





PAINTED WITH LIGHT

A SALUTE TO PHOTOGRAPHER JACK BOUCHER

by joe flanagan

IT IS A MONOCHROMATIC WORLD OF GABLE ROOFS, PORTICOS, door knockers, and balustrades; of stairways, barn board, and cedar shingles; of the dense ornament of the early high-rise and the Spartan parlor of a frontier president. And for all the grandeur, for all the quaintness, there is something lonely, something somber and elegiac. You can't escape the sensation that something is going on that does not lend itself to language. The pictures are alive with the intangible thing that is history. That is largely due to the man who took them. Jack Boucher of the NPS Historic American Buildings Survey just ended a 50-year career as the agency's much acclaimed photographer of historic sites. His work not only helped set the standard for architectural documentation, but is widely admired for its artistry. Boucher's images trace the arc of the preservation movement; its concerns, in any given decade, apparent in his lens. Colonial, vernacular, Victorian, industrial—he captured places invaluable to the American narrative. Through thousands of photographs, innumerable miles on the road, and untold hours chasing the light, Boucher produced a body of work that is nothing less than a portrait of American history. His career was intertwined with the growth of HABS, the nation's oldest federal preservation program, singular in terms of its scope and the accessibility of what it has produced—a wealth of histories accompanied by images like Boucher's, online and on the shelves at the Library of Congress. As the survey examined our past, Jack Boucher served as its eyes.

LEFT: *Gunston Hall, home of George Mason, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Says veteran Historic American Buildings Survey photographer Jack Boucher, "This is why we use a view camera. You could put a glass on this picture and count all the bricks."*

ALL PHOTOS JACK E. BOUCHER/NPS/HABS

BOUCHER, THE SON OF A NEW JERSEY NEWSPAPERMAN, JOINED THE NATIONAL Park Service in 1958, having refined his skills as an Atlantic City news photographer and as the official lensman for the construction of the Garden State Parkway. He arrived at a time when postwar prosperity had elevated newness to exalted heights. Space was the new frontier and hardly anyone was looking back along the superhighways then spreading across America.

The National Park Service was preparing for its 50th anniversary—coming up in 1966—with a major initiative to fix aging facilities and construct visitors centers to accommodate the newly mobile car culture. Mission 66, as it was known, brought an influx of investment into the parks. The agency began in earnest to care for a new class of property—historic sites—places increasingly the focus of scholarly study needing the expertise that HABS could bring to bear.

The survey, begun in 1933 as a New Deal project to employ out-of-work architects, became a joint initiative of the National Park Service, the American Institute of Architects, and the Library of Congress. Its goal was a nationwide inventory of historic buildings, documented with measured drawings, large-format photography, and research reports. World War II and the Korean War interrupted the effort, and by the time it resumed in the mid-'50s, large sections of cities were being demolished in the name of urban renewal.

Into this scene stepped Jack Boucher, to serve part-time with HABS and part-time with the National Park Service Branch of Stills and Motion Pictures, a public relations organ touting Mission 66.



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RIGHT: *"An extravagant example of* **woodwork and design,"** Boucher says of the Carson House in Eureka, California, built in 1885 by a timber mogul. The Queen Anne Victorian structure is one of the nation's most famous. Boucher happened to be there on a misty morning in 1960. "One thing the California coast has," he says, "is fogginess. That couldn't have worked out better because it gave an ethereal quality—there was no background to distract the viewer. My best pictures were taken under those circumstances. A lot of luck." **LEFT:** *Ornate portico and frieze at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. "Things like this are difficult," Boucher says, "because you need ladders and other stunts. Lighting is a problem." The photographer's bulky 5x7 large format camera, which requires a tripod, made for a challenge too.*





Boucher says his job was, in part, “to take pictures of people enjoying the parks.” He headed out in his own car on a six-month tour of the West, towing a trailer that served as a darkroom, fitted with developing sinks cut into modified card tables.

Flush with resources and a new sense of mission, HABS teams recorded a host of National Park Service historic sites: Independence Hall, Harpers Ferry, the John Quincy Adams House, and others. Boucher’s knowledge of historic architecture—he’d been active in the New Jersey preservation scene—proved an asset. So did his experience with large-format photography, the standard for architectural documentation. HABS’ Depression-era work tended to focus on pre-Civil War structures, especially those of colonial times. Now, in the wake of urban renewal, the definition of “historic” grew more encompassing. Mission 66 gave HABS a freer rein, with the survey eventually taking in the landmarks of the modern movement that helped spawn the postwar transformation.

