

Ella Watson's workday began when the regular occupants of the governmental buildings went home. Sensitive to the theatrical potential of deserted spaces, Gordon Parks experimented with lighting to heighten the solitary nature of her labor and the quiet authority with which she pursued it. A photograph of Watson in a pool of light at the end of a darkened corridor emphasizes the isolation of her work environment. Other photographs of her emptying trash cans, sweeping stairs, and tidying office spaces illuminate Watson as if she were onstage, a magnetic performer compelling the viewer's attention and respect.

Having worked briefly as a hotel cleaner in Chicago during the Great Depression, Gordon Parks understood and respected Ella Watson's custodial responsibilities. He often photographed her as she mopped or swept, her slender hands angling a broom handle in bathrooms, offices, and hallways adorned with patriotic signs. Scholar Salamishah Tillet describes the confluence of these elements as intentional, noting that Black domestic workers like Watson were in fact "patriotic, political, and pious" women, many of whom would become leaders in the civil rights movement.

Historian Deborah Willis notes that “Mrs. Watson spent her life taking care of family—her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren—and caring about other people’s welfare and comfort.” In an interview with Ella Watson’s great-granddaughter, Willis learned that Watson “often talked about the delight she took in caring for the children in the family,” and loved to cook for them. Parks often photographed Watson as she doted upon the children under her care—feeding them, embracing them, reading to them—revealing the warmth of her household through his camerawork.

Gordon Parks found inspiration in Ella Watson's family life. He was especially attentive to the routines of the household, which included Watson's departure for work. Watson appears upon the threshold of her home in several shots, neatly dressed in a light-colored hat, blouse, and calf-length skirt as she exits the apartment. Parks took several photographs through the windows of Watson's home at a low angle, much as a small child would peer over the sill to wave good-bye.

When asked how she would describe Ella Watson, Watson's great-granddaughter Rosslyn Samuels replied that she was "a Proverbs 31 woman!" As historian Deborah Willis notes, this biblical proverb says, "She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. . . . Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate." Gordon Parks's photographs venerate the tireless devotion, and tenderness, with which Watson cared for her extended family; her efforts are visible in the robust health of each child.

Ella Watson's Christian faith was critically important to her, and she adorned her home with devotional images and figurines. Gordon Parks photographed many of these to convey the significance of Watson's beliefs in the life of the household. Some of the most visually compelling images in the series center on Watson's bedroom bureau, a host of small religious figures arranged before, and reflected within, its mirror.

Reflections of Watson and two of the smallest children appear in two other photographs, the cross of a rosary dangling protectively alongside their faces in the mirror.

Gordon Parks often photographed Ella Watson's adopted daughter, Laretta, near the edge of the frame or as a reflection in one of the household's mirrors. Laretta's contemplative profile appears in two of Parks's most complex compositions in the series, each one taken in the apartment's main living space looking into the kitchen. Framed by the graceful curves of the mirror, Laretta gazes toward her family in the room beyond yet seems to be in a world of her own—a girl on the cusp of young adulthood, perhaps considering the responsibilities of her future.

Historian Melanee Harvey notes that “Ella Watson’s Washington, D.C., was an environment shaped by Black religious diversity,” and her choice of Verbrycke Spiritual Church was deliberately independent. Gordon Parks said Watson had “done him a great service” in welcoming him to services at Verbrycke, allowing him to understand the intellectual and spiritual means by which she defined herself and her leadership position within that community. Parks included a portrait of the church’s founder, the Reverend Vondell Gassaway, within the frame of his photograph of St. Joseph’s New Tomb, a small shrine inside the church building.



Members of Verbrycke Spiritual Church practiced a form of charismatic Christianity, and the church itself brimmed with religious iconography. As historian Melanee Harvey notes, “[Gordon] Parks’s photographs of the church reveal this storefront sacred space as a symbolically dense environment that facilitated spiritual [transcendence] beyond one’s socio-economic circumstances.” Parks’s photographs of Verbrycke’s pastor, pulpit, choir, and congregation reveal a vibrantly engaged community of faith, united in its efforts to “Think and Pray”—as a Verbrycke classified ad urged—toward a collective liberation.

Ella Watson was a leader in her religious community, serving first as a deaconess and later as a church mother. As deaconess, Watson prepared the sanctuary for Sunday services and other ritual occasions; as a church mother, she would have been recognized as an honored matriarch within the church hierarchy—official acknowledgment of a life devoted to caring for others. Gordon Parks photographed Watson taking part in the religious services she helped to prepare, her white dress and cap impeccable for Sunday.

Watson's church was established in 1928 and was a new Protestant denomination devoted to Spiritualist practices. Congregants embraced metaphysical education as part of their faith and sought a dynamic relationship with the divine. Parks strived to capture the vibrancy of Verbrycke Spiritual Church's community by repeatedly shifting his camera angle to frame the rapt faces and outstretched hands of church members.

Gordon Parks's photographs of the yearly flower bowl demonstration (a religious ritual at Verbrycke Spiritual Church) are deliberately solemn, focusing on the devotional expressions of church members. Resisting racist stereotypes of Black faith traditions as “wild” or “frenzied,” Parks underscored the dignity, agency, and intellectual engagement of Watson's religious community.

Gordon Parks took several photographs inside Franks Cleaning and Pressing, a laundry service located in Watson's neighborhood. At Franks, Parks photographed Black and Asian employees as they tailored garments, packaged clothing, ran deliveries, and took cigarette breaks. An American flag is visible in two of these photographs, as is a portrait of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt above a small calendar. Within the busy atmosphere of Franks, Parks highlighted a multiracial cast of American laborers as they contributed to the economy—and, by extension, the war effort.

Streetcars were the primary form of public transportation in Washington, D.C., until the 1960s. Gordon Parks photographed streetcars both from Ella Watson's apartment windows and at street level, where she and many other working people would catch a ride to their jobs in wealthier neighborhoods.

Gordon Parks was not an experienced street photographer in 1942, but he expanded his practice while in Washington, D.C. In Watson's neighborhood, he took both candid and posed photographs of people he encountered—dapper men in hats, a child with a serious expression leaning on the door of a beauty shop, a small child standing on crutches with one pant leg folded up. These telling details would become a hallmark of Parks's empathetic documentary style.

At J. Benjamin's Groceries and Meats, Gordon Parks photographed the shop's Black proprietor as he assisted other Black customers with their requests. Streams of light within the store spotlight stacks of canned goods, fresh fruits and vegetables, and bakery goods as well as cured meats—a cornucopia of nutritional abundance for those able to afford them. On the sidewalk in front of the shop, Parks photographed a stand holding two brooms and a mop—perhaps a sly allusion to his earlier portrait of Ella Watson.