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JAKE WELLS ENTERPRISES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF URBAN  
ENTERTAINMENTS IN THE SOUTH, 1890-1925

by

ERIC JAY DEWBERRY

Under the Direction of Dr. Kathy Fuller-Seeley

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the development of commercial entertainments and film exhibition in the urban South around the turn of the last century through the growth and decline of Jake Wells Enterprises. A former professional baseball player, Wells invested in a wide variety of public amusements, with the core of his early business centered on establishing and organizing a string of vaudeville, popularly priced, and legitimate theaters throughout the largest cities in the region, a network he later transitioned to showing exclusively motion pictures. A thorough analysis of period newspapers, trade journals, and some business records covering Wells' career provides much-needed evidence for film and cultural historians wishing to understand the genesis and evolution of public amusements in the region, and its negotiation of traditional social and cultural institutions. In the 1890s, Wells played and managed several professional baseball teams in the South. The sport educated players and spectators alike to both the values and creed of New South progress, and to rising tensions confronting the intersection of modern and traditional forms of culture. Using his experiences and contacts gained in baseball,

Wells helped foster a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation required for the progress of media industries in the region, establishing social networks of knowledge and improving distribution flows of entertainment. The dissertation explores how race and the genteel emerged as regional characteristics most influential to the success of this conversion in many urban areas. Protestants and evangelical culture served as the bulkhead supporting opposition to new amusements. Wells' expansion plans and violations of Sabbath day laws evoked a "spatial" battle between commercialism and religion where political, social, and cultural power drawn from place and identity were challenged and reconfigured. Another chapter explores the exhibition and reception of early Civil War films in the region. Wells and other exhibitors were influential in their production and circulation nationwide, and positioned cinema as an alternative shrine to commemorate the Lost Cause in many communities. The last chapter shows how Wells failed to meet local demands and consumer desires in competition with the rise of national chain theaters and Hollywood's vertical integration.

INDEX WORDS: Jake Wells, Film history, Public amusements, Regionalism, Baseball history, Vaudeville, Popular culture, Race, Religion, Lost Cause, Motion picture exhibition, Entrepreneurship history, Cinema history

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ERIC JAY DEWBERRY

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2010

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by

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## INTRODUCTION

This study explores the career of Jake Wells, a significant purveyor of commercial entertainments during the first decades of the twentieth century in the American South. A former professional baseball player turned producing manager of numerous classes of live theater, regional chain theater operator, amusement park owner, and film exhibitor, Wells successfully negotiated many of the territory's transportation, economic, political, social and cultural challenges to establish a multimedia empire I have termed Jake Wells Enterprises.<sup>1</sup> In 1909, the *Chicago Show World*, a national theatrical trade journal, labeled the entrepreneur the region's "unofficial cultural authority."<sup>2</sup> In 1912, at the height of his career, he operated over fifty theaters in the region's largest cities, stretching from Richmond, Virginia to New Orleans. Wells' reputation in amusement circles helped him attain multiple leadership roles in various regional and national theater and film exhibitor interest groups. His influence helped establish and develop a culture of entrepreneurship for nationally circulated forms of commercial entertainments in the region and improve their circulation throughout the territory. Studying his career provides sorely needed details of the evolution and supervision of a southern amusement network during the era. Wells' history provides new insights into the promotion practices, audience reception, and institutional responses to the growth of popular culture, and more specifically motion pictures in the region, and explores how the showman negotiated distinctive

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<sup>1</sup> Wells never legally grouped his holdings into one umbrella corporation called Jake Wells Enterprises. Over thirty years he incorporated more than twenty different ventures with multiple business partners. The title is taken from an advertisement in *Variety* taken out by Wells during the height of his career in which he wished to categorize his theatrical holdings publicly, which were grouped under: Wells Amusement Company; the Bijou Amusement Company; Wells, Wilmer, and Vincent, Inc.; and Wells-Leath Theatrical. See Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> *Chicago Show World* quote cited in the *Richmond News-Leader*, 2 February 1909.

regional challenges, such as traditional mores and customs, race, evangelical Christianity and Protestantism, transportation, public policy, and place and identity.

### **Cinema and Cultural History**

In addition to offering a narrative account of Wells' life, this study incorporates methodologies of cinema and new cultural history to uncover the contextual setting, nature, and challenges in which commercial entertainments and cinema were established, circulated, and received in southern urban cultures by way of Jake Wells Enterprises. In the 1980s, Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery's *Film History: Theory and Practice* (1985), and David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production* (1985) marshaled an analytical historical approach in film studies valuing contextual relationships of the social, political, and cultural phenomenon of cinema existing beyond the medium as text.<sup>3</sup> The former advocated the adoption of more rigorous investigation of sources and systematic rigor in line with traditional historical scholarship through the careful and extensive use of primary documents existing outside the film as text, including the trade press, archival documents, and newspapers. The latter soundly demonstrated this protocol in its blending of critically analyzed films with a variety of industry-related material to richly explain the evolving style, mode of production, and integration of technological change in American cinema from the nickelodeon period to 1960. Together, these works propagated the schema for a fresh historical approach engaging empirical research both with and without the analysis of film to enrich and complicate scholarly knowledge of cinema's history.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1985); David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

Media scholars such as Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, Eric Smoodin, Janet Staiger, and others have since refined the methodological inquiries driving the 'historical turn' in film scholarship to distinguish cinema history from what is understood as film history.<sup>4</sup> This study primarily practices cinema history, as explained by Maltby and Stokes, as "a project engaging with the economic, industrial, [and] institutional history on the one hand--in accounts of how the commercial institution of cinema operated--and the socio-cultural history of its audiences on the other."<sup>5</sup> Outside of historically analyzing film as text, genres, or products of auteurs, this approach favors the value of motion pictures in the contexts of people's everyday lives in addition to its function within society in specific places and times. Wells' prominence and influence in the region provides a window for new understandings of how popular culture, and particularly cinema, evolved in the South as an industry and social and cultural force.

Cultural history, which burst onto the academic scene in the 1970s, assumes an interdisciplinary philosophy of inquiry and analysis, blending social sciences with conventional historical research methods to explore past traditions and cultural interpretations of historical experience. Coupled with the prospect of social history, cultural history provides a bottom up perspective for understanding a group of people's past knowledge, customs, arts, and ideologies. More specifically, it explores overlooked events and experiences associated with people's daily interactions and ways of living, the ways in which groups construct a sense of the past, class interactions, and the source and progression of certain rituals, traditions, and leisure activities. Contemporary approaches to cultural history have adopted methodologies to allow easier

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<sup>4</sup> Melvyn Stokes, Richard Maltby, and Robert C. Allen, *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of the Cinema*. (Exeter: University of Exeter, 2008); Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin eds., *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007); Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley, *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2008); Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Maltby, Stokes, and Allen, *Going to the Movies*, 2.

assimilation of the theoretical legacy of disciplines like film studies. Open University's scholarly model of the "circuit of culture," for example, values interrelated historical moments associated with the production, representation, consumption, regulation, and identity of cultural objects (film texts) and social groups.<sup>6</sup> Smoodin, Maltby, Staiger, and Miriam Hansen employ portions of this approach to provide multi-perspectival analysis and broad contextual understandings of the complexities, contradictions, and power relations associated with the cultural reproductions of cinema and peoples within specific film cultures.<sup>7</sup>

### **Analytical Framework**

Two contending dualisms serve as the study's evaluative core: the concept of modernity versus traditionalism, and regionalism versus nationalism. Wells' story adds to a growing number of localized empirical studies on cinema dually complicating and deepening scholarly understandings of the "modernity thesis" and its significance to the historical production, exhibition, reception and cultural perception of cinema. In silent-era film histories, scholars largely incorporate this concept to help explain the period's environmental changes, social effects, and its interconnections with the development of cinema. The idea is evaluated in relation to early cinema in various ways, including serving as a new and unique sensory experience, as a practice predisposed to the encounters of modern life, and as a significant element in modernity's emergence. In *Melodrama and Modernity*, for example, Ben Singer offers a contextualist approach that explores the way in which sensational melodramas of the 1910s grew out of, and existed within, a multifaceted combination of social, intertextual and

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<sup>6</sup> This paradigm is articulated in Open University of Britain's ongoing textbook series Culture, Media, and Identities.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Smoodin, *Regarding Frank Capra: Audience, Celebrity, and American Film Studies, 1930–1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films*; Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Harvard University Press, 1991).

commercial contexts.<sup>8</sup> Despite recent debate amongst film historians concerning the degree to which modernity shaped and influenced film form and people's comprehensions and experiences of cinema, this thesis acts as a good vehicle to--as scholar Murray Pomerance suggests-- "understand the modern experience by light of cinema, and cinema in light of the modern experience."<sup>9</sup> What many film historians contend is that modernity can best be understood as intrinsically cinematic, and therefore fundamental to our historical understandings of the social experiences of early moviegoing and cultural developments from which it grew. This concept plays a particularly defining role in the spread of cinema and other public amusements in the urban South due to the region's well documented struggles to mediate traditionalism and the status quo with change and progress provided by modernity. Traditional histories of the New South concentrate on this balancing act almost exclusively, but largely dismiss or ignore cinema's significance in the struggle. Popular culture and cinema maintain a marginal status in most traditional histories, particularly those focusing on the South, as it is used by scholars selectively, generally lacks critical insight, or often embraces a romantic or symptomatic direction.<sup>10</sup> The blending of film history and traditional history with this study's primary research and analysis reveals cinema's impact on the formation of a "modern" cultural identity in the South. In addition, Wells' history enhances scholarly understanding of cinema's involvement in the creation of new regional urban social spaces, social practices, and environmental challenges. Wells' amusement endeavors are understood contextually as an interaction of various elements

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<sup>8</sup> Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Murray Pomerance ed., *Cinema and Modernity* (Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 4-5; Bordwell and Charlie Kiel are two critics of the modernity thesis. They believe the concept is too general to objectively answer the historical development of film aesthetics and the environment's effect on people's cognitive functions. Scholars like Lee Grieveson believe the thesis is stunting film history because of its linearity and predilection for grand narratives. Kathy Fuller-Seeley, Richard Abel, Robert Allen, and others question its influence outside of urban areas and encourage greater research within rural areas.

<sup>10</sup> Karen Cox, "The South and Mass Culture," *The Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 3 (August 2009): 677-290.

to explore how cinema affected perceptions and changing interactions of race, class, and gender relations due to the forces of modernization.

Debating the benefits and weaknesses of regionalism as an analytic framework is a discussion dividing many scholars in various academic disciplines, perhaps none more deeply than historians of the American South. The growth of micro-histories, which present localized analyses tending to rupture conventional knowledge and ingrained conceptions bestowed by grand narratives, have diminished the appeal of broad approaches of syntheses like regionalism. Critics of the former, however, believe its fragmentation presents conceptual dilution, promotes a celebration of triviality, and harbors a general apathy toward integrating with macro studies. Scholarship of the New South period is generally segmented between stressing the region's commonality with the nation and touting some sort of southern exceptionalism. New South urban histories complicate this divide even more when one compares the specific economic, political, and cultural identities of individual cities. Historian Blaine Brownell, for example, believes there was no 'solid' urban South around the turn of the century, emphasizing that localities like Birmingham, Alabama, with the influence of its dominant steel and coal industries, more resembled a "Rust Belt" city than, say, Charlotte, North Carolina. He also notes the differences of culture and economy existing between Charleston, South Carolina's reliance on old elite money and colonial ties to shipping versus New Orleans Creoles and jazz-men identities.<sup>11</sup>

Other New South scholars lean on southern historian David Goldfield's calls to embrace regionalism. He argues the "southern city derived its character from the South," conceptualized

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<sup>11</sup> Blaine A. Brownell, *The Urban Ethos in the Urban South, 1920-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975); Blaine A. Brownell, "Birmingham, Alabama: New South City in the 1920s," *Journal of Southern History* 38, no. 1 (February 1972): 21-48;

as a form of “self-image” or identity recognized nationwide.<sup>12</sup> A biracial society and dominant Protestant ideology determined life in virtually every community in the territory, in the process making city and region intertwined and inseparable. These two forces were crucial in defining public space in the South, an area of intense interest for cinema scholars. Moreover, despite material differences existing between cities comparatively, the nation and the South embraced the region's "otherness" as a measuring stick to articulate normalcy and deviation from national ideals. The South signifies regionalism in the national consciousness, and certain rhetorical descriptions dominate perceptions of the region both historically and today, whether it is mistrust of big government or Confederate heritage. Conclusions reached in this study take the middle ground, and support Sheldon Hackney's argument presented in "The Ambivalent South," in which he argues the area is both regional and national in one, embracing a sort of double history.<sup>13</sup> It is paradigmatic of America and disparately regional at the same time. This approach benefits critical analysis of the evolution of entertainment and cinema in this study, since popular culture was largely realized in industrial circles and marketed with regional distinctions in mind. Moreover, the foundational works on early cinema and amusements conceive of its history as a configuration of regions, with Chicago and New York as the locus points for the emergence of a national mass culture.

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<sup>12</sup> David R. Goldfield, “The Urban South: A Regional Framework,” *The American Historical Review* 86, no.5 (December 1981): 1009-1034.

<sup>13</sup> Sheldon Hackney, “The Ambivalent South,” in Winfred B. Moore, Jr., Kyle S. Sinisi and David H. White, Jr., eds. *Warm Ashes: Issues in Southern History at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003); for specific information regarding revisionist histories and debates over regionalism as a analytical perspective in New South scholarship see: Edward Ayers, et. al., *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1996); Larry J. Griffin & Don Harrison Doyle, *The South as an American Problem* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Orville V. Burton, “The Modern ‘New’ South in a Postmodern Academy: A Review Essay,” *Journal of Southern History*, 52, no.4 (1996): 767-786; and more.



## Entrepreneurship

This study also utilizes scholarship of entrepreneurship as an alternate channel to formulate analysis, since records of Wells' personal writings and business dealings are sparse. The notion of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship has assumed multiple definitions throughout history. These range from the simple idea of a businessperson who is self-employed and therefore targeted for greater financial risk, to later themes of managerial competence and innovation.<sup>14</sup> Cinema studies are a potentially inspiring area for a new paradigm of entrepreneurship history. Historiography of entrepreneurs emerged with the "heroic individual" model, celebrating visionary and successful leaders. In the 1950s, scholars embraced an "organizational turn," merging with business history to analyze the "role of management" as a political and societal concern or advantage within entrepreneurship.<sup>15</sup> The current approach is the idea of "intrapreneurship," or entrepreneurship within a large organization.<sup>16</sup> The difficulty with the latter lies in balancing the role of visionary leaders with factors explaining corporate growth—a trend often seen in film studies. Generally, entrepreneurial investigations into cinema's business history are limited to the nickelodeon barons who went on to establish the major corporations comprising the studio system, the pioneers (Edison et al.), inventors, or

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<sup>14</sup> W. A. Long, "The Meaning of Entrepreneurship," *American Journal of Small Business*, 8 (2), 47-56; Maria Brouwer, "Weber, Schumpeter, and Knight on Entrepreneurship and Economic Development," *Journal of Evolutionary Economics* 12 (1), 2002, 83-105; Richard Cantillon, *Essai Sur la Nature du Commerce en Général*, (1732).

<sup>15</sup> James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution* (New York: John Day Company, 1941); William H. Whyte *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956)

<sup>16</sup> G Pinchot III, *Intrapreneuring* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985); Michael J. Lynskey, "Introduction" in Michael J. Lynskey and Seiichiro Yonekura (eds.), *Entrepreneurship and Organization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

individuals (Lyman Howe) whose actions did not really affect the industry in its entirety.<sup>17</sup> A type of “intrapreneurship” approach is needed to explore the “middle men,” like Wells, who operated between the industry and the public (exhibitors, distributors, etc.), and were innovators in their own right. This can help open up new spaces and ideas, relieving the suffocating effects of the Classical Hollywood Cinema or the studio system approach that dominate scholarly understandings of cinema history.

As its foundation, this study uses economic historian and critical thinker Josef Schumpeter’s belief that entrepreneurship is the initiation of new commercial enterprises and use of resources in innovative ways.<sup>18</sup> Entrepreneurs like Wells were critical to the cultural and economic development of the New South. Wells integrated and diversified an emerging national economic and cultural system through the dissemination of motion pictures and other public entertainments to help spur a new type of commercial culture in the region. In addition to Schumpeter, this study employs theories and knowledge found in the “New Regionalism” approach in entrepreneurship studies. This direction conceptualizes space and location as central to the growth of innovation, emphasizing the geographic and social dimensions of entrepreneurship.

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<sup>17</sup> For example, see the list Louis B. Mayer studies: Bosley Crowther, *Hollywood Rajah: The Life and Times of Louis B. Mayer* (1960); Samuel Marx, *Mayer and Thalberg: The Make-Believe Saints* (1975); Gary Carey, *All the Stars in Heaven: Louis B. Mayer's MGM* (1981); Diana Altman, *Hollywood East: Louis B. Mayer and the Origins of the Studio System* (1992); Charles Higham, *Merchant of Dreams: Louis B. Mayer, M.G.M., and the Secret Hollywood* (1993). Other examples include: Joseph P. Eckhardt, *The King of the Movies: Film Pioneer Siegmund Lubin* (Madison, N.J.:Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997); Charles Musser, *High-class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition, 1880-1920* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> Joseph A. Schumpeter, *The Theory of Economic Development: An Inquiry into Profits, Capital, Credit, Interest, and the Business Cycle* (1934).

## **The New South**

Wells' career unfolds during the New South era, a period dating roughly between the 1880s and 1920s, in which southern society faced enormous changes socially, culturally, politically, and economically. The turn of the century is conceived as a pivotal period for the region's history for a variety of reasons, including its struggle to balance isolationism against adopting more national agendas, policies, behaviors, and lifestyles; coping with the Civil War's aftermath a generation removed; and embracing growth and change while preserving tradition and customs. A distinctive area of academic focus, particular aspects of race, class, and religion are the most prominent interpretive and thematic issues in Southern historical scholarship.

One characteristic that all New South cities, like Atlanta, Richmond, and Nashville shared was intense growth. The region experienced a population boom around the turn of the century, as annexation, increased births, and migration swelled the number of inhabitants. Cities urbanized at rates equal to and sometimes greater than other regions, and expansion forced extreme physical changes. Construction boomed as new residential dwellings, commercial buildings, and suburban communities sprouted up. Most New South cities also experienced extreme economic growth, as new industry and commerce abounded. In addition to benefiting from increased demands for agricultural goods such as cotton, lumber, and tobacco, these cities attracted new and diverse industries, including, chemicals, steel, food processing, and automobiles factories. Improvements to transportation and logistical services opened new and more efficient shipping routes, allowing for the growth of a wholesale distribution market. Banking, insurance, and retail industries flourished under the changes. Economic changes forced shifts in the New South city's labor force. New service jobs and the growth of white-collar professions generated a larger middle class. Both women and African Americans were employed in larger numbers, although

many were restricted to certain professions, generally as unskilled laborers, waiters, waitresses, servants, nurses, or social workers. These dynamic social and economic changes allowed New South cities to flourish as regional culture centers, housing the most influential entertainment, art and intellectual communities.<sup>19</sup>

Race is the fundamental theme of Southern history. Scholarship of the era traces racism and segregation as a cultural conception and largely ideological position. Particularly relevant in New South era studies is the understanding of the region's widespread project to secure white dominance after emancipation, create racial divisions in labor, protect "white womanhood," and separate individual black and white cultures. Howard Rabinowitz's *Race Relations in the Urban South* and Joel Williamson's *The Crucible of Race* are the two stand-out books on the subject.<sup>20</sup> In addition to detailing the effect of disenfranchisement, both studies explore social and cultural segregation. Jim Crow was a modern project of "white supremacy," a structural racism where the separation of races in public places became the dominant undertaking, particularly in urban locations. Both studies argue for the formation of two cultural worlds, and outline how the white South's goal was to humiliate and depress expectations of blacks, and to deter any notions of resistance. Of course, Jim Crow takes rise during the birth of commercial entertainments and public amusements, yet these studies and others do not recognize the degree to which cinema factored into the New South's segregated culture. This study offers a critical evaluation of the nexus between race, space, cinema, and modernity. It strengthens the idea of Jim Crow as a new structural weapon used to harden racism, specifically as a site and ritual (the cinema) where

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<sup>19</sup> Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Goldfield, *The Urban Ethos in the South*; David Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Lauren H. Larsen, *The Rise of the Urban South*. (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1985).

<sup>20</sup> Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Harold N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978).

African American mobility and visibility was its greatest--and for most whites threatening--in the region.