This was the environment in which Boucher honed his craft. A reinvigorated HABS reinstated one of the approaches of its early days: the regional survey. Depression-era teams had recorded Native American pueblos and Spanish missions in the Southwest, neo-classical mansions in the South, and a host of other regional building forms. Picking up that strategy again in the late '50s, HABS teams traveled to Vermont to document 18th and 19th century buildings, surveyed old New England textile mills, and recorded the imperiled early high-rise architecture of Chicago, where the loss was so alarming that the city became a key battleground in the fight for preservation.

There were stirrings in Washington that would culminate in the landmark National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, but the road there would be littered with the rubble of history. According to a soon-to-be-published history of the survey, “The rapid pace of redevelopment created a moment of awareness [that went] from the local areas affected to the upper echelons of government.” Increasingly, HABS was called on to record structures facing the wrecking ball. A federally appointed committee, whose report—illustrated in part with Jack’s work—led to the Act, likened the growing HABS documentation to a roll call of the lost, calling the survey one of the bright spots in an otherwise bleak landscape.

Toting his bulky equipment, this was the landscape that Boucher traveled. His camera, though intended solely for documentation, became a tool to evoke the aura of the past. He relied mostly on the 5x7 format, to capture detail, produce high quality enlargements, and correct the perspective distortion inherent in photographing large or tall structures. It was also conducive to showing a structure in context—often a building in relation to its landscape—a Boucher forté.

LEFT: *The Gropius House, built outside Boston in 1937 by architect Walter Gropius, founder of Germany's Bauhaus school of design. “HABS covers everything from privies to palaces,” Boucher says. “Somewhere in the middle is modern architecture.” He adds, “Any time you do a house that has a unique owner, especially one that was an architect, you’re really conscientious . . . you could feel Walter’s spirit in the building.”* **BELOW:** *The Johnson Wax Building in Racine, Wisconsin, Frank Lloyd Wright’s 1939 design. Like the Gropius House, it is a masterwork of modernism, and a national historic landmark. “The important features were inside,” Boucher says. “These column details resembled mushrooms. In one room was a wall made of Lucite pipes, which became the cover of my book A Record in Detail.” The pipes introduce soft light into the space.*



He stresses the importance of light, and luck. Sometimes pictures took hours of waiting for the right moment, coupled with years of technical savvy. Other times, he says, they happened “by accident.”

NEAR RIGHT: Fort Pulaski, a Civil War fortress and national monument in Georgia. "I love photographing forts," Boucher says. "First of all, I love medieval architecture. There are so many photo opportunities in a fortress because of the long passageways much like cloisters, and of course features like underground tunnels and casemates." **FAR RIGHT:** Boucher shot Utah's 19th century Silver King Mining Company for the *Historic American Engineering Record*. Debris on the rails signals the structure's long defunct status. "It was quite interesting because of all the wood used to move equipment and grain," he says, with steel and machinery apparently at a premium in the desert.

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TODAY, HIS IMAGES ARE CONSPICUOUS AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF A RISING interest in photography. The 35mm camera "put the latest in photographic technology into the hands of the eager amateur," says William H. Pierson in *A Record in Detail*, a retrospective of Jack's work. As a result, Pierson says, there are very few buildings "that have not been shot, from every angle . . . with every conceivable kind of lens, under every condition of light, and all with such predictable quality as to make the results indistinguishable one from the other." In the midst of this frenzy, "Jack Boucher's photographs stand out with stunning serenity. They are serene because they are contemplative." HABS' scope then, as now, was broad. Writes staff historian Virginia Price in the upcoming history of the survey, "Its subjects were multicultural, urban and rural, secular and profane, vernacular and high style."

