

D.W.GRIFFITH and the American RevolutionMusic arranged and played by STUART ODERMAN

1776 or The Hessian Renegades (American Biograph, 1909) Directed by D.W. Griffith;
photographed by G.W. Bitzer; 12 mins.

With Mary Pickford, Frank Powell, Owen Moore, Arthur Johnson, Kate Bruce, Bobby Harron,
Mack Sennett.

Although "1776" is scarcely as important a blueprint to "America" as "The Battle" was to "The Birth of a Nation", it nevertheless has a basically similar pattern, winding up with a miniscule call to arms by a Paul Revere parallel, and a routing of the Hessians by a band of American patriots. And - a typically Griffithian addition to such climaxes - the saving of a young maiden's honor assumes almost as much importance as saving the vital despatches that Washington needs so urgently. Even for 1909, the year he gave us "The Lonely Villa" and "A Corner in Wheat", this is lesser Griffith, but for a man who had been directing for only a year, it is still a smoothly told little story, really lacking only a better sense of cross-cutting and the occasional closeup to heighten a dramatic point or to make more use of Mary Pickford's pert attractiveness. The interior sets, though cramped, are good historical reconstructions, though the New Jersey exteriors, including some landscaping and cement walks, offer a few not too disturbing anachronisms. If the interior dramatics sometimes seem a bit unlikely -- for example, the card playing Hessians not noticing the father of the house skulking on the floor behind them -- it's because these are night scenes that would originally have been tinted blue, and the lessened visibility would have restored credibility. At this time, the Old West and the Civil War interested Griffith far more, and it was Edison that was to turn out, and in considerable numbers, stories of the American revolution.

A M E R I C A (1924)

A United Artists release of a D.W. Griffith presentation, directed by D.W. Griffith; story and screen play by Robert W. Chambers; historical arrangement by John L.E. Pell; directors of photography: G.W. (Billy) Bitzer, Henrik Sartov, Marcel Le Picard, ASC, Harold S. Sintzenich, ASC; Akeley camera operator: Vincent J. Farrar, ASC; art director: Charles M. Kirk; film editors: James and Rose Smith; music arranger: Joseph Carl Breil; assistant director: Herbert Sutch; director of construction: William J. Bantel; artist designer (matte paintings): Warren A. Newcombe; scenic artist: Charles E. Boss; still photographer: Frank J. Diem; studio projectionist: Benjamin Turner; technical advisers: Capt. George T. Shank, U.S. Army; Col. Hamilton Hawkins, U.S. Army; Brig. Sir Percy Sykes, British Army; Copyrighted as 14 reels, subsequently cut to 12,600 feet, and then 11,000 feet; New York Premiere: 44th Street Theatre, Feb. 21, 1924; released: Aug. 17, 1924.

Nathan Holden: Neil Hamilton; Nancy Montague: Carol Dempster; Capt. Walter Butler: Lionel Barrymore; Justice Montague: Erville Alderson; Charles Montague: Charles Emmett Mack; Samuel Adams: Lee Beggs; John Hancock: John Dunton; King George III: Arthur Donaldson; William Pitt: Charles Bennett; Lord Chamberlain: Downing Clarke; Thomas Jefferson: Frank Walsh; Patrick Henry: Frank McGlynn, Jr.; George Washington: Arthur Dewey; Richard Henry Lee: P.R. Scammon; Sir Ashley Montague: Sydney Deane; Gen. Gage: W.W. Jones; Capt. Montour: E. Roseman; Hikatoo: Harry Semels; Paul Revere: Harry O'Neill; John Parker, captain of the Minute Men: Henry Van Rousen; Maj. Pitcairn: Hugh Baird; Jonas Parker: James Milaidy; Capt. Prescott: H. Koser; Maj. Gen. Warren: Michael Donovan; Capt. Hare: Louis Wolheim; Joseph Brant, chief of the Mohawks: Riley Hatch; Marquis de Lafayette: H. Paul Doucet; Edmund Burke: W. Rising; Miss Montague's personal servant: Daniel Carney; household servant at Ashley Court: E. Ecanlon; Lord North: Emil Hoch; a refugee mother: Lucile LaVerne; Maj. Strong: Edwin Holland; an old patriot: Milton Noble.

Note: Resa Royce, Mrs Josef von Sternberg, appears as one of the ladies at Walter Butler's hunting lodge, and Major (later General) Wainwright, a hero of Bataan, can be seen doubling for Neil Hamilton as he leads the charge at the climax.

