

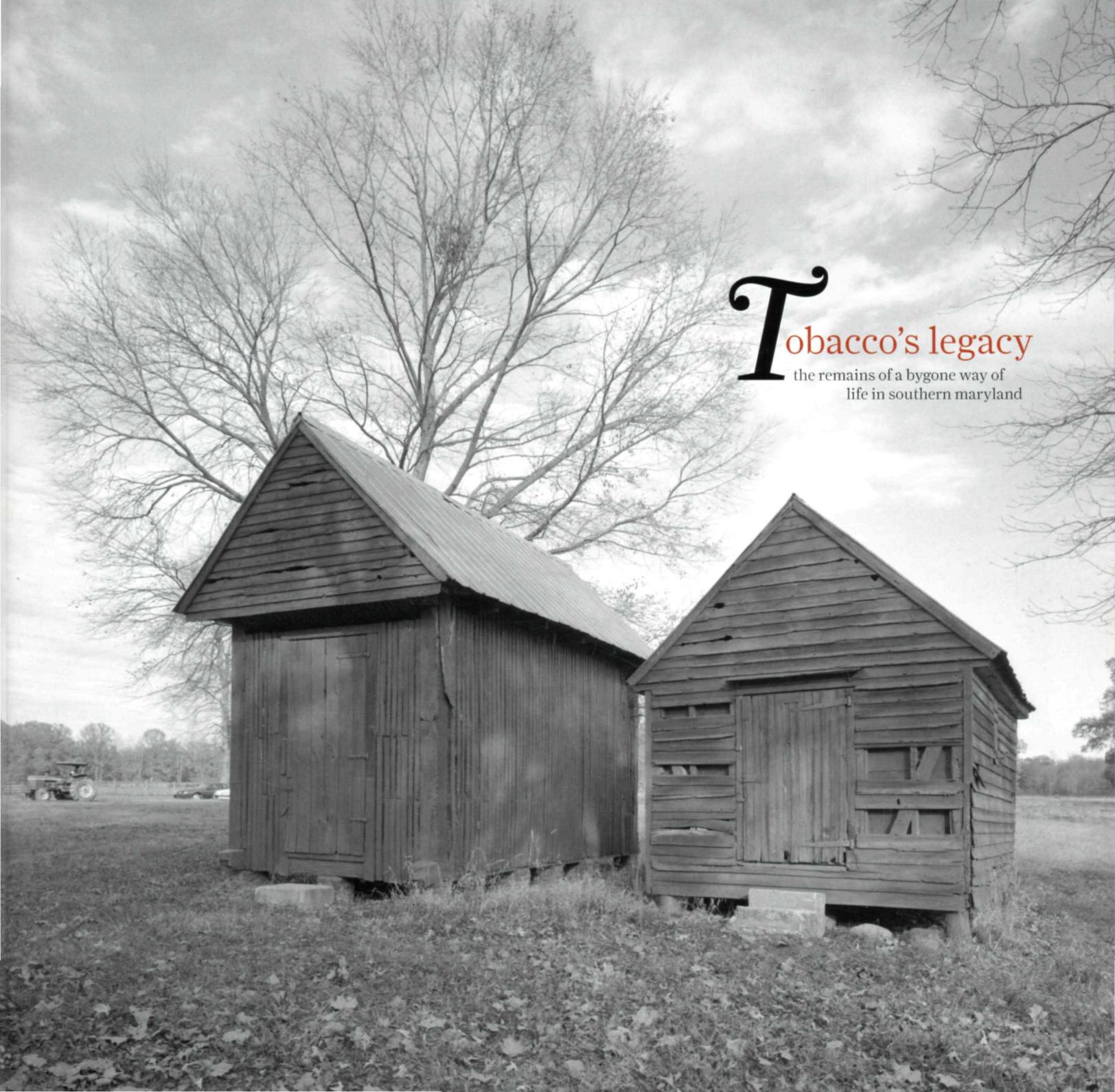


COMMON

PRESERVING OUR NATION'S HERITAGE SPRING 2011

# GROUND

*T*obacco's legacy  
the remains of a bygone way of  
life in southern maryland



# FIRST WORD

BY RICK BEARD AND RICHARD RABINOWITZ

## An Unsettled Heritage

IN 1961, LIFE MAGAZINE INVITED THE Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, poet, and scholar Robert Penn Warren to ruminate on the upcoming centennial of the American Civil War. His resulting 25,000-word essay—*The Legacy of the Civil War*—remains a brilliant and timely meditation on “our only ‘felt’ history—history lived in our national imagination.” As the war’s sesquicentennial arrives a half-century later, Americans prefer a degree of concision and self-assuredness to their historical legacies that would surely have been anathema to so nuanced a thinker as Penn Warren. Type in “the legacy of the Civil War” on Google, and wiki.answers.com will tell you that: “The civil war helped unify the union and free slaves.” Simple! Declarative! Forestalling debate! And certainly not incorrect. **BUT THERE IS A GREAT DEAL MORE** to be said about the legacies of what Penn Warren called “the great single event of our history.” In 1861, the federal budget of \$80.2 million devoted \$36.4 million to defense; in 1865, the comparable figures were \$1.33 billion and \$1.17 billion. By the war’s end, the accumulated federal deficit had grown from \$90.6 million in 1861 to \$2.68 billion in 1865. **THE WAR’S MOST IMMEDIATE LEGACY WAS** growth: the federal government, the population, and the country itself all got bigger. The size and role of the federal government began a dramatic expansion, starting a trend that has never reversed. In 1860, the last full year before the fighting began, the federal budget was \$78 million. By 1867, the first year in which the war could be eliminated as a major economic factor, the federal budget had grown almost fivefold, to \$376.8 million. Federal spending never again dipped below \$300 million a year. **THE REPUBLICAN COMMITMENT TO AGGRESSIVE FEDERAL ACTION** to spur economic development was apparent from the war’s outset. Yet neither the states of the defeated Confederacy nor the former slaves benefited from this explosion of growth or the Republican-led, business friendly economic policies. The end of slavery, however overdue, represented the largest uncompensated confiscation of property in history—“property” assigned a market value as high as \$4 billion by some economists. The planter class, which before the war had embodied more than 50 percent of the nation’s wealth, was in ruins, as were many of the South’s major cities. High tariffs worked against the export of the South’s primary staple crops—cotton and tobacco—and unsettled labor relations in the wake of emancipation created economic uncertainty throughout the region. **FORMER SLAVES PROVED ESPECIALLY** vulnerable. After Andrew Johnson revoked General William T. Sherman’s Special Field Orders, No. 15, providing 40 acres to former slaves, the federal government failed to provide any long-term, systematic support. Those blacks who stayed in the South, and most did,

