

Deaf Eyes

The Allen Sisters' Photography, 1885–1920

Brenda Jo Brueggemann

“The Misses Allen” they were most often called—personally, by those who knew them in Deerfield, Massachusetts, and also professionally, by those critics who wrote about their photography at the time. Although their individual names appear in relationship to a few of their photographs, more often than not they appear as a unit, Mary and Frances Allen together: The Misses Allen. For nearly fifty years they were companions in art, work, communication, and everyday life.

A “WELL-ROUNDED LIFE, IN THE CHIEFEST OF THINGS”

Frances and Mary Allen were born to a successful farmer, Josiah Allen, and his wife, Mary Stebbins, in the town of Deerfield, Massachusetts.¹ Frances, born in 1854, was the oldest of four children, and Mary was

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Mary Electa Allen



Frances Stebbins Allen

born four years later in 1858. They had two younger brothers. The Josiah Allen family was an extended one; numerous close relatives were always stopping by. They also housed many boarders during the children's younger years—especially young, unmarried, female teachers for the local school. In the fall of 1874—when Frances (often called “Fanny” at that time) was twenty years old and Mary (known sometimes as “Mame”) was sixteen—they began, together, a two-year program at the State Normal School teacher's college in Westfield, Massachusetts. Upon graduation from the normal school, Frances spent the next ten years, from 1876 to 1886, teaching school. Mary's health was reportedly poor during this period so her teaching was rather sporadic.

By 1886 their hearing loss had become great enough that they both gave up teaching. The specific source of the loss is as yet unknown, and the sisters did not develop significant problems until they were in their early thirties. The best medical guess we have today is that their loss might have been the result of otosclerosis, a hardening of the bones of the ear. This condition, once thought to be the result of chronic ear infections or the toll of typical childhood illnesses, is now known to be largely genetic.

True to the pattern of the Allen sisters, it may not appear in a significant way until the middle years of a person's life. In 1893—when they would have been thirty-nine and thirty-five, respectively—the two sisters took a hundred-mile trip by train to Boston to be examined at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary. The doctors determined that Frances would not benefit from surgery on her ears but that Mary might. Thus, surgery was performed on Mary but proved unsuccessful. Mary Allen apparently made use of an ear trumpet for some time. However, she eventually complained that it did not work very well, and so she gave it to her neighbor, Lucy Andrews, who was also deaf (and who had ten children). Even with two owners, the ear tube—which was sold as a “conversation tube” in the 1902 Sears, Roebuck catalog—survives in apparently excellent condition (see figure 1) (Flynt 56). Those of us who have used hearing aids with the same lack of overall utility as Mary Allen and Lucy Andrews experienced, and who thus eventually retired them to our sock drawers, might well imagine Mary Allen's “conversation tube” nestled among the knickers of either of these two women at the time.

In 1897, after they had already embarked on their second career as photographers, Mary—who was often writing letters—corresponded with her friend and cousin, Ellen Gates Starr, about their position and life in



FIGURE 1. Mary Allen's ear trumpet, c. 1902.

relation to their hearing loss.² Starr responded with words that are remarkably wise and forward thinking given the reality of what it must have been like for two single women who had just lost their first careers (and one of the few careers available to women at all during this time): “No, it isn't a maimed life. It is a difficult one—hard & trying often; but those who having eyes see not & having ears hear not, they live the maimed life. Yours is a well rounded one, in the chiefest of things” (Flynt 22).

Although certainly their hearing loss could not have been heartening, the fact remains that it did foster their new careers in photography just as it added to their mutual support of each other. Although the official historical records state that Mary and Frances “remained single” all of their lives, in fact nothing could be further from the truth. Not only did they have each other in an obviously rich and rewarding nonsingular relationship, but they also had thick and multiple relationships with their Deerfield neighbors, their extended family, and several key women of the time—most notably Ellen Gates Starr; the social reformer Jane Addams, who cofounded the Hull House in Chicago; and Frances Benjamin Johnston, a foremost photographer and critic of the “pictorial” school of photography that was becoming so popular at this time. Finally, out of their deafness and their close relationships, they generated a kind of “life of the eye” through the lens of photography.

