

Spring/Summer 2014

Cecil County Life

Magazine

Seeing Cecil County through the lens of Steve Gottlieb

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Seeing Cecil County through the lens

Photographer Steve Gottlieb shares his love of the region

**By John Chambless
Staff Writer**

As a sophomore in college, drifting through the year without a major, Steve Gottlieb was taken to a career counselor by his concerned mom. “The counselor gave me a test and said I was a bright guy who had a lot of abilities, but the one area that I needed to steer clear of was anything remotely creative,” Gottlieb said during an interview last month. “So I walked out of there and told my mom that I was going to major in history and become a lawyer.”

During a wide-reaching interview held in the sunny third-floor studio he rents in Chesapeake City, Gottlieb traced his

unlikely path from the law career he loathed to a passion he has followed for most of his life – photography.

When asked how much interest he’d had in the arts or photography as a child, Gottlieb quickly replied, “Zero. My father was a writer and photographer. And he was the biggest producer of film strips” that were used in classrooms in the 1960s.

Gottlieb laid out two 1960s children’s books on the table, “Farmyard Friends” and “The Four Seasons,” both with color photos of himself on the covers as a quintessential red-headed 1960s boy. He was a recurring model for his father’s books for young readers, but never expressed any interest in photography. “I was a model, but we never talked about photography or writing, or anything creative,” he said.



Photo by Steve Gottlieb

Abandoned places such as this bridge have long fascinated photographer Steve Gottlieb.

His father, William Gottlieb, is perhaps known today for the iconic photos he took of jazz performers during the 1950s and early 1960s. "He became world-famous for those photos," Gottlieb said, opening a copy of "The Golden Age of Jazz," which combines classic images of Billie Holiday, Frank Sinatra and others that you've seen all your life.

After college, and a decade of being a lawyer, Gottlieb made the decision to pursue the art that kept calling to him.

"I found out I was not completely incapable of being creative," he said with a grin. "What I've always believed is that being creative has much more to do with mindset than some native ability."

Gottlieb had a lucrative career as a commercial photographer, producing images for top-level companies. "I loved it until I'd been at it a long time and started to get a little bored," he said. Working in Washington, D.C., with

two assistants at one time, Gottlieb made the jump to New York City, but "When the economy turned, I was working twice as hard to get half as much work, so the joy of it dissipated a bit."

He eventually left commercial photography and has since found that "the highlight of my professional life has been the books that I've done." Those very successful and well-reviewed books are "Abandoned America," "American Icons," "Washington: Portrait of a City," "Cecil County" and, published last winter, "Flush."

"When you have an opportunity to come up with the concept, to do the photography, to organize the images, to write the captions, to design the book and even market the book, when it's your book, you come at it with a certain gusto," Gottlieb said.

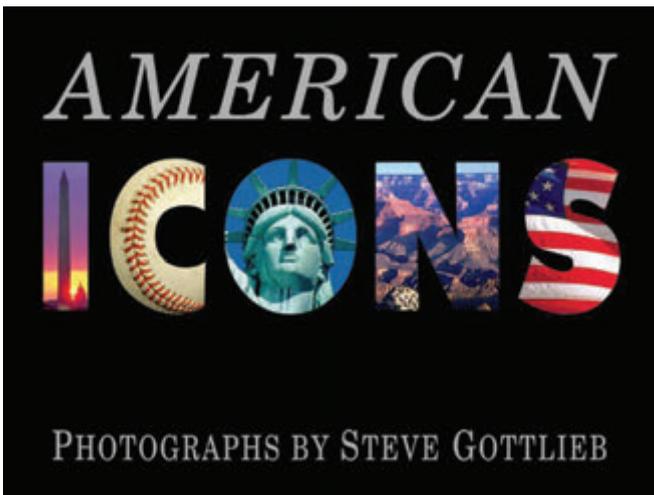
In 2005, looking to step away from the rat race of commercial work, Gottlieb drew a circle from New York to

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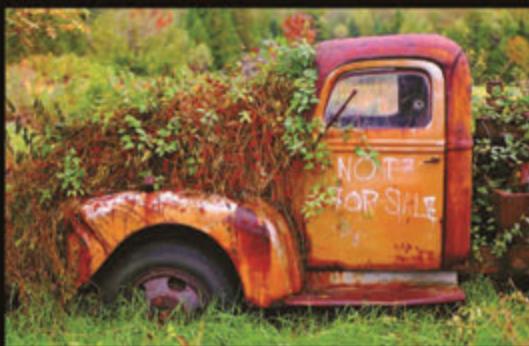
Through the lens..

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Washington and started looking for a place to move. He discovered Chesapeake City, a canal-side town that has remained essentially unchanged since the late 1800s. With a walkable downtown full of boutiques, B&B inns and res-



Steve Gottlieb's books have included 'Abandoned America' (right) and 'American Icons' (above).



ABANDONED AMERICA

Photographs and Text by Steve Gottlieb

taurants, and scenic vistas at every turn, the town latched onto Gottlieb right away.

"It's quaint to the nth degree," he said, "and nobody knows it. They come and they say, 'What a great escape.' No stoplights, but still, there's good food, there's B&Bs. Everybody loves it here and I've had a wonderful 10 years."

Since 2005, Gottlieb has run Horizon Photography

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Through the lens...

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Workshops in Chesapeake City for small groups of people who come to learn, relax and fall in love with the town for themselves. Working with several photographers and a large number of returning clients – and side trips to the American West and to Ireland – Gottlieb had a good decade's run as an instructor.

