos. Though the present writer was not able to look, pictures taken at the St. Louis World’s Fair are housed in Missouri Historical Society and St. Louis Public Library. Some of these collections are available through Visual Information Access, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.


(7) Alland, American Photographer, p.56.
(8) Alland, Jessie Tarbox Beals, p.43.
(9) Ibid.
(12) Alland, Jessie Tarbox Beals, p.43.
(13) Alland, American Photographer, p.58.
(14) Alland, American Photographer, p.59.
(15) Ibid.
(17) Alland, Jessie Tarbox Beals, p.43.
(23) Byrdcliffe, p.225.
(26) Kate Sanborn, Adopting An Abandoned Farm (1891), Boston: Indy Publish. com, and Abandoning an Adapted Farm, New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1894.
(27) Sanborn, Hunting Indians in a Taxi–Cab, p.15.
(30) Alland, American Photograph, p.59.
(35) JTP Papers, 92–M45. Memo attached to the Photo a8778 July 5, 1917. “According to Nanette Brainard, Nanette in bed with doll a ‘nurse’ standing her was play–acting——Not in hospital but at home. (Alland misidentified in his book.) 4/1/92.” The picture shown here from Alland’s book is a nurse sitting version.
(36) Alland, Jessie Tarbox Beals, p,61.