It is likely that the Allen sisters learned about photography from their brother, Edmund Allen, who often took photographs for his job as a civil engineer in the 1880s, the same time that they were going deaf and leaving their careers as teachers. Edmund himself began using the camera outside of his engineer's job when his four daughters were born, between 1888 and 1895. By at least 1884, Frances and Mary were photographing using a view camera and creating albumen prints. There is, for example, a wonderful image taken by Frances of Mary standing beside a view camera in 1885, which would have been at the very beginning of their photographic careers.³

The Allen sisters had been taking pictures, using photography as both art and income, for nearly fifteen years before their moment of national and international fame. Brought along with thirty other American women photographers to be featured in the 1900 Universal Exposition in Paris, the Allen sisters found themselves the center of considerable attention

when the exhibition organizer, Frances Benjamin Johnston—herself a well-known photographer and critic—declared the sisters two of the “Foremost Women Photographers in America” in a July 1901 issue of *Ladies Home Journal* (Flynt 42).

Despite their popularity as photographers even in their local area (neighbors reported having to put signs on their own doors warding off lost Allen sister visitors),⁴ and despite their considerable artistic and competitive success, when they did choose to exhibit their work in larger public exhibits and contests, the Misses Allen remained remarkably modest about their work. In a March 1894 article in the photography journal the *Photo-Beacon*, the sisters present a quite unpretentious “Prize-Winners’ Account of Themselves.” This account contextualizes well the sisters’ own vision of their work and is worth repeating, at least in part:

Our methods are too simple to have much interest for the skilled amateur photographer who tries all the new processes. We use the camera simply as a quick way of sketching, and regard all the technical part, which comes after the exposure is made, as a necessary evil. . . .

In pictures, artistic excellence is usually entirely at variance with what is called a perfect photograph. The eye cannot focus itself on every object in its field of vision at the same time. If a photograph does this, the effect is hard and unnatural. But there must be method in this madness. A picture is not necessarily beautiful because it is blurred, and there’s need of all one’s technical skill, even after a negative is made, in adapting the print to its peculiar individual qualities.

The merit of posing, which you kindly give us credit for, belongs rather to the models. Our chief virtue is in letting them alone. We usually have better success with children who are not too highly civilized, or too conventionally clothed, or who are too young to be conscious. We give them a general idea of the picture we want, and then let them alone until they forget about us and the drop catches an unconscious pose. They consider it a game, as we are always ready to play at it. (Flynt 27)

As their modest comment on their art demonstrates here, the sisters’ particular success at the kind of art “pictorial” photography being made

popular at this time was chiefly with children, although they also excelled at photographing colonial recreated scenes of work and home, local citizens at work or play, and local landscapes. Throughout their photographic career Mary repeatedly described their work as somewhere between “art” and “craft.” This midway designation may have been in part because their photography served at least a dual function for them as both artistic expression and basic income. For even while their images garnered attention in competitions and art-focused publications, the Allen sisters also used it as a source of income. Their income-producing photography can be divided into two categories: portrait photography (including sittings arranged for people who traveled to have their portraits done by the sisters) and photographic illustrations for magazine articles.

They opened their own formal studio in 1901 by converting an upstairs bedroom into their darkroom; the parlor downstairs became the salesroom. The conversion of a typically “hearing” social space, the parlor, into their salesroom, a place now dominated by the eye—a space centered around visual communication—seems particularly appropriate. In 1904 they began publishing catalogs of their images. Their last catalog was published in 1920. Mary apparently went on with some of the business throughout the 1920s—well into her sixties—but Frances’s sight began to deteriorate considerably during that decade. Although she became both deaf and blind, Frances continued to work in her garden, and she walked the equivalent of a mile every day on their front porch. Frances died first, at the age of eighty-seven, on Valentine’s Day, February 14, 1941. Always but always together, Mary died only four days later, February 18, at the age of eighty-three.

