

INTRODUCTION

Deborah Willis

Each photograph tells a story located in space and time that serves to empower the subject.

—Manthia Diawara, *Malick Sidibe: Photographs*

This book celebrates both Charles “Teenie” Harris and the city of Pittsburgh. It is a love story, a graphic romance about a community visually documented through an artist and his camera, an intimate and diaristic view of a city and a photographer. Pittsburgh also holds a special place in my life, as I often visited the city as a young girl. I recall riding in the backseat of my father’s Dodge with excitement as we traveled west from Philadelphia going through the tunnels carved through what my young eyes imagined were huge mountains, arriving in Pittsburgh hours later. Every summer, we visited family members, went to church programs, and climbed the hilly streets and high steps of the Hill District. I didn’t know about Charles “Teenie” Harris or his photographs then, but I captured mental images of my visits. After hearing about Harris’s photographs in the early 1980s, I was fascinated to find that my memory of the insular and vibrant community had been so vividly preserved and by someone I did not know.

Charles Harris (1908–1998) grew up in Pittsburgh in the heart of the Hill District, where his family opened the Masio Hotel in 1917 (fig. 1). Popularly known as “Teenie,” he was trusted and respected by all. He was known for his stylish attire—hats, suits, and shoes. He was a twentieth-century dandy, who appreciated beauty and sought to document the beauty, dignity, pleasures, and passions of his community.

In 1937, when he was in his late twenties, he started selling a weekly news picture magazine targeted to black communities on the streets. He soon realized that he could learn the craft of photography and publish his own photographs in *Flash* magazine. He carried his 4 x 5-inch handheld camera, a Speed Graphic, everywhere



Fig. 1. Attributed to Charles “Teenie” Harris, photograph of two boys, one on right possibly from West or Parr family, standing outside Masio Hotel, Hill District, c. 1920–1934. Gelatin silver print. 1996.90.11.



Fig. 2. Unknown photographer, portrait of Charles “Teenie” Harris, c. 1940–1945. Gelatin silver print. Carnegie Museum of Art, gift of the estate of Charles “Teenie” Harris (not accessioned).

and produced one of the richest photographic archives of the city of Pittsburgh.¹ In a few years, Harris was working for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a national black news weekly, initially as a freelancer. In 1941, he was hired as the paper’s staff photographer (fig. 2).

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Harris lived and worked in Pittsburgh for more than sixty years, leaving an inspiring legacy that allows generations to witness what otherwise would be lost in most of our collective memories.

He was a studio photographer, photojournalist, and advertising photographer who helped preserve African American culture from family life to social life. His photographs were like the calling cards that were displayed in middle-class homes. I am dazzled by his vision and his foresight, especially at a time when the twentieth century was going through multiple transformations: segregation to integration, farm workers to industrial workers, newly arrived mi-

grants in the North to established residents who owned their own businesses. Harris's subjects were building a community that was full of hope about a future of possibilities that included the right to vote, own a home, play sports, and perform in clubs and churches.

I first heard about Charles "Teenie" Harris in 1983, while working as a curator of photography at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The director of the center in 1983 was Wendell Wray, a former librarian from Pittsburgh (fig. 3).² Wray expressed his concern about his friend Harris, whose photographs were being sold at flea markets and on the sidewalks in Pittsburgh. He asked me to speak with the photographer because his health was failing; Wray wanted to be sure that the Schomburg Center acquired some of Harris's photographs.

Speaking with Harris forever changed my life. I shared with him my concern about and interest in his photographs and in subsequent conversations suggested that the Schomburg acquire a selection that focused on marketing and advertising of products targeted toward the African American consumer. Today, I can imagine him sitting in the Harris Studio preparing to photograph a new refrigerator, television, or cigarette ad for his community. He re-created a narrative of empowerment for consumers, helping them envision what it would be like to have these items in their homes.