This examination into race and cinema in the region is analyzed through a lens favoring concepts of spatial analysis. Both cinema scholars and historians have increasingly recognized the usefulness of space as an organizing and theoretical category to further our knowledge in the dynamics of gender, class, cultural and political change. New South studies exploring the evolution of Jim Crow, for example, have used this method to locate important elements of black resistance critical to the project's unfolding. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre, a French philosopher and key architect of the spatial analysis approach, identifies space as a social and cultural creation produced by shifting relations between human beings, which is integral to both the construction of people's or group's identities and relations of power and ideology operating in society. Lefebvre classified three specific forms of space determining the unfolding of history: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space.<sup>21</sup> Spatial practice entails the elaboration of everyday routines and rituals between people and the environment, representations express the designed development of space through maps, models, or planning, and representational denotes the abstract vision, idealistic, or theoretical extension of space. This study is concerned with cinema as a social and material practice and recognition of place, investigating its role in the shaping of lived urban spaces in the New South and the cinema's effect on regional identity.

In addition to examining racial relations in spaces of cinema, the study uses spatial conceptions to explore its interactions with religion and the genteel, two forces structuring the

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<sup>21</sup> Kanishka Goonewardens et al., *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefebvre* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2008), 1-24.

cultural make up of New South cities. Historians have thoroughly detailed how evangelicalism and fundamental Protestants shaped social and cultural development in the South.<sup>22</sup> The relationship between religion and reform during this era garners the most scrutiny from scholars. William Link details this association in full and suggests faith provided moral reform movements vigor unparalleled in other regions, generating a “crusade” with a like momentum and enforcement.<sup>23</sup> Religion is also cited as the divisive force behind the see-saw embrace of continuity and change between values of the Old South and New. The growth of commercial entertainments in the region often exposed this challenge and was often viewed as a threat to the church's cultural authority over the community. Few historians, however, have adopted the spatial turn in analyzing religion in the region, particularly in urban settings. The most fundamental problem within cultural history and religious studies, as argued by historian Kathleen Neils Conzen, is its failure to determine the frequency with which faith has been able to influence day-to-day issues, such as enforcing morality, socializing children, affirming traditional gender roles, and its significance relative to competing value systems and institutions.<sup>24</sup> My study particularly focuses on the intersection of religion and cinema, which engage in a battle between traditionalism and modernity to alter representational space and define sets of symbolic associations afforded by place.

A similar intersection is examined between the cinema and the genteel. The rapid growth of a middle-class consumer culture in southern cities, coupled with the region's historical legacy and embrace of Victorian culture, cultivated a genteel habitus or lifestyle which intensely demarcated sites of high and low culture during the growth of public amusements. Theaters

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<sup>22</sup> Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 160.

<sup>23</sup> Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism*; Gaines M. Foster in *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyist and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Kathleen Neils Conzen et al., “Forum: The Place of Religion in Urban and Community Studies,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 6, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 107-129.

assumed a symbolic stature throughout the South representing a city's level of cosmopolitanism. Through spatial analysis, this study contends that these spaces offered a level of distinction and self-improvement beyond serving as a site of conspicuous consumption and leisure, to satisfy demands to improve the region's cultural image and taste levels. This desire retarded the growth of cinema in the region, as early motion pictures did not retain a level of cultural worth deemed valuable for the genteel.<sup>25</sup>

### **Southern Cinema History**

As suggested previously, most New South histories ignore the role cinema played in the experiences of everyday people and its overall cultural impact. Traditional social and cultural histories existing outside a Southern perspective have offered greater insight into this relationship. Kathy Peiss, Roy Rozensweig and Lizabeth Cohen have each shown how cinema helped women break down traditional gender barriers in public places and foster new social and cultural freedoms; how working-class consumers substituted the saloon for the motion-picture theater and generated a unique moviegoing experience based on previous public recreational mores and customs; and how cinema served as a space and recreation where immigrants sought local cultures and community traditions while increasingly encountering standardized and assimilative mass culture.<sup>26</sup> These studies are limited to understanding the Northeast or the largest metropolitan areas, like Chicago. Moreover, they all but ignore race, the central issue challenging Southern society. This dissertation aims to help fill this gap in the scholarship.

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<sup>25</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction," in *Power and Ideology in Education*, Jerome Karabel and A. H. Halsey eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 487-511; Ted Ownby ed., *Manners and Southern History* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in New York City, 1880 to 1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1921* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

Gregory Waller's *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930*, and Steve Goodson's, *Highbrow's Hillbillies, and Hellfire: Public Entertainment in Atlanta, 1880-1930*, are the two most comprehensive works which critically examine Southern cinema history.<sup>27</sup> Their books show how cinema surfaced as the key cultural battleground for which opposing ideologies of New South cities would clash, as the region embarked on a mission to define and maintain a regional identity, cultural heritage, social ordering, and racial hierarchy. Both studies posit that Atlanta and Lexington, Kentucky contained boosters who craved imported entertainment and opponents who feared it; detailing competing processes of embracing modernization and progress on the one side, while staunchly defending Old South customs, values, and mores on the other. Both books also excellently detail the biracial pattern of film consumption. Robert C. Allen has also undertaken the project of analyzing Southern cinema and its larger social and cultural impact through his exploration into the cinema of North Carolina. The most vocal advocate of the approach, Allen believes the history of moviegoing and exhibition in the South, perhaps more than other regions, underscores the importance of space, place, and sociality as constitutive features of the experience of cinema.<sup>28</sup> Bemoaning the legacies of 'grand theory' in film studies and its ambivalence toward the spatial and social conditions of the cinematic experience, he concludes that the history of cinema in this region "troubles and complicates" our assumptions about the role of cinema in American life in the early decades of the century because of three interrelated factors defining the character of the southern cinema experience and influence: religion, race, and rurality (or

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<sup>27</sup> Gregory Waller, *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930*, (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); Steve Goodson, *Highbrow's Hillbillies, and Hellfire: Public Entertainment in Atlanta, 1880-1930* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Robert Allen, "Relocating American Film History," *Cultural Studies*, 20, no.1 (January 2006): 48-88.



rusticity).<sup>29</sup> John Kyle Thomas' dissertation, "Of Paramount Importance: American Film and Cultural Home-Rule in Knoxville, 1872-1948," outlines the growth of cinema in the Tennessee city and argues the community's genteel desires embraced cinema in a project of "cultural reconstruction" where a working synthesis between traditional cultural expressions and demand for cosmopolitanism defined its development.<sup>30</sup> This study uses these four works as a basis to show how Wells was instrumental in defining the early social conditions and cultural practices of commercial entertainments and cinema in the region, often weaving a mix of local legal ordinances, his own perceptions, and particular attention to regional customs, to fashion an experience acceptable to the inhabitants and institutions of the majority of Southern cities. Negotiating race, religion, the genteel, and politics of space and place in the region, Wells conditioned Southerners for the growth of mass culture, and laid the foundation for the rise of national theater chain interests to assume principal control over cinema in the South.

### **Jake Wells Biographical Information**

Jake Wells was born on August 9, 1867 in Memphis, Tennessee to Bertha Scharf, a twenty-three year old German immigrant; his father was unknown. The Scharf clan settled in the multi-cultural Memphis wards sometime between 1860 and Wells' birth, surviving as local butchers and saloonkeepers. During the 1870s, Bertha met and married George Wells, a saloon owner and elected city official from Pensacola, Florida. She changed her name to Barbara and naturally took Wells as her surname, as did Jake, and the family settled in the panhandle port city.<sup>31</sup> At some point, Barbara adopted her nephew Otto Scharf, also changing his surname to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>30</sup> John Kyle Thomas, "Of Paramount Importance: American Film and Cultural Home-rule in Knoxville, 1872-1948," (Ph.D. diss. University of Tennessee, 1990).

<sup>31</sup> United States Bureau of the Census. *Seventh Census of the United States: 1870*, Tennessee, Memphis Wards 1-6, M-20; *Eighth Census of the United States: 1880*, Florida, 2:42, 32; *Tenth Census of the United State: 1900*, Florida,

Wells —Jake later identifies him as his half-brother, as the two would be close business partners and best friends throughout their lives. Little is known about Wells' childhood, but presumably he helped his stepfather operate the saloon while growing up.

At the age of nineteen, Wells departed Pensacola to play professional baseball, serving for numerous ball clubs nationwide and even breaking into the major leagues with Detroit and St. Louis. In 1894, he ended up in Richmond, Virginia, as a player/manager with the city's minor-league team, eventually assuming complete control over the franchise's affairs. What is interesting about Wells' baseball career is that it overlapped with the game's growth from a sand-lot, club activity to a mass-spectator sport. This and frequent travel to northern cities persuaded him to invest in various entertainment businesses in the South, an area lacking the latest "modern" amusements. During the decade, Wells met and married his wife Ida, who he met in upstate New York. The two did not have any children.

In January 1899, Wells moved into vaudeville, opening the 1,100-seat Bijou Theatre in Richmond. His undertaking in vaudeville from baseball is perhaps not so surprising since the two industries shared many similarities in their corporate structure and transformation to mass entertainment. Adopting "polite vaudeville's" strategy of refined programming, and providing a clean and reputable atmosphere, Wells micro-managed the daily ongoing of his theater and adapted them to southern values and attitudes. In 1900, Wells created the Wells Theatrical Circuit. Throughout the decade he built, leased, and managed vaudeville, legitimate, popularly-priced and motion picture theaters in most of the territory's largest urban centers, including Norfolk, Atlanta, Nashville, Chattanooga, Knoxville, Montgomery, Memphis, Birmingham and

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5:23, 4; *Eleventh Census of the United States: 1910*, Virginia, 51:96, 2; *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1920*, Virginia, 58:57, 93.

other southern towns. In 1903, he even purchased a theater in Brooklyn and moved his offices to Broadway, becoming an independent subsidiary of Keith's United Booking Office serving the South. This ultimately tied him to northern entertainment circles. Operation of the circuit reduced the company's overhead, but more importantly eased logistical concerns of staging theatrical amusements across the region. In 1907, Wells formed and served as president of the Southern Managers Association, one of many protection agencies for regional theater owners and managers he would lead. Such activities helped tie the region together culturally and ensure the financial success of the Wells' circuit, in due course establishing the groundwork for future motion-picture exhibition chains.

Wells struggled for years to establish a major circuit rivaling those based in Chicago and New York. First-class vaudeville, for example, proved too expensive for the region. He, like many other independent theater and later motion-picture exhibitors in the South, was at the mercy of larger and more powerful booking agents or distributors and was often forced to accept inferior engagements and products. To stave off competition from the largest circuits and to enable nation-wide mass entertainment to operate and be economically feasible in the South, Wells made many alliances with potentially competing entrepreneurs of equal size. In 1908, for example, Wells partnered with Sydney Wilmer and Walter Vincent, ex-comedy writers which owned a string of vaudeville theaters in New York and Pennsylvania. In 1911, he briefly joined with the Princess Company and Princess Theatrical Exchange, who owned and serviced many theaters in Kentucky and bordering states. By 1915, these relationships allowed Wells to construct one of the region's first and largest motion-picture theater chains.

In 1919, Wells sold 32 of his theaters to Paramount—retaining his holdings in Richmond and Norfolk—allowing the studio giant to effectively link the over 200 theaters they had recently

purchased in the region. As for Wells, he focused much of his energy in protecting independent exhibitors throughout the nation. In 1921, for example, he gained a position on the national board of the Motion Picture Theater Owners of America, which represented over 12,000 exhibitors nationwide. Known as one of the most radical figures in the group, his hatred for changing distribution and exhibition patterns, especially block booking, ultimately affected his holdings in Virginia. Unwilling to adapt to specific changes, Wells' remaining Virginia theaters fell into disarray, causing local moviegoers and civic and commercial leaders to pressure Wells to sell out and relinquish film exhibition to the growing studio-dominated chains. In 1926, Wells all but left the amusement business, other than two small theaters he operated in Ashville and Hendersonville, North Carolina, investing in a string of failed real estate developments. In 1927, following a months-long struggle with depression, he committed suicide in Hendersonville.<sup>32</sup>

## Chapter Outlines

Chapter one explores Wells' career in professional baseball. Focusing primarily on his time as a player and manager for the Richmond Bluebirds of the Virginia State League between 1894 and 1899, it shows how his experiences in the sport groomed him for future entrepreneurial successes in other forms of public amusements in the South. Often overlooked by historians as a medium of commercial entertainment, baseball grew by leaps and bounds near the turn of the century into the nation's first true spectator sport. Many Southern communities were exposed to professional league games well before the wide-spread availability of other forms of nationally

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<sup>32</sup> For more biographical details see: , Bernard J. Henley, "Jake Wells: Baseball Star to Theatre Impresario," *The Richmond Quarterly* 3:2 (Fall, 1980), pp. 51-53. George Rogers, "Of Jake Wells...And a Trunk Strap...and Amaturer Night at the Bijou," *Richmond News Leader* June 2, 1952. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater* (Richmond, Virginia: The Dietz Press, 2002), 18-22. Earl Lutz, "Bat Strap Leads to Big Theater Combine," *Richmond Times Dispatch* January 6, 1924. Roy Proctor, "Norfolk Theater: Alive and Wells; Granddaddy of Stage Dragged Richmond Out of the Dark Ages," *Richmond News Leader* January 22, 1987. *The Virginian Pilot*, "Wells Theaters Celebrate Silver Anniversary," January 24, 1926.

circulated forms of entertainment, and attendance figures at games would often reach well into the thousands. Spectators and players alike were exposed to many modern principles guiding New South development through the leagues' organization, circulation, and other uses of new business practices, including the implementation of "scientific" baseball, which advocated strategy based on statistics and rationalization. Wells would apply these experiences to the growth of his theatrical circuits. Wells was also influenced by the city's reaction to baseball as a dynamic public event, and by the challenges the game posed to traditional social order and cultural tastes and values. The genteel character of the performance, maintenance of strict segregation, espousal of Confederate heritage, and civic pride associated with "quality" entertainment were all demanded by the community, factors Wells learned were vital to the spread of popular culture in the region. Moreover, Wells used the baseball diamond as a laboratory to test alternative entertainments and ways to amuse paying customers away from the game.

In 1899, leaving his post as the Bluebird's skipper, Wells ventured into vaudeville, launching a region-wide chain of theaters and various entertainments circuits throughout Dixie, which served as the basis for Jake Wells Enterprises. Chapter two explores this development and argues that he was instrumental in cultivating a culture of entrepreneurship vital to the growth of popular culture and cinema in the South. Using lessons learned and business contacts from professional baseball, Wells opened his first theater in Richmond before expanding into Norfolk and Atlanta. In order to circulate nationally marketed entertainment, Wells worked to shrink the geographic and social distances separating the largest cities and pool of entrepreneurs from one another, in an effort to energize innovation and profit potential. This chapter reveals how he provided access to necessary resources and developed a pipeline for delivery of national

products; how Wells improved the general infrastructure and transport service of goods throughout the region, mainly through improvements to the region's rail service; and how he helped foster an extensive social network of amusement operators who could share knowledge of business services and organize to protect trade interests. In 1907, his arrangement of the region's first theatrical trade agency, the Southern Managers Association, demanded improvements in the circulation of standard attractions in the territory. This chapter will jump forward in time to reveal how Wells' realization of the organization's demands improved the distribution of feature films in the region during the mid-1910s.

Chapter three traces Wells' relationship to motion pictures and the conversion of his theaters to only screen films. Wells attempted to profit from the exhibition of film from the beginning of his amusement career, but often failed to sustain significant monetary gains beyond the technology's initial drawing power due to its novelty. Despite venturing into other amusements outside of theater where he displayed motion pictures, including penny arcades, amusement parks, and Hale's World Tour cars, Wells made a strategic decision to decline to enter the nickelodeon boom. Two significant forces dominating the region and world of commercial entertainments prevented his investment: race and the genteel. Wells' history in Richmond reveals how urban white communities feared the potential dangers of "cheap amusements" to uphold segregation, usurp the benefits of whiteness, and upset the region's racial order, making race considerably more important than class in the early development of motion pictures. In the South, Wells feared his association with nickelodeons might diminish his reputation in other theatrical affairs, and he had experienced firsthand the increased surveillance by local authorities of such ventures. The chapter also explores Wells' transition from vaudeville and popularly-priced venues to vaude-film theaters in the early 1910s. His attempts to exhibit

film as the centerpiece entertainment and profit like that of "small-time vaudeville" pioneers Marcus Loew and William Fox failed regularly in the urban South. The cultural currency of motion pictures did not satisfy white, southern genteel desires in the region to consume "high-quality" entertainment and achieve a level of sophistication and cosmopolitanism, regardless of the space in which it was exhibited. Vaudeville continued to pay the bills for the showman, and this chapter suggests cinema historians must peer more deeply into the taxonomies of variety acts and reevaluate the value of live theater to managers and audiences in the vaude-film transition.

Chapter four explores the exhibition and reception of early Civil War films in the South prior to and during the 50th anniversary of the conflict (1911-1915), even before the premiere of *Birth of a Nation* which has been erroneously viewed as the first southern-themed film to have an impact on the region, and shows how theater operators like Wells utilized the genre to profit from a shared regional identity and heritage found in every community in Dixie. Information revealing the frequency of which Wells may have exhibited such films is scant, forcing my research to consolidate various primary sources from the territory to critically analyze this phenomenon. Film producers' increasing recognition of a southern moviegoing market, coupled with audience and exhibitor appeals from the area, facilitated drastic changes in representations of the War in its films. As a result, Civil War-themed pictures rapidly embraced, and in some cases updated, traditional Lost Cause themes and narratives found in other forms of entertainment. Displaying nostalgic recollections of the Old South and the conflict, the historical myth endorsed national reconciliation through pathos and the setting aside of political disagreements, in addition to whitewashing the role of slavery in the conflict and relations between blacks and whites, developing a false consciousness through persistent celebrations and ceremonies. The motion-picture theater, it is argued, emerged as a modern venue for such rituals

to be re-imagined and celebrated. Moreover, it did so outside of the support of the United Daughters of Confederacy, the unofficial guardians of Confederate history and heritage in the region, revealing the hegemonic powers of popular culture. Film fashioned new historical memories championing Southerner's perceptions, remembrances, and beliefs, and provided an outlet for the South to embrace both regional pride and American citizenry.

Chapter five traces Wells' negotiation of evangelical Christianity and conservative Protestant forces in the region. It details how cinema and religion collided in a modern battle to mediate cultural experience in urban spaces and to define place. In Richmond, Wells attempted to build a theater near several influential churches, infringing upon the spirituality, character, experience, and symbolic influence and power associated with religious influence over space and place, leading to several public debates over the physical boundaries of commercialism in the city. Pressure by religious leaders forced city authorities to rezone the city and physically demarcate the operating boundaries of national consumer markets versus other spaces in an effort to preserve traditional order and experiences. Wells also challenged Sabbath Laws in different cities on several occasions, allowing for an exceptional channel to analyze the evolution of this struggle, in particular the changes made in religious opposition. Analysis reveals drastic shifts in Protestant leaders' defense of the Sabbath in the face of cinema's increasing popularity, emphasizing rhetorical strategies arguing in favor of provincialism over religiosity and increasing discourse regulating consumer behavior.

Chapter six outlines Wells' career in the face of the beginnings of the film industry's vertical integration and traces his decline as an entrepreneur in the region. Set back financially by WWI and unable to withstand the expansion of national theater chains into the region, Wells sold the majority of his holdings to Paramount, minus a select group of theaters in Virginia.



Integrating Schumpeter's theory of creative destruction and the rise of new forms of competition in industries, this chapter examines the loss of innovation and control Wells endured over his business as he attempted to operate under the rubric of past success. His gradual decline, coupled with his growing stature in amusement circles nationwide, led him to become a militant leader in many independent exhibitor agencies, leading the fight against many core issues rendering the marketplace uncompetitive, such as film clearance, protection, and pricing. Other factors, including the constant threat of federal taxes, increasing amount of copyright fees paid out to music publishers, and a fight against the implementation of a state censorship board in Virginia, further hindered Wells' business prospects. Evidence reveals the showman pursued African American consumers and workers to help compensate for loss of profits, skirting many of the unwritten rules determining segregation in sites of amusements and business transactions amongst blacks and whites that he once helped enforce. His actions arguably fueled the state's Assemblage Act of 1926, which barred racial integration at sites of public audiences. Despite this transgression, Wells continued to lean on local knowledge and control in his effort to profit within the industry's changing dynamics. In 1925, after purchasing the interests of First National, Wells controlled every motion picture theater in Richmond, presenting a rare situation where no national theater chains serviced a major city. Within a year, the community forced Wells to divest himself of his exhibition monopoly, as he was unable to offer the same incentives and service as national corporations. His decline, understood through methodologies of entrepreneurship, provides historians with a new way to conceptualize the limits of vertical integration and exhibition, changing levels of consumer expectations and behaviors, and the blurring of local, regional and national distinctions in the growth of cinema.