quickly found themselves condemned to poverty by a system of sharecropping. Not until the Great Migration between 1910 and 1930 did blacks begin to break free of a way of life rooted in the 18th- and 19th-century plantation. It took almost a century before the South began to match the prosperity of other regions. **THE COMMONPLACE NOTION THAT** the South lost the war and won the peace was accepted because in large part it was true. The defeat of the Confederacy, ironically, fueled the defiance of white southerners. The myth of the “Lost Cause” deserves considerable credit for the “resurrection.” First postulated almost immediately after the war, and lent considerable momentum by former Confederate General Jubal Early during the 1870s and 1880s, the argument held that the South had fought for a noble cause; had a constitutional right to secede; had been led by morally superior leaders; had fallen short in its quest for independence due only to the North’s superior resources; and had been motivated by the defense of the southern homeland and states’ rights, not chattel slavery. This genteel and decontaminated narrative of the Civil War justified both massive **WHAT AMERICANS KNOW ABOUT THE CIVIL WAR AND WHAT THEY BELIEVE ABOUT THE CIVIL WAR ARE SOMETIMES UNCOMFORTABLY FAR APART.**

sistance to concepts of equality and the inferior social and economic position accorded African Americans. **THE SESQUICENTENNIAL YEARS** present an opportunity to assess the many legacies of the war. Some Americans continue to question the primacy of the federal government, especially when social and economic pressures are greatest. Others contest the landscape of historical memory, challenging one another’s narratives and too often ignoring the historical record in favor of comfortable tales passed down from one generation to the next. What Americans know about the Civil War and what they believe about the Civil War are sometimes uncomfortably far apart. In 1998, in *Lee and His Generals in War and Memory*, the noted Civil War historian Gary Gallagher presciently established a measure of success for the sesquicentennial. Americans will accomplish something of great value, he argued, if we are able to confront “the wider issue of how the Civil War should be presented to the American people, and why academic and popular conceptions about the conflict are often so different.” Narrowing that conceptual gap would create a new legacy of great value 150 years after Americans shed so much blood.

**Edited excerpt from the new National Park Service publication *The Civil War Remembered*. Rick Beard is former director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum; Richard Rabinowitz is founder and president of the American History Workshop.**



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**8 TOBACCO'S LEGACY** The legacy of the iconic crop and the culture that grew up around it in southern Maryland.

**18 LOOK PRESERVED** An African American slice of life preserved thanks to *Look* magazine—and Save America's Treasures.

*Above:* Hopkinson's Plantation, Edisto Island, South Carolina, circa 1862, reproduced in *The Civil War Remembered*. *Front:* Outbuildings, Thomas Stone National Historic Site. *Back:* At play in Harlem, photographed for *Look* magazine.

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# Memory of War

*A New Lens on the War Between the States—and Its Aftermath*

“Before bodies were riddled by bullets . . . before men returned home maimed and crippled, the American people were captivated by the idea of a quick and glorious conclusion to the Civil War,” writes historian Peter S. Carmichael in the new National Park Service publication, *The Civil War Remembered*. Editors John Latschar and Robert Sutton ask, “Didn’t that generation—like others—have to learn that war, once launched, is difficult to control, has a tendency to become ungovernable, refuses to be managed logically, takes turns that no one anticipates?”

This April marked the 150th anniversary of the Civil War’s opening shots. While the conflict itself is well-documented and understood, what is not is the “why,” the passion that accounted for killing on such a scope that it changed society forever. With essays by leading scholars, *The Civil War Remembered* frames a context for the more than 75 Civil War battlefields and sites immortalized in the National Park System.

While slavery’s moral aspects are often discussed, its economic dimensions are not. In 1861, four million African Americans were in bondage. Senator James Hammond of South Carolina cast their value as capital that would not be willingly relinquished: “Were ever any people, civilized or savage, persuaded by argument, human or divine, to surrender voluntarily two thousand million dollars?”

**LIKE THE FADING OUTLINE OF ENTRENCHMENTS IN THE WOODS AT FREDERICKSBURG, THE WAR IS AT ONCE DISTANT AND IMMEDIATE. IT WAS A CATAclysm THAT TOUCHED EVERY AMERICAN, AND CONTINUES TO MAKE ITSELF FELT TODAY.**

Historian James McPherson writes of “two socioeconomic and cultural systems” vying for dominance. The industrial, free-labor North seemed to have the edge, but that was by no means clear at the time. For most of the years from 1789 to 1861, southern slaveholders were president, McPherson writes, and two-thirds of the Speakers of the House were southerners. Most Supreme Court justices were from the South as well. And when the South did secede, it was not only because it feared the end of slavery. A prosperous, dynamic Confederacy was eager to expand into new territory: Cuba, and possibly Mexico and Central America, in addition to the American West.

**ABOVE:** The only known photograph of an African American soldier with his family. **RIGHT:** Girl in mourning dress with picture of her father, a cavalryman.

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web *The Civil War Remembered*, published by Eastern National, can be purchased for \$10.95 in national park bookstores and online at <http://civilwar.eparks.com>.

Far from the carnage, profound economic repercussions were taking shape. When Southern democrats abandoned Congress, Republicans, with Lincoln’s help, pushed through laws stalled for years by Southern opposition. “Many of these bills set the course for the United States to emerge by war’s end . . . poised for a massive and rapid



westward expansion,” writes National Park Service historian Benjamin T. Arrington, positioned “to establish and dominate America’s industrial and economic future.”

While the idea of a sovereign Confederacy died at Appomattox, its ideology carried over through the Civil Rights Era, and in arguments today about states’ rights. Though we are a century-and-a-half removed from a war that claimed over 600,000 lives, we continue to cherish—and debate—the principles that brought bloodshed. *The Civil War Remembered* examines the war’s profound reverberations throughout society: how it changed ideas about death and spirituality, its impact on women, how Reconstruction came to an end, how it transformed our conceptions of race and freedom.

Like the fading outline of entrenchments in the woods at Fredericksburg, the war is at once distant and immediate. It was a cataclysm that touched every American, and continues to make itself felt today. It calls across time to be reckoned with.



# LAND MARK

RECENTLY DESIGNATED NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS

**LUDLOW MASSACRE SITE** In 1913, when over a thousand miners went on strike at John D. Rockefeller's Colorado coal camps—one of the world's most dangerous places to work—all they wanted was union representation, a decent wage, and an eight-hour workday. What they got was the state militia setting fire to their tent colonies—erected with help from the United Mine Workers—and “the Death Special,” a machine-gunning armored car. Four men were murdered and during the fire two women and eleven children suffocated in a “safety cellar” dug under a tent. The labor skirmish—the first to kill women and children—sparked mass outrage, turning the nation's eye to the unrest. “People who never gave unions a tumble before the Ludlow massacre, were climbing on our bandwagon,” remarked a survivor. The 40-acre site is today a singular source for archeological research into the history of labor.

