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# SILENT FILMS IN ST. AUGUSTINE

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*Foreword by Donna L. Hill*

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## FIRST EXPOSURES

1906–1911

St. Augustine is the oldest European city in the continental United States. Juan Ponce de León may have landed somewhere nearby in the year 1513 when he named the newly discovered land La Florida. In 1565 Pedro Menéndez de Avilés established a permanent settlement at St. Augustine, and in the following centuries the Spaniards, Indians, French, and English struggled for possession of the land, until it became part of the United States in 1821.

As early as the 1820s Americans living in northern states began coming to St. Augustine in the wintertime to escape frigid weather. These Yankee sojourners discovered an antique Spanish town, with stone houses whose balconies extended over narrow sandy streets, set amid a semitropical landscape bordering on the white sand beaches leading to the Atlantic Ocean. The gray stone Castillo de San Marcos, renamed Fort Marion by the United States, stood as an impressive monument to the military conflicts that had been fought for ownership of the town.

In the 1880s Henry M. Flagler, cofounder of Standard Oil Company with John D. Rockefeller, came to St. Augustine and constructed impressive, solid concrete resort hotels that looked like Spanish Renaissance palaces. His architects, Thomas Hastings and John Carrère, had started their careers at McKim, Mead & White—Stanford White was infamous as a bon vivant of New York society. Flagler also built a railroad that



The Vedder House was one of the old Spanish stone buildings that made St. Augustine so attractive to moviemakers. The Edison Company set *A Night at the Inn* there shortly before fire leveled the building along with several blocks of the city. (Courtesy of St. Augustine Historical Society)

connected Florida to the northern states and eventually extended south all the way to Key West. It was during the Flagler era that moviemaking companies discovered St. Augustine, and for a few years they used the Ancient City as the setting for films requiring a tropical or exotic atmosphere. Eventually, more than 120 films would be made partially or wholly in St. Augustine.

Thomas Edison, whose company supplied the electric dynamos for Flagler's hotels, may not have invented the moving picture, but his primitive motion picture device was the first to capture the public's imagination and make movies a commercial product. His "kinetoscope" consisted of a wooden box, two feet by three feet, with a slit in the top through which the viewer squinted. When the customer dropped a nickel in the change slot, a forty-foot strip of film rolled across a light projector, giving a thirty-second glimpse of animation. Albert E. Smith, a film pioneer with the Vitagraph Company, recalled, "No furor in entertainment history can compare with that aroused by Tom Edison's peep show. . . . Public excitement over the wooden cabinet with a slot at the top and a few moving pictures was unbelievable. It stirred controversy in scientific circles."<sup>1</sup>

Soon moving pictures were being projected onto screens, and large audiences of men, women, and children could watch a man chop down a tree, a sailboat glide across a pond, a woman push a baby stroller—anything that moved in an interesting way. These one-minute “flickers” simply catered to the public’s astonishment that pictures could be made to move. By 1903 this novelty had worn off, and moviemakers started giving people films that told stories, most famously an eleven-minute thriller called *The Great Train Robbery*.

Within a matter of a few years the cameras that recorded pictures on film improved, and the projectors that showed the films operated more smoothly, eliminating the flicker of the first moving pictures. Lenses captured images with remarkable clarity, even by modern standards. By 1907 the citizens of cities across the land could walk into theaters and watch motion pictures playing almost continuously all afternoon and evening. As many as two million people a day took time to sit in the dark and be entertained. Motion picture companies churned out thousands of half-reel and one-reel animated stories lasting from as few as five minutes up to fifteen minutes.

St. Augustine residents were introduced to the movies with *The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight*, the longest moving picture made up to that point. It recorded the fourteen-round world heavyweight championship bout between Jim Corbett and Bob Fitzsimmons that took place in March of



Henry M. Flagler, an early partner in Standard Oil Company, built the Hotel Ponce de Leon (pictured) and several other large structures in Spanish Renaissance style. These were often used as the backdrops for scenes set in a variety of exotic locales, such as Italy, France, or Spain. (Courtesy of Flagler College Archives)



Actors and film crews sometimes made Flagler's Hotel Alcazar their headquarters because of its informal atmosphere and the amusements housed under its roof. (Courtesy of St. Augustine Historical Society)

1897. Veriscope's groundbreaking film created a sensation as it toured the country, finally arriving in St. Augustine in January 1898. The cavernous casino of Flagler's Hotel Alcazar served as the theater. Workmen stretched a canvas across one end of the large swimming pool, and spectators took seats on both sides of the surrounding mezzanine, an area where dances and bazaars were frequently staged. At first the projector operator wrestled with a balky machine, but eventually the crowd was treated to a very satisfactory exhibition.<sup>2</sup>

Two weeks later when the editor of St. Augustine's winter-season high-society magazine, *The Tatler*, witnessed the next moving picture presentation in the casino, featuring films produced by the Biograph Company, she was flabbergasted. The woman editor hardly knew what to make of the films. She dubbed the experience "one of the marvels of this electronic age. . . . This reproduction of living, moving men and women, life size, of galloping horses, dashing trains, gave very general satisfaction. . . . The enthusiasm was boundless. While the audience was a good one, had the

people of St. Augustine had the least idea of what the show would be, the great hall would have been crowded.”<sup>3</sup>

In succeeding years the casino would occasionally host films shown for the winter visitors to St. Augustine. In 1906 *The Tatler* advised its readers: “Next Monday moving pictures will be the attraction and no one should miss seeing them, as they are the best shown here and are equal to any exhibition anywhere. Admission twenty-five cents, and ten new subjects direct from New York will be given.”<sup>4</sup>

The first place in St. Augustine to show moving pictures on a fairly regular basis was Genovar’s Opera House on North St. George Street in the heart of town. The opera house had been constructed by family patriarch Bartolomé Genovar shortly after the Civil War, and all sorts of entertainments had been staged there over the years. The aging black abolitionist Frederick Douglass spoke to a mixed-race audience there in 1889 (and received a standing ovation), while on another occasion comic actor Joseph Jefferson performed *Rip Van Winkle*, a play he wrote and that became his hallmark. By 1907 Genovar’s was occasionally showing films such as *The Lighthouse Robbery*, a stage play that had been turned into a moving picture.<sup>5</sup>

In 1908 the Genovar brothers, William P. and Frank, entered the movie business in a serious way. First, they staged a free exhibition of films in the dance pavilion at St. Augustine Beach, then they opened Genovar’s Electric Theater in a rented retail space near the family opera house on St. George Street.<sup>6</sup> Their first advertisement described the theater as “New, Bright, Cool.” The last descriptor was important for a southern town in the midst of summer swelter. They offered a one-reel visual record of the Bill Squires–Tommy Burns heavyweight championship fight, a few “amusing” films, and some “scenes in other lands.”<sup>7</sup>

At the same time as the Genovars were getting into the moving picture business full time, Gus Hooks opened the Plaza Theater in the Plaza Hotel on the corner of King Street and Hospital (today’s Aviles) Street, on the south side of the old Spanish plaza. He advertised “the coolest theater in town,” and staged matinee and evening showings every day except Sunday. Like the Genovars, he charged five cents admission for children and ten cents for adults. Shows did not always go smoothly. A September showing of the Kalem Company’s *Ben Hur* came to an abrupt end when