## CHAPTER 2

### BASEBALL AS COMMERCIAL ENTERTAINMENT

Jake Wells' career as a professional baseball player and manager groomed him for his ventures as a commercial entertainment entrepreneur, ultimately enlightening the showman to the profitability and limitations determining markets for new forms of popular culture in the South. The growth of the "national game" as the most watched spectator sport near the turn of the last century is often overlooked in the literature of public amusements, despite its widespread popularity and similarities to competing industries of leisure. Emphasizing its broad appeal, a writer from the era claimed, "as an amusement enterprise . . . baseball today is scarcely second to the theater."<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary historians' disregard of the sport as a site functioning similarly to the vaudeville hall, nickelodeon, or amusement park is partly explained by its eternal link to male sporting culture and perceived failure to fully embrace certain aspects of consumerism, including its promotion to family audiences. The popular availability of alcohol and gambling, primarily male patronage, as well as its checkered past and sometimes violent spectacle, fuel its estrangement from the scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Not all historical baseball outfits, however, featured these distinctions, and many, including the team Wells would control, attempted to model themselves on contemporary business practices and corporate values understood to improve professionalism, efficiency, and profits. The game introduced Wells, and its fans in the South, to the modern

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<sup>1</sup> Johnnie Evers and Hugh S. Fullerton, *Baseball in the Big Leagues* (Chicago, 1910), 24 cited in Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 190.

<sup>2</sup> David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 96-103; Steven A. Reiss, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

principles guiding many regional industrialists, merchants, and writers who preached the New South's creed of progress emphasizing economic, cultural, and industrial development in an attempt to liberate the territory from its agricultural past.<sup>3</sup> Professional baseball promoted the logic of rationalization and the scientific principles supporting modernity, as it demanded such fundamentals as organization, teamwork, discipline, rules, cooperation, efficiency, and self-sacrifice. Yet Wells' experience in the sport dually familiarized the future showman with many of the region's traditional values and beliefs which clashed with economic and cultural progress championed by modernity and the material or environmental shortcomings stifling development.

This chapter employs broad theorems of Josef Schumpeter's conceptualization of entrepreneurship and the "economics of innovation" to trace how baseball imbued Wells with the foundation of emerging middle-class mores and expectations, mediation of New South values and Old South traditions, and contemporary business practices critical to establishing a regional network of commercial entertainments in the area. Providing a channel to measure individual businessmen's contributions, personalities, and achievements in qualitative terms, this framework helps explain Wells' ambition and ability to mobilize resources to meet a growing demand for urban entertainments in lieu of scant business records and personal correspondence. Central to this agenda is the idea of "innovation." Innovation, as expressed by Schumpeter, "is the doing of new things or the doing of things that are already being done in a new way...it is a process by which new products and techniques are introduced into the economic system."<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Gudmestad, "Baseball, the Lost Cause, and the New South in Richmond, Virginia, 1883-1890," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 106, no.3 (Summer 1998), 267-300.

<sup>4</sup> Three sources were examined to sift out the dynamics of Schumpeter's notion of innovation and entrepreneurial economic implementation of such ideas, including: Josef Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper Collins, 1943); Josef Schumpeter, "The Creative Response in Economic History," *Journal of Economic History* 7 (1947), 149-159, reprinted in *Essays on Entrepreneurs, Innovations, Business Cycles, and the Evolution of Capitalism.*, ed. Richard V. Clemence (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 221-27; Josef Schumpeter, "Economic Theory and Entrepreneurial History," (1949), 63-84, reprinted in *Essays on Entrepreneurs, Innovations, Business Cycles, and the Evolution of Capitalism.*, ed. Richard V. Clemence (New

act of innovating, for Schumpeter, is the primary force contributing to the maturation of a capitalist society, stimulating economic and cultural growth, competition, and regional development. His understanding of innovation is not invention per se, or the idea of something that has not existed before or entered the economic market. Rather it is understood as existing in five varying types fueled by adaptation and change, including the exploitation of new markets, access and management of new products, mediating sources of supply, and new methods of production.<sup>5</sup> I argue that Wells proves to be a key figure in the implementation and expansion of innovation for the regional growth of public amusements, establishing channels of diffusion and commandeering social networks necessary for a culture of entrepreneurship. The innovations he brought to professional baseball to ensure revenue, victory, and fan support served as a stepping stone to future entrepreneurial endeavors later in his business career.

Baseball provided Wells a pathway out of the saloon he helped his father run as a youth in Pensacola, Florida. In the nineteenth century, these sites were characterized as a bastion of male-bachelor subculture, typically filled with working-class customers, alcohol, gambling, and prostitutes. The space functioned for many of its patrons as a local social center, validating one's masculinity away from the home and providing a location for spending leisure time. Owners presented various forms of staged amusement, including dancing girls, musicians, and comedy acts, to encourage customers to patronize for long hours and guzzle plenty of drinks. These venues also acted as sport promoters. Many saloonkeepers sponsored local amateur athletes and teams, and others purchased telegraph devices to keep their patrons informed of important national sporting results. Overall, the saloon provided an arena for lower-class men to share a

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Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 231-253.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

common sporting culture.<sup>6</sup> Outside of the working class, however, critics adhering to Victorian culture scorned and ridiculed the space as a dark, dingy, and depraved environment. Wells' childhood existed somewhere in the middle of this space, since his father also held reputable positions in government, once serving as mayor. But his future in Pensacola was never realized, for at age seventeen, Wells entered the world of professional baseball.

Baseball grew in popularity in the South just after the Civil War, as many young southern men adopted the sport with gusto. Similar to saloon culture, the game offered a proving ground for showcasing a young man's masculinity, while also providing an outlet for spending leisure time.<sup>7</sup> Such connections made the sport appealing to Wells. Played outdoors in a clean and open environment and praised as a means for exercise, baseball garnered greater respect within society, as opposed to say boxing. A large number of early professional players were first-generation immigrants, like Wells, who identified the sport as a means of acculturation and source for social mobility.<sup>8</sup> Very few southern men, however, made up the early professional ranks. Still in its infancy within the region, the game lacked strong competition as compared to the North.

In 1886, Wells joined the Acid Iron Earth Club of Mobile, Alabama. From there his career took him on a whirlwind tour of the nation, as he played for numerous clubs in the Northeast, Midwest, and South, including Buffalo and Troy, New York. The majority of his playing career was spent in the minor leagues; however, he did serve two stints in the majors: in 1888, he played for the Detroit Wolverines of the National League, and in 1890, for the St. Louis

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<sup>6</sup> Richard D. Mandell, *Sport: A Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 184-185.

Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will*, 35-57. Gorn & Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports*, 39-40.

<sup>7</sup> Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction*, 310-314, Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, & Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Steven A. Riess, *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), 151-220. Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 332-337.

Browns of the American Association. A mediocre squad player at the major league level, Wells devoted the majority of his playing time filling in as a back-up catcher, outfielder, and first baseman.<sup>9</sup> In 1892, he returned to the South to play for Macon in the Southern League (SL), where he excelled. Originally established in 1885, the SL was newly restored after a two year hiatus, with New South advocate Henry W. Grady, the managing editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* newspaper, serving as the league's president. Comprised of teams representing Dixie's largest cities, including Atlanta, Nashville, and New Orleans, the league suffered from low attendance and financial trouble in most markets throughout the 1890s. A variety of factors were to blame, such as an economic depression, poor management, and improper scheduling. In 1893, Wells moved to Birmingham, where he served as player-manager for the Iron City ball club. In July, a string of poor performances and meager attendance caused the owners to dissolve the team. The SL brass assumed control of the club and named Wells controller. With the support of the squad's existing players, he convinced league officials to reappoint the team to Pensacola for the remainder of the season, certain his hometown could support the club. An unfortunate outbreak of yellow fever, however, left the team quarantined in the city for the remainder of the season. In 1894, a group of investors purchased the franchise and moved it to Mobile, retaining Wells as manager and director of operations. He built a formidable squad which led the league throughout the season. A chain reaction of events, however, left just four teams carrying the SL before it forfeited play for the season. In less than a month, W. B. Bradley, a contractor from Richmond, Virginia, hired Wells to play catcher for the city's beloved minor-league outfit the

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<sup>9</sup>Marshall D. Wright, *Nineteenth Century Baseball: Year-by-Year Statistics for the Major League Teams, 1871-1900* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1996), 34, 210. In 1888, Wells played in only 16 of the Wolverines' 131 games. He finished the season with a .158 batting average (Batting averages in the nineteenth century were not as high as today because of rule differences and softer baseballs). In 1890, Wells played in 30 of the Brown's 131 games and finished with a .258 batting average.

Crows (later the Bluebirds) of the newly assembled Virginia State League (VSL).<sup>10</sup> Wells, accompanied by his wife Ida, who he met while playing in upstate New York, found a permanent home in the former Capital of the Confederacy after traversing the nation for over 10 years. The move was important because the city, coupled with Norfolk later in his life, would function as the nerve center for Jake Wells Enterprises until his death.

Wells' travels provided him exposure to the variety of different cultures, people, and entertainment markets significant to the growth of his "entrepreneurial spirit," a vague concept defining one's ambition, optimism, and drive to constantly seek new opportunities. This is evidenced by Wells' investment in virtually every new amusement medium available throughout his lifetime. The experience may have also engendered in the showman a cosmopolitan disposition allowing for a progressive energy critical to his advance of New South development. More specifically, Wells' brief tenure in the major leagues also exposed him to events significant to his growth as regional leader in various amusement operator protection agencies and provided him with connections in future inter-firm relationships. In 1879, similar to the corruption of large, overbearing industrial corporations of the era, baseball owners instated the infamous reserve clause, a stipulation in player contracts giving management virtually total control over their buying and selling. Originally proposed to keep salaries manageable and prevent the wealthiest clubs from hoarding the best and most expensive talent, owners habitually abused the rule in unintended ways; for example, blackballing disgruntled players if they attempted to

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<sup>10</sup> *Richmond Times (RT hereinafter)*, 1 September 1895; in 1887, Wells played for the New Orleans club of the Southern League. The Kansas City club of the Western League picked him up in 1888; here he played until August 9 when the Detroit Wolverines of the National League, which was considered the major leagues since 1876, bought him for \$1,000. Wells played in Detroit until June 1890, when owners traded him to the St. Louis Browns of the American Association, also considered a major league at the time. In 1891, Wells found himself again mired in the minor leagues, playing for the Troy (New York) ball club in the Eastern League. In 1892, he traveled across the state to play for Troy's rival, Buffalo. Wells returned to the South in 1893, accepting a position as player-manager of the Birmingham-Pensacola club of the Southern League. In 1894, he moved back to Mobile to serve as player-manager of their Southern League club.

change teams or demanded higher salaries. During the early 1890s, major league baseball, comprised of the National League and American Association, underwent a player's strike and subsequent organization of a rival conference (Players League) in an attempt to break the monopolistic abuses. The insurrection ultimately failed, however, strengthening the power of owners, further centralizing competing professional leagues, and magnifying the cartel-like wrongdoing of owners throughout the decade.<sup>11</sup> Similar events would plague the entertainment industry following the turn of the last century, including the White Rats strike in vaudeville, the Trust versus Independents booking wars in the legitimate stage, and Paramount's oligopoly pursuits in motion pictures. These incidents positioned the South in compromising situations where Wells adopted an influential and radical stance in his desire to support a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship free from exclusivity which stifled free trade and enterprise.

Wells' grounding in Richmond facilitated the cultural values and belief system governing the prospect of public amusements in the South. His arrival in the city, for example, revealed the region's overwhelming sense of civic pride and fear of outsiders, attitudes which many southerners generally exhibited toward the emergence of national popular culture. Despite hailing from Florida and delivering major-league experience to the Richmond team, many followers did not take kindly to Wells' introduction, often criticizing the player throughout the year. Partly to blame for his icy reception was a lackluster debut statistically in which he batted a paltry .236. Shortly after his first season, many fans clamored for Wells to "fold his little cot, and go back to sunny Florida, and look after his crocodile farm."<sup>12</sup> Ownership appreciated his leadership qualities and past experience, however, and promoted him to player-manager for the 1895 season. He would hold this position for almost two years, until a horrific elevator accident

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<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Rader, *Baseball: A History of America's Game* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 53-64. Seymour, *Baseball: A Early History*, 104-113.

<sup>12</sup> *Richmond Dispatch* (RD hereinafter), 27 July 1895. RT, 2 July 1895.



cut his playing career short.<sup>13</sup> Afterwards, he assumed the exclusive role of manager, and later director of operations, until the demise of the team in 1899. The promotion allowed Wells to not only control the day-to-day operations on the field, but also to have input on the future of the club at a business level. Immediately, Wells increased the team's professionalism by recruiting players from outside the area, securing talent from as far away as Atlanta, Pittsburgh, and Cincinnati. During the 1897 season, for example, Wells scouted and signed future Hall of Fame pitcher of the New York Highlanders (later Yankees) Jack Chesbro, and future star hurler for the Pittsburgh Pirates, Sam Leever.<sup>14</sup> This strategy mimicked those of other clubs throughout the nation which in the nineteenth century supplanted the game's early participants of neighborhood boys and middle-class gentleman's clubs with more talented players, as increasing spectatorship amplified the demands for winning.<sup>15</sup> Wells wished to improve the quality on the field, as the owners hoped to attract more paying customers. This procedure, however, did not go over well with many of the club's followers, since the majority of the team was composed of local stock who had played semi-professional ball in the area for years.<sup>16</sup> Homegrown players held personal relationships with many of the fans, and were perceived to be more passionate in their

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<sup>13</sup> A horrific elevator accident in Norfolk left a young African American bellhop, Nick Hall, dead and Wells with persistent leg pain. Apparently, a handler did not shove a bag completely into the car, and the bag hung up on a beam within the elevator shaft when climbing. The sudden halt caused the counterweights from atop the device to fall on top of the elevator. The car cables snapped, plummeting the elevator to the ground and violently throwing Wells and Hall to the floor. The young man fell on top of Wells, while all twelve of the counterweights--weighing fifty pounds apiece--came crashing down on the bellhop. Taking the brunt of the impact, Hall saved Wells' life; however, the teen suffered a cracked skull and later died in the hospital because of his injuries. *RT*, 24 June 1896, *RD*, 28 June 1896.

<sup>14</sup> Bernard J. Henley, "Jake Wells: Baseball Star to Theatre Impresario" *The Richmond Quarterly* Vol. 3 No. 2 (Fall 1980), 52. *The Richmond News-Leader*, 9 February 1907, hereinafter cited *RNL*.

<sup>15</sup> Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 56-58. David Q. Voight, *American Baseball: From Gentleman's Sport to the Commissioner System* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), 21-22. In 1869, the Cincinnati Red Stockings assembled as the first hired professional baseball team. The Red Stockings barnstormed the nation, playing against amateur teams from most major cities, in the process attracting thousands of spectators at each stop. They finished their tour with an undefeated record, 56 wins, and 1 tie. The ball club's success proved that paying baseball players to play was a legitimate business, and that professionalization of the game could serve as genuine entertainment. An estimated 200,000 people saw the Red Stockings on the field during their tour.

<sup>16</sup> *RT*, 12 May 1895.

representation of the city, settled in a bond of community between the club and its followers. In 1895, Wells' transformation of the team propelled the "Bluebirds" to the top of the standings for all but one game of the season, from a paltry fourth place finish upon the manager's arrival, eventually winning the pennant and securing the coveted Nowlan Cup.

Midway through the 1896 season, as the team fiercely battled with Lynchburg for first place, Wells instituted an innovative recruitment method which created a league controversy. The manager signed several contracts with National League clubs to "farm out" or borrow players in order to secure talent capable of winning the pennant. The strategy is most often associated with the legacy of St. Louis Cardinals owner Branch Rickey's innovation of the "farm system," which in the 1920s and 1930s set up the networks of team affiliations recognizable today. The organization provided major league teams with a ladder for player development. In the 1890s, the base of this system, established through the practice of loaning players between leagues, grew substantially. Apprehensive of the evils of monopolies associated with big business practices sweeping other industries, the unconventional process drew the ire of many critics within the game fearful of "chain-store baseball."<sup>17</sup> Protests grew over purported price fixing and the prospect of stifling competition throughout the sport, which included disapproval of the possibility of clubs acquiring first rights to players, the prospect of hoarding talent, and guarantees over minor league team full valuations of players.<sup>18</sup> In 1903, executives banned farming in the original draft of the Major League Constitution, a contract which still governs the day-to-day operations of the league.<sup>19</sup> Four VSL teams—Lynchburg, Roanoke, Portsmouth, and Petersburg—protested Wells' acquisitions, claiming that under rules governing the league,

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Dickson, *The Dickson Baseball Dictionary: 5,000 Terms Used by Players, the Press, and People who Love the Game* (New York: Facts on File, 1989), 89.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Zimbalist, *In the Best Interest of Baseball?: The Revolutionary Reign of Bud Selig* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006), 24-26.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 20-24, 160.

players must be purchased outright. “The present system will make Virginia base-ball diamonds the practice-ground for the reserve forces of the National League teams,” the *Lynchburg News* argued, “and if continued, will demoralize the game throughout the state.”<sup>20</sup> Further research reveals that the protesting clubs did not have enough money to farm players of their own, and grew worried that Wells’ actions would prove financially detrimental to the welfare of the VSL. League officials called a meeting inviting all owners and managers to discuss the situation, afterwards reaching a compromise restricting further hiring of National League players. Wells’ farmed players were allowed to remain in Richmond, and the four protesting teams were given the rights to hire two National League players each to compensate.<sup>21</sup> How many players Wells loaned originally, or if the rival teams followed suit is unknown. The strategy nevertheless helped the Bluebirds secure the pennant for a second straight year, although with consequences. The team’s dominance, coupled with other financial issues, forced the league to dissolve for several seasons, one of several stoppages over the next few decades of the VSL<sup>22</sup>

The significance of farming to Wells’ entrepreneurial future was invaluable. The process introduced the manager to many facets of innovation he would adopt in his entertainment ventures throughout the region, including access to and management of a new or significantly improved product (or process), and the introduction of new organizational methods in business practices. The experience thrust Wells into the structure of a large, corporate-like pyramid he would negotiate at multiple levels in future amusement industries he entered. The chain-store baseball mentality of the era guided the major-league’s growth into a corporate organization with

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<sup>20</sup> *RD*, 13 May 1896.

<sup>21</sup> *RD*, 12, 13, 26 May 1896.

<sup>22</sup> The league stopped in 1896, started again in 1899 and stopped again in 1902. In 1906, Wells was elected as president of the newly established Virginia League. In 1912, he stepped down from the position, unable to perform his duties satisfactorily because of his management of Jake Wells Enterprises. The Virginia League continued operation until 1928.

overwhelming strength and power following the turn-of-the century.<sup>23</sup> Within this climate, Wells mediated the networking of talent, witnessed fears of small organizations in the face of corporate ruthlessness, and conformed to the expansion of nationwide organizations and businesses. Moreover, he encountered the anti-trust fervor sweeping the era through the VSL teams' protests against player loans. The experience paralleled the later distribution malpractices of many mushrooming amusement conglomerates, including the motion picture industry under vertical integration and the policy of "block booking" and "blind bidding" in film distribution. Wells, unable to achieve the type of exclusive ownership held by the larger syndicates, became an outspoken critic and leader of multiple protection organizations which would fight against free market abuses.

Further seasoning for a career as an amusement purveyor within the emerging networks of national popular culture transpired through the intellectual handling and philosophy Wells adopted when managing the game. Wells employed "scientific" baseball. Gaining some popularity in the 1890s, "brainy baseball," as it was also known, endorsed a style of play stressing the importance of mental attributes over physical ones, relying on fundamentals, percentages, and split-second decisions from players for execution.<sup>24</sup> This system differed from the common "survival of the fittest" paradigm most teams practiced, which emphasized brawn, big sluggers, and aggressive play.<sup>25</sup> Wells employed innovative techniques like the bunt, hit and run play, placement hitting, strategic positioning of defensive players, and stealing, often to the dismay of fans who were understood to have enjoyed watching the Darwinian philosophy at

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<sup>23</sup> Major League Baseball, to this day, holds exemption from antitrust laws. Stemming from a 1922 Supreme Court decision in which the Court ruled that antitrust law did not apply to baseball, the opinion declared baseball games were local affairs, not interstate commerce. The Supreme Court upheld the antitrust exemption twice, first in 1953 and again in the famous 1972 case in which Curt Flood sued Bowie Kuhn in his attempt to have the reserve clause declared illegal and have himself declared a free agent.