**ALSO P HOUSE** An unparalleled example of early 19th-century American decorative arts, the Richard Alsop House boasts rare and well-preserved frescoes that offer a glimpse of an all-but-vanished time. A Classical-influenced structure in Middletown, Connecticut, its walls and ceilings are adorned with Greek and Roman gods, floral patterns, birds, and angels. Frescoes were popular among the urban elite in places like New York and Philadelphia. But as fashions changed, they were either painted over or covered with wallpaper. Few have survived. Art historian Samuel Green calls the paintings “the most elaborate program of decoration in American domestic architecture before the Civil War.” Wesleyan University bought the house in 1948, since working to preserve it. Now known as the Davison Art Center, the house still stands apart because of its idiosyncratic style, wall paintings in evidence both inside and out. Peter Kenny, the curator of American decorative arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, describes the frescoes as “unique and irreplaceable treasures [which] are truly part of our national cultural patrimony.”

**contact point web** [www.nps.gov/history/nhl/](http://www.nps.gov/history/nhl/)

## UPenn Laboratories >>

Modern architecture made a name for itself with groundbreaking transformations of the built environment, but by the late 1950s, the creative well seemed to be running dry. “There was really nowhere to go from the elegantly reductive principles of Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building,” points out Carter Wiseman in *Louis I Kahn: Beyond Time and Style, A Life in Architecture*. Inspired by tours of Europe's ancient ruins, Kahn found a direction forgotten by most architects of the day: the past. With two complexes built for the University of Pennsyl-

**WITH TWO COMPLEXES BUILT FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA IN PHILADELPHIA BETWEEN 1957 AND 1961 . . . KAHN ELOQUENTLY FUSED HISTORY AND THE MODERN WITH TOWERS EVOKING COMPARISONS TO ITALY'S MEDIEVAL SAN GIMIGNANO.**

vania in Philadelphia between 1957 and 1961—the Alfred Newton Richards Medical Research Laboratories and David Goddard Laboratories—Kahn eloquently fused history and the modern with towers evoking comparisons to Italy's medieval San Gimignano. “Although Kahn never intended these buildings as a protest, [they] provided a potent design alternative to International Modernism,” notes the National Historic Landmark nomination. The Richards lab is configured in a pinwheel pattern with three primary towers—adorned with steel-frame windows—attached to a fourth housing research animals, mechanical systems, stairwells, and elevators. There are “servant” and “served” spaces, the former housing lab spaces, the latter ventilation shafts and other auxiliary elements. Rather than creating yet another glass box, Kahn clad the structures in heavy red brick and concrete. A “real building,” noted the *Architectural Review*. “Probably the single most consequential building constructed in the United States since the [second world] war,” declared Wilder Green, curator at the Museum of Modern Art. The structures embody the theories of human nature and group needs espoused by Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright (though university scientists did not care for the studio-like labs and problematic overabundance of natural light). “In rehabilitating an idea of functionalism that was more humanistic than the modern movement had suggested,” wrote sociologist Robert Gutman, “Kahn offered a vision that was at the same time familiar and original.”





REMAINS OF A BYGONE WAY OF LIFE IN SOUTHERN

MARYLAND

# *Tobacco's Legacy*

*by joe flanagan photographed by renee bieretz / historic american buildings survey*



DRIVING INTO THE TIDEWATER REGION OF SOUTHERN MARYLAND, THERE IS NOT SO much a sense of place as of vacancy—available space for nearby Washington, DC, extra room for the metropolis to stretch its ever-expanding influence. This is clear in the large condominium complexes that line the road south, in the strip malls and new town house developments with names like “The Preserve” harkening back to the days when the agrarian aristocracy, wealthy from the tobacco trade, ruled like feudal lords along the Potomac’s estuaries. Occasionally there is a lonely symbol of the region’s once thriving tobacco economy—a dilapidated barn sitting by itself in a field, sometimes a stone’s throw from the McMansions that surround it. Southern Maryland was once one of the main sources of tobacco in the United States, a lucrative agribusiness that generated great wealth, shaping geography and culture. For 350 years it was the primary industry, critical to the state’s economy. From the early colonial era to the latter part of the 20th century, tobacco’s fortunes waxed and waned dependent not only on labor, soil, and climate, but on the fickle tastes of the public. It finally died out for good with a state tobacco buyout agreement in 1998, which basically paid farmers not to grow it.



*Southern Maryland was once one of the main sources of tobacco in the United States, a lucrative agribusiness that generated great wealth, shaping geography and culture.*

THE ARCHITECTURAL LEGACY TOBACCO LEFT BEHIND IS EXPRESSIVE TESTIMONY TO A history all but buried in the growing urban context. Yet the further south one travels, the faster all reference to Washington falls away, until one is, as National Park Service interpreter Scott Hill says, “in the land that time forgot.” Here is a trailer from the 1940s, rusting into the ground, perhaps still occupied judging from the dirty lace curtains in the window. Here is an outbuilding subsumed by brown vines. Billboards proclaim the coming of luxurious housing developments with rural-sounding names, but they haven’t arrived yet. They are just an idea, a suggestion in bright colors against the somber brown-gray monochrome of an old landscape.

*Previous pages: Sarum, Charles County’s earliest documented home. Tree-ring analysis dates it to 1717. Left: Outbuildings at the Thomas Stone National Historic Site in Port Tobacco. Above: Lone structure at McPherson’s Purchase, which boasts the county’s largest intact collection of early agricultural buildings.*

ALL PHOTOS RENEE BIERETZ/NPS/HABS

The tobacco culture's plantation houses, barns, churches, and other structures have lately been of great concern to local preservationists, given the tremendous development and changing agricultural picture. "Tobacco barns are really the emblem of southern Maryland," says Cathy Thompson, Charles County community planning program manager. "They're the character-defining feature of the rural landscape." In 2004, the National Trust for Historic Preservation added Maryland's tobacco barns to its list of most endangered places. The designation led to the Southern Maryland Tobacco Barns Preservation Initiative, a cooperative effort by the National Trust, Preservation Maryland, the Maryland Historical Trust, and local governments. Other structures have come into focus as critical to southern Maryland's identity, from the mansions that tobacco built to the quarters of those enslaved to the system. The *Historic American Buildings Survey* of the National Park Service, whose photographs are shown here, recorded many of the sites as part of an ongoing collaboration with MHT.

