

**Bread and Milk**

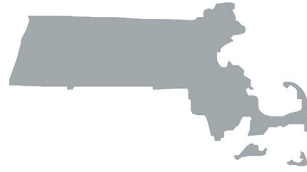
Frances S. Allen and Mary E. Allen, 1894
Albumen print

In the nineteenth century, it was unheard of for a commercial photographer to portray a child eating. But once women entered the profession, they looked for beauty in everyday life in and around their homes, resulting in compositions of domestic life. This photograph was acclaimed as a fine example of what women could do with the camera. It was reproduced in "Baby-Photography for Amateurs," *Photo-Era*, October 1900, and in "Women Photographers and Their Work," *The Delineator*, November 1901.

PHOTO ESSAY

The Allen Sisters: “Foremost Women Photographers in America”

SUZANNE L. FLYNT



Editor’s Introduction: *In our effort to expand HJM’s focus to include artistic and material culture, we have initiated a new “Photo Essay” feature. Here we offer selections from a photography exhibit on display at Memorial Hall Museum in Deerfield. Because HJM is now available in several online academic databases, reproducing this exhibit in our pages makes it available to a much wider audience and preserves it for future generations of readers and researchers. Suzanne L. Flynt is curator of Memorial Hall Museum, Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Deerfield, Massachusetts.*

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Frances Stebbins Allen (1854-1941) and her sister, Mary Electa Allen (1858-1941), were among the foremost women photographers at the turn of the twentieth century. Frances and Mary Allen’s home and inspiration were in the Connecticut River Valley town of Deerfield. The Allen sisters were provided opportunities to advance academically, socially, and artistically at Deerfield Academy and, beginning in the fall of 1874, at the State Normal School teacher’s college in Westfield, Massachusetts (now Westfield State College). The sisters amiably shared a room, classes, and friends. After the first day of school, Frances wrote to her mother:



The Baby

Mary E. Allen, c. 1899

Platinum print

The Allen sisters had innate wisdom about composition. Some of their most effective figural studies do not focus on the face. This print was reproduced in *McClure's Magazine* in November 1900 and exhibited in the "Fifth Annual Exhibition of Photographs" at the Worcester Art Museum in 1908.

“I think there is a splendid set of teachers. Anybody can see that they are smart, and good too, by just looking at them.”¹ Frances and Mary’s subsequent letters home brim with enthusiasm about all aspects of school life. In a letter to her brother, Edmund, Frances encouraged him to visit, although the school’s strict boarding rules made her uncertain “whether they would dare have a wolf come among the lambs here.”² Tuition was free to the State Normal School pupils who agreed to teach in the state’s public schools following commencement and, in June 1876, Frances and Mary Allen graduated from the State Normal School.

Frances spent the next ten years, from 1876 to 1886, teaching, but due to poor health, Mary’s teaching career was sporadic. When they were in their thirties, however hearing loss forced both to give up their chosen careers. Frances became profoundly deaf, and Mary could only partially hear even with the use of amplification. Resolved to find employment, the Allens were drawn to the field of photography – one of the few socially acceptable pursuits for women outside of the home. They learned their craft through photography journals and by their association with urban artists and photographers summering in Deerfield. The rural landscape of Western Massachusetts provided artistic vistas for the Allen sisters to work with, and Deerfield’s impressive eighteenth-century houses and furnishings offered a perfect environment for their colonial re-creations. Book and magazine publishers commissioned the Allens’ photographs of children, country life, or costumed figures enacting Colonial Revival interests. Between 1896 and 1916, the flourishing of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Deerfield played a critical role in the Allen sisters’ careers. Summer exhibitions, the Old Deerfield Pageants, large numbers of tourists, international competitions, and national press coverage provided the Allens with an admiring audience not found in most rural towns.

Recognition of the success of their vision came in 1901 when eminent photographer and critic Frances Benjamin Johnston named the sisters two of “The Foremost Women Photographers in America.” She declared:

Frances and Mary Allen, like most of their professional sisters, are women whose success in photography is the result of patient, painstaking effort. Without any special training but that of well-read women of good taste they have put character,

¹ Frances S. Allen, Letter to her mother, Mary Stebbins Allen, Deerfield, MA, September 13, 1874, Private Collection.

² *Ibid.*

dignity and artistic feeling into their pictures, and they stand unrivaled in their individual line of work. In that quaint, old Massachusetts town of Deerfield the Allen sisters have found a veritable mine of picturesque material.³

Frances and Mary Allen's photographs of children were especially admired. In a March 1894 letter published in the journal, *The Photo-Beacon*, the sisters noted:

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, and are always ready to play at it.

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Editor's Note: This selection of photographs is drawn from the twenty-six Allen sisters' photographs currently on view in the exhibition *Don't Smile for the Camera: Another Angle on Early Photography*, at Memorial Hall Museum, Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Deerfield, Massachusetts, until November 1, 2009. For more information, visit the museum's website at americancenturies.mass.edu. Portions of this text were excerpted from Suzanne L. Flynt's *The Allen Sisters: Pictorial Photographers 1885-1920* published by the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Deerfield, Massachusetts (2002).

Seeking Future Photo Essays: If you have seen a recent photography exhibit featuring an intriguing aspect of Massachusetts history, please let us know.

³ Frances Benjamin Johnson, Editor. "The Foremost Women Photographers in America," *The Ladies' Home Journal* 18, No. 8 (July 1901): 13.



Pilgrim's Progress
 Frances S. Allen and
 Mary E. Allen, c. 1910
 Platinum print

Although by the time this photograph was taken an abridged children's version of John Bunyan's popular Christian allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, was available, it does not appear to be what this boy is reading. Perhaps the film *Pilgrim's Progress*, made in 1912, would have put a smile on this boy's face.

Man with Twine
 Frances S. Allen and
 Mary E. Allen, c. 1900
 Platinum print

The Allen sisters were more likely to depict men, rather than women and children, in their views of rural life. With darkened background, the focus is on the man's working hands.





Miss Fidelia: “It’s time they were here”

Frances S. and Mary E. Allen
Deerfield, Massachusetts; c. 1900
Printing out paper

Ten photographs from the Miss Fidelia series were exhibited in Deerfield in 1901. Audiences admired “the remarkable series of character pictures which they call ‘Miss Fidelia’s Story,’ that is full of New England humor . . . brilliant examples of the variety of their artistic perceptions.” This photograph is part of a series that depicts Miss Fidelia preparing for and receiving company.



The Old Deerfield Pageants in 1910, 1913, and 1916 – held in the backyard of the Allens’ house – provided costumed models for their colonial revival photographs. With casts of hundreds, and audiences of thousands, Deerfield created a new industry.

Above: “Morning Prayers,” c. 1913. Wearing unlikely white stockings and Mary Janes, Jennie Childs and local children were costumed as Deerfield’s colonial schoolteacher and her pupils.

Below: “Anachronism,” c. 1913. Posing as a Native American, a pageant participant is portrayed photographing other cast members.