Pittsburgh to Harris was Belgian block streets, hills, porches, waterways, bridges, trolley tracks. It was the Negro League's Pittsburgh Crawfords and Homestead Grays and downtown views from the Hill District. He documented the city's churches that, whether Baptist, Catholic, Episcopal, or A.M.E., looked like cathedrals and functioned like community centers. And he told visual stories about Pittsburgh's citizens—families, couples, steelworkers, homicide detectives, beauty- and barbershop owners, schoolchildren, and masons. Between, during, and after the war years, Pittsburgh became a destination place for celebrities such as Duke Ellington, Lena Horne, Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong, Billy Eckstine, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Nina Simone, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Sam Cooke, Cab Calloway, Ray Charles, Sarah Vaughan, Gregory Peck, Lionel Hampton, Josephine Baker, Nat "King" Cole, George Benson, and the International Sweethearts of Rhythm. Politicians who campaigned there ranged from Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon to the Kennedys. Sports figures who posed for his camera included Roy Campanella, Jackie Robinson, Jesse Owens, Jack Johnson, and Muhammad Ali. Harris captured them all. He was a storyteller who photographed human rights and civil rights activ-

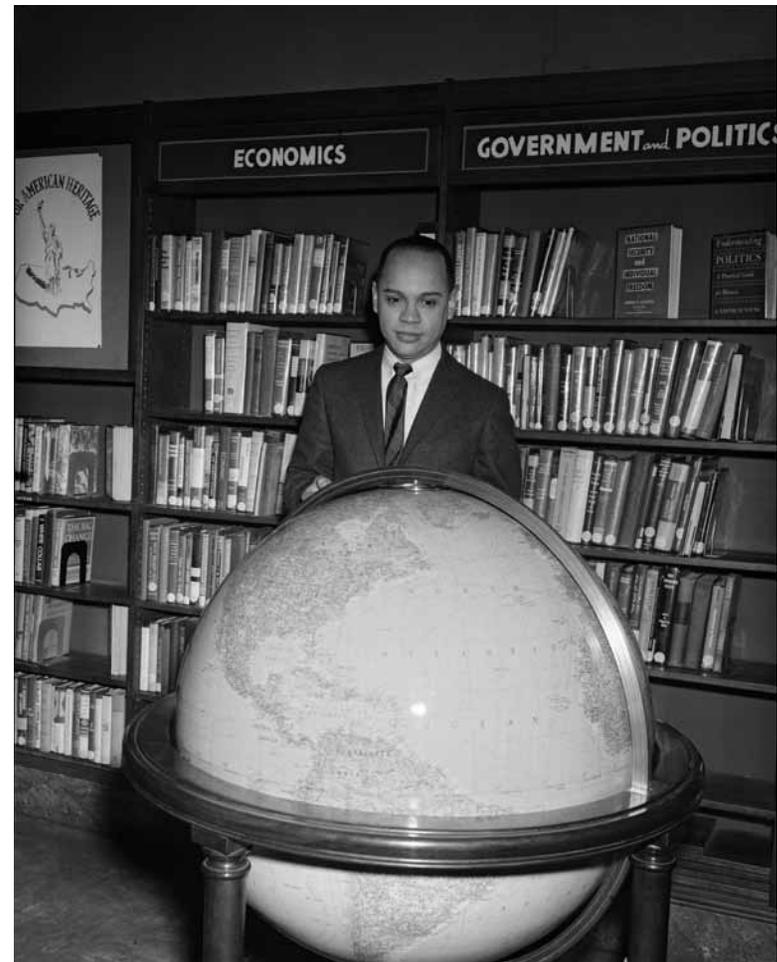


Fig. 3. Librarian Wendell Wray in Carnegie Library, 1958. 2001.35.48192.

ists such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Eleanor Roosevelt, A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King Jr., and Stokely Carmichael as well as artists Selma Burke, Richard Hunt, and Raymond Saunders, sometimes alone and sometimes with community leaders and children. Harris also took photographs of local Pittsburgh businesses such as Rosebud, Eddie's Restaurant, Bratton's Famous Betterburgers, Kay's Valet Shoppe, RB&S (Rhythm, Blues & Spiritual Record Distributors), Spell's Dry Cleaners, Sky Rocket Grill, and the Crawford Grill. These photographs empowered small businessmen and businesswomen and their employees, who recognized Harris's love for the city and his commitment to photographing the working and middle classes.