**ENGLISH SETTLERS DISCOVERED NICOTIANA tabacum** through the Indians, and began cultivating it as one of many endeavors to gain a foothold in the Chesapeake region. Southern Maryland was particularly suited to tobacco growing. Its gently rolling landscape offered plenty of space, the soil was right, the rain plentiful, and the two major rivers, the Potomac and the Patuxent, with their numerous tributaries, meant that the product could be easily moved. For the English government, looking for a quick return on its investment in the New World, tobacco was the answer. There was high demand in Europe, and soon the entire region was involved in its cultivation. According to a nomination of the barns to the National Register of Historic Places, "The vast majority of the early settlers to the Chesapeake . . . arrived to earn a living from tobacco. The tobacco trade paid the way for more than one-third of all immigrants from the British Isles before 1640." Tobacco drove population growth in the Chesapeake for the next 100 years.

For the better part of the 17th century, tobacco farms in southern Maryland were scattered and remote, situated along creeks and tributaries. They were isolated and self-sufficient, so there were no social organizations or cultural institutions. Many were modest in scope, and at first

*Above:* Entrance to Mount Republic, built in 1790 on 350 acres with a sweeping view of the Potomac River Valley. *Right:* Dating to 1732, Old Durham Church.

the workers were primarily indentured servants from England. The complex of waterways allowed planters to ship and receive goods practically at their doorstep. This meant there was no need for major towns like Annapolis or Williamsburg. Since tobacco quickly exhausts the soil, planters were frequently looking for new land. Sometimes they simply left existing structures to rot and moved elsewhere to start again.

Tobacco's profitability brought a surplus of hopeful planters. Encouraged by the fortunes of others, immigrants and newly freed indentured servants wanted to try their hand at it. Between 1620 and 1680, the trend led to an oversupply of tobacco and an attendant drop in value. Consumers came to favor the sweeter variety grown across the river in Virginia. In the last years of the century, emigration dropped dramatically. Opportunities were better in England, where wages and working conditions had improved.

Into the void stepped the wealthy landowners. Powerful agricultural interests—akin to today's agribusinesses—began taking over the small farms. Africans were enslaved in large numbers. According to the National Register nomination, "Before 1684, less than half of the wealthy tobacco growers owned slaves, but by 1712, nearly all of the gentry class did." In the early 1700s, Maryland's robust leaf came back into favor, reinvigorating local tobacco growing.

There were still many moderate and small-sized farms that had neither servants nor slaves, their owners having diversified into other crops. Tobacco was labor-intensive, difficult to produce without an army of workers. The plant did best in virgin soil, and while it could be grown in previously cultivated areas, size and quality were often diminished. A field that grew tobacco for three consecutive years would need another twenty to recover. This drove planters to clear out forests in search of rich soil. By the

mid-18th century, Maryland farmers were running out of land.

Thomas Stone National Historic Site is likely typical of how wealthy plantation owners lived during tobacco's 18th century heyday. One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, Stone built the house, "Haberdeventure," in 1771. Says Hill, "It had been a tobacco plantation for eight decades before he purchased it. The soil was depleted and it was no longer a viable cash crop." Today, the site comprises 322 acres of fields and woodlands but Stone owned over a thousand around the county. It was a sign of status among the gentry to have at least some



*Today the architectural legacy tobacco left behind is expressive testimony to a history all but buried in the growing urban context.*





tobacco in the ground, says Hill. Tobacco meant land. It meant slaves. Even for someone like Stone, who made most of his money practicing law, tobacco was the sign of having arrived.

While Stone's meticulously kept estate—a partial replica, the original burned in 1977—conveys the character of rural Maryland around the time of the Revolution, a short excursion outside park boundaries reveals another picture. The houses of the wealthy, many of which are preserved today, have names that call to mind English country estates: La Grange, Linden, Black Friars, Mt. Bleak. Like Haberdeventure, they tend to be set back off the road and isolated. Yet today many are a little down-at-heel, as if the region were once a retreat for the rich, who have since moved on. Less than two miles from Haberdeventure, Port Tobacco, on the river of the same name, was once Maryland's second busiest port. Today, there are only a few 19th century buildings, a restored courthouse, and a brick outline where a church used to be. Some distance beyond, the land dips, forming a large trough, grown-in and swampy. A hawk watches from the top of a dead tree. This, says Hill, is where the river used to run. Farming filled the rivers with silt, impeding navigation. Archeologists have determined that most of it came from tobacco's heyday. Though an outdoor exhibit shows a plan of the town at its zenith, it is difficult to believe there was anything here at all.

The waterways served as the roads, says Lucy Lawliss, superintendent of Thomas Stone and George Washington Birthplace National Monument, just across the river. "The Potomac was the I-95 of its time," she says. "There were a lot of relationships across the river between families . . . it was the way information was exchanged." Ferries were common. Today, Lawliss says, visitors to the birthplace say it is "out in the sticks," but in the 18th century it was anything but. "These places that seem so isolated now were very connected then," she says. Hill points out that a drive from Alexandria to Stone's house is now a roundabout 30 miles; then it would have been roughly 12 as the crow flies, crossing the river by boat. When George Washington was on his deathbed, his doctor—Stone's neighbor—arrived via ferry. Hill says that a pair of water trails, the John Smith and the Potomac, encourage getting out on the water, which gives a great perspective on the geography.

**"IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO TALK ABOUT TOBACCO CULTIVATION WITHOUT TALKING ABOUT the labor involved,"** says Thompson. It is not a crop that lends itself to mechanized processing. "There was little that could be done with tractors, even when that technology was available," she says. From the planting to the cutting to the hanging in the barns to dry, it was very

hands-on. This is reflected in the spike in the slave population, with Maryland at one point the second-largest slaveholding colony. By the middle of the 18th century, the biggest plantations had 100 or more slaves, most working the tobacco fields. In 1712, enslaved workers were 18 percent of the county's population, by 1850 more than half.

A short distance up the road from Port Tobacco is St. Ignatius Church, one of the oldest continuously active parishes in the United States. Situated on a high point with a dramatic view of the river, it preserves its former servants' quarters. The place is deserted but for a caretaker, who unlocks the padlock on the tiny wood frame structure to allow a look inside. Repairs in 1963 uncovered part of a tunnel that seems to have led to the river; although its use as such is as yet undetermined, some local historians believe St. Ignatius may have been a stop on the Underground Railroad.

