



# VISIONS OF PROGRESS

Portraits of Dignity, Style, and Racial Uplift

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MAIN GALLERY | SMALL SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARY



## Setting the Scene



*Visions of Progress: Portraits of Dignity, Style, and Racial Uplift* showcases portraits that African Americans in Central Virginia commissioned from Charlottesville's Holsinger Studio during the first decades of the twentieth century. The portraits expressed the individuality of the women and men who commissioned them and silently yet powerfully asserted the Black community's claims to rights and equality.



Above: William Biggers (1892–1965) and Ellen Bowles Biggers (1891–1955), seen with their daughters, Ellen, Julia, and Elizabeth, grew up on farms in Albemarle County. By 1930, they had moved to Columbus, Ohio, where William established a house painting business.

Cover: Minnie Anderson McDaniel (1889–1956) was born in rural Nelson County, Virginia, and commissioned her portrait a year after her marriage to Robert McDaniel, a manual laborer from Charlottesville. She later relocated to Covington, Virginia, where she worked out of her home as a laundress.

Portraits featured in this brochure are from the Holsinger Studio Collection (MSS 9862), Albert Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia.

These portraits invite us to see the dignity, resilience, and creativity of the African American community in Charlottesville and Albemarle and Nelson counties during the New Negro era. Community leaders and everyday people sensed that a “new spirit” energized the community locally, as it did across the nation.

Paradoxically, it was also the era of Jim Crow segregation. Within the Black community, opinions differed on how to “uplift the race.” Some argued that education and enterprise were the keys. Others emphasized protest and political engagement. Most Black people chose strategies that they believed best fit the immediate circumstances that they faced. All agreed that racial unity was essential and that securing the full rights of American citizenship was the goal.

These portraits reflect the spirit of the New Negro era. Many people used the portraits to assert their status as respectable citizens, fully entitled to the rights of first-class citizenship. Others emphasized their personal style and beauty. A few rejected middle-class standards of dress and comportment and instead embraced new forms of cultural expression—it was, after all, the Jazz Age.

## Fashioning the Self



The Holsinger Studio's evocative portraits open a unique window on the history of Central Virginia in the New Negro era, providing insights that are otherwise unavailable. Archives rarely collect the written records of everyday people, especially the poor and marginalized. In the absence of diaries, autobiographies, and letters, portraits commissioned by Black people help us understand how they saw themselves, their families, and their communities—and how they wished others to see them.

African Americans carefully prepared for their portrait sessions, thinking deeply about how they would look, from clothing and

facial expressions to posture and props.

They presented themselves to the camera as women and men of dignity, style, and panache. The portraits were also small acts of resistance to the racist caricatures of the day. As the late bell hooks famously argued, “though rarely articulated as such, the camera became in Black life a political instrument, a way to resist misrepresentation as well as a means by which alternative images could be produced.”

There is no evidence that Rufus Holsinger, the studio's owner, was a racial liberal. In fact, as a member of Charlottesville's City Council, he supported an ordinance that segregated residential areas. Yet, he was also a businessman who knew that his studio's success depended on collaborating with customers to create photographic images that pleased them.



Alice Coles Carter (1879–1936) was born in Albemarle County and worked as a laundress. Late in life, Carter moved to Gospel Hill, a Black neighborhood adjoining the University of Virginia, which was demolished when the University expanded its medical complex in the 1970s and 1980s.

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## Serving the Nation



Several hundred African American men from Central Virginia were among the 380,000 Black soldiers and sailors who served in the segregated United States Armed Forces during World War I.



Burnett Watson (1896-1972) was born in Albemarle County and served in the U.S. Army during World War I. He spent most of his life in Atlantic City, New Jersey, where he and his wife, Marion, raised a large family. Watson worked as the fountain manager at Fralinger's Salt Water Taffy, on the Atlantic City boardwalk.

Over 200,000, including many from this area, served overseas. The African American troops who saw combat compiled a distinguished record. Notably, France awarded the *Croix de Guerre* for heroism under fire to 170 members of the all-Black 369th Infantry, as well as a unit citation to the entire regiment.

The portraits that returning African American soldiers commissioned from the Holsinger Studio were more than mementos of their service and affirmations of their courage and devotion to duty. They wordlessly asserted their sense of equality and claims to the rights of citizenship. They were well aware that they had risked their lives to preserve rights and freedom abroad that they did not enjoy at home.



*Visions of Progress* is one facet of the ongoing work of the Holsinger Studio Portrait Project. We believe that seeing the lives of the African Americans who commissioned portraits from the Holsinger Studio in the context of local and national history is a vital contribution to understanding our shared past in Central Virginia. We are grateful that a generous grant from the Jefferson Trust will fund an extensive community engagement program.

Visit the project website to learn more about our research, events, exhibitions, and social media: [holsinger.iath.virginia.edu](https://holsinger.iath.virginia.edu).