<sup>24</sup> Rader, *Baseball: A History of America's Game*, 65.

<sup>25</sup> David Q. Voigt, *American Baseball: From Gentleman's Sport to the Commissioner System* (University Park, P.A.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983), 289-290.

work. In 1897, Wells embraced the strategy unconditionally when the Bluebirds entered the more competitive Atlantic League (AL). Formed in 1896, the AL consisted of six clubs from the Northeast: Philadelphia, New York City, Paterson, New Jersey; Wilmington, Delaware; and Hartford and New Haven, Connecticut.<sup>26</sup> The addition of the Richmond and Norfolk clubs for the 1897 season, the two strongest teams from the now defunct Virginia State League, solidified the Atlantic as one of the best minor leagues in the nation.<sup>27</sup> Wells offended many within the local baseball community by adopting modern techniques in order to win at a higher level. Most spectators, the *Richmond Dispatch* reported, were “violently opposed to bunting and sacrificing, preferring, rather, that the team should hit the ball.”<sup>28</sup> Although the team would finish in fourth place, the strategy allowed the club to secure the league pennant for the 1898 and 1899 seasons, before a myriad of issues forced the AL to suspend play indefinitely.<sup>29</sup> The philosophy demanded that the team operate like an efficient machine, imitating many of the principles supporting “scientific management” and the logic underpinning the development of economies of scale and distribution channels. Wells’ establishment of a regional chain of theaters and entertainment circuit would follow a similar historical path which would eventually lead to the success of the Loews, Balaban & Katz, and others who embraced a “Taylorite” emphasis of modern business strategies to succeed.

Wells’ duties as manager were more extensive than simply increasing the team’s professionalism and winning. The club’s owners demanded that he present baseball as reputable entertainment, producing respectable standards of play and performance on the diamond. Closely linked to the game’s origins and promotion, the middle class was baseball’s primary fan base

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<sup>26</sup> Barrows, *My Fifty Years in Baseball*, 27-28.

<sup>27</sup> The minor league classification system familiar today i.e. AAA, AA, A etc. was not implemented until 1901. The Atlantic League was considered as one of the, if not, the most competitive minor league in the nation at the time.

<sup>28</sup> *RD*, 7 July 1897.

<sup>29</sup> Financial details will be explained in detail later in the chapter.

throughout the late-nineteenth century, as ticket prices to games were relatively expensive, and contests played in the afternoon and mostly during the midweek prevented many of the working class from attending.<sup>30</sup> In order to retain existing spectators and possibly attract new ones, some club owners were compelled to parallel the actions of “polite vaudeville” which, in an attempt to lure a family audience, promised clean amusement that adhered to the tenets of genteel culture. Moreover, middle-class spectators historically looked down on the largely immigrant populated body of professional baseball players, branding them with a reputation for immoral conduct on and off the field. Many owners feared that the players’ behaviors and actions alienated potential fans, hence the obligation they felt to improve the squad’s behavior. Commenting on the decorum expected at the Bluebirds’ ball games, a writer for the *Richmond Dispatch* noted, “The spectator at a baseball game has the same right in respect . . . as the occupants of a seat at a play or an opera.”<sup>31</sup>

A central element of the Bluebirds’ ownership’s rationale to improve conditions at the ball park materialized as a motive to attract more female fans. The decade sanctioned the growth of a modern consumer culture identifying customers based on notions of the feminine, essentially touting middle-class women as essential purchasers. The modern consumer economy ushered in a new way of life for women, and going shopping, or to the theater, or even the ball game functioned as a form of leisure and social display. These new activities propelled women into public places outside of their traditional domestic spheres, generating greater attention to safe environments and vigilance to maintain one’s reputation and respectability. Many professional ball clubs throughout the nation attempted to lure female spectators in the hope of future profits by intermittently offering them admission free of charge. Presenting a respectable and secure

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<sup>30</sup> Prices for general admission to the bleacher seat cost twenty-five cents. It was an additional ten to fifteen cents for grandstand ticket prices.

<sup>31</sup> *RD*, 4 March 1898.

space free of immoral behavior and violence associated with a sporting culture teeming with masculinity was a necessity. Some outfits even provided segregated seating based on gender.<sup>32</sup> Many club owners, including the Bluebirds, believed that the presence of more female spectators in the stands would influence not only the players to behave better, but also the “rowdies” or working class fan base privileged to attend. The latter were typically forced to sit in the bleacher seats, which cost twenty five cents and stretched down the first and third base lines. The grandstands, which owners covered with an awning and placed directly behind home plate for the best view, cost an extra fifteen cents and were almost always filled with middle-class spectators. The bleacher seats fostered a rowdy environment, as beer sold underneath the stands encouraged saloon-like behavior such as stomping, booing, whistling, and even fighting. Some owners partitioned seating sections off with screens to prevent the working class from spilling over into and disrupting the middle-class spectators in the grandstands. Others employed extra police protection to fend off any misbehavior.<sup>33</sup> Identical to the creators of polite vaudeville, club owners wished to foster a family environment safe for all spectators seeking greater profits, and to influence audience behavior by the content displayed.

Recognized as the “bush leagues,” the VSL, like the majority of conferences springing up during the era, lacked sufficient organization, proper policing of clubs and players, and epitomized the play of “rowdy” baseball.<sup>34</sup> In fact, many of the leagues dissolved almost as quickly as they were formed because of dirty tactics and lack of centralized control. On the diamond, players engaged in a “win-at-all-cost attitude,” employing practices of deceit, fraud, and cheating, coupled with self-indulgent behavior like cursing, kicking, and fighting to achieve

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<sup>32</sup> Riess, *Touching Base*, 27-28. Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*, 328-329. For an example of the Bluebirds’ owners attempting to woo female patronage, see *RD*, 21 April 1895.

<sup>33</sup> Riess, *Touching Base*, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Edward G. Barrows with James M. Kahn, *My Fifty Years in Baseball* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1951), 27.

victory and advance in their careers. Off the field, many players' working-class backgrounds brewed stereotypes of boozers and gamblers. In 1895, for example, during the Bluebirds' first road game of the season versus Lynchburg, the umpire called an outfielder out on a close play at second base. Engaging in a "fit of wrath and temper," the player argued the call with the man in black, eventually striking him in the face in disapproval. The local press, which sensationalized the incident to a degree, reported that the player attempted to "kick his [the umpire's] spinal column through the top of his cranium."<sup>35</sup> The league failed to hand down any long term punishment over the incident, irritating many within the Richmond baseball community.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, disorderly instances like this occurred almost daily in the VSL. "If there could be more discipline maintained among the players, and that puerile kicking and wrangling stopped," a correspondent for *Richmond Times* vented, "the games would be more enjoyable to the public, and the attendance materially increased."<sup>37</sup>

Calls for "cleaner" baseball appeared from fans as well. "Numbers of protests on the part of base-ball patrons have been received at the *Times* office . . . There is a great demand among the rooters for discipline, so as to stop all unnecessary kicking and wrangling."<sup>38</sup> One passionate supporter even "placed a gold watch in a jeweler's window to be given [to] the team in the State League that does the least kicking during the season."<sup>39</sup> Many believed that disorderly play on the diamond encouraged the raucous behavior in the bleachers.<sup>40</sup> To overcome this, Wells transformed into strict disciplinarian over his squad, policing their actions on and off the diamond, and providing experiences valuable to his maturation to an amusement showman.

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<sup>35</sup> *RT*, 25 April 1895.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *RT* 21 April 1895.

<sup>38</sup> *RT*, 23, April 1895.

<sup>39</sup> *RT*, 28 April 1895.

<sup>40</sup> Gudmestad, *Baseball, the Lost Cause, and the New South in Richmond, VA*, 294-295.; Riess, *Touching Base*, 59-61.



Wells demanded self-control and orderliness from his players, which was unorthodox amongst his peers. In the 1890s, many managers encouraged rowdy play, believing it furnished the team with a winning edge and offered a lively spectacle for the fans. In fact, the decade is notorious among baseball historians for its lack of fair play and violence. The famed Baltimore Orioles, who won several National League championships during the era, used physical and verbal jousting of opposing players as a blueprint for their success. Other sources of unruliness stemmed from the players' increasing frustrations with management relating to issues revolving around the reserve clause, and on-field ethnic conflicts.<sup>41</sup> But pressures to appeal to the genteel and provide entertainment considered respectable and sophisticated emerged as a New South demand throughout Wells' career, as it was symbolic of growth, progress, and cosmopolitanism.

Wells' handling of Charles E. Kain during the 1895 season provides an example of the manager's policing. Kain, a twenty-five year old local product, was in his fourth year of service for the Bluebirds. Nicknamed "Little Barley," he was known as the fastest base runner in the entire VSL, and was a "red-hot favorite" with the fans.<sup>42</sup> Kain, however, also possessed a "red-hot" temper and characterized to the fullest extent the behavior of an immoral ball player on and off the field. In early May, for example, in a game versus Lynchburg, Kain provoked the opponent's center fielder into a shoving match. The umpire suspended the two for the remainder of the game, and league officials fined them both.<sup>43</sup> In late May, after a second game win of a three game series in Norfolk, Kain spent a wild night on the town filled with heavy drinking. The next morning he stumbled to the ballpark still intoxicated. One of Kain's teammates notified Wells of his physical condition, prompting the manager to confront and immediately suspend the left fielder for the day's game. Wells ordered Kain to leave the premises and sober up in his hotel

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<sup>41</sup> Rader, *Baseball: A History of America's Game*, 66-68; Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*, 286-291,

<sup>42</sup> *RT*, 1 September 1895.

<sup>43</sup> *RT*, 18 May 1895.

room before the team traveled to Portsmouth for another grueling three game series. The directive infuriated the left fielder. That night, Kain, supported by Wells' close friend and ex-Bluebird first baseman "Pop" Tate (who now played first base for the Norfolk club) confronted the manager in his room. Kain directed some "strong language" at Wells concerning his suspension, and attacked the manager. In self-defense, Wells gave Kain a "broadside" and knocked him to the ground. Pop considered joining in the scuffle, but stopped when Wells threatened to fight them both. After the fracas, the manager suspended Kain for several more games, as news of the confrontation filtered back to Richmond. Wells explained his actions through the press:

I expect to treat all the players on my team right, and I expect to be treated right by them. I have determined to maintain discipline in the club, and will not allow anything that tends to encourage carelessness, riotousness, and neglect of duty on the part of the players. I am looked to for order and discipline. There are rules which the players, including the manager, are expected to observe. Kain has been only temporarily suspended without pay. He has not been released. The matter will be considered and decided later. I am simply doing what I consider to be my duty as the manager of the team.<sup>44</sup>

Afterwards, Kain offered his apologies to fans: "I desire to state that he [Wells] was in no way to blame, as I was entirely at fault, and I said things on the impulse of the moment which I afterwards regretted. I also desire to say that Mr. Wells has always treated me as a gentleman."<sup>45</sup> The episode sent a message to both the Richmond team and to fans about the conduct Wells expected from his players on and off the field. The manager adopted a zero tolerance policy against immoral behavior from his players for the rest of the season. When further tested, Wells lived up to his guarantee. For example, during one game, Wells diverted a Bluebirds pitcher from

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<sup>44</sup> *RT*, 25 May 1895.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* Not surprisingly, Wells removed Kain from the team in July in response to another drinking episode. See *RT*, 18 July 1895.

fighting with an umpire.<sup>46</sup> On another occasion, he released a player because of insubordination.<sup>47</sup> Wells' well-mannered Bluebirds attracted much praise throughout the state and were thoroughly acknowledged as the best-behaved team in the league. "The boys of Richmond are the jolliest set of ball-players in the league," the *Norfolk Landmark* stated, "Their snap and ginger on the field will make friends with them everywhere."<sup>48</sup> Wells gave the Richmond baseball community and owners what they desired: clean, respectable baseball on the diamond, as well as a winning ball club.

Wells' efforts helped the Bluebirds lead the league in attendance every season he managed, often times rivaling major league clubs of the era. Richmond's average home attendance was the highest in the VSL and in the Atlantic League, which the team joined in 1897, many times exceeding 2,000 fans during the week and tipping 4,000 to 5,000 thousand spectators on the weekend.<sup>49</sup> Female attendance materially increased. Playing one afternoon in a depressingly dull contest versus Petersburg, the *Richmond Times* sarcastically reported that the main feature of the game was that the "fair sex was out en masse."<sup>50</sup> Interest in the Bluebirds' road games prompted the Richmond "rooters" to regularly sponsor excursions to rival cities by way of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, the line even providing a separate car designated strictly for the "ladies."<sup>51</sup> Fair play also attracted many respected city and state officials as regular patrons, including Governor Charles T. O'Ferral and his staff, Mayor Taylor, and Justice John Crutchfield of the Richmond Hustings Court.<sup>52</sup> Courting the aforementioned patrons proved vital to Wells' success as a showman in other amusements, as female attendance provided a good

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<sup>46</sup> *RD*, 23 June 1895.

<sup>47</sup> *RD*, 25 August 1895.

<sup>48</sup> *RT*, 18 May 1895.

<sup>49</sup> *The Sporting News*, 22 June 1895.

<sup>50</sup> *RT*, 4 August 1895.

<sup>51</sup> *RD*, 21 May 1895; *The Sporting News*, 23 March 1895, 2. For one series, Wells remembered 800 fans escorting the team for a three game road trip to Norfolk.

<sup>52</sup> *The Sporting News*, 1 September 1895, 2.

bulk of his profits, and the approval of the community's top brass sanctioned his ventures as culturally relevant.

The respectable and popular team Wells fashioned allowed for the invention and display of the "Little Men." Samuel Crowder, a local electrician for the city's Western Union Telegraph Branch, invented an ingenious device that graphically portrayed play-by-play results of the Bluebirds away games, by way of decoded telegraphic messages relayed directly from the field of play. Named the "Little Men," the apparatus consisted of tiny wooden manikins atop a steel board outlined with a baseball diamond. The invention allowed for mimicry of the action of players. As controllers reenacted the game live through decoding of telegraphic messages, the figures' arms and legs moved realistically. Housed at Richmond's "legitimate" theater, the Academy of Music, the invention was popular with local fans, providing an atmosphere more suitable than the ballpark, while also offering the Bluebirds road games conveniently and at more affordable prices than train excursions. The "Little Men" regularly drew 700-800 fans per performance.<sup>53</sup> Wells learned that beautified and adorned theatrical spaces could alter perceptions of respectability associated with certain entertainments, and could attract new audiences in the process.

Wells' management of the Bluebirds also exposed him to the challenges governing commercial spaces of consumption within a culture of segregation. Mediating the pressures to comply with spatial arrangements and products demanding absolute white authority in the face of economic pressures to court African American business as a potential market was a constant struggle Wells first confronted with the ball club. Richmond's black community supported the Bluebirds irregularly. The supporters who patronized the ball park, like in many other everyday

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<sup>53</sup> Eric Dewberry, "'Imagining the Action': Audiovisual Baseball Game Reproduction in Richmond, Virginia, 1895-1935," in *The Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and American Culture, 2003-2004*, eds. William M Simons and Alvin L. Hall (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2005), 141-156.

public places where racial integration was enforced in the region, were quarantined, required to sit in segregated bleachers and use separate gates upon entering. The politics of inequality and the ensuing embarrassment had usually prompted many blacks to boycott such establishments and support black-owned businesses, particularly in the larger cities of the South where viable black economies emerged.<sup>54</sup> Such protests had plagued prior professional baseball outfits in Richmond. In the 1880s, for example, some African-Americans patronized the Virginians' games, but the press reported that they took the habit of rooting for the visiting team.<sup>55</sup> Most blacks were more likely to attend games of local all-black amateur teams in the area. The Bluebirds, however, sometimes attracted a larger contingency of African-American supporters, evidence of their increasing wealth afforded by New South economic growth.

The local papers routinely mention "Buck" Spotswood, a wealthy businessman from Jackson Ward, the city's most populous black neighborhood, as the leader of the segregated "rooting section." In fact, he personally hired a brass band to entertain black spectators and encourage their support of the team.<sup>56</sup> In 1895, Wells' first full season at the helm, black attendance was so numerous ownership routinely sold out the racially designated seating section, forcing some fans to spill onto the edge of the field thus "aggravating" the white patrons of the "respectable" grandstands. The perceived breach of racial boundaries spurred some white spectators to complain to Wells, suggesting ownership bar blacks all together from the West End grounds. The club, however, constructed a set of bleachers further down the right field line to

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<sup>54</sup> The embarrassment from forced segregation in all forms of commercial entertainment in the South dissuaded many black patrons from participation. For examples showing black refusal to patronize the theater see Kathryn H. Fuller, *At The Picture Show: Small Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 34; For specific references to baseball, see Bruce Adelson, *Brushing Back Jim Crow: the Integration of Minor League Baseball in the South* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1999).

<sup>55</sup> Gudmestad, *Baseball, Lost Cause and the New South in Richmond, VA*, 295-297.

<sup>56</sup> *The Sporting News*, 1 June 1895, 2. Buck even offered to buy each Bluebird player a gold medal if the team won the pennant.

accommodate the loyal black customers. “Buck” and the contingency of Jackson Ward supporters openly protested the decision, but it is unclear to what degree.<sup>57</sup> The incident exposed Wells to the delicate balance he, like many other amusement purveyors in the region, would have to maintain between soliciting black consumers and maintaining racial order. In April 1899, prior to the start of the Atlantic League season, Wells secured a pre-season contest against the closest and most cherished major-league team supported by Richmond fans, the Washington Senators. Although the game took place on an unseasonably cold day with a chance of snow, the club’s owners undoubtedly expected large gate receipts, but only three spectators paid admission to see the contest. White supporters boycotted the game because the Senators had played an exhibition match just days before against an all-black team of hotel waiters. Protesters used the nationally circulating *Sporting News* to vent their frustrations, promising that all “southerners” who had previously cheered for the club would now be transferring their allegiance to another National League team.<sup>58</sup> The incident harkened back to a situation in 1889, when Wells and his Detroit Wolverine teammates were denied by Richmond authorities permission to play an exhibition game against one of the two local all-black teams in the city, the Cuban Giants, over fears that race mixing would inflame racial tensions in the area.<sup>59</sup> Segregated seating endorsed an inferior space acceptable to most in white society, but the prospect of interracial competition on the diamond without rules and regulations sustaining black inferiority flaunted the region’s racial hierarchy. Wells learned the balance of white privilege and levels of racism guarding the prospect of racial integration in public places.

Wells was also exposed to the importance of religion to cultural values and beliefs in the

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<sup>57</sup> *The Sporting News*, 13 July 1895, 3; *RT*, 3 August 1895.

<sup>58</sup> *The Sporting News*, 1 April 1899, 3; *RD*, 5 April 1899. Interestingly, when Wells played for the Detroit Wolverines in 1889, Richmond authorities refused to allow the team to play an exhibition game in the city against the all-black Cuban Giants because the locals did not want to see race-mixing on the diamond. See, *RD*, 2 September 1884.

<sup>59</sup> Gudmestad, *Baseball, Lost Cause and the New South in Richmond, VA*, 297.

region, in both the sacred practice and the almost universal secular belief in the Lost Cause. Concerning the latter, professional baseball in Richmond served as one of the many outlets consecrating the celebration of Confederate heritage and Old South ideals. The game was widely believed to have been introduced to Southerners by Northern soldiers during the Civil War, with the sides enjoying contests between battles. The city's first professional team, the Virginia Baseball association, in fact, was organized by Confederate veterans. In 1884, the squad joined the American Association, as the first team from the Confederacy to represent a city in the major leagues. Historian Robert Gudmestad argues that the squad's brief participation in the league endorsed memory and charity of the war, and symbolized "a visible reminder" of the Confederacy.<sup>60</sup>

A similar publicity and iconography was demanded of Wells' club when entering the Atlantic League. In 1897, owners changed the name of the Bluebirds to the "Johnny Rebs," and outfitted the team with all grey uniforms to mark their entry into the predominantly northern league. League officials disapproved of the moniker and within two weeks forced the club to change the name, which Wells selected as the Giants.<sup>61</sup> Only one year prior to the Spanish-American War—the event which ushered in a national spirit of goodwill and reconciliation between regions—league officials feared that the name would stir controversy and possibly promote violence. Fans and the local press did not warm to the name change, and they affectionately referred to the club as the "Cherubs" throughout the remainder of the year. The nickname, representing innocence and guardianship, embodied a double meaning with supporters, as it also sprouted from the club's protests against playing on Sundays. The VSL did not operate on the holy day, but the Atlantic league's survival depended on the revenue generated

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 295-297.

