

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • ARTIST

The Weapon of Choice

Gordon Parks and a Camera Aimed at American Poverty and Power

Prepared for the Two Americas Archive

September 13, 2026

Contribution Track • ERA VI-VII • Fort Scott, Kansas

Who He Is

Gordon Parks was born November 30, 1912, in Fort Scott, Kansas, the youngest of fifteen children, and largely self-taught as a photographer after buying his first camera at a Seattle pawnshop in 1937 for about twenty-five dollars, drawn in by a magazine spread of migrant workers. He had almost no formal training and no early access to the institutions that trained most working photographers of his generation — he built a career from nothing, in a field that offered Black photographers essentially no entry points, through sheer persistence and a talent editors could not ignore once they saw his work.

American Gothic, Washington, D.C.

In 1942 Parks won a photography fellowship that placed him at the Farm Security Administration in Washington, D.C., where his mentor, Roy Stryker, sent him out to document the city and quickly confronted the limits of the assignment: restaurants, theaters, and stores across the capital turned Parks away because he was Black. Parks channeled that experience into *American Gothic, Washington, D.C.* (1942), portraying FSA cleaning woman Ella Watson standing before an American flag with a mop and broom — a deliberate visual echo of Grant Wood's famous painting, turned into a rebuke of the country's professed ideals.

"I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs." — Gordon Parks

Life Magazine and Beyond the Frame

Parks joined *Life* magazine in 1948 as its first Black staff photographer, spending more than two decades there documenting segregation, poverty, and the civil rights movement, including an intimate multi-year photo essay on the Fontenelle family living in Harlem tenement poverty and extended access to Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party at a time when few white photographers could gain that trust. Parks was also a novelist, composer, and, in 1969, the first Black director to helm a major Hollywood studio film, *The Learning Tree*, based on his own semi-autobiographical novel; he went on to direct *Shaft* (1971), a defining commercial success of the era's Black cinema. He died in New York City on March 7, 2006, at ninety-three.

NC Local Lens

No documented North Carolina, Fayetteville, or Cumberland County connection was found for Gordon Parks in this research pass. A research agent flagged Fort Bragg, as one of the country's largest military installations with a substantial Black servicemember population, as a plausible subject Parks could theoretically have photographed for *Life* given his general beat covering Black American life and institutions — but no specific Parks photograph, assignment, or visit tied to Fort Bragg or Fayetteville was located. This entry does not assert that connection; it is noted here only as an unconfirmed avenue for future research, not a documented fact.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Fort Bragg / Fayetteville: no specific documented Parks connection — flagged only as a plausible, undocumented research avenue. Do not assert as fact without a specific photograph or assignment record.

Camera purchase price: commonly cited as roughly \$12.50 to \$25 depending on the source; treat as approximate.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Gordon Parks," The Gordon Parks Foundation, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/>.
2. Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).
3. "American Gothic, Washington, D.C.," Library of Congress, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.loc.gov/item/fsa1998021539/PP/>.
4. "Gordon Parks," National Gallery of Art, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.1288.html>.
5. Richard B. Woodward, "Gordon Parks, Photographer and Director, Dies at 93," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2006.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.