Harris's photographs are at the intersection of family life. He introduces ways in which we are reminded that the cycles of family are the core of our existence: photographing wedding ceremonies, baptisms, first communions, and funerals. In a recent interview in her Pittsburgh home, Sharon Watson Mauro said the power of Harris's photographs is found in her memory of visiting his photo studio in the 1950s. "Inside that studio, he made me feel special," says Mauro, a librarian. Harris had photographed her parents' wedding

and made a portrait of her in her first communion dress in the 1950s. "He made people feel special. No matter what happened in your life outside of the studio, the moment I was in the studio, I knew I was special."³ He created a biography of the city of Pittsburgh and its neighborhoods through the desires and aspirations of the people he enjoyed photographing. His best works show that Pittsburgh had a bright presence during his active years and preserve moments that interpreted his dream for its future.

Plates



Plate 1. Woman, possibly Barbara Jones, posed
with car on Mulford Street, Homewood, c. 1937.
2001.35.8275.





Plate 3. Roland M. Sawyer and Aileen Eckstein Sawyer posed on their wedding day on steps of The Thimble Shop, 5913 Bryant Street, Highland Park, August 1938. 2001.35.18230.



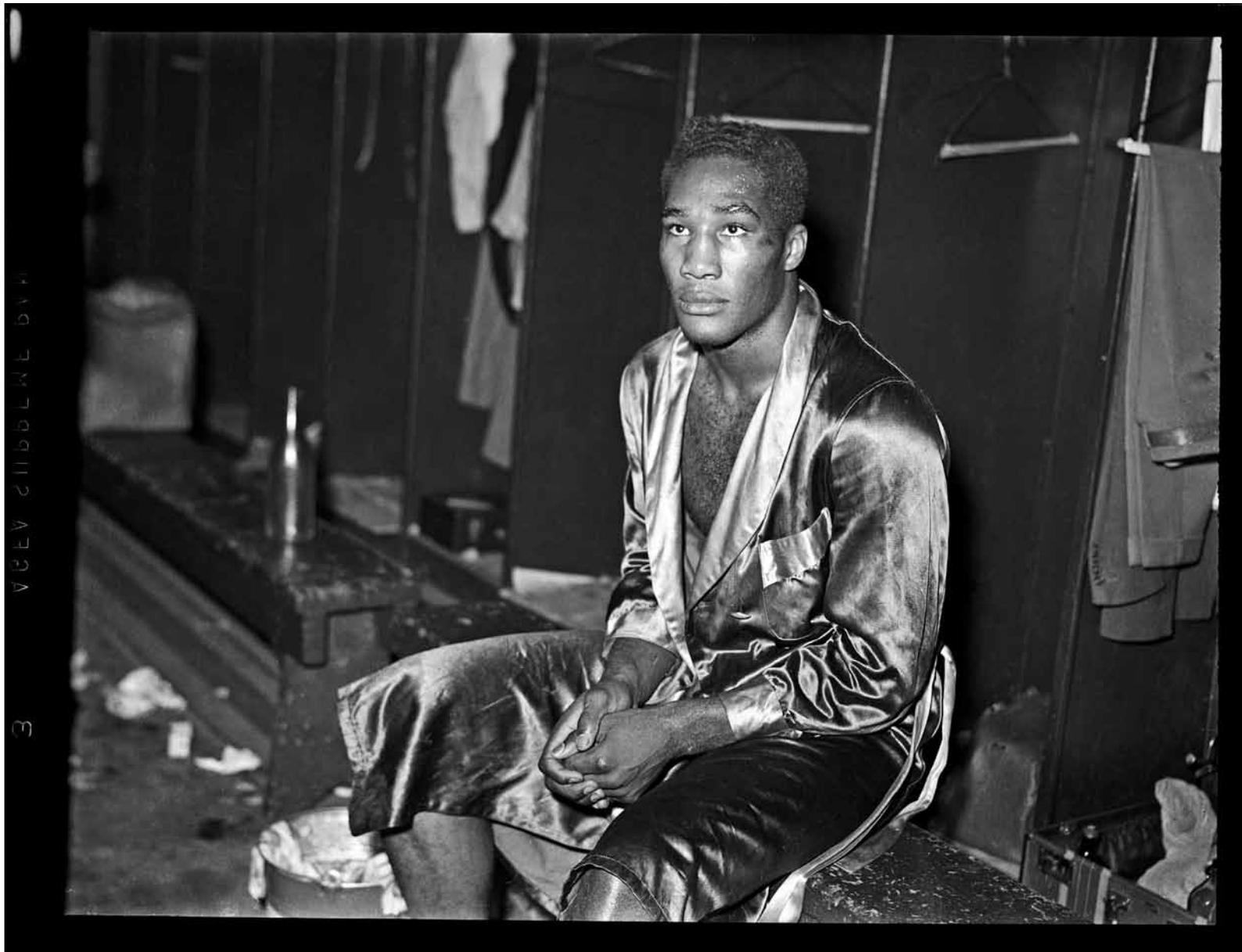


Plate 5. Boxer Harry Bobo, 1941. 2001.35.1045.