<sup>61</sup> *The Sporting News*, 26 December 1896, 3; *RD* 28 March 1897.

by working-class patrons in cities “devoted to manufacturing interests,” including Philadelphia and the Paterson and Newark New Jersey clubs.<sup>62</sup> Wells and the players publicly announced their dislike of the schedule when the Cherubs were slated to play upwards of six games on Sunday. In May, after playing Paterson, ownership threatened to leave the league, forcing the board to call an emergency meeting to discuss the situation. In June, the clubs met in Philadelphia and agreed to a reworked schedule excluding Sunday play for the Cherubs. The event demonstrated to Wells the predominant power and influence that religion, in both sacred and civil belief, determined cultural experiences within the region.

The baseball diamond also provided a laboratory for Wells to craft elements of showmanship. Financial constraints forced many clubs during the era to advertise promotions and creative activities to attract patrons. For Richmond, the extra travel expenses of playing in the Atlantic League placed an already stretched budget covering salaries, fees, taxes, and various other operation expenditures in jeopardy. In 1897, mired in fourth place with only two weeks remaining in the season, Richmond’s owners conferred with Wells and devised a series of diversions intended to further entertain spectators and attract fans. For example, they hired the Stonewall band of Staunton to perform music in between innings, and implemented throwing and running contest of fans versus players before and after the game.<sup>63</sup> In conjunction with Wells’ “clean” baseball, the promotions helped Richmond top the league in attendance, despite their poor record. Ed Barrows, president of the league and future general manager of the New York Yankees, cited Richmond as the “banner city in the league for attendance.”<sup>64</sup> In fact, the Bluebirds were one of only three franchises in the league to boast a profit, along with Newark

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<sup>62</sup> *RT*, 3 April 1897

<sup>63</sup> *RD*, 4, 5, 11, September 1895.

<sup>64</sup> *RD*, 3 July 1897.



and Hartford.<sup>65</sup>

In 1898, Atlantic League clubs suffered even heavier losses, as attendance continued to slide. Ed Barrows believed the lack of patronage stemmed from national pre-occupation with the Spanish-American War.<sup>66</sup> Others blamed poor performance on the diamond resulting from player raids by National League teams.<sup>67</sup> Some even targeted incessant rowdy play as the cause.<sup>68</sup> More than likely, all these factors contributed. Despite the gloomy forecast, Richmond fans kept their faith in Wells. “Atlantic League affairs are in a muddled condition,” a special correspondent for the *Sporting News* reported, “but the Richmond team, thanks to the good management of Jake Wells, will be in the game at the finish.”<sup>69</sup> To pique spectator interest and increase profits throughout the Atlantic, Barrows hired John L. Sullivan and Jim Corbett, ex-heavyweight boxing champions, and a female pitcher, Lizzie Armstrong, to barnstorm the league. Wells hired Armstrong to pitch in a game versus Allentown in hopes of attracting more of the “fairer sex.”<sup>70</sup> Her performance was superb; she gave up only one hit in three innings of work. More importantly, she attracted 4,000 fans to Broad Street Park.<sup>71</sup> Barrow’s scheme, however, was not enough to increase profits within the league. Even though the Bluebirds brought home their first Atlantic league pennant at season’s end, for the first time under Wells’ guidance, the team suffered a financial loss, reportedly exhausting \$6,000 despite continuing to lead the league in

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<sup>65</sup> *RD*, 21 & 22 September 1897.

<sup>66</sup> Barrows, *My Fifty Years in Baseball*, 87. *RD*, 11 September 1898. Not only did the Bluebird owners lose patronage because of disinterest brought on by the war, but were also liable to pay a special tax of ten dollars a game under the war-revenue bill. See *RD*, 26 July 1898.

<sup>67</sup> *The Sporting News*, 5 November 1898, p. 4. *RD*, 11 September 1898. Also suffering financially from the War, many National League clubs snatched up the bulk of talented players in the Atlantic, in return providing players of lesser quality. Wells called the dealings an “injustice” and believed the new players led to “bickerings [sic] and knocks,” among the team. For Wells, the fresh faces and bad attitudes proved detrimental to maintaining an obedient and ethical team.

<sup>68</sup> *RD*, 11 September 1898.

<sup>69</sup> *The Sporting News*, 16 July 1898.

<sup>70</sup> *RD*, 13, 16 July 1898.

<sup>71</sup> Barrows, *My Fifty Years in Baseball*, 41. *RD*, 13, 16 July 1898.

attendance.<sup>72</sup>

As the Atlantic League teetered on the brink of financial failure, Wells looked for new ways of luring in the crowds and covering the club's expenses. On August 18, 1898, after a 2 to 0 win for the Bluebirds, Wells presented a mock battle scene at Broad Street Park, complete with fireworks and music. Entitled "Bombardment of Manila," the show depicted Admiral George Dewey's recent engagements in the Spanish-American War. Wells advertised the show as the "latest, greatest, grandest pyrotechnic display," accompanied by a "grand" orchestra and including "large fire pictures" of Spanish-American war heroes General Fitzhugh Lee and Richmond P. Hobson. Expected to be one of the "most magnificent productions of modern times," tickets to the occasion cost 25 cents for general admission, 50 cents for reserved seats, and one dollar for box seats.<sup>73</sup> Five thousand people turned out to witness the event, but much to their displeasure the show was a bust. The *Richmond Times* called the performance "bogus," and "disgust[ing]" to the thousands of fans that attended.<sup>74</sup> The "grand" orchestra turned out to be composed of only "four and one-half pieces," and the fireworks display contained a "few skyrocketes and inglorious squibs."<sup>75</sup> Wells had been duped. He and a partner, W. J. Conners of New York, paid an illegitimate fireworks agent \$520 to put on the show, "understood to be a bona-fide representation of the battle."<sup>76</sup> The presentation was a farce. Wells was stunned by the turn of events, and suggested that had he not paid the agent in full the night before, he would have "refunded every dollar taken in at the gate" to the patrons.<sup>77</sup> To make matters worse, the following day, Henrico County's Justice of the Peace T. P. Larus arrested Wells, charging him

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<sup>72</sup> *RD*, 11 September 1898. Barrows, *My Fifty Years in Baseball*, 41.

<sup>73</sup> *RD*, 16 August 1898.

<sup>74</sup> *RT*, 19 August 1898.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *RD*, 20 August 1898.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

with giving a fireworks demonstration without a license. The county demanded \$160 from Wells: \$100 for failure to acquire the license, \$50 from the gate receipts, and \$10 for the war tax. Wells pleaded that he never “dreamed” of paying for a special license and tax, since the show was performed at Broad Street Park. He believed that the taxes already paid by the Richmond Baseball Association covered the fireworks demonstration. The trial convened a week later, and Wells testified that the failure to pay the county actually stemmed from a disagreement with authorities concerning how much the license cost. The authorities believed that the license cost \$100, but Wells agreed to only pay \$3. Wells also testified that the reason he did not refund the audience members their money was because of poor ticket sales. A mere \$1,264 dollars was collected from the performance, \$761 of which was spent on expenses to stage the show, leaving only \$503 as profit for both Wells and Conners. Larus found Wells guilty as charged and ordered him to pay \$50 in damages. Conners was also prosecuted, but he escaped by train to Memphis after rumors swirled he was in on the con.<sup>78</sup>

Although a bust, the show encouraged Wells to enter the world of public amusements outside of baseball. In 1899, the Atlantic League folded. Wells received offers to transplant the club to Syracuse, and was presented with a chance to manage the Washington Senators, but he refused both opportunities to venture into the world of vaudeville. Throughout his career, however, he would continue to maintain an interest in professional baseball. During the 1900s, he served as president of the Virginia State League, and he purchased interests in minor-league teams representing Chattanooga, Norfolk, and Richmond.

The experiences Wells gained with the Richmond ball club were invaluable to his grooming as a showman in the region. Baseball, as a nationally circulated form of spectator

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<sup>78</sup> *RD*, 20, 21, 27 August 1898; *RT* 16, 19, 20 August 1898.

entertainment, provided training in modern business practices necessary to establish a regional circuit of entertainment and a theater chain. Moreover, Wells negotiated many of the social and cultural forces distinctive to the region which challenged entry into a market economy and public world of amusements for others. Wells used this knowledge to cultivate a spirit of entrepreneurship and innovation that served him through the next phase of his career in the world of vaudeville, legitimate, and popularly-priced theater.

## CHAPTER 3

### CIRCUITS OF INNOVATION

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the growth of popular culture in Southern urban areas lagged behind that of other regions. The territory largely lacked the infrastructure or capital necessary for substantial economic growth, and its people possessed values and beliefs largely inhospitable to modern cultural change. Entertainment entrepreneurs wishing to establish businesses in the area faced a number of deficiencies within the marketplace, including a populace often indifferent to industrialization and modernization; a lack of investment in social overhead; the malignant effects of racism; the empowerment of local elites, who had a short-term economic self-interest in the status quo; the scarcity of capital; and an absence of a skilled labor pool.<sup>1</sup> Despite these limitations, many Southern cities began to urbanize at a rate matching other parts of the country due in large part to the energy and enthusiasm of city boosters and a new generation of entrepreneurs. This chapter explores Wells' negotiation of many of the aforementioned challenges in his quest to establish a string of lucrative amusement ventures in the South. Using contemporary entrepreneurial theory devoted to spatial analysis which explores geographical proximity and various social and spatial mechanisms as factors influencing innovation, economic growth, and entrepreneurship, conclusions drawn will reveal how the former baseball manager was instrumental in establishing the infrastructure and conditions necessary for efficient and profitable distribution flows of commercial entertainments vital for

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<sup>1</sup> For further details see, Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); David Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1982); Blaine A. Brownell, "The Urban South Comes of Age, 1900-1940," in *The City of Southern History: The Growth of Urban Civilization in the South*, eds. Blaine A. Brownell and David R. Goldfield (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1977), 123-158; Lauren H. Larsen, *The Rise of the Urban South* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1985).

the cultural modernization of the region.<sup>2</sup> This model provides a framework to understand how regional entertainment entrepreneurs, like Wells, cultivated cultural spaces in which public amusements could thrive economically through negotiation of specific economic conditions and interactions with local traditions and customs. Wells' greatest contribution to this development was his leadership in overhauling regional transport services, his coordination of scarce resources, his efforts at unionization and national recognition within entertainment circles, and his development of social networks necessary for achieving the growth of popular culture in the region. Effectively, the showman pioneered the growth of urban amusement proximities in the South and fostered an environment of innovation for new nationally circulated cultural products.

Although Wells' first attempt at staging entertainment other than baseball with the Spanish-American fireworks show proved an utter disaster financially, the fact the event attracted an estimated 5,000 patrons demonstrated an unprecedented appeal for popular amusements within Richmond. At the time, only two theaters graced the city: the Academy of Music, home to first-class dramas and operas catering to the city's elite; and Putnam's Theater, an "illegitimate" venue located in the red-light district which presented cheap burlesque and other acts with heavy sexual overtones.<sup>3</sup> The disparity between the venues' target audiences, the entertainment provided, atmosphere, and affordability was exceptional, and the absence of any

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<sup>2</sup>General sources emphasizing geography as an integral force shaping innovation and entrepreneurship can be found in, Bjorn Asheim and Meric Gertler, "The Geography of Innovation: Regional Innovation Systems," in *The Oxford Handbook of Innovation*, eds. Jan Fagerberg, David Mowert, and Robert Nelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 291-317; Doreen Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labor: Social Structures and the Geography of Production*, (Routledge: New York, 1995); two academic journals *Regional Studies* and *Journal of Economic Geography* serve as key organs for scholarly analysis in the subject; primary articles used in this study include, Ron Boschma, "Proximity and Innovation: A Critical Assessment," *Regional Studies*, 39, no. 1 (2005): 61-74; Michael Porter, "The Economic Performance of Regions," *Regional Studies* 37, no. 6,7 (2003): 549-578; K. Morgan, "The Exaggerated Death of Geography: Learning, Proximity, and Territorial Innovation Systems," *Journal of Economic Geography*, 4 (2004): 3-21; Meric Gertler, "Tacit Knowledge and the Economic Geography of Context, or the Undefined Tacitness of Being (There)," *Journal of Economic Geography*, 3 (2003): 75-99; and others

<sup>3</sup>Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, Wayne Dementi, and Elisabeth Dementi eds., *Celebrate Richmond Theater* (Richmond, VA: Dietz Press, 2003), 12, 15-18; John A. Cutchins, *Memories of Old Richmond, (1881-1944)* (Verona, VA: Mclure Printing Company, Inc., 1973), 118.

moderate alternative kept many of Richmond's emerging middle class and new amusement seekers at home, starved for new outlets of entertainment. The *Richmond Dispatch* indicated that the city offered a theatrical drawing capacity of nearly 125,000 spectators, and other localities "half the size of Richmond supported [more than] two theaters."<sup>4</sup>

In 1899, Wells filled this void, introducing "polite vaudeville" to the city with the opening of the 1,100 seat Bijou Theater.<sup>5</sup> The showman emulated the new wave of entertainment entrepreneurs operating in the North and Midwest who offered middle-class consumers, women, and children refined variety shows appealing to Victorian sensibilities. Through the censoring of show content, banning of alcohol, disciplining of audience behavior, and beautification of theaters, Tony Pastor, B. F. Keith, and others shed the industry's image associated with the rowdy all-male saloon.<sup>6</sup> Of course the idea to bring vaudeville to Richmond was not a new proposal. In the 1880s, up to six theaters devoted solely to stage entertainment dotted the city, but all had failed due to the poor quality of the facilities and failure to regularly acquire acts, amongst other factors. Many northern managers refused to send troupes below the Mason-Dixon

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<sup>4</sup>*RD*, 1 January 1899.

<sup>5</sup> The story Wells liked to tell was that he and Ed Barrows, then president of the Atlantic League, late in 1898, walked into City Councilman E. Harvie Spence's Trunk Shop, on the corner of Eighth and Broad Streets one afternoon, so that Wells could purchase a leather strap to hold baseball bats. Upon entering the store, Wells noticed the slant of the floor toward the rear of the building, and asked Spence about the peculiar construction of the shop. Spence informed Wells that the building used to be the old Ford's Opera House, one of the failed variety theaters from the 1880s. While exiting the building Wells supposedly turned to Barrows and said knowingly, "Ed, I believe there is money waiting for the man who gets hold of that building and puts on the right kind of popular priced vaudeville." In fact, Wells' vision of a popularly priced vaudeville theater in Richmond was a well-contrived plan and not some impromptu impulse as he liked to share. For years, his baseball travels exposed him to vaudeville, as it was already an established form of amusement in other parts of the country. Also, since the mid-1890s, Wells may have attended one of the regularly staged outdoor summer vaudeville acts in Richmond at West End or Forest Hill Parks. In fact, Thomas Leath, director of the West End Park summer vaudeville stage and proprietor of the Academy of Music, offered the Bluebird players free admission to the summer variety shows. Earl Lytz, "Bat Strap Leads to Big Theater Combine," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 6 January 1924; George Rogers, "Of Jake Wells... And a Trunk Strap... And Amateur Night at the Bijou," *Richmond News Leader (RNL hereinafter)*, 2 June 1952; Roy Proctor, "Norfolk Theater: Alive and Wells: Granddaddy of Stage Dragged Richmond out of the Dark Ages," *RNL*, 22 January 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Bert Lowry, "In the Days of Variety," *American Vaudeville as Seen by its Contemporaries*, ed. Charles W. Stein (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 6-9; Barth, *City People*, 194-196.

Line because of the nationwide perception that the region lacked cultural sophistication, urbanity, and a customer base receptive to the medium. They assumed that the multi-varied and multi-paced acts were "too foreign" for Southern taste and experiences. Many vaudeville skits commemorated ethnic customs and rituals in an effort to attract immigrant customers, mocked conditions within city life, and poked fun at the disparity between social classes, situations largely absent from southern society.<sup>7</sup> A man closely associated with the theatrical business in New York City told a *Richmond Dispatch* reporter that upon word of the Bijou's opening, "gentleman" of the City believed that vaudeville in the "land of Dixie" would not "take." He claimed a "'variety show' would not suit the taste of her citizens."<sup>8</sup> The region preferred minstrels and dramatic historical romances. These themes, which reinforced a fabricated historical memory of the region's tranquil illusion of plantation life, race relations, and morality of "southern womanhood," dominated theatrical entertainment.<sup>9</sup> "Polite vaudeville," on the other hand, celebrated many of the Victorian values and behaviors practiced in the celebration of the "Old South" which aided Wells' new venture.

The commercial feasibility of all media of popular culture in the territory required the growth of certain entrepreneurial conditions necessary to fashion a climate of innovation welcoming investment and sustainability. Innovation is understood here in an industrial or organizational perspective as the successful introduction of a new product or method which harnesses the embodiment, combination, or synthesis of knowledge in original, relevant, or

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<sup>7</sup> For a great source on vaudeville programming in Northern theaters see, Kathryn J. Oberdeck, *The Evangelist and the Impresario: Religion, Entertainment, and Cultural Politics in America, 1884-1914* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 182-193, 341-346.

<sup>8</sup> *RD*, 2 April 1899.

<sup>9</sup> Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 94-123.



valued new goods, processes, and services.<sup>10</sup> Wells identified and confronted two key factors plaguing the growth of vaudeville in the region: access to quality products and negotiation of local customs and mores. Indeed, to be realized as a national practice, popular culture had to be integrated and understood within the boundaries of traditional culture.

The furthest south professional touring circuits played was Washington D.C., and it was there that Wells initially traveled to procure the Bijou's first acts. On his scouting trips, the showman personally attended each performance and obtained acts that he believed would directly appeal to southern families and offer a level of quality and refinement absent from previous attempts at variety theater. "The policy of the management seems to be to present the very best acts obtainable," the entertainment reporter for the *Richmond Dispatch* stated, "and to not allow nothing [sic] objectionable or offensive to creep into any performance given on stage."<sup>11</sup> Another report detailed, "At the rehearsals each Monday morning, he [Wells] is present to see that nothing objectionable is to remain in any of the features. 'Cut it out,' he says, when he thinks a song is too broad or suggestive . . ." <sup>12</sup> "Mr. Wells is determined to allow no act to form a part of programme [sic] which cannot be witnessed with propriety with lady audiences," stated the local newspaper.<sup>13</sup> Integration of popular culture in the South demanded extra scrutiny beyond middle-class values to include widely practiced regional mores, attitudes, and beliefs. The amount of censorship that Wells and his peers employed over show content, however, is nearly impossible to trace without detailed business records. Undoubtedly, the deeper entrenched the region became into national, standardized circulations of popular culture, the harder it was to directly alter programming. Although the forerunner in centralization and standardization within

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Luecke and Ralph Katz, *Managing Creativity and Innovation* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> *RD*, 19 November 1899.

<sup>12</sup> *RD*, 29 January 1899.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

the amusement industry, vaudeville was the easiest stage entertainment to control, since unlike legitimate and popular-priced touring attractions which were packaged and distributed through booking agents as complete programs, variety performers could be contracted on an individual basis and more creatively assembled by local managers. Of course, the arrival of motion pictures and other electronic forms of entertainment would present their own distinctive issues, and would pay less attention to regional particularities in its attempt to reach broad audiences. As his circuit grew, Wells yielded more responsibility to hired talent agents and local managers familiar with each area's local characteristics. The costs, time constraints, and other factors hampering alteration of subject matter for every show to certain Southern standards, however, essentially created an impossible task.

To negotiate regional particularities outside the boundaries of content and performance, southern entertainment entrepreneurs were impelled to create special relationships with the local populace, provide services outside their designed functions, and construct spaces adhering to strict social and cultural boundaries in order build and maintain a successful business. One of the trends amongst contemporary cultural historians studying commercial entertainments is to unearth such everyday interactions, events, and activities between purveyor and community to locate this delicate exchange between popular culture and its regional integration in terms of space, place, and sociality. In the South, the most common concession was with matters of race. Although many amusement venues only allowed whites, Gregory Waller, Steven Goodson, and others have shown how entrepreneurs who catered to racially-mixed patrons reinforced the region's culture of segregation by separating whites and blacks through strict organization of seating and ticketing. This division, in addition to the public spectacle it generated, fostered an environment inviting to the white community, since it upheld racial privileges, politics, and

boundaries deemed necessary in Jim Crow society. Robert Allen has located the need for entrepreneurs to offer their venues as alternative spaces for leisure and activity outside of nationally mass marketed entertainment to both establish and maintain their business as a predominant and necessary feature of the community's civic life.<sup>14</sup> Theaters, amusement parks, and nickelodeons were universally offered as spaces for a variety of events, including charity drives, club meetings, graduations, and lectures. Terry Lindvall reveals how in Norfolk, theater managers (including Wells) developed tight-knit relationships with local church authorities and offered their venues for religious exercises. Locals perceived the association as elevating religious spirituality and virtuousness within the community, improving the image of the theater and engendering the space as a vital civic institution. How Wells managed these affairs will be discussed in detail in a later chapter; however, one condition largely absent in contemporary scholarship which needs introduction here is the embrace of the Lost Cause.