By the mid-'60s, federal preservation was expanding. In 1966, HABS headquarters moved from Philadelphia to Washington, DC. Boucher, who lived in Atlantic City, faced a tough decision. "I was freshly married, and neither of us wanted to move to Washington," he says. Because of his involvement in local preservation, he was offered a position as director of New Jersey's Office of Historic Sites. "I decided to accept the job, which had great promise," he says. "I had charge of 18 historic houses, three historic villages, and about four lighthouses. It was very interesting, but they had no money. For the 18 historic houses I had a grand total of \$35,000. You could have lost \$35,000 in any one of them." The politics added to his frustration and within four years, he had enough. He got a call from the National Park Service, then embarking on an effort to document a class of sites that, though vital to the American story, had received little attention. The new *Historic American Engineering Record* would document railroads, factories, mills, bridges, roads, and more. Boucher was offered his old job back—along with the chance to shoot this type of site, too. He moved to Washington.





THIS PROPERTY WAS LISTED
ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF
HISTORIC PLACES
IN 1983

The region has a rich architectural legacy, which Boucher captured in the stunning *Landmarks of Prince George's County* . . . The result of the project was a time exposure of the once-sleepy southern tidewater, a landscape formerly populated by plantation mansions, tobacco fields, small towns, and dwellings of every stripe.

LEFT: *St. Paul's Church, part of a regional survey in which Boucher and HABS recorded 64 structures in Prince George's County, Maryland. "The elements of the design—the circular window, the arched window and doorway—are all harmonious in their use of the curve," he says. Places that are rural and poor, he points out, tend to retain a great deal of their architectural integrity, as was the case in parts of the county. The survey was done at the request of local officials, who were keen to capture the county's rapidly disappearing architectural heritage. The agricultural ways of the county—a suburb of Washington, DC—have largely disappeared, subsumed by sprawl.*

RIGHT: *Addison Chapel, part of the same survey. "This is a perfect case of putting a place in context. Any time I documented a structure, that would be my very first view. Here you have a church, and a graveyard." In its context, the church appears incidental to the tombs.*

BOUCHER ONCE AGAIN PACKED HIS GEAR AND WENT IN WHATEVER DIRECTION

the project called for. By this time, HABS was well known as the gold standard in architectural documentation, a distinction owed somewhat to Boucher himself. William Lebovich, in *A Record in Detail*, writes that Jack possessed a "unique vision and ability to create photographs that are informative, in a documentary sense, and have the movement or tension [of] fine art photography." His bosses depended on his eye. "When you go out on these projects, you're on your own," Boucher says. "There is not a list that says 'get a view of southwest room, second floor from northeast,' or anything like that. You have to know architecture—and what's important to preserve."

Federal, state, and local agencies increasingly relied on the expertise of HABS, whose regional surveys delivered broad, rich portraits of people, events, and cultural realities of the past. "When you compare the building forms in a region, you see patterns," says program chief Catherine Lavoie. "This helps develop the historical and architectural context." A good example is HABS' work in Prince George's County, Maryland, in the late 1980s. The region has a rich architectural legacy, which Boucher captured in the stunning *Landmarks of Prince George's County*. The project, done at the county's request, captured "a broad



range of properties," says Lavoie. "Large parts of the region were still rural." Lavoie did the research, often speaking with property owners to document the story that helped direct Boucher's lens. "I would see something that indicated a change, like an addition that had historic significance," she says. The result of the project was a time exposure of the once-sleepy southern tidewater, a landscape formerly populated by plantation mansions, tobacco fields, small towns, and dwellings of every stripe, transformed by its proximity to Washington, DC. The county government used the end product—the in-depth research as well as the high-quality images—as the basis for education and outreach, mounting an exhibit at the Arts Club of Washington.

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THE PRESERVATION MOVEMENT GREW MORE SOPHISTICATED IN THE '70S AND '80s as many localities passed preservation ordinances, working in concert with the structure put in place by the National Historic Preservation Act, which created the National Register of Historic Places and the federal, state, tribal, and local partnerships we know today. HAER became so well established that it needed its own photographer. Jack continued with HABS.

From ladders, cherry pickers, even helicopters, Boucher captured the classical, the threatened, the *au courant*, the quirky, and the forgotten. Books and exhibits featured his photographs.