Plate 9. Man greeting boys at entrance of Kay Boys' Club, Hill District, c. 1938-1945. 2001.35.33570.

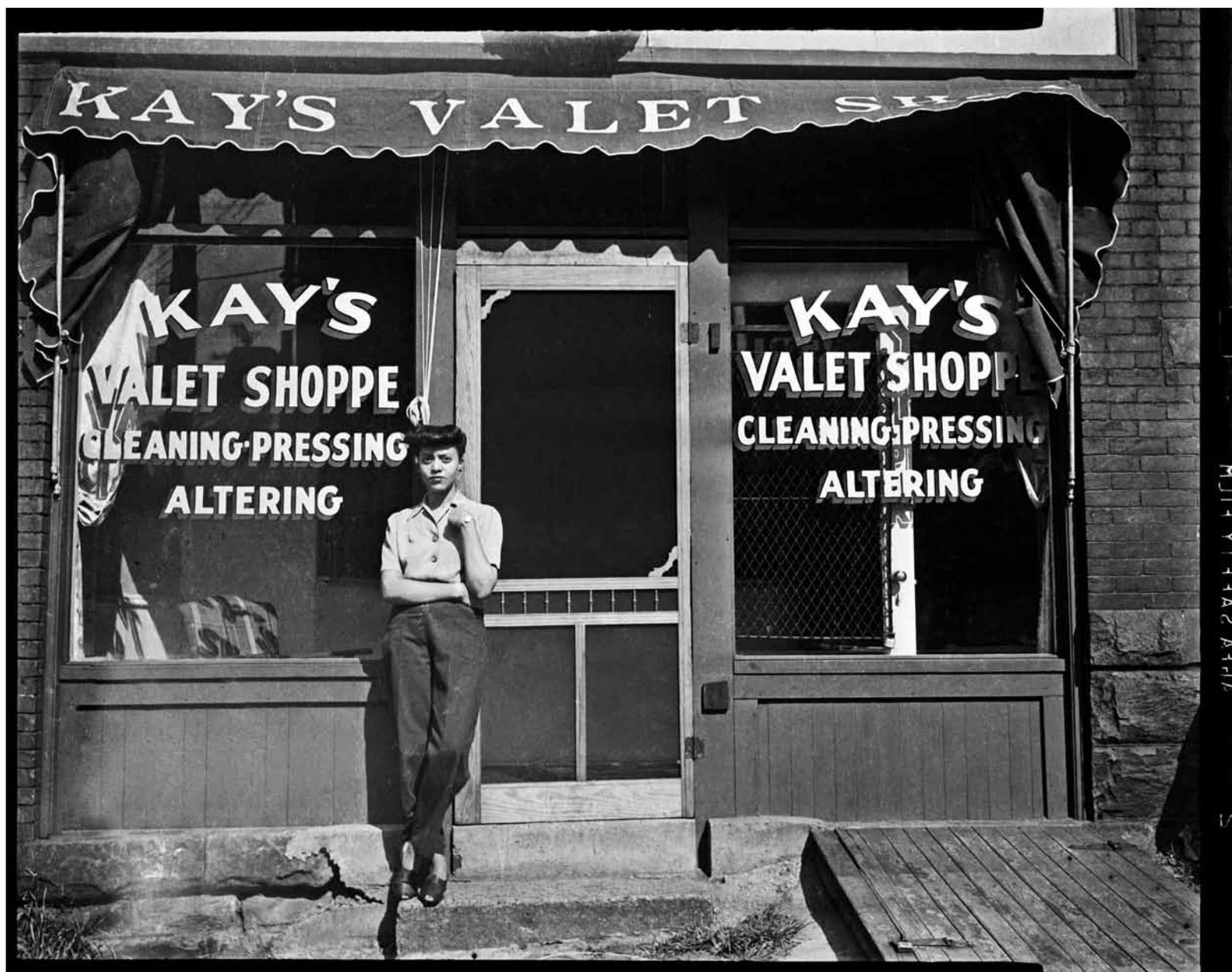


Plate 11. Woman outside Kay's Valet Shoppe, c. 1938-1945. 2001.35.13766.