The Lost Cause, as a historical myth, functioned as a form of civil religion for many in the region. Paying reverence to and exploiting Confederate symbols, groups, and idols was but one way southern entrepreneurs could mitigate the foreignness associated with nationally circulated popular culture. On January 20, 1899, for example, within weeks of opening the Richmond Bijou, Wells outfitted his theater to commemorate Robert E. Lee's birthday. He hung a large picture of the celebrated hero from the center portion of the stage, flanked by draped Confederate flags, and illuminated with a spotlight in between skits. The *Richmond Dispatch* reported that upon the unveiling of the picture, "The applause was almost instantaneous with the flash of the light, and continued for some minutes."<sup>15</sup> Reaction to the gesture was so positive, Wells kept the makeshift memorial erected for the entire week, and made the week-long

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<sup>14</sup> Allen, "Relocating American Film History," 21-22.

<sup>15</sup> *RD*, 21 January 1899.

celebration an annual event.<sup>16</sup> A later chapter will analyze how Wells and other regional showmen used cinema in particular to profit from Lost Cause memory and celebration by shaping it into a "modern" ritual and tradition of Confederate celebration.

Another condition vital to the integration and growth of popular culture in the region was the establishment of a social network of entertainment purveyors who could share ideas and resources essential to the organization of an amusement marketplace.<sup>17</sup> Outside of New Orleans, the channels of communication, manpower, and specialty understanding required to circulate new forms of urban amusements like vaudeville and motion pictures, particularly throughout the Southeast, were all but nonexistent. In order to expand Jake Wells Enterprises, the showman assembled a skilled labor pool of amusement agents capable of piloting the innovative strategies and management necessary for the regional development of popular culture. He explicitly recruited former baseball allies to develop his business. Experienced in modern business practices associated with the game's growth into a spectator sport, they were skilled in methods utilizing the logic of rationalization, centralization, and scientific management indispensable for networking fundamentals and organization necessary for the growth of a amusement circuit in the face of the region's limitations. Moreover, they were accustomed to a transient lifestyle and familiar with entertaining the public. In addition to his half-brother Otto Wells, Hugh Cardoza, a former sports writer in Richmond and secretary of the Virginia State League, was one of the key members in Wells' enterprises, serving in various capacities including secretary of several

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<sup>16</sup> *RNL*, 17 January 1905.

<sup>17</sup> Improved social ties allow for stronger links to customers and services, easier access to financial resources, formation of a skilled labor pool, and a better flow of knowledge and information. See: Phillip H. Kim and Howard E. Aldrich, *Social Capital and Entrepreneurship* (Hanover, MA: Publishers, Inc., 2005); E. L. Hansen and K. R. Allen, "The Creation Corridor: Environmental Load and Pre-organization Information-processing Ability," *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 17, no. 1 (1992): 57-65.

corporations and circuits, theater and amusement park manager, and press agent.<sup>18</sup> Ed Lyons, another former sports writer for several metropolitan newspapers, oversaw various theaters and circuits for Wells. The journalism contacts of Lyons and Cardoza provided needed outlets with local papers and brought experience in mass marketing strategies essential to growth; the latter, in fact, once worked for Henry Grady, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* and champion of New South rhetoric. Charles McKee, who managed the Richmond Bijou until 1910, served as treasurer in Wells' first corporation (Bijou Theatre Company), and later acted as director of first-class attractions for the showman; he had managed various baseball teams in Pennsylvania prior to entering the theatrical world. Corbin Shields, a former player on the Bluebirds, also managed several theaters for Wells.<sup>19</sup> McKee and Ed Barrows, then president of the Atlantic League and future famed general manager of the New York Yankees, in fact, were Wells' first business partners, although the latter bailed out of the partnership within a year after it showed little financial return. Mimicking the New South entrepreneurial trend of collaboration with Northeastern business men for capital gain, they provided Wells thousands of dollars to purchase the Bijou and establish the financial foundation of the business.<sup>20</sup>

Through the assemblage of his sporting associates, Wells helped foster an "exchange of knowledge" vital to establishing a culture of entrepreneurship for the growth of amusements. This is a spatial concept highlighting both material and immaterial factors required for day-to-day knowledge flows and formation of social networks necessary for innovation within distinguishable geographic boundaries. Understanding and negotiating local cultural traditions or regional belief system, for example, is considered a tacit categorization; its opposite would be

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<sup>18</sup>*The Atlanta Constitution* (AC hereinafter), 25 May; 17 November 1902.

<sup>19</sup> "Savannah, GA," *Variety*, 20 September 1912; *RNL*, 30 April 1910.

<sup>20</sup> Barrows offered \$1,400 of his own money, and borrowed \$3,000 from the struggling Atlantic League's treasury. "For additional capital," Barrows remembered, "Wells pawned his wife's diamonds." See, Barrows, *My Fifty Years in Baseball*, 47.

codified knowledge, like industry manuals or books. The capacity to capture and utilize such information fosters a learning region ripe for innovation and growth. Economic geographer Ron Boschma locates five different dimensions critical to a learning region's establishment: cognitive, organizational, social, institutional and geographical proximity.<sup>21</sup> These forces range from sharing a common vocabulary to the capacity to coordinate and exchange information and products, the configuration of social ties built on trust and friendliness, and settling routines for negotiating rules and regulations affecting the industry. Wells was instrumental in fashioning a regional network and environment fluent with information exchange and collaboration required to eliminate spatial and cultural disparities limiting the market for popular culture.

In order to expand into other cities, Wells set a pattern of luring men of established wealth and prestige already fixed in Dixie's theatrical circle to join his enterprise. The history and identification of legitimate theater operators and their houses as sophisticated and reputable outlets of leisure provided Wells an entryway into new markets, as their status helped allay anxieties attributed to modern amusements. Their recruitment helped to attain what John Kyle Thomas identifies as a "cultural synthesis" of old and new entertainments, which provided a compromise between the modernity/traditionalism dualism plaguing New South cultural progress in the region.<sup>22</sup> In November 1901, after a failed attempt to establish polite vaudeville in Atlanta the previous winter season because of an unsuccessful partnership, Wells leased the Columbia Theatre in Atlanta from the DeGive family, builders of the city's Opera House in the 1870s and regional leaders in managing first-class attractions.<sup>23</sup> The affiliation sparked a fruitful business relationship empowering the two sides to combine in several ownership and

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<sup>21</sup> Boschma, "Proximity and Innovation: A Critical Assessment," 63-71.

<sup>22</sup> Kyle Thomas, "Of Paramount Importance," 3.

<sup>23</sup> AC, 17 November 1902; for detailed information on DeGive and the families theatrical history in Atlanta see, Goodson, *Highbrows, Hillbillies, and Hellfire*, 16-23, 42-57.

management ventures, which, in 1909, would allow the two parties to operate every major theater in the Gate City outside of a sprinkling of nickelodeons.<sup>24</sup> In June 1904, Wells leased the McDonald Opera House in Montgomery, Alabama and entered a local alliance with its builder and manager of forty years, George McDonald.<sup>25</sup> In 1907, to enter Knoxville, Wells joined forces with Fritz Staub, operator of and son of the builder of the Staub Theater, home to legitimate attractions since the 1870s.<sup>26</sup> These men represent a sampling of the many partners Wells allied with who were respected cultural authorities and members of the business elite in the region's growing urban cities. Sharing their know-how of the community's established social and cultural patterns, they made the introduction, approval, and circulation of modern amusements easier to achieve. Moreover, leasing their established theaters was cheaper than if Wells had to undertake new construction, and existing theaters harbored the decorum and respectability desired by many consumers.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle impeding the commercial expansion of Southern vaudeville and other urban amusements outside ideological or social differences was the vast geographical distances between populated areas, and inadequate transport services. The railroad determined the economic geography of the region for virtually all industries. By 1900, the rail serviced nine out of 10 counties in Dixie, and five consolidated groups monopolized the industry. Intense competition led to disagreements among firms, abusive shipping practices, irregular rates, and a host of technological challenges which deteriorated conditions and at times retarded economic growth in the region. Moreover, according to historian William Thomas, service in the territory was the most dangerous in the nation with "death, destruction, and delay" a daily occurrence.

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<sup>24</sup> AC, 07, 16 August 1909.

<sup>25</sup> AC, 10 June 1904.

<sup>26</sup> Kyle Thomas, "Of Paramount Importance," 23-35.

Percentages of cargo destruction, passenger injuries, and derailments were the highest in the nation. A sophisticated campaign of lobbying, blackmail, bribes, and perks to politicians, newspaper editors, and judges warded off any chance of serious regulation.<sup>27</sup> Such conditions hampered national amusement corporations and local entrepreneurs from disseminating their products throughout the region profitably, whether it was a troupe of stage performers or canisters of film. Shipping fees were the biggest expense, and routing decisions the biggest headache entrepreneurs faced in their business endeavors, rivaled only by similar conditions in the West. The growth of Jake Wells Enterprises depended on shrinking the geographic dimensions separating Southern cities to successfully distribute products through improvements to the region's chief transport service. Any improvements also encouraged the growth of entrepreneurial development at multiple levels. Not only did the rail provide a pipeline for the entry of nationally circulated products and their distribution, but rail line expansion was necessary to social benefits improving business services, and the face-to-face contact necessary for exchange of knowledge and fruition of a "learning region."

In 1901, after opening theaters in Richmond (Bijou) and Norfolk (Granby), Wells set his sights on expanding vaudeville throughout the region, targeting Atlanta as his next destination, due in large part to the geographical advantages the city offered. While Virginia provided a gateway to superior touring attractions and products with its proximity to the mid-Atlantic, the Gate City offered a crossroads for them to circulate across the region. At the time, New Orleans was the only city in the South capable of luring high-quality national touring attractions, with most shows or acts jumping directly from Chicago or St. Louis. Eastern-based acts typically

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<sup>27</sup>William G. Thomas, *Lawyering for the Railroad: Business, Law, and Power in the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 61.



stopped at Washington D.C. or Baltimore, rarely venturing below the Mason-Dixon Line.<sup>28</sup> Wells wished to duplicate the distribution system established by Klaw and Erlanger, booking agents of standard attractions who serviced ninety percent of legitimate theaters in the South, with vaudeville. But variety furnished unique challenges and demanded systematization for its distribution in new areas. Unlike first-class and later popular-priced attractions, which were purchased as assembled packages thorough booking agents with travel costs and many expenses paid for in advance, theater operators paid for individual vaudevillian's lodging, travel, and transport of costumes and equipment.<sup>29</sup> Paying expenses from the nation's capitol or Baltimore to Virginia was feasible for Wells, but in order to entice higher-grade shows to Atlanta and possibly the overnight jump to New Orleans, he had to promise numerous stops in between to make up for travel costs. Indeed, Atlanta's interior position and abundant rail service was central to engineering a routing layout capable of accommodating smaller cities in the region. An *Atlanta Constitution* writer expressed the magnitude of the city's capture when he professed, "This will be one of the most important circuits of the country should it be completed and one of which managers have dreamed for many years."<sup>30</sup>

Following the Gate City's capture, Wells executed a leasing and building spree of large theaters in the region's largest urban areas. From 1902 to 1906 he entered Birmingham, Montgomery, Memphis, Nashville, and other markets, while increasing his holdings in Atlanta, Richmond, and Norfolk. Wells targeted the larger interior cities in the region, primarily in Georgia and Tennessee, which leapfrogged the majority of its coastal counterparts in economic

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<sup>28</sup> AC, 15 October 1905.

<sup>29</sup> The Orpheum circuit initially paid for travels out West, but stopped after 1908; the Keith circuit never reimbursed troupes. Arthur Frank Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-time and its Performers* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 74; "Vaudeville too Expensive for Most Southern Cities," AC 16 October 1911.

<sup>30</sup> AC, 09 November 1901.

development. These markets possessed a more progressive business community, alternative sources of capital, and more insistent adoption of rail. In coastal cities such as Charleston, Mobile, and Savannah, old families and old money largely controlled the economy and ties to agriculture and shipping determined growth and expectations. Wells did not entirely ignore these markets, since they shortened the distances and jumps to other cities, making routing decisions more efficient and transport costs cheaper. In 1909, for example, Wells specifically leased a Charleston, South Carolina house to help with the jump from Savannah to Atlanta.<sup>31</sup> An *Augusta Chronicle* reporter explained the logic and benefits of such growth to his readers, “Instead of engaging an act for a week or two or even three weeks,” “he [Wells] engages them for thirty-five weeks and on account of the small railroad jumps and other expenses not experienced on the Jake Wells circuit, vaudeville acts are even anxiously vying with each other for a Jake Wells contract.”<sup>32</sup> The showman constructed a transport infrastructure to allow for access to and resourceful delivery of products allaying many of the limitations of the geographic dimensions making entrepreneurship difficult in the region.

Conditions in the region and a series of events, however, prevented Wells from initially realizing the profit potential of nationally circulated vaudeville in the South. In 1901, the showman moved from D.C. to New York City to acquire talent, joining the Vaudeville Managers Association (VMA), a national body anchored by the mighty Keith and Orpheum circuits formed for the purpose of evaluating and booking performances for associated houses. Comprised of over sixty theaters across the country, the agency promised members thirty weeks to a year’s worth of “big-time” engagements. Within weeks of Wells’ joining, however, the first of the infamous White Rat strikes unfolded; this involved an actor’s union which wished to improve

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<sup>31</sup> AC, 05 July 1909.

<sup>32</sup>“At the Bijou,” AC, 1912 October 27.

salary options and rid the five percent commission the VMA charged for booking. The strike crippled service to members and placed Wells in a vulnerable position, but it was resolved by the following season. In April 1902, the VMA awarded Wells the territorial rights for the entire region. He approached theater managers throughout the South and arranged agreements to guarantee acts up to 54 venues to service. Despite the benefits of shortening the distances between jumps, the overall costs of operations, routing decisions, shoddy rail service, and travel fees proved to be too demanding for Wells. Moreover, he struggled to regularly attract “serious” acts, despite his connections to the VMA, as many were leery to make the trek through Dixie.

By 1903, unpredictable and unreliable service thwarted Wells’ vision of controlling a region-wide vaudeville circuit, and he let his VMA privileges lapse. Wells and many of his peers were forced to install stock companies to accompany the smattering of quality vaudeville acts they could secure. In April 1901, prompted by the White Rats’ strike, Wells formed two stock companies to alternate between the Bijou and Granby theaters, the Bijou Musical Comedy Company (BMCC) which performed musical comedy and farce, and the Wells Dramatic Company, which performed legitimate drama and operas.<sup>33</sup> The cost to produce a show was far less expensive than the fees associated with booking vaudeville. The *Richmond Dispatch*, for example, reported that it cost only \$250 to produce the BMCC’s production “A Trip to Chinatown.” In contrast, Wells at the minimum paid \$1,000 for big-time vaudeville shows, and sometimes paid upwards of \$2,500.<sup>34</sup> In addition to the production savings, Wells did not pay for excessive rail rates inherent with transferring vaudeville acts to the South, and could manage a clearance system within his own circuit to assure covering overhead. The quality and national

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<sup>33</sup> *RD*, 13 January, 21 April 1901.

<sup>34</sup> *RD*, 9 June, 11 August 1901. For an excellent description on vaudeville booking prices and actors’ salaries see: Charles W. Stein, *American Vaudeville as Seen by its Contemporaries* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 114-123. Wells not only used the funds to pay actors and actresses, but also for the stage construction, scenery, and musical composition.

prominence of touring acts from top circuits ultimately offered chances of greater profit, though. Wells refined the routing network in the region by circulating stock companies between his theaters and pooling with other managers to distribute the shows to their houses. The BMCC, in fact, toured Baltimore, Washington, Pittsburgh, and New York, while returning every six weeks to Richmond with a new bill.<sup>35</sup> Managing stock groups allowed Wells to barter deals with competing entrepreneurs and circuits, used as leverage to improve his holdings. Wells at the same time established himself as the unofficial king of the outdoor summer theater theatrical circle. From his humble beginnings with the opening of the Casino at Reservoir Park, Wells ventured into Norfolk, Atlanta, Columbia, South Carolina, and Long Branch, New York acting as a producing manager for over “thirty-seven summer resorts” in total.<sup>36</sup> What Keith had amassed in big-time vaudeville booking with the UBO, Wells replicated in the outdoor theater booking scene. The *Richmond News Leader* reported that Wells received dozens of extra applications from other summer theater owners asking him to book their shows because their business was suffering in “comparison with the superior attractions offered in the Wells theaters.”<sup>37</sup> The management of these circuits provided Wells the added knowledge and experience to further gauge the potential and limits of proximity conducive to entrepreneurship within popular culture. From 1900 to 1907, Wells’ dealings improved the organizational networking of the region, refined the capacity to coordinate and exchange products, promoted the fusion of social ties, and facilitated sharing of knowledge within the industry.

It was Wells' actions in legitimate theater, however, which vastly improved the circulation flows of *all* commercial entertainments in the region. In 1904, Richmond’s Thomas

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<sup>35</sup> *RD*, 11 August 1901.

<sup>36</sup> *RNL*, 18, 19, June 1903.

<sup>37</sup> *RNL*, 12 August 1903.

Leath, controller of the Leath Circuit of first-class attractions with theaters stretching from Virginia to South Carolina, hired Wells as general manager to oversee bookings and day-to-day operations. From this position, the showman formed Dixie's first permanent theatrical protection agency, the Southern Managers Association (SMA). Established to protect, improve, and advance the commercial enterprise of standard attractions in the area, the group, driven by Wells' dogged leadership, improved the region's distribution of standard attractions, lobbied railways to drop travel expenses for theatrical troupes and their equipment, and increased the quality of shows touring the area. Such improvements benefited all classes of touring companies, including vaudeville. Moreover, changes within the region during this period set the foundation for the introduction and efficient circulation of feature films in the mid-1910s, leading to cinema's eventual dominance as the premier medium of entertainment.

In November 1907, Otto Wells reluctantly released a statement to the Virginia theatrical community announcing that many of the best legitimate attractions booked for the Leath circuit's winter season were canceled due to increasing rail rates in the region.<sup>38</sup> In 1906, Congress enacted the Hepburn Act which gave the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) exclusive power to regulate rail rates at "just, fair, and reasonable" levels. Written to dismantle the industry's price fixing exploits at the expense of average customers, the bill provided the public the same special rates offered to certain industries and loyal shippers.<sup>39</sup> Exclusive rates granted to theatrical touring companies in the South were scrapped in favor of the legislation which demanded a flat three cents rate for the public at large. This was an increase of a half cent, raising transportation costs for touring companies by fifty percent to travel the region which was

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<sup>38</sup> "Shows Canceling Engagements," *RNL*, 14 November 1907.

<sup>39</sup> Eliot Jones, *Principles of Railway Transportation* (New York: MacMillan, 1924), 126-128.

already more expensive than the two cent rate afforded to tours in the North and East.<sup>40</sup> Before the start of the 1908 winter season, the region's legitimate theaters alone experienced nearly 100 cancellations, and overall booking numbers for all attractions were down 50-70 percent compared to the previous season.<sup>41</sup> Managers of shows including such stars as John Drew, Rogers Brothers, and Hattie Williams refused to send companies south of Washington D.C.<sup>42</sup> The rate increase augmented the already poor routing schedule comprised by Klaw and Erlanger, who treated the region as second-class territory despite its importance to the agency's coffers.<sup>43</sup> Formed in 1896, Klaw and Erlanger's "Theatrical Trust" dominated legitimate theatrical bookings across the United States for more than a decade, and serviced over 200 houses, or nearly ninety percent of the South's first-class attractions. The syndicate provided organization and security to producers and theater managers who previously would have risked competing against one another in towns incapable of supporting multiple acts, simplified booking procedures, provided guaranteed dates, and eased general logistical concerns with traveling.<sup>44</sup>

The debut of "The Shepherd King," for example, was canceled because of the excessive rail rates. The company was dispatched to jump from Evansville, Indiana to Richmond to begin its Southern swing, instead of moving logically across Dixie from west to east.<sup>45</sup> Further damages to Southern managers were inflicted due to the rising opposition of independent agents led by the Schubert Brothers of New York against the Theatrical Syndicate who started an aggressive campaign of luring Klaw & Erlanger stars and playwrights from the agency to break

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<sup>40</sup> AC, 1908 April 12.

<sup>41</sup> *New York Dramatic Mirror* (NYDM hereinafter), 25 July 1908.