It seems reasonable that John Wilkes Booth, after escaping Ford's Theater, would have slipped into the swamps and thickets here. Southern Maryland was a hotbed of clandestine pro-Confederate activity. A woman named Olivia Floyd, who lived at the estate next to Stone's, was a Confederate agent. Union troops searching for the assassin saw a dilapidated Port Tobacco, a harbinger of the future. With the abolition of slavery, the tobacco economy crashed. Other regions developed new varieties popular with smokers as Maryland growers struggled through the rest of the century. Some let fields go unplanted. Some went bankrupt. Others

switched to less labor-intensive crops. While some black residents left to find opportunities elsewhere, most stayed to try their hand at tenant farming. Some farmed tobacco.



*Tobacco barns are really the emblem of southern Maryland. They're the character-defining feature of the rural landscape.*

—Cathy Thompson, Charles County community planning program manager

*Above and left: Tobacco barns and outbuildings in Charles County. Barns are an iconic presence in Maryland, their preservation a national concern for state and local groups working with the National Park Service and the National Trust.*



**THE RISE OF THE BLENDED CIGARETTE—AND THE FEMALE SMOKER—RESCUED LOCAL** tobacco. Pleased with its burning qualities, aroma, and low tar and nicotine content, the Swiss bought large quantities for cigarette manufacturing after World War I. Sweden, France, Germany, and the Netherlands were importers as well. Maryland tobacco also became an additive in American blends. The prosperity was unlike anything since before the Civil War. The local price per pound tripled between 1938 and 1945, and smoking skyrocketed after World War II. Black farmers played a big role locally, many making the transition from sharecroppers to landowners.

The 1980s—after a years-long drumbeat of health warnings—saw the beginning of the end. Farms disappeared while the suburbs grew. The final blow was the buyout, funded by a \$206 billion settlement between the tobacco companies and 46 states. Tobacco auction houses closed one by one as farmers switched to other crops. The change was profound. Because raising tobacco required so many hands, it engendered a sense of community among those who spent days in the fields and barns. The auctions were an opportunity to visit with other farmers and exchange news. While there is still agriculture here, it is but a shadow of the days of big tobacco. Today, with suburban development perhaps just over the horizon, alarm over the fate of the barns helped secure a grant from the federal Save America's Treasures program. This funded research for a National Register nomination, and a project by the University of Delaware Center for Historic Architecture and Design to document 30 barns with measured drawings. Preservationists are working with landowners on ways to save the barns through adaptive re-use.



*By the middle of the 18th century, the biggest plantations had 100 or more slaves, most working the tobacco fields.*

**MANY SUBURBS NEVER GET THE CHANCE TO NEGOTIATE THE VALUE OF THEIR RURAL** past. They are simply enveloped too quickly. Southern Maryland seems in an enviable position of having the time to pause to examine its history, still everywhere in evidence, not simply in the disused barns and sequestered houses of the former tobacco lords. There is the possibility that the region might not want to trade its character for what has made other places anonymous. There is, in each winding turn, in the mist rising off the fields, a timelessness that, even though you might be a stranger there, you would like to remain untouched.

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*Left: Rose Hill, overlooking the Port Tobacco valley. Above: Thomas Stone NHS.*



PAUL FUSCO/COURTESY MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK/LOOK MAGAZINE

# LOOK

BY MEGHAN HOGAN *preserved*

*Harlem at Mid-Century* Photographed by Look Magazine *Images Preserved Thanks to Save America's Treasures*

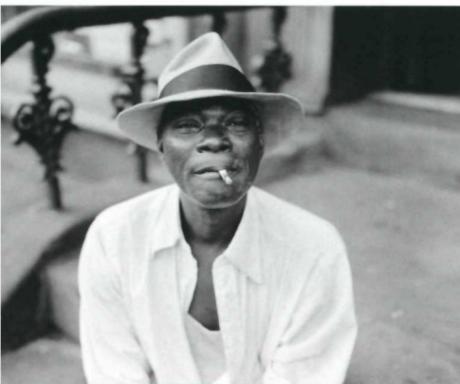
**“COMMUTERS GIVE THE CITY ITS TIDAL RESTLESSNESS, NATIVES GIVE IT SOLIDITY AND CONTINUITY, BUT THE settlers give it passion,”** E.B. White famously claimed in his 1949 paean *Here is New York*. Harlem at mid-century had all of these qualities, and more, a vital enclave in a place emerging as the world’s cultural capital in the wake of World War II. Harlem was home to three classes, said a 1964 *Time* article—“middle, working, and deprived”—all packed in a desolate no man’s land of crumbling tenements slowly being ravaged by drugs, poverty, and crime. “This is the jungle,” a woman said in the article, “the very heart of it.” At the same time, it was an outpost of hope amid the squalor, a vortex of African American art, music, and forces galvanizing the nation to change. Into this milieu stepped the photographers of *Look* magazine, capturing an indelible portrait of the city, today preserved for posterity thanks to a grant from Save America’s Treasures. **LEFT: HARLEM, 1958.**

MOST OF THE FIVE MILLION IMAGES TAKEN FOR LOOK, WHICH RAN FROM 1937 TO 1971, RESIDE AT THE Library of Congress. Except for those of Gotham. They were donated to the Museum of the City of New York, thanks to Grace Mayer, its first curator of prints and photographs. She wooed *Look* in the 1950s, when museums typically did not acquire photographs. For decades, the 200,000 images went largely unviewed. The \$64,000 grant, matched with \$65,000 from the William E. Weiss Foundation, allowed for much needed archival storage of negatives, contact sheets, and prints. The materials were rescued from their original acidic envelopes, placed in polyethylene sleeves, then stored in binders with acid-free liners, and are now safely housed in a climate controlled area of the museum. Perhaps most significantly, each binder was indexed with assignment dates and descriptions. No longer was the collection a jumble of unidentified pictures. "The finder's guide was really the key to understanding the collection," says Donald Albrecht, co-curator of two exhibitions, *Willing to Be Lucky* and *Only in New York*, from which these images were drawn.

While its rival *Life* catered to the educated, *Look* had something for everyone, with the promise to advertisers of "reader interest for yourself, for your wife, your private secretary, for your office boy." Thus there is a vast array of themes. "*Look* tended to be a bit quirky, more democratic, and less authoritative," Albrecht says. Or, as one former editor told him, "the fun one to work at." The images evidence a spectrum of sensibilities. Photographers like Arthur Rothstein and John Vachon forged their socially conscious styles in the Depression.

