

Spontaneous Excellence

| BY PAUL DOLINSKY |

“THAT’S A BOUCHER” IS A PHRASE often heard among architects, photographers, and historians perusing the vast collection of photography in the National Park Service archive of American architecture, the Historic American Buildings Survey. Well over 300 photographers have contributed images to the collection, but none is more recognizable than a Jack Boucher photograph. His name is synonymous with HABS, not just because of the sheer volume of his contribution over the past 50 years, but because of the quality and signature of his work. **WHAT ARE THE HALLMARKS OF A Boucher photograph?** His recent retirement—and the salute to his work on page 12 of this issue—offer an opportunity to reflect. He often says that his early training as a news photographer, in the 1950s, gave him a rigor that served him well throughout his career. Spontaneity was everything. Working for the *Atlantic City Tribune*, he didn’t have the luxury of time to produce the perfect image. He had to quickly capture the subject and hope his technical skills produced what he was after. Some of his most iconic images, like his picture of the massive, mist-shrouded columns of the Carson House, an extravagant Victorian landmark in Eureka, California, capture the immediacy of his newspaper days. The look that morning was just right and the opportunity could not be lost. The sense of the moment marks it as a Boucher photo. **WHEN HE HAD THE LUXURY OF TIME**, he worked that sensibility into the image as well. His shot of Lorton, Virginia’s Gunston Hall reveals the way raking light can illustrate architectural detail. This carefully produced image is the result of selecting the exact moment of the exact day when the light would produce the perfect picture, another Boucher hallmark. **HIS TECHNICAL SKILL**, combined with an uncanny eye for recognizing a building’s significant features, made Jack Boucher a vital asset to the HABS program. Image manipulation was not necessary to his art. The art was in the field, not in the lab. **IMAGES IN THE HABS COLLECTION** must accurately document the subject for the record. That is the baseline requirement. Jack always produced the required elevation and detail images. But his work was highly pictorial, too, elevating it beyond architectural documentation. It is common to see the gracefully arching tree branch enveloping a steeple, or a tightly framed entrance walkway, the subtle departures from form that underpin his style. That all this was done with a cum-

bersome, large-format camera, with hundreds of pounds of accessories and lighting equipment, must not be overlooked. “It weighs 50 pounds,” he often said, “but that’s at 8 a.m.” He carried that burden to 49 states, making more than 50,000 images documenting the history of the United States, published and exhibited as fine art for five decades. **“PAINTING WITH LIGHT”** is how Jack refers to the artful illumination of subject matter. Most times that meant knowing the vicissitudes of the sun, the seasons, and the time of day. Other times it meant painting his own light on the canvas. Boucher’s shot of the coal stove at the Bradford Meeting House was illuminated with thousands of watts of carefully

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staged, though invisible, lights. His view of Fort Pulaski was similarly choreographed, the illumination tucked out of sight behind each arch in a series down a corridor, all commanded with a shutter click. The result looks completely natural. **PERHAPS IN SOME SMALL WAY THIS HELPS** explain why Jack was the recipient of the Meritorious Service Award, the second highest honor bestowed by the U.S. Department of the Interior. With characteristic humility, he says, “Although I have some favorites, I have yet to make my best photograph.” His favorites always seem to involve the spontaneous and serendipitous, due probably to an instinct from his newspaper days. There is perhaps no better example of the Boucher touch than when he was setting up to shoot through the front door of New Mexico’s San Jose de Gracia Church, trying to capture the contrast of desert light outside with somber light within. In the moment before he clicked the shutter, an elderly nun peeked around the doorjamb. It’s a Boucher classic.

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