



# Foundations of U.S. History

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## Primary Source Activity: Depression Photographs, 1930s

- [Download Photograph 1](#)  
(<http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/activities/pdf/DocPhotosPhoto1.pdf>)
- [Download Photograph 2](#)  
(<http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/activities/pdf/DocPhotosPhoto2.pdf>)
- [Download Photograph 3](#)  
(<http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/activities/pdf/DocPhotosPhoto3.pdf>)

[\*print this activity \(.pdf\)\*](#)

(<http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/activities/pdf/DocPhotos.pdf>)

### 1. Overview

In this activity, teachers examine three photographs of Floyd Burroughs and his family, all sharecroppers in Hale County, Alabama. As sharecroppers, the Burroughs were virtual slaves to landowners in the area. The photos, taken in 1936 by Farm Security Administration photographer Walker Evans, paint a portrait of rural poverty. First, teachers examine the map, and ask the following questions:

- What do you notice about these photographs?
- What questions do you want to ask about these photographs?

After discussing these questions, teachers learn more about the historical context of the Depression, and draw conclusions about the photographs and the photographer. After completing the activity, teachers discuss possible classroom applications.

### 2. Source Analysis

- Distribute a copy of [Photograph 1](#)  
(<http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/activities/pdf/DocPhotosPhoto1.pdf>) to each

teacher. Ask teachers to work in pairs while examining the photograph and noting observations and questions.

- Distribute a copy of **Photograph 2** (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/activities/pdf/DocPhotosPhoto2.pdf>) to each teacher. Ask teachers to work in pairs while examining the photograph and noting observations and questions.
- Distribute a copy of **Photograph 3** (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/activities/pdf/DocPhotosPhoto3.pdf>) to each teacher. Ask teachers to work in pairs while examining the photograph and noting observations and questions.
- Ask teachers to spend an additional 5 minutes comparing the three photographs.

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### 3. Group Discussion

Write three columns on the board: Notice, Questions, and Historical Background.

Use the following questions to guide discussion:

- What did you notice about each photograph?
- How do the people in the photos appear?
- What are they wearing? What emotions do they display?
- How do they interact with each other?
- What did you notice when you compared the photographs?
- What is missing from these photographs? What can the photographs tell us and what can they not tell us about this time period?
- What questions do you want to ask about the photographs?
- What do you already know about these photographs? About the time period in which they were created and published?

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### 4. Historical Background

Present this historical background to enhance the group's knowledge of the time period, and as a basis for drawing conclusions in Step 5. Write the words in bold on the whiteboard, and use the rest of the text for guidance.

- **Walker Evans and the Farm Security Administration:**

Walker Evans worked for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) Photographic Project. Between 1935 and 1942, FSA photographers created a pictorial record of the Great Depression and its impact on the nation, primarily on rural Americans. A major goal of these images was to justify New Deal legislation designed to alleviate economic crisis. Evans was the most outspoken of the FSA photographers in his opposition to posed or arranged photos. Yet Evans's camera of choice was a bulky 8 by 10 view camera that had to be mounted on a tripod. This setup required his subjects to remain motionless while he took a picture. Historians and art critics have long praised Evans's photography for the clarity and precision this camera helped his photographs achieve, but his reliance on large format photography required the very arrangements he would later denounce.
- **Documentary Photographers:**

Documentarians like Walker Evans and James Agee succeeded because they understood the

desires of their audience and did not shy from molding their images accordingly. Far from being passive observers, documentary photographers were active agents, searching for the most effective way to communicate their views and those of the FSA. Each photograph represents an argument or a particular perspective. Evans at his best, though, convinces us that we are seeing facts, presented without comment.

■ **Intended Audience:**

The intended audience for the photographs was urban, middle-class Americans. Many of the 80,000 photographs taken by the FSA photographers were distributed by the agency to newspapers and magazines—read largely by urban, middle-class Americans—to build support for the rural programs of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal. Evans’s photographs turned these portraits of families into icons of Depression-era misery and poverty. Today, in Hale County, Alabama, Evans and his photographs remain controversial. Many descendants maintaining that their families were presented in an unflattering light by Evans’s photographs.

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## 5. Conclusions

Which photograph do you think Walker Evans published?

Answer: Photograph #3 was published.

- **Photograph #1** (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/activities/image/835a3.jpg>) : This photograph was not published, perhaps because Evans felt the hint of a smile on Burroughs’s face projected too much confidence. In addition, Burroughs’s shirt and overalls are clean. Evans, as well as the Farm Security Administration, wanted to document the problems of the Depression and the difficult conditions among people in rural communities.
- **Photograph #2** (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/activities/image/835a4.jpg>) : This pose was not published, perhaps because Burroughs’s posture and pose with his family seemed too self-assured. Today, we tend to think of the Great Depression as a time of extreme hardship, discounting the realities of the lives of the people who experienced that hardship. In this photograph, the family looks cohesive, is relatively well-dressed, and seems happy. Some are smiling, and it is clear that they are enjoying posing for the picture.
- **Photograph #3** (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/activities/image/835a5.jpg>) : Evans chose this photograph for publication. In it, Burroughs projects an anxious dignity that would bolster Evans’s desire to show the extreme poverty of the South and the plight of sharecroppers during the Great Depression—the popular image of the Great Depression that we have today. Our view of the Great Depression has no doubt been shaped by the choices that the Farm Security Administration and other arms of government chose to portray.

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## 6. Classroom Applications

- Do you think this activity would work with your students?
- Could you use this strategy with other resources?
- Would you do anything differently in your classroom?

\*This activity is based on the History Matters exercise [Making Sense of](#)

**Documentary Photographs: How Was the Photograph Taken?**

**(<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/Photos/try.htm>)**

**Photograph #1 - Floyd Burroughs, Hale County, Alabama, 1936.**



**Photograph #2 - The Burroughs Family, Hale County, Alabama, 1936**



**Photograph #3 - Floyd Burroughs, Hale County, Alabama, 1936.**