IN A COMMUNITY: THE ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENT IN DEERFIELD

Some part of the Allen sisters’ success at photography—whether as art or craft, income or aesthetics—would have been due to their local historical circumstance as citizens of Deerfield, Massachusetts, at the turn of the past century. Deerfield was a town deeply engaged in the local arts and crafts movement that swept much of America at the turn of the century, and it was regarded for “its four-fold aspect which makes up the back-

ground for human happiness,—rural peace and plenty, historical associations, artistic expression, and intellectual alertness” (“Deerfield,” 53).

Mary Allen herself was one of the original four members of the Deerfield Society of Blue and White Needlework; in fact, she designed its trademark, a blue “D” within a flax wheel (see figure 2). This society of embroiderers was held up as a kind of model community for arts and crafts at the time, as was noted by the *Chicago Daily News* in 1897: “The Deerfield Society of Blue and White Needlework is a national product of our awakened interest in things colonial and in handsome things rather than in those turned out by the dozen from machines; it is also an example of the Ruskin notion of establishing village industries and promoting rural crafts” (Flynt 32).

In fact, for a number of years Mary was often torn between embroidery and photography. In a 1898 letter to Francis Benjamin Johnston she



FIGURE 2. Deerfield Society of Blue and White Needlework.

wrote that the two “still elbow each other, & I am no nearer deciding which master to serve” (Flynt 33). But by 1900, when Johnston convinced the Allen sisters to exhibit some of their prints in the famous Universal Exposition in Paris, photography seems to have become the dominant elbow for her. Yet the relationship between their photography and the larger arts and crafts movement was still often two handed, as their biographer Suzanne Flynt has noted: “Frances and Mary Allen served two critical, but distinct, roles in the Deerfield Arts and Crafts movements: their handcrafted photographs were among the town’s artistic offerings and their images of craft workers publicized the town’s activities” (Flynt 33). The photographic work of the Misses Allen was always handcrafted, aesthetic, subtle, careful, and yet simple, and these qualities matched and advanced those of the overall Arts and Crafts movement in America at the time.

What is more, their location in Deerfield, Massachusetts, was crucial to the content and composition of their photography as they made the most of their local subjects.⁵ The Allen sisters excelled, for example, at four overlapping kinds of photographic compositions that all somehow made use of local scenes and subjects. First, their images often capitalized on the still potential nostalgia of farming in the area (see figures 3 and 4). Second, they often recreated colonial life (another form of nostalgia of the time) through the portraits of local subjects (their friends, neighbors, and family most often) who willingly posed for them in colonial scenes and costumes and through their photographic documentation of annual pageants that often featured colonial themes (see figures 5–8). Third, they excelled and capturing and composing nature’s paradoxical grandeur and simplicity in their local environment as well as through some foreign travel and a trip to the western United States (see figures 9 and 10). Fourth, and perhaps most successfully, their photography often exhibited the simple yet rich lives of children (see figures 11–13).

Living in Deerfield had additional relevance for the Allen sisters. Deerfield is located only twelve miles from Northampton, Massachusetts, which is home to the Clarke School for the Deaf. Founded in 1867, this school was the first permanent oral school for the deaf in America, and to this day it remains one of the premier oral-focused educational centers for deaf and hard of hearing children in America, if not the world. The Allen



FIGURE 3. Onion Harvest.



FIGURE 4. Sharpening the Scythe



FIGURE 5. Betty at the Churn.



FIGURE 6. The Letter of the Law



FIGURE 7. Spirit of the Wheat.



FIGURE 8. Anachronism.



FIGURE 9. Snowstorm.