Now, he's beginning to scale back the number of classes and is focusing more on his recent book, "Flush: Celebrating Bathrooms Past and Present," which – as unlikely as it seems – focuses on toilets, both abandoned and lavishly appointed.

The book sprang from Gottlieb's "Abandoned America" (2002), the first large-scale book of images of derelict buildings. The trend is now a global phenomenon, with photographers scrambling over every ruin they can find.

While doing a slide show on the book about three years ago, Gottlieb included some images of toilets he had found in empty factories, in the woods and elsewhere. "Each time, I'd get a strong reaction, oohs and ahhs," he said. "So I stopped and asked, 'If I did a book of these pictures, how many of you would buy one?' I'd

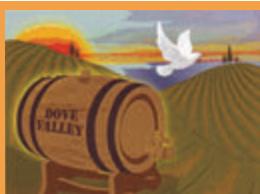


Gottlieb's latest book is 'Flush: Celebrating Bathrooms Past & Present.'

say 40 to 50 hands went up. I looked out and thought, 'Now I know what my next book will be, so long as nobody else has done it.'"

Searching the internet for any similar bathroom book projects, he didn't find any. "I was stunned," Gottlieb said. "What you find are outhouse books, and interior designer and how-to books. It's so hard to find something that you want to do that nobody else has done. This has so fixated me that I see a whole new direction for my career."

To produce the images for "Abandoned America," "American Icons" and "Flush," Gottlieb traveled the



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country, "trespassing when necessary," he said. While he found that people were proud of the toilets he asked to photograph, when it came to abandoned buildings, he explored first and asked permission only if confronted.

"You can't find out who owns all the places you go to," he said. "The other thing is, 90 percent of the places I went into, there was no photo. Yes, I have been caught trespassing. I did get arrested twice. But in most cases, when somebody sees your car parked outside the abandoned house or factory that they are responsible for, they come in with guns blazing. When you calm them down and say you're there to take a picture for this fabulous project, their attitude is, 'That's really cool.' They're transformed from an antagonist to an ally."

Gottlieb leaves every scene as he found it, and doesn't manipulate scenes for overly dramatic effect. The places he captures in "Flush" range from two-seater outhouses on wind-blown western plains to marble bathrooms fit for a king. His wry, perceptive text accompanies the images.

Gottlieb's next step is to create another book on the bathrooms of the world, addressing issues of sanitation and poverty that are crises in much of the world. That is also the focus of the Gates Foundation worldwide. Gottlieb has tapped into a new universe – the people



As a child, Gottlieb was a model for his father's books for young readers.

who design and sell fixtures for bathrooms.

"In a few weeks, I'm giving a little talk to designers, architects and plumbers who are meeting at a big bathroom supply house," he said. "The Kohler company is sending its rep to talk about the latest in bathroom technology. It's a huge universe, and I come to it from a visual, photographic angle -- an outsider and a storyteller. That's what I want to spend the next few years of my life doing."

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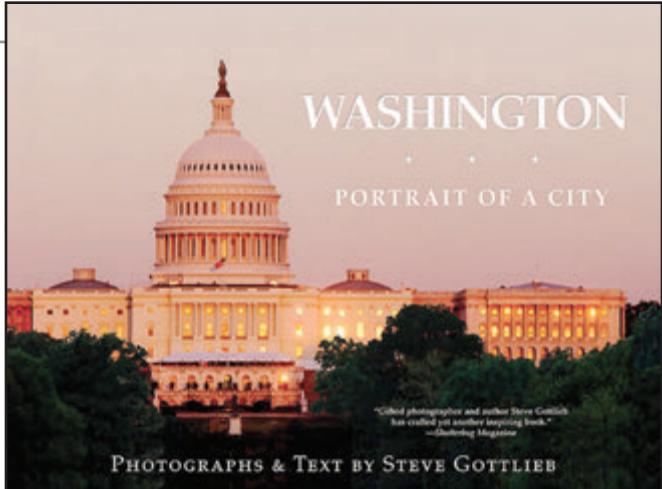
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The project will also give Gottlieb an excuse to visit countries he hasn't seen before. Not that he hasn't traveled. "I've been to all 50 states," he said offhandedly, "and I've been on every road in Cecil County that I know of."

As an instructor, Gottlieb has seen photography change to the point that now people document every moment of their lives in photographs. "Almost anyone can take a passable picture," he said. "The challenge in photography now is that everybody does it. To take something that stands out is really difficult. What I do in my workshops is to teach and critique. I get people to see things in a more interesting way than just a postcard shot. To do something more interesting requires time and thought, and really pushing yourself."

Many beginners think that because they like the scene they've photographed, the image is a good one, Gottlieb said. "There's a difference between a beautiful thing and an interesting photo," he said. "Most people, if they see something beautiful in a picture, they say, 'That's a beautiful photo,' as opposed to, 'That's a beautiful place.' I try to sensitize people to see the difference."

Gottlieb, who is also a top-ranked tennis player in the Middle Atlantic region, has a house in south Chesapeake



'Washington: Portrait of a City' took a different approach to often-photographed sites.

City and a condo in Washington, D.C., but he finds that the small-town allure of Cecil County is a constant inspiration.

"I love my town," he said. "People come from outside the area, and they can't believe it. ... This town's very special. It is an unusually beautiful place."

For more information on Steve Gottlieb, visit www.gottliebphoto.com or www.horizonworkshops.com.

To contact Staff Writer John Chambless, e-mail jchambless@chestercounty.com.

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