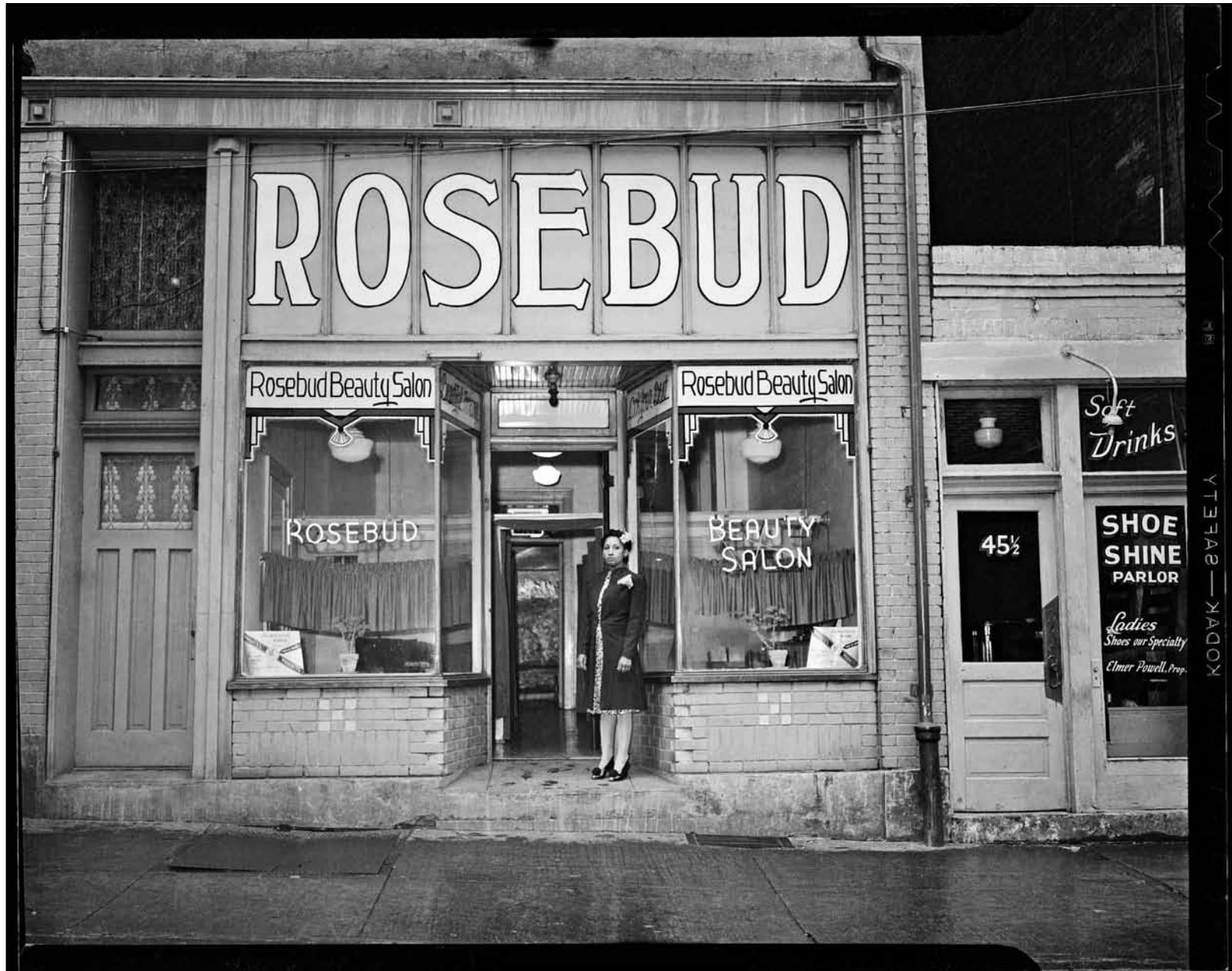


Plate 13. Woman, possibly Olive Johnson, in doorway of Rosebud Beauty Salon, 45 Logan Street, Hill District, September 1945. 2001.35.10764.