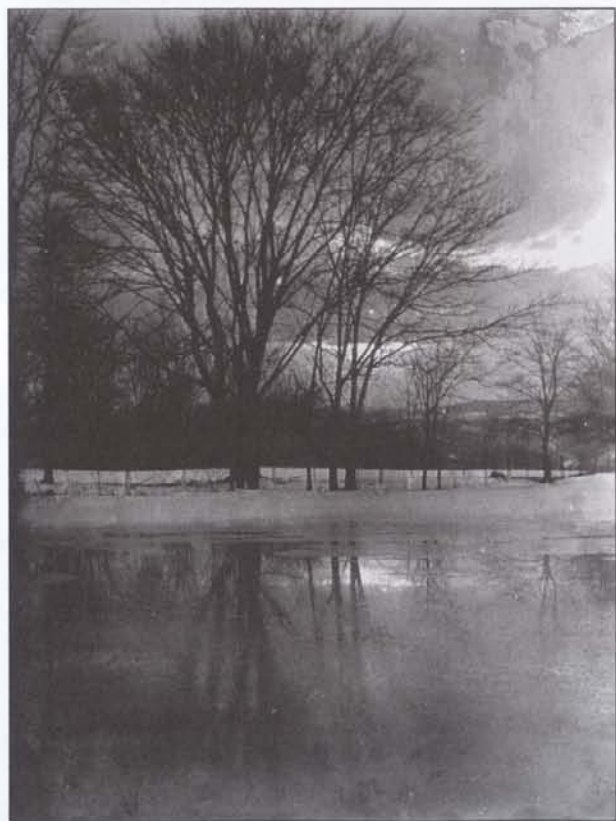


FIGURE 10. Red Winter Sunset.



FIGURE 11. Eleanor Brown Stebbins (1875-1955) (Mrs. Benjamin Stebbins) Washing a Child's Hand.



FIGURE 12. Making a Dam.



FIGURE 13. Little Girl & Doll at a Tea Party.

sisters both took some lipreading lessons at the Clarke School; however, they did not do well at them. Although Mary continued to give lipreading some effort and practice, Frances—who was also apparently more deaf than Mary—abandoned lipreading and oral efforts altogether and relied primarily on writing to communicate with others. (There is, for example, a wonderful image taken by Mary Allen of her sister, Frances, exchanging a written note with one of their young nephews.) But given that the oral method dominated in the education of deaf children (and adults) at this time, the sisters' proximity to the very center of American deaf oral education certainly would have affected the way they went about being "deaf" and interacting in a hearing world.

WOMEN AND PHOTOGRAPHY: A TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY SNAPSHOT

Alfred Stieglitz, father of the pictorial movement in photography and instigator of the renegade "photo-secession" movement at the turn of the twentieth century, wrote to Frances Benjamin Johnston in summer 1900 that "the women in this country are certainly doing great photographic work & deserve much commendation for their efforts." Commendation was indeed quick in coming, as Johnston organized, on very short notice, the history-making exhibit of thirty-one American women photographers at the Universal Exposition in Paris in both 1900 and 1901. The exhibit was so successful that it went even more international when W. I. Srezniewsky of St. Petersburg commissioned the exhibit to travel to Russia.

Johnston herself was a formidable figure in American photography; she compiled a string of impressive firsts: the first White House photographer, the first woman member of the Washington D.C. Camera Club, the first woman really involved in underground photography, and a prolific critic and author (on the subject of photography and art) (Curtis 24). For the Universal Exposition in Paris, Johnston particularly sought out and encouraged those women doing what she deemed as "art photography." Furthermore, records of her correspondence indicate that she believed that the inclusion of professional photographic work by three American women photographers in particular was essential to the exhibit: Zaida Ben Yusuf from New York, Mabel Osgood Wright from Connecticut, and the

Allen sisters of Deerfield, Massachusetts. From the outset, photography developed as a field that offered women multiple and previously unmatched possibilities. Here, at some necessary and illuminating length, is how contemporary photography scholar Verna Posever Curtis explains these possibilities in an essay about Francis Benjamin Johnston's role in "staking the sisterhood's claim in American photography":

It was true that the field of photography, in particular, offered women life-fulfilling possibilities. The will to experiment in a promising endeavor motivated those seeking their independence in the last quarter of the century. Photography allowed women to show their mettle in socially acceptable ways without being bound to predominantly male patronage or to the academic tradition of the fine arts. Qualities that were advantageous to the picture-taking, developing and mounting processes—such as deftness, attention to detail, good taste, patience and perseverance—were regarded as innately female, or at least were reinforced through training in such household arts and crafts as spinning or needlework. Indeed, mastery of photography required what was then expected of the female sex. In photographic portraiture, to cite one area, women who radiated graciousness and tact were at a great advantage with sitters. (29–30)

It is striking how Curtis's list of advantageous qualities for success at photography mirrors, in essence, those qualities deemed most desired for teachers: deftness, attention to detail, good taste, patience, and perseverance. Yet teaching was clearly a hearing vocation (at that time, if not always), and photography, quite conveniently, could facilitate the deaf and "silent," but ultraobservant, faculties of the photographer's "eye."