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Boucher seems less interested in technique than talking about a lifetime on the road. A U.S. Navy sub cut his catamaran in half when he was off the Puerto Rico coast shooting a 16th century fort. Lost on a remote road on his way to New Mexico’s El Morro National Monument, he was greeted by a rifle-toting man when knocking on a door to ask for directions. Later that night, awoken inside his tent, he thought the armed stranger was outside, but instead it was the biggest skunk he had ever seen. A helicopter lost power while he was shooting Jamestown from the air, dropping 200 feet before the engine started again.

LEFT: Photographing the remains of Puerto Rico’s Hacienda Azucarera la Concepcion sugar mill was, in Boucher’s words, “intensely interesting.” Aside from having to carry cumbersome equipment in the tropical heat, the site was remote. “You could not drive within a quarter mile of it,” says Boucher, who had to lug his gear the rest of the way by foot. “That meant five or six round trips,” he says. “In this picture is a ‘Jamaica Train,’” he adds, where sugar cane juice was laddled from one pot to the next in a difficult, labor-intensive process. Of the pots, Boucher says, “They were enormous. God only knows how much they weighed. You really were documenting something that was integral to the life and times of the area.” **ABOVE:** The spiral staircase at Las Cabezas de San Juan lighthouse, also on the island, part of a nature preserve and listed in the National Register of Historic Places.



BUT BOUCHER'S AFFINITY FOR STORY REVEALS SOMETHING ABOUT HIS PHOTOGRAPHS.

It is clear that he is intrigued by detail, hue, and nuance. An assignment to photograph Edison Laboratories is not, in his telling, simply taking pictures of the famous inventor's workplace. It is, in part, the story of his conversation with a man in the company cafeteria, discovering that he is Edison's son. As Lebovich writes, "Fidelity to the subject is essential, of course, but it is a point of departure, not the entire objective." Boucher understood the functional parameters of the job. But he also had a gift for turning a two dimensional image into a story, adding what Lebovich calls "the powerfully dynamic realities of architectural space, tactile substance, and stylistic vocabulary." You see the dormer, the dentilation, the roofline. You sense the era, the mood, the human presence.

When one looks at Boucher's photographs, one is looking at the growth of HABS and, by extension, the evolution of the preservation movement. On the heels of the NHPA came the National Environmental Protection Act, which included the historic fabric of place in its definition of "environment." Policy and regulations were refined as federal, state, and local governments professionalized their staffs and became more invested in preservation. The NHPA was amended to empower certified local governments in 1980, and then Native American tribes in 1992.

In the late '90s, Boucher took part in a survey of Quaker meeting houses in the Delaware Valley, a federally funded documentation of this endangered and little-known legacy. "Jack photographed around 25 of the them," Lavoie says, "basically 300 years of meeting-house evolution." The project produced a book, *Silent Witness: Quaker Meeting Houses in the Delaware Valley, 1695 to Present*, a symposium, and an exhibit at the Athenaeum of Philadelphia. The images are contemplative and stark. They also serve as the perfect evidence of Quaker craft, the marriage of beauty and structure. In Boucher's lens, the two exist in equal parts.

Writes Pierson, "As in all great artistic performances, technique is the handmaiden of statement; in the end, it is the building as a work of art that Jack Boucher sees, understands, and celebrates." Looking through the collection at the Library of Congress, one gets a powerful sense of Jack's legacy to the nation. In Boucher's pictures of America he has given us both an evidentiary document and a dream of the past.

The HABS/HAER collection at the Library of Congress, on the web at http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs_haer, is an unequalled archive of American history. While preservation professionals and historians find it invaluable for research, others discover in it a passage to the past. "Many people have a fondness for anything American," writes Lebovich in *A Record in Detail*, "and find the collection a fascinating way to see this country." The collection, which covers the entire nation, is in many cases the only record of buildings that have been destroyed.

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LEFT: *Bradford Meetinghouse in Chester County, Pennsylvania, built in 1767, one of many Quaker meeting houses recorded by HABS as part of a regional survey in the Delaware Valley. "The meeting houses were extraordinary," says Boucher. "The purpose of our survey was to show the development of the Quaker meeting house from the earliest to the present day." Many of them are still in use—retaining much of their architectural integrity—with wood stoves still providing heat. While the photo seems at a glance to be a mirror image, it is in fact two separate rooms, one for men and one for women. Panels in the wall can be closed to seal the two off.* **ABOVE:** *The Reel Farm at Antietam Battlefield.*