Stanley Kubrick—who came to *Look* at the ripe age of 17—pointed a filmic but no less socially aware lens on the lives of the city, notably those of boxers and showgirls, informing his later career as director of the iconic *Dr. Strangelove*, 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, and *A Clockwork Orange*. The pages of *Look* also featured the images of esteemed fashion photographers like Michael A. Vaccaro. The work was crafted in a hothouse of creativity, the darkroom of the magazine's

LEFT AND RIGHT: *Harlem, summer 1949.*

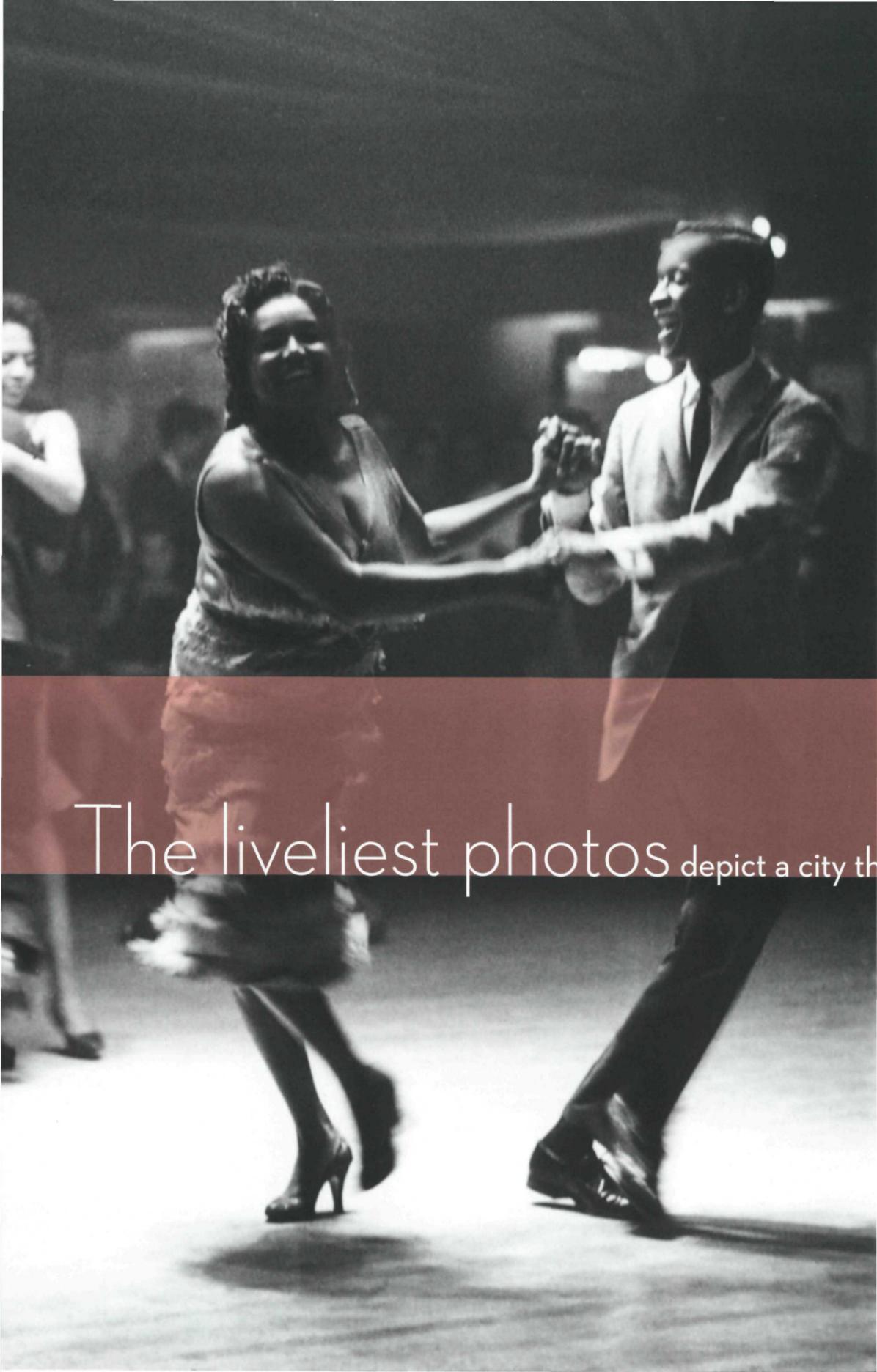


LEFT AND RIGHT: JOHN VACHON/COURTESY MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK/LOOK MAGAZINE



The images reveal the city both "as a newly minted national capitol, yet also as a small town." —curator Donald Albrecht

Emery Roth & Sons-designed headquarters at 488 Madison Avenue, today in the National Register of Historic Places. Photographers were encouraged to explore, experiment, and shoot what excited them, and the cheap price of film fostered a freedom not unlike that of digital today. The images reveal the city both "as a newly minted national capitol, yet also as a small town," Albrecht says.



The liveliest photos depict a city that never slept, in long-gone nightspots like the Palladium, where the mambo craze got its start.

AWAY FROM TOURIST ATTRACTIONS SUCH AS BROADWAY AND CENTRAL PARK, THE CITY has always been one of “micro-neighborhoods,” says Eric C. Schneider, a native of Yorkville on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. Author of *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings: Youth Gangs in Postwar New York*, he describes the place at that time as a patchwork divided by class, race, ethnicity, and religion. “There were literally hundreds of neighborhoods in New York, much as in other cities, though more numerous of course because of the city’s size.”

John Vachon’s photos of Harlem, shot in 1949, and those of Paul Fusco and Robert Lerner, shot in 1958, are among the most telling portraits of the place in that era. In the 1920s and ’30s, the northern stretch of Manhattan around 125th Street had earned fame as the epicenter of the Harlem Renaissance, where Langston Hughes penned “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and Cab Calloway jumped around the stage of the Cotton Club wielding his famous baton. “I’d rather be a



hallways and rotting, rickety staircases, their rat-infested rooms and grease-caked stoves where the roaches fight one another for space, their crumbling plaster and Swiss-cheese ceilings.” With no one of political clout living in Harlem, drugs, prostitution, and illegality flourished.

The encroaching decay, fast overtaking a swath of land no bigger than four square miles, is evident in the images from *Look*. A poster for the film *Road House* peels forlornly on a wall. Unemployed men—for whom

lamppost in Harlem than the Governor of Georgia,” was the saying of the time, as its borders swelled with newcomers from the south, excited to have a place of their own. It wasn’t all roses, however. “People have this idea that Harlem was like a promised land for blacks,” says Michael Henry Adams, author of *Harlem Lost and Found*. “But it wasn’t a perfect place more than any other place.” Discrimination was alive and well in Harlem’s retail establishments, which lost their exclusive patronage as stores elsewhere in the city slowly integrated after World War II.

