



The Library Company OF PHILADELPHIA

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## New Online Exhibition Explores Life and Work of Photographer John Frank Keith



PHILADELPHIA – October 2, 2009: The Library Company of Philadelphia announces the launch of a new online exhibition exploring the life and work of John Frank Keith (1883-1947), a prolific Philadelphia photographer who specialized in portraiture of residents of South Philadelphia and Kensington. Taken between 1910 and 1940, Keith's snapshot-like portraits depict hundreds of relaxed, sometimes playful Philadelphians on their doorsteps and sidewalks. While the subjects and exact locations of the images are rarely identified, the faces, clothing, and street-level details tell important stories about life in these working-class neighborhoods during the turbulent times of the early 20th century.

The online exhibition, *Faces and Facades of Philadelphia: Three Decades of Portraits by John Frank Keith*, provides a biography of Keith based on new research. It also situates his activity in early-20th-century photographic and neighborhood history. Keith used a style of direct portraiture similar to photographers like Lewis Hine, August Sander, and Mike Disfarmer, but not for social reform or commercial purposes. Described by a family member as shy and socially awkward, Keith probably used his camera as a means of connecting with those around him. In the process, he created a fascinating record of friendship and family life in early-20th-century Philadelphia.



Supported by a grant from the Samuel S. Fels Fund, the online exhibition improves public access to and engagement with this significant body of work. The Library Company's collection of Keith photographs is the largest in any public repository. It provides an important link to the rich history of Philadelphia's oldest neighborhoods and will be appealing to both current and former residents of South Philadelphia and Kensington as well as to researchers with an interest in fashion, social relationships, and vernacular photography. *Faces and Facades of Philadelphia: Three Decades of Portraits by John Frank Keith* is available on the web at:

<http://www.librarycompany.org/keith/>.

**Background information about the Library Company**

The Library Company of Philadelphia is an independent research library concentrating on American history and culture from the 17th through 19th centuries. Free and open to the public, the Library Company houses an extensive non-circulating collection of rare books, manuscripts, broadsides, ephemera and works of art. The mission of the Library Company is to preserve, interpret, make available, and augment the valuable materials within our care. We serve a diverse constituency throughout Philadelphia and the nation, offering comprehensive reader services, an internationally renowned fellowship program, an online public access catalog, and regular exhibitions and public programs. Located at 1314 Locust Street, Philadelphia, it is open to the public free of charge from 9:00 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. Monday through Friday. The Library Company can be found online at [www.librarycompany.org](http://www.librarycompany.org).