In their thirties, the Misses Allen, who trained first as teachers and who earned their own income as well as their independence, found themselves struggling to communicate in an oral and aural world. In fact, when Johnston wrote to the Allen sisters early in 1900, requesting that they submit some photographs and a biographical sketch for consideration as part of the famous Paris exhibition, Mary Allen responded modestly about their work and their biographies. Although Mary hints at the role of their deafness in coming to photography, she does not, of course, directly name it:

I will send you a few prints to show what sort of work we have done in a few days. I should be glad to compose an autobiography also, but you know already all there is to know. We have no "methods" and no "conditions." We have had no training either—technical or artistic—and we have no theories. We take what work comes to hand—and it fits itself as it can into the intervals of other duties, for it still has to take a secondary place.

We took to it [photography] ten years ago as a resource, when we were obliged to give up teaching. (Flynt 39)

As this passage from Mary Allen's own letter indicates, they were talented and resourceful, yet they also lived with the limitations in career options imposed upon them as members of the female sex at this particular time and place. Quite craftily, quite artfully, however, they found their place and success behind the shutter of the camera's eye. With a camera in their hands and an artful eye, the Allen sisters passed in a hearing world.

DEAF EYES: THE ALLEN SISTERS AS DEAF/ WOMEN/PHOTOGRAPHERS

The Allen sisters grew up in a unique period and place in American deaf history. It was also a hard place, to be sure. For deaf people in America, the first half of the nineteenth century had been a significant period of educational and social growth as the first school for deaf children opened in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817—the American School for the Deaf (ASD). Education for the students at ASD was delivered and encouraged in both oral English and manual sign language—a method that not only worked to meet the linguistic capabilities of all the students but that also allowed deaf adults to be teachers of deaf children. But by midcentury things began to shift considerably. Oral education grew to be the favored method of education. The first major oral school in the United States, the Clarke School for the Deaf in Northampton, Massachusetts, opened in 1867. Although the first college for deaf and hard of hearing people in the world opened in 1864—then known as the Columbia Institution for the Deaf in Washington, D.C., and now known as Gallaudet Univer-

sity—oral education was still fast taking hold as *the* method of instruction for deaf children in the United States.

The influence of Alexander Graham Bell was substantial in these oral-focused efforts. Bell's mother and his wife, Mabel Hubbard Bell, were both deaf and in fact Bell began his adult career as an oral educator of deaf children. Mabel had been one of his students. He stumbled onto the telephone—his most famous invention—because he was actually looking for a device that would help deaf people hear better and that would help him use, with more success, a method of teaching deaf pupils that he and his father had developed called "visible speech." Bell also developed the first audiometer—a machine to measure hearing loss. Furthermore, Bell was also known as one of the leading eugenicists of the day, and he even wrote and published a eugenicist tract, *Graphical Studies of Marriages of the Deaf*, attempting to prove that when deaf people marry other deaf people they often produced deaf children. Using his "positive" eugenics philosophy as his rationale, Bell concluded that deaf people should thus be greatly discouraged from marrying other deaf people.

The eradication of sign languages and the support for, and dominance of, oral/speech-based means of communication and education for deaf people was crucial to Bell's eugenicist argument. Bell believed that when deaf people had sign languages to share with each other they were all the more likely to associate exclusively with each other and marry. He supposed that deaf children raised orally would be more likely to mix, mingle, and marry in the hearing world, thereby eventually decreasing (if not eradicating) the birth of deaf children. At a famous international conference on the subject of deaf education, the Milan Conference of 1880, Bell himself spoke strongly in favor of oral-only education. When the vote was taken at the Milan Conference regarding the oral-manual debate, sign language was declared forbidden as a method of educating (or communicating with) deaf children.⁶