<sup>42</sup> "Shows Canceling Engagements," *RNL*, 14 November 1907.

<sup>43</sup> One-night stands guaranteed a steady stream of revenue for the booking agents, which provided funds necessary to distribute bigger and more expensive attractions, some of which failed to profit. Larry T. Menefee, "The Syndicate War in Little Rock," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 46, no. 1 (Spring 1987), 29-31; Steve Travis, "The Rise and Fall of the Theatrical Syndicate," *Educational Theatre Journal*, 10, no.1 (March 1958), 40.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> "Shows Canceling Engagements," *RNL*, 14 November 1907.

the monopoly. Altogether, the situation left houses in the region literally in the "dark" many nights of the week, unable to host shows and open their doors.

In February 1908, at Wells' request, more than forty legitimate house managers representing over 400 theaters of all classes in the South convened on the Piedmont hotel in Atlanta to mark the region's first theatrical conference. There, in an effort to confront the issue of increasing rail rates, they formed the SMA, to protect the interests of managers of first-class attractions and combat the transportation industry head on. Wells, who independently traveled across the region to meet face to face with managers and organize the group, was unanimously voted president by members.<sup>46</sup> All associates of the SMA suffered from the crippling amusement circumstances and feared the direction in which the industry was moving, but Wells and his peers managing the houses in the largest cities had the most to lose. The high grade acts they were able to periodically secure complete with expensive production values carried more equipment, staff, and props, and often jumped from longer distances in their travels to reach the region. The group petitioned the Producing Theatrical Manager's association to urge the ICC to change theatrical rates for the region, and requested the Southeastern Passenger Association (SPA) to prohibit the increased party-rate ruling.<sup>47</sup> Unsuccessful in their appeal to the SPA, Wells tactfully conducted secret negotiations behind closed doors with Seaboard Air Line, a railway servicing virtually all of the territory comprising the showman's legitimate circuit, and within a month ironed out an agreement with the SMA to grant touring companies of ten or more a "party rate" of two cents a mile on one ticket, which they dually offered to the public at large.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> "Managers Ask Lower Rates in the South," *AC*, 1908 February 07; "Theater Men Ask for Party Rates," *Atlanta Journal* 07 February 1908 Wells attempted to create a permanent theatrical protective agency prior to 1908, but could not drum up enough support. See "Wells Here to Witness Stock Company Opening," *AC*, 1908 April 12.

<sup>47</sup> "Applications Received from Southern Theaters," *AC*, 1908 February 14.

<sup>48</sup> "Seaboard Gives the Party Rate," *AC*, 27 February 1908; *NYDM*, 19 September 1908; The Seaboard lines stretched from Virginia to Florida down the coast, and as far westward as Alabama.

The move forced all competing rail lines in the region, including the Atlantic Coast Line, Georgia Southern and Florida, and Southern and allied lines to open the entire area to the two cent rate.<sup>49</sup> By this point, Wells has clearly become a key figure in regional business negotiations, continuing to innovate new ways of combating obstacles to providing quality entertainments in the South.

Wells' protest actually reduced the rate prior to government regulation, escalating the prospects of theatrical entertainment and entrepreneurship in the region. In 1908, Wells again acquired the rights to Keith vaudeville within the territory through a pooling agreement with Sydney Wilmer and Walter Vincent, former vaudevillians who owned a string of theaters in Pennsylvania and New York. The latter, who had recently purchased a property in Norfolk in direct competition with Wells, prevented Keith and Proctor from opening theaters in Virginia as a gateway to the Southeast. The trio formed the Wells, Wilmer, and Vincent (WWV) Corporation, and operated the region's first large-scale "pop" or small-time vaudeville booking agency with acts pulled from Keith's United Booking Office (UBO) and the Western Vaudeville Association. Wells launched Southern Vaudeville Enterprises, "real vaudeville for regular managers," with offices in Atlanta. The service operated "for the purpose of regularly routing meritorious vaudeville acts through the South."<sup>50</sup> Plans were drawn to open a studio for the construction of props and scenery, and the creation of a regional trade journal, but whether these were realized is unknown.<sup>51</sup> Wells' theater leasing spree continued in earnest, as he acquired houses in Jacksonville, Knoxville, Tampa, Savannah, and Evansville, Indiana to bring his

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<sup>49</sup> "Wells Here to Witness Stock Company Opening," *AC*, 1908 April 12.

<sup>50</sup> "The South Organized," *Variety*, 11 September 1909.

<sup>51</sup> *AC*, 17 March 1909.



operations to nearly fifty theaters.<sup>52</sup> Wells' efforts cemented Atlanta as the southern hub for media industries, a honor it still holds today. In 1912, Keith and Albee, who purchased interest in Wells' ownership of the Orpheum in Atlanta, made their inaugural visit, establishing UBO offices directly in the city to further promote vaudeville in the region.

Surprisingly, Wells' leadership of the SMA would also influence the regular circulation of feature films by Hollywood studios in the mid-1910s, as distribution strategies followed those set by the legitimate theater and the Theatrical Trust. By 1908, many Southern managers were convinced standard attractions offering full-week engagements could circulate profitably throughout the region with improvements to routing and show quality, which they believed the Theatrical Trust ignored. Klaw and Erlanger classified the majority of the region in the "one-night stand" category, since many cities did not meet the population threshold established by the booking agents to support the newest, star-studded multiple night engagements. The few markets which did meet the agency's requirements struggled to benefit from top-class acts, as distances between larger cities and shoddy rail service sapped profits from all parties involved. Serving as the backbone of the industry, one-night territory housed the second and third-year runs of prior top shows often with minor stars, lower production values, and smaller crews. In the South, they could attract advance prices equivalent to their first run, making the second-hand programs extremely lucrative to producing managers and booking agencies as they cheaply provided a constant and generous revenue stream. Small town theater managers, however, struggled to attract talent and continually justify charging high admission prices to shows with lesser quality. Moreover, the Trust's routing system lacked proper rationalization and was deemed by many

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<sup>52</sup> See Appendix A; for some few individual sales see, *Variety*, 27 July 1907; 8 May 1909; 25 February 1911 (Savannah); *AC*, 27 February 1908 (Mobile; Knoxville), 05 July 1909 (Charleston, SC), 30 August 1909 (Jacksonville, FL); 06 December 1909 (Birmingham; Nashville).

managers in the region to be inefficient. “The lack of a properly organized first-class circuit that would enable us to offer the big shows a full week of good business was what we had to contend with,” Wells later remarked of the situation.<sup>53</sup> The Trust was also accused of ignoring regional mores and attitudes, sending shows into areas which raised the ire of local authorities and cultural watchdogs. SMA Jacksonville representative and manager of the city’s Orpheum, James D. Burbridge stated, “We [SMA] also decided to bring no unclean shows to the South and ‘The Girls from Rector’s’ and plays of that kind will be barred. We also agreed to place a ban on cheap old shows which charge advanced prices in the South and which play at popular prices in the North.”<sup>54</sup>

Complaints against Klaw and Erlanger increased throughout the 1908-10 winter seasons following the rise of the “Independents.” Led by the Schubert brothers of New York, the pool of theater managers wished to usurp the booking monopoly held by the Trust. In 1907, a New York City grand jury summonsed Klaw and Erlanger on charges of restricting free trade in the legitimate market, but they were acquitted of any anti-trust violations. Following a small truce in 1908, the two competitors reached open warfare again the following year, when the Independents offered special rates to seasoned one-night stand producing managers from the Trust in an attempt to fill their schedule, run profitable tours, and convince small town circuits to abandon their service. The tactic left the Trust scrambling to find shows covering guaranteed contracts thus intensifying their inferior service and dark nights experienced in the South and West. With both agencies incapable of assuring quality seasonal contracts, the majority of theater managers clamored for an “open door” policy, which would allow managers to choose acts from any agency without retribution from the Trust.

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<sup>53</sup> “Richmond to be Taken Out of ‘One-Night’ Stand Class,” *RNL* 1912 February 2.

<sup>54</sup> “The Theatrical Situation,” *NYDM* 04 June 1910.

Wells emerged as a leading proponent of the open door policy at both the regional and national levels. He believed "cities outside the big cities," in particular those whose livelihood depended on one-night stand programs, would benefit from booking attractions from *all* available sources.<sup>55</sup> His primary grievance was the Trust's penchant for recruiting inferior acts and piecing together poor performances to cover gaps in their schedules, which hurt the profit potential of theater managers. "The more good shows we give the people, the better our business will be," proclaimed Wells. "The more disappointments we hand them in the way of poor shows, the greater loss will be ours. It is business pure and simple."<sup>56</sup> Wells recognized the commanding position Southern managers possessed in the struggle, since the Trust depended on its constant revenue stream of one-night stand bookings in the region. Wells used it as leverage to demand the region be treated in entertainment circles as equal to others and to modernize the circulation flows of entertainment. "The theater is no longer some haphazard sort of chance," lectured Wells, "It has become very serious and a very highly systematized business, and to make ends meet we must regard it as such."<sup>57</sup> The rational and efficient advantages the Trust offered through its monopoly which had been lost on the region grew worse. Wells convened the SMA several times during the summer of 1909 to discuss the prospect of adopting an open door policy, but failed to persuade the Trust's old guard in the region, including DeGive and Leath, who remained loyal to the agency.<sup>58</sup> Wells pleaded with members to adopt change and not "let sentiment stand in our way."<sup>59</sup> Albert Wies, one of the most powerful figures in the SMA, who owned the American Theatrical Exchange and controlled over 200 theaters nationwide including legitimate theaters in Memphis, Charleston, and virtually all of Texas and Oklahoma, provided the coup de grâce to

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<sup>55</sup> *RNL*, 08 July, 31 August, 1910.

<sup>56</sup> *AC* 30 July 1909.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *AC*, 18 September 1909.

<sup>59</sup> *AC*, 30 July 1909.

Wells' campaign. Weis pledged his allegiance to Klaw and Erlanger because they could "deliver the goods," and praised the centralized operations the group maintained for ten years.<sup>60</sup> "They have made a haphazard business a systematic one," explained A. Thalheimer, representative for the southwestern mogul. Thalheimer explained that the circuit valued the "protection" the agency offered to theater managers through a "simplified booking process" and the "fairness" of never "throwing down a house."<sup>61</sup> Possibly every member of the SMA, however, could recall when the agency had failed them in past years. Weis' support was, in truth, a reaction against the Schuberts, who previously pulled some shows during the lucrative holiday season. As an organization, the SMA decided to stay loyal to Klaw and Erlanger.<sup>62</sup> In light of the decision, Wells remarked, "I am a Schubert sympathizer, but we are so situated that we will book Klaw & Erlanger attractions this season." Many feared Klaw and Erlanger's threat to open theaters in cities where managers booked through the Independents.

The open door policy gained strength in May 1910, when over 1,200 theater owners, lessees, and managers in the U.S. and Canada joined forces to form the National Theater Owners' Association (NTOA), declaring their right to book any attractions through any agencies, thus crippling the Theatrical Trust. Wells was one of five individuals elected to the board of directors, and he pledged the SMA's support of the group.<sup>63</sup> "Our main effort is to please the public, to get the best shows on the market, for, after all, the public is the only competition the manager of a playhouse has to fight," Wells explained. "If the people like a play or a star they come to see the play or a star. If they don't like it you couldn't drag them in, even with free tickets as the lure."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> AC, 29 June, 18 August 1909.

<sup>61</sup> AC, 18 August 1909.

<sup>62</sup> AC, 12 July 1909.

<sup>63</sup> AC, 08, 24 May, 27 August, 1910; Both Leath and DeGive had passed away by this time.

<sup>64</sup> AC, 13 May 1910.

As he engaged in more regional and national politics, Wells stayed true to his basic business principles learned in his days of managing minor league baseball.

The growth of the NTOA provided the death knell to the syndicate's stranglehold on theatrical booking. Wells advocated the open door policy for three years. His disposition was very much in line with a growing number of New South elite businessmen who demanded a market economy based on principles of individualism and unrestrained competition.<sup>65</sup> Other leaders of the NTOA did not share these sentiments. The Schuberts, bitter from years of fighting, and eager to assure future booking strength, blacklisted theater managers booking from Klaw and Erlanger, despite their support of the open-door policy. Wells grew disgusted with the Schuberts. "The crisis for a free theater is on," wired Wells, "...victory must make for freedom, honesty, fair dealings, and the initiative these elements create for the stage. It must not create a new trust."<sup>66</sup> Wells' criticism grew in tone as he publicly called the board's direction "drunk" and "disgusting."<sup>67</sup> "It is the passing of a kingdom and the creating of an empire," jeered Wells over the blacklisting charges of the Schuberts.<sup>68</sup> The brothers called a special meeting of the NTOA board of directors without Wells' knowledge, and kicked him out of the organization after drumming up phantom charges of booking violations found deep in the NTOA's bylaws. "They painted my name off the door as one of the directors, and that is about all the National Association of Theaters Owners has accomplished," Wells sarcastically told an *Atlanta Constitution* reporter. After accusing the group of using him and the SMA as a "stepping stone"

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<sup>65</sup> Doyle, *New Men, New Cities New South*, 19-20.

<sup>66</sup> AC, 09 July 1910.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

to their own ambition, Wells proclaimed, "The people, the press, and many managers and owners have been gulled. They have gained nothing, and the public is no better off."<sup>69</sup>

Wells' fight for the open-door policy held significance for the future of feature-film distribution in the region. In 1909, Wells negotiated a deal with Klaw and Erlanger to place a permanent SMA office in New York City to advise the agency's routing exchange of plays and stars distributed throughout Dixie. Wells, who micromanaged the mission, mapped out a system which improved distribution efficiency and eliminated the "dark night" problem plaguing many theater managers in the region. The plan divided many attractions, and redistributed acts from cities struggling to support the "overcrowding" of higher-class shows, in towns such as Lynchburg, Virginia or Montgomery, to new towns "breaking in" to the circuit or underserved localities, like Biloxi, Mississippi or Columbia, South Carolina. A new routing design promised increased profits to theater managers and booking agents, encouraging the latter to schedule more acts for the region and higher-classed attractions for the larger cities.<sup>70</sup> In addition, Wells improved the selection of transportation facilities when scheduling to lessen delays and cancellations.

Wells' consultation modernized the distribution flows of commercial entertainment for the region beyond legitimate theater. Remapping the region provided a stable and superior system for distribution flows of feature films, ironically one of the forces responsible for legitimate theater's demise. Nickelodeon-era film distribution was in a constant state of disorder and confusion, as film exchanges lacked proper oversight and uniform shipping procedures. In 1910, the General Film Company (GFC), the distribution arm of the Motion Pictures Patent

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<sup>69</sup> AC, 03 September 1910.

<sup>70</sup> "Theatre Bureau to do Great Work for the South," AC 1909 September 11.

Company (MPPC), was created to monopolize and systematize circulation of the Edison Trust's single-reel motion pictures. Prior to this, independent private exchanges notoriously accepted kickbacks from local exhibitors for rights to films, or opened competing theaters to show the best quality and newest prints ahead of their competitors.<sup>71</sup> Other problems included exhibitors "bicycling" films, which was the practice of one exhibitor sub-renting a film to a competitor outside an exchange's knowledge and financial reach.<sup>72</sup> The GFC attempted to reel in such disorder by buying up or closing down every exchange in the U.S., in the process prompting some rival producers and exchange operators to pool together in defiance and create independent companies, many of which would evolve into major Hollywood studios. Beyond such collusive tactics, GFC introduced measures to standardize the marketplace, introducing service based on exhibitor location (like zoning), and improved pricing measures based on age of film and length. GFC service, however, did little to improve circulation quality of film, particularly in regions furthest away from the manufacturing plants in Chicago and New York. Failure to rationalize a proper networking arrangement and miscalculations regarding their clientele led to poor service. GFC salesmen, for example, subjectively graded exhibitors according to service they believed they could afford, rather than implementing a more systematic policy. Moreover, they often flooded markets with the same film, leaving exhibitors scrambling to differentiate programs from their competitors and often forced to seek out older films.<sup>73</sup> Poor rail service in the South only intensified these problems. Such service did not meet the security measures exhibitors expected through monopolization. Wells' re-mapping of the region helped alleviate many of these problems with the emergence of the feature film.

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<sup>71</sup> Michael J. Quinn, "Paramount and Early Feature Distribution, 1914-1921," *Film History*, 11, no. 1 (1999): 98-113.

<sup>72</sup> Max Alvarez, "The Origins of the Film Exchange," *Film History*, 17.no.4 (2005): 438.

<sup>73</sup> Michael J. Quinn, "Early Feature Distribution and the Development of the Motion Picture Industry" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1998), 67-84; *Variety*, 26 June 1914.

Two strategies defined circulation of feature films prior to the run-clearance zone established by the distribution arms of major Hollywood studios: the states-right's system and road-show attraction. Both allowed exhibitors to purchase films exclusively, and for a specific period of time, but both also suffered from problems stemming from a lack of centralization and buyer protection. Oftentimes, for example, exhibitors encroached on each other's territories under states' rights distribution. Producers also suffered as they sold distributors' films at a flat fee, instead of profiting from a percentage of rentals as they would later on. Paramount would overcome these issues, pioneering the run-clearance zone, and new ways of charging exhibitors with the establishment of the percentage distribution fee, where producer and distributor received a percentage of gross exhibitor rental. The studio instituted territorial protection, routing networks, differentiation of product, and price hierarchy for products based on population size of markets, utilizing models systematized by Klaw and Erlanger.<sup>74</sup> Wells' leadership of the SMA, which smoothed over logistical concerns in the territory and opened new markets for Klaw and Erlanger's service, laid the foundation for improved circulation of feature films in the South.

Wells' changes to the distribution network of films are just one of the features the showman implemented which brought about the maturation of market efficiency for the growth of commercial entertainments in the region. By shrinking geographic distances, routing entertainment circuits, and fostering social ties among his peers, he established a culture of innovation vital for amusement entrepreneurship in regional cities. Moreover, Wells' leadership in the territory increased the region's stature in national entertainment circles, helping it to acquire the recognition required for maximum development of New South industries.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 111-131; Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 69; Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 641-642; *Variety*, 26 June 1914.



## CHAPTER 4

### CONVERSION TO CINEMA

By 1910, Jake Wells Enterprises operated amusement parks and more than fifty theaters throughout the largest cities in the South, comprised of varying classes of entertainment, including legitimate, vaudeville, and popular priced circuits.<sup>1</sup> During the middle of the decade, paralleling a nationwide trend with the growth of the feature film, the showman transitioned the majority of his houses into motion picture-only venues. Wells' theater pricing options, architectural layouts, and alluring atmospheres designed to accommodate high-class amusements paved the way for the "picture palace's" emergence in the region—a signal that film had become the preeminent form of popular culture and applying a coup de grace to the dominance of live theater. Prior to this change, Wells' handling of film was complex and challenging. In addition to placing Wells' efforts into the context of forces affecting cultural entrepreneurs nationwide, this chapter will emphasize two regional particularities which stymied the showman's profit potential with the medium: race and elements of the "genteel."

The region's vigilant campaign to enforce Jim Crow festered in the new and affordable outlets of "cheap amusements," including the penny arcade, amusement park, and nickelodeon, shying the showman away from fully engaging with nickelodeons. Racial anxiety fueled vigorous regulations and waves of harassment against owners of such venues, and Wells, himself a victim of the hassle, refused to fully engage in the store-front boom. His renown as a cultural entrepreneur of first-rate offerings also swayed his decision, since an association with

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix A.

nickelodeons may have tarnished his status in other amusements. This reputation more than likely aided in his adoption of cinema when transitioning to the ever-popular small-time format and the intermixing of film with variety acts, but advocacy of the genteel and heightened awareness of cultural hierarchies also threatened to weaken profits. The vaude-film policy and the cinema's social and cultural impact during this turnover is one of the least understood periods in film history. The social makeup and class awareness of audiences, interchange between live acts and film, and the commercial viability and general popularity of motion pictures during this change are but a few areas currently under debate. To what degree the genteel influenced cinema during this period is also under review.<sup>2</sup> The pressures to conform to the tastes and values of the genteel may have been stronger for cultural entrepreneurs in urban locales within the region. Conflicting ideologies between the Old and New South clashed in an attempt to offset one another in the balance to preserve traditional social and cultural order while welcoming cosmopolitanism and new experiences of consumerism. Wells' negotiation of the small-time transition reveals the difficulties in exploiting film at the intersection of "high" and "popular" culture. Although vaudeville did not meet the full requirements of "high brow" culture, it possessed greater cultural currency than motion pictures and attracted a wide variety of

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<sup>2</sup> Some works exploring the impression of the genteel on American silent-era film exhibition and moviegoing referenced for this chapter include: Lary May's *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Sumiko Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: the Silent Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1996); Paul S. Moore, *Now Playing: Early Moviegoing and the Regulation of Fun* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008); Michael Aronson, *Nickelodeon City: Pittsburgh at the Movies, 1905-1929* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008); Sumiko Higashi, "Dialogue: Manhattan's Nickelodeons," *Cinema Journal* 34, no.3 (Spring 1995): 72-74; Rob King, "Made for the Masses with an Appeal to the Classes: The Triangle Film Corporation and the Failure of Highbrow Film Culture," *Cinema Journal* 44, no.2 (Winter 2005): 3-33.

spectators. These theaters assumed a symbolic significance which helped define the cultural status of the region and aided in the commercial development of the downtown retail district.

