



New Jersey and the Early Motion Picture Industry by Richard Koszarski, Fort Lee Film Commission

The American motion picture industry was born and raised in New Jersey. Within a generation this powerful new medium passed from the laboratories of Thomas Edison to the one-reel masterworks of D.W. Griffith to the high-tech studio town of Fort Lee with rows of corporate film factories scattered along the local trolley lines. Although a new factory town was eventually established on the West Coast, most of the American cinema's real pioneers first paid their dues on the stages (and streets) of New Jersey.

On February 25, 1888, the Photographer Eadweard Muybridge lectured on the art of motion photography at New Jersey's Orange Music Hall. He demonstrated his Zoopraxiscope, a simple projector designed to reanimate the high-speed still photographs of human and animal subjects that had occupied him for over a decade. Two days later he visited Thomas Alva Edison at his laboratory in West Orange, and the two men discussed the possibilities of linking the Zoopraxiscope with Edison's phonograph.

Edison decided to proceed on his own and assigned direction of the project to his staff photographer, William Kennedy Laurie Dickson. In 1891 Dickson became the first man to record sequential photographic images on a strip of transparent celluloid film. Two years later, in anticipation of commercialization of the new process, he designed and built the first photographic studio intended for the production of motion pictures, essentially a tar paper shack mounted on a revolving turntable (to allow his subjects to face the direct light of the sun).

It was at this West Orange studio, nicknamed "the Black Maria," that the Edison Manufacturing Company filmed Buffalo Bill, "Gentleman Jim" Corbett, Annie Oakley, Sandow, and other celebrities of the day as well as *Fred Ott's Sneeze* (1894), *The Kiss* (1896), and an experimental sound film in which Dickson played his violin. But by 1897 Edison cameramen had begun to abandon the old studio in favor of location shooting, sometimes filming in the streets of East Orange or Newark, but occasionally journeying as far as China and Japan.

Edison built a new studio in Manhattan in 1901, where interiors were photographed, but New Jersey continued to be a favorite site for location work. Edwin S. Porter filmed portions of *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) in the Essex County Park reservation and on the Erie and Lackawanna lines near the Passaic River. The West Orange factory also continued to manufacture motion picture projectors and related hardware until a disastrous fire on December 9, 1914, hastened the end of Edison's film operations.

Edison's rivals also used New Jersey as a location during this period. In 1904 American Mutoscope and Biograph shot *Personal* in Edgewater and *The Suburbanite*



in Asbury Park while the Kalem Company made regular days trips to the area around Fort Lee and Coytesville as early as 1907. Cast and crew would assemble at the studio in Manhattan, travel by subway to one of the Hudson River ferry lines, and make the rest of the trip by streetcar. After he began directing for the Biograph Company in 1908, D. W. Griffith frequently chose to work in this same area. Here he made *The Curtain Pole* (1912), and the one-reel Civil War epic *The Battle*, filmed in 1911 on the undeveloped acreage behind Rambo's Hotel in Coytesville.

At this same time the first permanent New Jersey studios were being built: Centaur at Bayonne in 1908, Champion in Coytesville in 1910, Eclair in Fort Lee in 1911, and Pathé, first in Bound Brook (1910) and later in Jersey City (1912). It was Pathé that would send Pearl White to film "cliffhanger" episodes of *The Perils of Pauline* on the Fort Lee Palisades in 1914, helping to establish the new genre of movie serials. These early studios were designed to produce one- and two-reel films for the nickelodeon market and co-existed with the first studios built in Southern California.

But by 1914 feature-length films of an hour or more were becoming the industry standard, and production at the larger California studios began to increase dramatically. Land and labor were cheaper, and work did not have to be abandoned in the winter when Eastern producers sent their crews on extended southern location trips. The greater narrative complexity of feature films did demand Broadway stars and Broadway properties, however, and a new wave of studio construction swept through Fort Lee between 1914 and 1916.

The smaller Champion and Eclair studios were soon dwarfed by half a dozen local rivals, many of them clustered around Main Street and Linwood Avenue. C.A. Willat built a pair of large "greenhouse" studios which he rented to Fox and Triangle and where Theda Bara, "Fatty" Arbuckle, and Douglas Fairbanks all worked. The Peerless Studio, built for the World Film Corporation, plays a major role in Maurice Tourneur's *A Girl's Folly*. Alice Guy Blanche's Solax Studio occupied a full acre on Lemoine Avenue. Universal's Fort Lee studio, which opened on Main Street in 1915, was intended as the East Coast version of Universal City (although it was mainly used by Goldwyn and Selznick). And the enormous Paragon Studio, financed by raw stock mogul Jules Brulatour, became the new home of Maurice Tourneur on films like *The Blue Bird*.

The years between 1914 and 1918 proved a brief golden age for film production in Fort Lee. Ferries were packed with film workers every morning, and at lunchtime the studio whistles sent hundreds of actors and technicians into the streets. But local residents were not entirely happy with the sudden transformation of their community; they resented the noise, crowding, and confusion generated by the studios and were suspicious of the theatrical types arriving each day from New York. In the winter of 1918 most of the studios were forced to close down because of wartime coal rationing, and many stars and directors relocated to Los Angeles. When the war ended, their employers abandoned Fort Lee, tired of the difficult



wintertime ferry crossings and squabbles with local residents; they built new studios in New York to handle what Eastern production remained. The last important star based in Fort Lee, Richard Barthelmess, made his final film there, *The Enchanted Cottage*, in 1923.

When talkies arrived, many of the old New Jersey studios were wired for sound and rented out to independent filmmakers (the major producers continued to work in New York). Some of the earliest musical shorts were shot at the cramped Victor Recording Studio in Camden, and the old Ideal Studio in Hudson Heights was sound-proofed and made available as a rental stage. Here W.C. Fields made his first talking film, *The Golf Specialist* (1930), and Bill Robinson starred in *Harlem Is Heaven* (1932). Only the Peerless Studio in Fort Lee, then called the Metropolitan Studio, was capable of handling a large number of feature pictures, and these were all produced by low-budget independents or producers aiming at specific racial, ethnic, or religious markets. At this one studio in 1931 and 1932 alone, Wilfred North directed the Mormon feature *Corianton*, Thalia Productions shot a series of Italian language films, including *Così e La Vita*, Maurice Schwartz appeared in the Yiddish production *Uncle Moses*, and film producer Oscar Micheaux directed *The Exile*, *Veiled Aristocrats*, and *Ten Minutes to Live*.

But the deepening Depression, and a general constriction of the entire film industry in the East, meant that the smaller, older, and less well-equipped New Jersey stages were abandoned. In 1935 film historian and Englewood native Theodore Huff shot the documentary *Ghost Town: The Story of Fort Lee*, in which countless reels of abandoned film can be seen littering the shattered stages of the great, glass silent film studios. Much of this footage would later be used by Thomas Hanlon in his 1964 documentary *Before Hollywood There Was Fort Lee, New Jersey*.

Many of the remaining studio structures in the Fort Lee area burned during the 1950s, although the Champion Studio still exists near the Fort Lee/Englewood line. In 2002 the Fort Lee Film Commission placed a series of historic markers at the sites of the Eclair, Peerless, Willat, Universal, and Solax studios, a long overdue commemoration of Fort Lee's role in transforming the American cinema into a modern industrial enterprise.

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