Running time: Approx. 2 hrs and 20 mins., depending on variable projection speeds.

identical shot in his 1911 "Fighting Blood", and the scene in the corridor where Hamilton hesitates (shall he rescue his sweetheart from rape at the hands of Butler, or ride to warn the troops of an impending massacre?) is taken bodily from one of Griffith's unproduced plays, "War". Its chief weakness however is the rather protracted love story. There is not necessarily too much of it, but it is often badly placed. The "Romeo and Juliet" balcony scene is a charming interlude, but one tends to be impatient with it since it occurs just as D.W. has gotten us all excited in expectations of Paul Revere's ride. However, it should be remembered that this print, the only surviving one, is of the British version. Not only was the film edited substantially before its ultimate American release -- and Griffith had a tendency to edit on impulse -- but it was edited yet again for the British market. Not only did Griffith not wish to offend the British for obvious commercial

Just as "The Birth of a Nation" had been of the Civil War, so was "America" an accurate but controversial treatment of the Revolutionary War. The complaints this time accused Griffith not of distortion, but of a shifting of emphasis. Most of the historians were from aristocratic Eastern families, and they saw the war as one that was fought almost solely along the Eastern seaboard. To Griffith however, and many military tacticians agreed, the real struggle was in the interior, and was waged over the all-important grain region to the North. John Ford's "Drums Along the Mohawk" took a similar viewpoint.

In general, "America" follows the same pattern as "The Birth of a Nation". Taking contrasting "high born" and "low born" characters, Griffith weaves them into history. The buildup is slow and deliberate; political intrigue, plot and counterplot, until the machinery of war is set in motion, then a cavalcade of spectacular action until the first climax, and the end of the first half of the film is reached. In part two, the process starts all over again, but at a much higher pitch, building to a mighty and typical climax of two battles intercut, and an exciting race to the rescue.

The best of "America" is Griffith's best, but the film as a whole does fall below the standards of "The Birth of a Nation", and is generally second-echelon Griffith. For the first time, Griffith was working from some kind of a screenplay, if not a script, and it may well have hampered him. He admired and respected writer Robert Chambers, and was possibly reluctant to discard too much of what he had written. Also he borrows to some extent from his own earlier work. Example: the superbly framed shot of Morgan's Raiders riding off into action is an expanded version of an

reasons, but he was also deeply appreciative of the respect they had shown him when he was there to make "Hearts of the World" during the war. Accordingly, for the British release he eliminated the surrender of Cornwallis, and also re-wrote many of the titles to pay tribute to the British code of honor in warfare (actually both sides behaved rather badly in certain areas), to refer to an armistice rather than a defeat, and so on! So probably some of the disjointed editing may result from these cuts. However, there is no excuse for the bad grammar and even inaccurate spelling of some of the titles, which look like first drafts badly in need of polishing. Incidentally one sequence expected and not cut (because it was never filmed) is of Washington crossing the Delaware. Griffith planned such a sequence, but Hearst, making his own Revolutionary war film "Janice Meredith", wanted it as a highlight of his film. So a deal was struck -- Griffith didn't film the sequence, and in return the Hearst papers got behind "America" to boost it as much as possible. Incidentally, the film is full of authentic props and weaponry from the war, and the number of troops involved in each battle are duplicated to a man. For a more detailed coverage of this aspect of "America", we refer you again to an excellent article by George Mitchell in the October issue of "American Cinematographer". (We hope some of you obtained it in advance, as we urged a few programs back). The print, by the way, was made some thirty five years ago, probably the very last one struck from the original negative. We'll say a little about this, and its shortcomings, in the introductory comments.

And too, some of the characterisations are on the weak side. Arthur Dewey plays Washington in a stiff, aloof, God-like manner, as though he were already a history-book stereotype, and that lovely and sensitive actress Carol Dempster inexplicably performs like a puppet. When Griffith orders her to play a scene as Mae Marsh would do, she does a fine imitation; on other occasions, Lillian Gish is clearly the model. When she is left to her own devices, she seems uncertain just what to do. This was hardly a question of inexperience, since she was fine in 1920's "The Love Flower" and even better in "Isn't Life Wonderful?" which followed "America". It may have been a matter of personal pique, since she and Griffith did not always work amicably together.

Several situations in AMERICA seem not unlike those in THE BIRTH OF A NATION -- the heroine's visit to an army receiving center, for example. But although there are fine dramatic situations in AMERICA, it fails to develop the poignancy of the earlier film. However, in terms of historical reconstruction and mass action, there need be no reservations. The ride of Paul Revere, and the Battles of Lexington, Concord, Bunker Hill and Johnson Hall are all brilliantly and excitingly done, and show once again that no one ever bettered Griffith at knowing how to cut -- and when. And, as in INTOLERANCE, the mob scenes are superbly organized; every extra, knowing exactly what to do, performs as an individual and not as part of a crowd; heroic tableaux and little vignettes of personal action are superbly interwoven into the frieze of panoramic action.