The Allen sisters grew up in the middle of this period of significant stigma over deafness, when staunch oral methods came to dominate deaf education and when eugenics "science" declared deafness (and thereby deaf people) an aberration worthy of eradication and not deserving of marriage, particularly if the cause of deafness was unknown (as it was for the Allen sisters) and potentially genetically transmissible. Perhaps they

felt the stigma even more palpably because they were well educated and well off financially, because they began young adulthood with a career that depended significantly on their hearing, and also because they lived in such close proximity to the nation's premier (and elite) school for oral education. One effect of the focus on oral education was that deaf women found themselves without employment opportunities at a time when America's women were entering the teaching force in great numbers. Although deaf men, being men, had other kinds of work they could do, the possibilities were quite limited for deaf women. Once teaching—along with the focus on oral education—was taken from them, the limits were staggering. As historian and Deaf studies scholar Susan Burch has written, the combined trends of oralism and the overall feminization of the teaching force in America “ultimately displaced educated Deaf women to an even greater extent, depriving them of both educational and career opportunities, as well as of social choices. Thus, as oralism and other reform movements opened more opportunities for women in general, they closed doors for Deaf women” (19). If Deaf Americans overall were the subjects of “illusions of equality,” as historian Robert Buchanan suggests, deaf women were not even allowed the illusions.

Yet clearly Mary and Frances Allen had something—or rather, some things: a camera; a failed career at teaching and new time on their hands; a knack with children; a sensitivity to the soul of a pose; an educated and worldly sense of art and culture that was quite forward-looking, yet a strong sense of local flavor and understanding that also centered on saving and savoring the past (nostalgia, we might call it); and a community that embraced them and their work. And, of course, they had each other. With two pair of deaf eyes, they looked out for each other. Mary often assisted Frances, for example, whose hearing loss was considerably greater, when they traveled and also when they met with people to do their portraits.

As time went on and the sisters aged and became even more deaf (Frances was also mostly blind in the last ten years of her life), their photos move back and away from their earlier people-centered and posed portraits. These portraits would have surely been hard to do well the more their deafness overtook them. Frances especially withdrew and communicated less and less with people in Deerfield; while Mary would still sometimes take the actual portraits or pose the subjects, Frances would

complete the technical work and focus on other business-related tasks. In the later years, especially in the last five, from 1915–20, most of their photography is either of landscape—something they would not really need to listen to or interact socially with—or an image that positions them as the distant history-recording observers who chronicled the many pageants and events in the Deerfield community. From these positions, their camera and their photographers' eyes—deaf eyes—allowed them to remain in the scene, however distant. Whether they were watching and recording from close up or afar, the deaf eyes of the Misses Allen behind their cameras were serving, in effect, as tools of communication and social interaction, art and income, history and hope.

NOTES

1. Much of my autobiographical information about the Allen sisters comes from Suzanne L. Flynt's thorough and remarkable book about them and their photography: Suzanne L. Flynt, *The Allen Sisters: Pictorial Photographers 1885–1920*.

2. Ellen Gates Starr founded the Hull House settlement in Chicago with Jane Addams in 1889, where she also lived for nearly thirty years. She is known for her significant social reform efforts aimed at child labor laws and improving the working wages and conditions for immigrant factory workers, as well as her strong support of and belief in the value of arts and crafts for communities and individuals alike.

3. Throughout their photographic careers, the sisters often took portrait images of each other.

4. Biographer Suzanne Flynt notes that the Allen sisters' neighbors were said to have had to direct “lost” visitors and portrait seekers to the home of Mary and Frances Allen. On this matter, I speculate that it is quite possible that the visitors may well have first shown up at the correct address. But given the fact that the sisters were, of course, deaf and may well have been in the darkroom, elsewhere in the house, or busy with a sitting, it is quite possible they did not hear the first knocks of their visitors. And when they did not answer the initial knocking, their visitors likely wandered off to another nearby house—a house where someone actually did answer the door—and inquired about the correct address of the sisters.

5. A good number of the Allen sisters' photographs are available digitally at the Old Deerfield Memorial Hall Museum online collections.

6. For further reading about this era and the effects of oralism and A. G. Bell on the Deaf community, see the works by Baynton, Van Cleve and Crouch, Van Cleve, and Winefield.

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Women and Deafness

Double Visions

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