BY THE TIME THE LOOK PHOTOGRAPHERS ARRIVED ON THE SCENE, THE RENAISSANCE was over. Many jazz masters, some at the heights of their careers, succumbed to the new scourge of Harlem’s streets—heroin. Saxophonist Charlie Parker died at the young age of 34; trumpeter Miles Davis, vocalist Billie Holiday, and a roll call of greats all battled addiction. After the death of a 12 year old, actor Al Fann wrote his award-winning play, *King Heroin*. As drugs moved in and crime took over, the middle class began to move out. “It was two steps forward and two steps back,” Adams says. While it was positive that they could leave to pursue the American dream, they left behind a wasteland of abandoned buildings and poverty-stricken residents. Notes the 1964 *Time* article, “Half of Harlem’s buildings are officially classified as ‘deteriorating’ or ‘dilapidated,’ but no classification—official or otherwise—can adequately describe their garbage-strewn

card games and cheap alcohol were a popular pastime—sit on a curb. Children—mostly from single-parent homes—climb a chain-link fence with no supervision in sight, the ground strewn with debris. In another image, a question mark hovers behind them. Or they happily jump rope oblivious to a white child crying out “I Am So an American!” in a billboard posted by the Institute for American Democracy. It shows “how social relations were scripted in advertising,” says Fusco of the poster, quoted in *San Diego Magazine*. “It also combines the issue of racism with the issue of national identity.” A *Look* article, “Behind New York’s Façade: Slums and Segregation,” presented readers with an eye-opening view of a neighborhood famous, but rarely frequented by anyone but its residents. The article includes “a wealth of statistical information” about segregation’s inherent flaws. For African Americans and other minorities who wanted to live in Manhattan, Harlem was the only choice. “You don’t want to live in a slum. You didn’t make it—you in-

LEFT AND ABOVE: *The Palladium*, January 1961, like the *Savoy Ballroom* not only a showcase for new styles and trends, but a venue for integration.

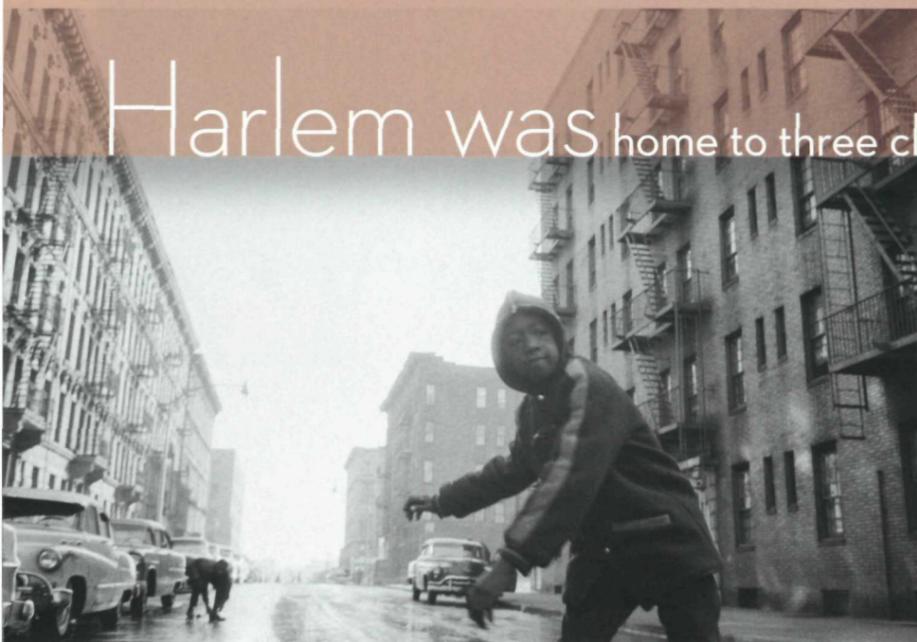
ABOVE AND RIGHT FRANK BAUMAN/COURTESY MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK/LOOK MAGAZINE

herited it. But you'll find all the exits barred by the invisible barrier," notes the article. Harlem's murder rate was six times higher than any other area of New York, and tenants were rent-gouged by rich landlords oblivious to their requests for repairs. "There is no fun, no glamour here," notes *Time*. "There is little excitement even in the violence and sin." Despite the deteriorating state of affairs, hundreds of thousands stayed, and the sense of community nurtured the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. The Hotel Theresa, "the Waldorf Astoria of Harlem"—today listed in the National Register—became home base for Malcolm X's Organization of Afro-American Unity, established to help black people reconnect with their mother continent.

PHOTOGRAPHER PHILLIP HARRINGTON'S SERIES OF PHOTOS, TAKEN BETWEEN APRIL and August of 1953, vividly illustrate New York's ever-changing demographics, as a large number of Latinos, particularly from Puerto Rico, moved into "Spanish Harlem," also known as El Barrio, on the east side of Fifth Avenue and north of 96th Street. Harrington's images show gatherings of young men watching their turf. "Street corner groups of young males could be obnoxious, but they also kept their blocks safe by their presence," Schneider says. "For poorer kids, the block was everything, their claim to being someone, their assertion of rights in a city where poor people usually had none." The hit musical *West Side Story* was a sign of the times, although in real life the clash depicted would more likely have been between Latinos and blacks, not whites as in the story.

Though topics like race were not the standard (more often that was the province of *Life*), in 1954 *Look* turned its lens on the Brooklyn Thrill Killers, an infamous group of Jewish neo-Nazi teenagers

Harlem was home to three classes, said a 1964 *Time* article—"middle, working, and deprived"—all packed in a desolate no man's land.



PAUL FUSCO/COURTESY MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK/LOOK MAGAZINE

ABOVE: Winter in Harlem. RIGHT: Posing for a *Look* photographer, 1949.

who murdered two men. Instead of focusing only on the crime, photographer James Hansen turned the spotlight on the neighbors, with a headline saying "Could This Happen to Your Boy?"