The bulk of the film was shot in Griffith's Memoroneck Studios, where he flung up huge sets. The whole Battle of Lexington was filmed here. Other scenes were photographed in Virginia, along the James River, and in old Williamsburg. The Johnson Hall battle was photographed just south of Washington, and other battle scenes along the Putnam County Border in New York State. Stretches of the Boston Post Road and glimpses of Long Island Sound are recognizable in many scenes.

As with ORPHANS OF THE STORM, AMERICA met with a highly enthusiastic press -- but an apathetic public. The Daughters of the American Revolution and other patriotic groups that had urged Griffith to make the film joined the rest of America in being more interested in flappers and jazz-age sex-comedies. AMERICA was "square" and old-fashioned, and despite being an apparently sure-fire boxoffice winner, turned out to be a flop instead. However, it has survived the years rather better than many of the films that were stealing away its audiences in 1924.

Historically, AMERICA is an invaluable record. It was filmed with full Army cooperation, and its detail in terms of military uniforms, tactics and so on is quite astounding. And in the broader issues, it only occasionally utilises an overdose of dramatic license. For example, even though he makes such an ideal villain, Griffith does not exaggerate the crimes of Walter Butler. Butler was possibly the most despicable individual involved in the entire war, hated even by his own allies. Historians agree that he "had not one redeeming feature -- unless it be his magnetism and leadership." (Strangely though, one hears him maligned much less than the at least well-intentioned Benedict Arnold). However, it is true that Griffith places too great a stress on the importance of Butler in the overall picture of the war. In the latter half of the film, the war between Britain and America is largely forgotten, and Butler becomes the common enemy. This is undoubtedly due, at least in part, to Griffith's friendship for the British. (After the Buckingham Palace showing of INTOLERANCE, and the British Government's invitation to Griffith to make HEARTS OF THE WORLD, Griffith's good will to Britain knew no bounds). As such, he bends over backwards to be fair to both sides -- even though both sides were guilty of some pretty cold-blooded dealings in that war. Tonight's print, incidentally, made up from the only surviving negative, contains titles that were intended primarily for British consumption, and some of the "diplomacy" is quite remarkable. However, despite such titles, and despite changing the overall title to "Love and Sacrifice" for English release, the film was not a success in that country. The British did not like to be reminded about a war they'd lost, so soon after just winning! Perhaps if Griffith had been canny enough to include the episode of the British burning down the White House -- one of the glorious moments of British 18th century history -- it might have been a different story!

Griffith's innovations in AMERICA are few -- but there is artistry and showmanship in every frame. The mass movements of troops (which seem to have impressed King Vidor, for his troop movements in "War and Peace" are almost identical) make wonderfully exciting use of the panel shot -- the CinemaScope ratio -- and when Morgan's Raiders ride off towards the end, there is a superlative natural panel shot, the riders framed by sky and foliage. Seeing it today, it's hard to imagine just why such a film, admitting its shortcomings, could have failed. It's typical of Griffith though, that after such a failure he didn't attempt to recoup his losses by a retrogression to "safe" pictures. His very next film was very much of a masterpiece, in some ways his finest film since INTOLERANCE...the lovely and sensitive ISN'T LIFE WONDERFUL? An almost certain "uncommercial" item even before the cameras rolled, it dealt with inflation in post-war Germany, and preceded Pabst's JOYLESS STREET and the other German "street" films. It's nice to know that even then, Griffith's work still had not only integrity but the power to influence other film-makers. But integrity is not always enough. In the U.S.A., the control of the industry was passing from the hands of the creators to those of the bankers. Griffith saw the handwriting on the wall, and in order to keep active had no other recourse but to give in. His independence at an end, he became a contract director for Paramount, and later United Artists -- the company he had helped to form. Good pictures still lay ahead, but no more great ones. Griffith's Golden Years were over.

If these notes have somewhat the look of a re-edited Griffith film it is because, in order to include more information, I have reproduced the smaller-type notes that I wrote for the New Yorker Theatre for a showing of the film in 1962. There are thus a few overlaps in information, and a reference to the British burning down the White House should of course carry the additional information that this occurred in the second U.S.-British war in the early 1800's. Also, Mamaroneck, the area where the studio was located, is mis-spelled in the reproduced notes.

-- Wm. K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.15!
Discussion/questions follow.