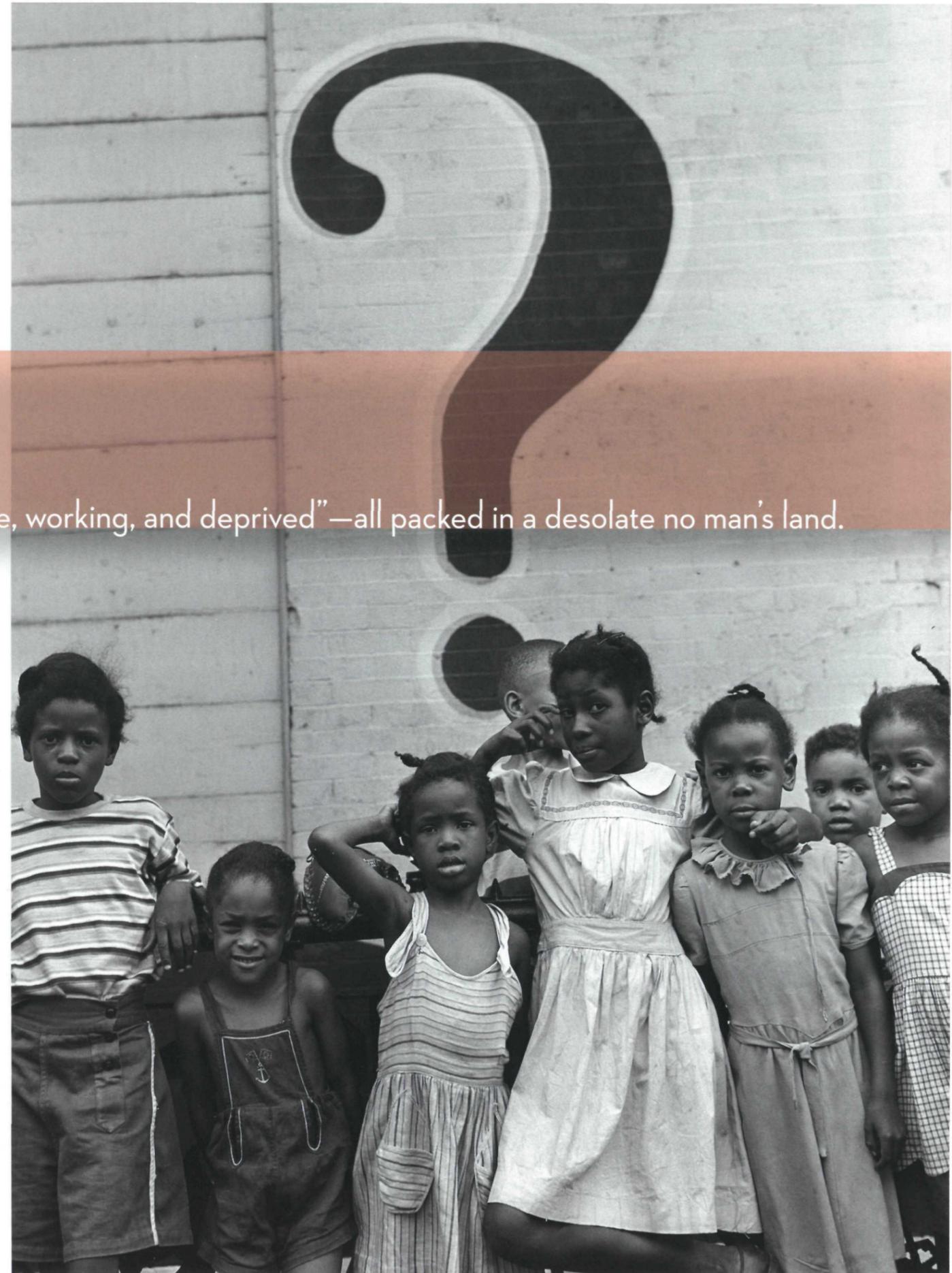
In the pages of *Look*, such depictions contrasted with the generally upbeat image of life in Gotham. The liveliest photos depict a city that never slept, in long-gone nightspots like the Palladium, where the mambo craze got its start. Or the Savoy Ballroom, like the Palladium a venue for integration.

Its advertisers tempted away by TV, *Look's* last issue hit the newsstands on October 19, 1971, with *Life's* demise only a year later. For photojournalism, it was the end of an era when, to quote *The Digital Journalist*, "photographers were the stars."

AS THE BIG APPLE BECOMES MORE HOMOGENEOUS, SO MUCH of it just isn't there anymore, which makes the *Look* collection all the more noteworthy. Though many

bemoan the loss of old New York, the one area that has arguably changed for the better is Harlem. Encouraged by home-grown pride—attracting newcomers such as ex-President Bill Clinton, who moved his office here in 2001—a new renaissance has completely transformed the Harlem that once was. Blocks of buildings have been brought back to life, some thanks to federal historic preservation tax credits—like the Apollo Theater, currently saving for an additional restoration and expansion, and the circa 1908 Park and Tilford building, now the site of chef Marcus Samuelsson's popular Red Rooster restaurant. New stores and businesses are plentiful, and people feel safe. But not all of the change is good, Adams believes. While he applauds the improvements, he says it's a "cosmic joke" that people who have lived and suffered here their entire lives are being forced out for lack of money, just as new resources are arriving. "Harlem today is like Harlem of yesterday—it's the best of times and the worst of times," he says.

contact points web Save America's Treasures Program [www.nps.gov/history/hps/treasures/](http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/treasures/) Museum of the City of New York [www.mcny.org/](http://www.mcny.org/)



JOHN VACHON/COURTESY MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK/LOOK MAGAZINE

# ARTI FACT

## *Ghost Fleet*



**LIKE AN AGED ARMADA WITHOUT A CAUSE**, they sit moored in a river far from the high seas. The National Defense Reserve Fleet, anchored in Beaumont, Texas, is comprised mostly of mothballed merchant vessels kept in case of national emergency, such as a shipping crisis. Varying in age, type, and condition, they can be activated within anywhere from 20 to 120 days. The Beaumont fleet is one of three nationwide—the others are in California's Suisun Bay and Virginia's James River—numbering about 183 ships in all. Informally called the “ghost fleets,” they are a veritable museum of maritime technology, recently documented by the Historic American Engineering Record of the National Park Service. **AT THEIR PEAK IN 1950 THE FLEETS NUMBERED** 2,227 vessels. They were used during the Middle East conflict of 1956, when the Suez Canal was closed, during the Berlin crisis of 1961, and in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. More recently, ships of the ghost fleets housed relief workers in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the Gulf oil spill. **OBSOLETE VESSELS ARE SOLD AS SCRAP**, others are sunk to form artificial reefs, while still others are kept for their historical significance. Ships can be donated to organizations qualified to preserve them. **WITH THE VESSELS SITTING UNUSED FOR DECADES**, pollution is an issue. Lead, copper, zinc, and barium from flaking paint accumulate in the water and sediment of Suisun Bay. The U.S. Department of Transportation, which manages the fleets, is removing the worst sources of pollution and recycling materials. **THE UNCERTAIN FATE OF THE VESSELS** is what brought the HAER team. Though most of the ships at Beaumont are unlikely to ever make the trip down the Neches River, where they are moored, to Sabine Lake and then on into the Gulf of Mexico, they now will be on permanent display in HAER's collection at the Library of Congress. Go to [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs\\_haer/index.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs_haer/index.html).

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