Wells' relationship to moving pictures was largely contingent on the medium's reputation within the region, which was generally tied to its place of exhibition through the social makeup of its patrons, commercial significance to the city, physical allure of the building, and symbolic status within the area. Many New South business and community leaders in urban areas envisioned large, ornate theaters as sites of cultural sophistication to augment the region's rapid industrial and economic development. The properties were symbolic of cultural improvement and cultivation; an image builder to shed the bumpkin-like representations and "backwardness" of the region. John Kyle Thomas' study of the growth of commercial entertainments in Knoxville, for example, discovers a city where the public compelled places of public amusements to not only appear, but to function like legitimate theaters.<sup>3</sup>

Wells, of course, was one of the region's savvy entrepreneurs who capitalized upon this desire by providing inexpensive amusements and cheaper imitations of what southern communities demanded through the establishment of polite vaudeville and high-classed popular theater. In the South, this accord between producer and consumer was more complex than the social class explanation where an emerging middle class with greater spending power and more leisure time necessitated new sites of popular and more affordable amusements aspiring to replicate the comfort and quality of entertainment experienced by the elite. This regional archetype envisioned a mixing of high culture and popular arts, in which genteel traditions rooted in historic notions of southern femininity, romanticism associated with chivalry and

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<sup>3</sup> John Kyle Thomas, "Of Paramount Importance;" this thesis is also supported in Thomas' "The Cultural Reconstruction of an Appalachian City: Knoxville, Tennessee and the Coming of the Movies," *Journal of East Tennessee History* 65 (1993): 34-52.

honor, and the region's historic obsession to replicate the life of landed gentry, guarded these spaces at an exalted level. Distinctive aspects of refinement in tastes and manners through the widespread cultural memory of the "Old South" intensified, as outlined by Lawrence Levine, the segmentation and stratification associated with the growth of a cultural hierarchy in public amusements prior to the birth of cinema.<sup>4</sup> Therefore one can consider regional ideology empowering class difference, or certain civilities and perceptions in these spaces to function as tools of social control. Not only did these spaces demarcate the difference between enriching or harmful entertainment, but they served to strengthen boundaries within society structured to restore or maintain traditional power structures, whether threatened by new racial, gender, class, or ethnic-based challenges materialized via modernity. New technologies which sprang from the birth of "cheap amusements," like the nickelodeon, amusement park, or penny arcade, were typically established outside of the sanctioned space of the decorated theater, raising the ire of cultural authorities and challenging Wells' adoption of the medium of film.

Unlike most of his peers who went on to operate a string of motion picture theaters, Wells did not get his start in, nor did he speculate in, the nickelodeon boom. There is circumstantial evidence linking Wells to ownership of store front property in Richmond, where he may have leased space to enterprising exhibitors, but there is in no evidence involving him in any capacity in their day-to-day operations.<sup>5</sup> The discourse surrounding film's first permanent venues as tawdry, catering to ethnic patrons and the "masses," and hosting possible dangers to the mind and body, were fair warning to dissuade Wells from large-scale investment. Any advance in the field would have possibly hindered his business activity in the live theater.

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<sup>4</sup> Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 169-242.

<sup>5</sup> Richmond's first nickelodeon operator, Amanda Thorpe, leased the building space for the Dixie Theater from Wells, after a failed attempt to run a store-front theater in Norfolk. Whether the site was outfitted for exhibition prior to her management, and how long Wells owned the space is unknown. For more information on Thorpe see: Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, 24-27; *RNL*, 13, 23 January, 17 May 1909.

Having built a reputation as "the Napoleon of the Southern theatrical field" and the "apostle of soap and water" in his business, the showman branded his playhouse circuits based on this notoriety and his personal taste in amusements.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the 1900s, for example, a picture of Wells graced the front page of his circuit's programs, declaring under his "absolute direction" that he promised "the best obtainable high class and popular priced attractions."<sup>7</sup> The nickel show environment, with its "unchecked" content and rapid expansion—which for many southerners was more reminiscent of a saloon and not a playhouse—further alarmed officials and reform groups in the region. Many communities imposed strict regulation and oversight over the "lowbrow" and popular venues, from which the showman wished to disassociate himself to maintain the reputation of Jake Wells Enterprises.

From one locality to the next, leaders harassed the new motion picture exhibitors, overly taxed their ventures, and enacted stringent laws intended to preserve public safety and order, particularly in Richmond where Wells owned a home and offices from which he directed the majority of his media holdings. In 1907, the "picture queen" Amanda Thorpe, a 45-year old widow from Ohio who may have sought Wells' help in acquiring the space, operated Richmond's first nickelodeon the Dixie Theater.<sup>8</sup> By 1909, nearly twenty such venues were operating. The majority of the store-front theaters' initial entrepreneurs in the city were local saloon owners who, because of increasing taxes on liquor, re-outfitted their businesses with the purchase of cheap chairs, a few inexpensive decorations, and a projector.<sup>9</sup> In May 1908, in part to choke the nickelodeon boom, the city council passed several laws aimed at projectionists. One law required operators to hold a license to work the machine, and they were forced to take an oral exam

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<sup>6</sup> "Jake Wells was asked to Resign," *RNL* 02 February 1902; *RNL*, 19 December 1911.

<sup>7</sup> *Wells' Bijou Program*, Evansville, Indiana (1906-1907), Chattanooga, Tennessee (1907-1908), author's private collection.

<sup>8</sup> *RNL*, 9 January 1909.

<sup>9</sup> *RNL*, 2 May 1908.

proving their knowledge over the equipment. Another ordinance forbid projectionists to be drunk on the job.<sup>10</sup> Concerns over public safety demanded the handling of highly flammable film stock be regulated. Surprisingly, however, there was little fuss over the content of films during this period.<sup>11</sup> Authorities were satisfied with personal reviews of the proprietors—who were kept under close surveillance by many different groups in society—and the knowledge that every theater in the city attained films from Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), censored by the newly formed National Board of Review in accordance to concerns of New York City officials.<sup>12</sup> In February 1909, a reporter for the city’s *News Leader* embarked on an investigation to uncover if any of the then 18 venues exhibiting film showed “indecent pictures and [or] immoral variety acts, and to attract the attention of the public and the police to these places.”<sup>13</sup> Working for one of the more progressive papers in the area, the reporter was likely a proponent of cinema, and he reported that he failed to uncover the existence of any infractions. In addition to MPPC oversight, the reporter praised exhibitor knowledge of the city’s “condition” and accountability to “public sentiment.”<sup>14</sup> One concern he did address, however, was the circumstance surrounding the all-black venues, which he believed lacked sufficient oversight and posed certain dangers. Indeed, his fears reveal the white community’s distress over the combination of race and cheap amusements on the structure of segregation and white power imposed in the city.

In 1910, when asked by a reporter if he would secure reels of the controversial “fight of the century,” in which the African-American boxing champion Jack Johnson defeated the “great

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<sup>10</sup> *RNL*, 27 May 1908.

<sup>11</sup> In fact, from 1907-1913, only two films were targeted and stopped from exhibition for immoral, incendiary, or suggestive picture content: the Johnson-Jeffries fight (1910) and *The Vampire* (1913). The latter film’s suggestive dance scene raised the eyebrows of some religious leaders who pressured the Mayor to stop its showing.

<sup>12</sup> *RNL*, 3 May 1909.

<sup>13</sup> *RNL*, 22 February 1909.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

white hope” James Jeffries, Wells simply replied, “I’m not in the picture business.”<sup>15</sup> Many local and state censorship boards throughout the nation prevented exhibition of the film for fear its showing would spark race riots, which erupted in many communities following the bout.<sup>16</sup> In the South, the picture did not circulate at all.<sup>17</sup> Heightened racial tension and the pervasive fear of racial disorder in the region undoubtedly prompted the film’s censorship. Moreover, the discourse of racial superiority generated before the bout and the signification of the contenders as embodying the essence of whiteness and blackness was a harrowing ideological defeat for white Southerners. From a business standpoint, exhibitors risked potential white backlash in attempting to profit from the film. Wells’ statement, though not identifying the racial significance of the picture directly, can be understood as an implied danger jeopardizing all white showpersons when managing cheap amusements, particularly those of his stature.

Race, perhaps more so than social class, determined the stature and perception levels attributed to the initial progression of motion pictures and its exhibitors through outlets of cheap amusement in the region. In Richmond, these sites offered affordable entertainment to even the city's poorest black residents, conceding a level playing field with poorer whites in the realm of public leisure. This balance presented a modern battleground for the community upon which to aggressively reinforce and negotiate economic privileges of whiteness critical to sustaining key elements of the region's social patterns of Jim Crow. These spaces provided a new environment which perpetuated a threat to white power structures where direct human interaction and dominant economic interests combined to blur the inequalities between rich and poor whites. The

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<sup>15</sup> *RD*, 07 July 1907.

<sup>16</sup> Dan Streible, *Fight Pictures: A History of Boxing and Early Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 195-266.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

threat potentially made class interests superior to racial ones in market relations and public freedoms, therefore endangering the foundation of segregation and white power.<sup>18</sup>

Literature exploring the origins and evolution of Jim Crow from Reconstruction through the Civil Rights movement reveal a systematic and organized social construction of racism established through a myriad of legal statutes (at both the local and state level), social practices, and bureaucratic or police power. Cultural historians and film scholars continue to unearth how places of commercial entertainment were integral to the "racing of space" where strict racial boundaries were designed to benefit whites over blacks and prevent their social and physical intermingling.<sup>19</sup> This instrumental development of racial exclusion is understood as a "modern" and rational event supported through advances in technology, science, and government to combat any new potentialities triggered by the unfolding of modernity in the region. Sites of public amusements near the turn-of-the-twentieth century, themselves a product of modernity, threatened to disrupt traditional patterns of leisure and practices of social politics. As Kathy Piess and Roy Rosenzweig have shown, working-class customers in the Northeast used these spaces to actualize new cultural and physical domains to foster independent identities and express new realizations of power as public citizens.<sup>20</sup> Southern whites feared similar expressions of modernity by African Americans, and intensively mapped out social and economic spheres

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<sup>18</sup>Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> For specific discussion relating to cinema see, Robert Allen, "Relocating American Film History," 71-72; Chris McKenna, "Early Movie-Going in a Tri-racial Community: Lumberton, North Carolina, 1896-1940," in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, eds. Melvyn Stokes, Robert Allen, and Richard Maltby (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008); Waller, *Main Street Amusements*; Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

<sup>20</sup>Kathy Piess, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in the Turn-of-the-century- New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers & Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), for examples in the South see, Georgina Hickey, *Hope and Danger in the New South City: Working-Class Women and Urban Development in Atlanta, 1890-1940* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003).



which structured the social experience between blacks and whites in order to maintain traditional racial order. Segregation in sites of commercial entertainment was designed, when possible, to physically separate the races for a variety of protections, including safeguarding perceived virtues of white womanhood, defining white consumer privileges, and preserving white political authority. But as Robert Allen speculates, scholars have only scratched the surface of the levels of complexity regarding race, space, and place in these sites. He argues that deeper forces surrounding issues of class, gender, and spectatorship are imbedded in the process of racial exclusion.<sup>21</sup>

Migratory patterns and the large population of African Americans in the region's largest urban areas fueled racial anxiety in many of the localities where Wells operated. Many Southern cities possessed the highest density of blacks comparatively in the nation. By 1920, for example, in Richmond, Memphis, Atlanta, and Birmingham, blacks comprised over thirty percent of the total population. Tracing the social origins of Nashville during this time period, historian Louis Kyriakoudes sees the city as representative of the region's largest urban areas with its intense and often irregular patterns of migration amongst Southerners, especially between women and African Americans who constituted the majority of transients. Many of them sought employment, worked seasonal jobs, or were attracted to the city's economic potential as opposed to rural life, creating a constant inflow and outflow of people. Moreover, as commercial centers, industrial hubs, and beacons of consumption and modernity, the cities also tempted visitors wishing to escape certain social or cultural restrictions, or those with wanderlust.<sup>22</sup> The constant current of workers and visitors perpetually threatened racial customs and laws specific to each

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<sup>21</sup> Allen, "Relocating American Film History," 72-73.

<sup>22</sup> Louis Kyriakoudes, *The Social Origins of the Urban South: Race, Gender, and Migration in Nashville and Middle Tennessee, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

urban center in time and place with their different past experiences or naiveté. Their patronizing of new, technologically driven and affordable leisure outlets, which many cultural authorities perceived existed outside of traditional society and their control, emerged as battlegrounds to reinforce white supremacy. These sites were of particular concern because the majority of the spaces lacked strict racial boundaries separating blacks and whites, like those found in the large playhouses catering to higher-classed entertainment. Most of Wells' houses in all classes of live theater were constructed with balconies, which, in addition to the installation of a separate entrance servicing blacks from the alley way or side street and isolated stairwell to access the "crow's nest," provided the physical conditions necessary to accommodate a segregated, orderly, space for white entitlement. But pinpointing which white theaters in the region admitted blacks is a historiographic challenge, due to varying legislation and local ordinances, and the fact that almost all amusement sites were deemed private spaces, thus giving owners the power to cull their patronage. Moreover, many entrepreneurs, particularly of cheap popular amusements, lacked the capital or space to erect a separate gallery to satisfy standards for segregation.<sup>23</sup>

Local southern authorities typically harassed or even abolished cheap amusements catering to blacks to reinforce the region's social and economic benefits privileging whites. In 1906, prior to the construction of the city's first nickelodeon, Wells was exposed to local restraint when he opened one of Richmond's two competing penny arcades located on Broad Street named "Wonderland." Outfitted with a string of Vitascope machines, gum and candy dispensers, horoscope readers, and phonograph players, the coin-in-slot venture indirectly experienced city leaders' increasing suspicion and oversight of cheap amusements. Despite efforts to restore the

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<sup>23</sup> Charlene Regester, "From the Buzzard's Roost: Black Moviegoing in Durham and Other North Carolina Cities During the Early Period of American Cinema," *Film History* 17, no. 1, 113-124; Allen, "Relocating American Film History," 70-75.

arcade's reputation to that of pre-1900 parlors which attracted more "respectable" clientele and enacted greater supervision over customers, authorities targeted the venues within weeks of opening. Mayor McCarthy, under powers granted the office in the 1890s which allowed for censorship of amusements deemed a threat to public morals or safety, closed Wells' competitor Frank Ferrandini's "Penny Arcade" for "objectionable" motion pictures consisting "of a nature tending to corrupt the morals of the youth."<sup>24</sup> Ferrandini denied the charges, and the matter was taken up within days by Justice Crutchfield of the police court. Testimony from officers who escorted the mayor, Ferrandini's employees, and the accused exonerated the arcade's owner from the charges. Police officer Yarbrough, for example, who was one of several authorities to accompany McCarthy during the inspection, testified that the pictures found on "cigar boxes and souvenir postal cards" within the store were more objectionable than the moving pictures.<sup>25</sup> Crutchfield commissioned a party, which included himself, the Chief of the Fire Department, and a church deacon, to investigate the arcade and found Ferrandini innocent of the mayor's charges. Under cross examination, McCarthy admitted "what riled him more than the pictures was the mob of negroes that thronged the place at the time of the visit."<sup>26</sup> The "Penny Arcade" catered to African Americans, and was located at 2nd and Broad Street, which lay on the periphery of the city's largest black neighborhood, Jackson Ward.

Wells' arcade, which drew white patrons, escaped similar charges over immoral content, probably aided by his reputation in entertainment circles. The mayor, however, embarrassed after drawing contempt charges during the trial and determined to dispose of the black establishment,

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<sup>24</sup> *RNL*, 20 January 1906. Ferrandini, a first generation Italian, co-owned a marble and plaster sculpting business which serviced many of the leading playhouses in the city. In 1920, he erected Richmond's National Theater after procuring First National exhibition rights from Wells. Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, 47.

<sup>25</sup> "Mayor Isn't Upheld Yet," *RNL*, 24 January 1906. Motion pictures included some travel scenes, scenes from John D. Rockefeller's bible class, and actualities which showed some couples kissing.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

used underhanded tactics to close Ferrandini down, which damaged Wells in the process. Later in the year, in addition to a special \$10 tax levied by the General Assembly on all coin-in-the-slot machines in the state, Richmond authorities, led by McCarthy, subsequently added an additional \$10 vendor's license for operation of individual machines in the city, raising fees almost four times higher than the prior \$3 commission. "We have like arcades in many southern cities," Wells vented to a Richmond *News Leader* reporter, "but this is the first time we were ever held up to pay that exorbitant tax. It is an outrage, but what is the use to fight. I don't believe in that sort of thing in cases of this kind."<sup>27</sup> The additional tax sapped the profits out of the potentially lucrative venture, causing both arcades to close their doors. Wells was doubly penalized, since just months before he outfitted the Bijou with candy dispensers placed on the back of the seats.<sup>28</sup>

McCarthy never specifically explained his fears, but one can safely assume his prejudice stemmed from the increasing spatial mobility and visibility of blacks, were afforded in new commercial entertainments. Wells was indirectly affected by Ferrandini's travails, and was witness to attacks on other forms of cheap amusements in the city. The concern surrounding the "Penny Arcade" may have been the crowding of patrons in front of the business, which lay on the city's main commercial thoroughfare. For many Southern whites, the prospect of a group of African Americans assembled in front of a "foreign" venue of modern culture sparked fears of racial disorder and placed suspicion over authorities' enforcement of public segregation. The incident can also be understood as white supremacy's attempt to make blackness invisible in Southern society. Similar to the effect of segregated balconies and separate entryways in motion-picture theaters, as Allen argues, dispersing black amusement seekers milling about the street eliminated any scopic balance between the races, removing blacks from white field of

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<sup>27</sup> *RNL*, 9 December 1906.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

vision and visual experience.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, it is also symbolic of Jim Crow's racial exclusion embedded in market relations, as blacks did not possess the same status or value as whites in relations of commodity exchange and consumption.

Similar concerns surrounded the emergence of the amusement park in Richmond. Wells avoided any direct penalties operating the Idlewood amusement park, one of five he owned throughout the region, as blacks were refused admission.<sup>30</sup> The spatial freedoms within the park's boundaries and close physical contact many of the rides and activities favored prevented racial integration in virtually all southern "mechanical wonderlands." In April 1906, a group of African American investors opened the "People's Pleasure Park," an all-black amusement venture erected at the far east end of the Richmond city trolley line at Fair Oaks Station in Henrico County. Legal battles prompted by nearby white residents and led by local authorities to close the park ensued for two years. Depositions from the trial revealed white fears stemming from the distress of "large black mobs" flooding the area, the inability to secure seats on outgoing trains, and the "incessant" "hurrahing and whoops" of pleasure seekers in the park.<sup>31</sup> The central and most decisive factor in this case was the all-African-American investment team which threatened "right of exclusion" power embodied in property ownership, as the property the group purchased was protected by a covenant preventing black individuals from ownership.<sup>32</sup> In *People's Pleasure Park Co., Inc. v. Rohleder*, the Supreme Court of Virginia State ruled that racial identity could not be specifically defined in the legal definitions of a corporation therefore

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<sup>29</sup> Allen, "Relocating American Film History," 74.

<sup>30</sup> In the 1900s, Wells operated Ponce de Leon Park in Atlanta, Ocean View Resort in Norfolk, and two parks in Birmingham and Nashville.

<sup>31</sup> Richard R. W. Brooks, "Incorporating Race," *Columbia Law Review* 106, no.8 (December 2006): 2024-2071.

<sup>32</sup> Cynthia I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* no. 106 (June 1993): 1707-1790.

deeming the amusement park ownership raceless.<sup>33</sup> Fundamental legal and economic concerns surrounding white investment guided the Court's decision in lieu of reinforcing segregation de jure. The opinion potentially intensified racial anxieties over blacks and spaces of amusement within the state, as African American entrepreneurs could pool together to skirt specific property laws enforcing racial exclusion. As will be detailed in a later chapter, these fears were realized in Richmond, as black entertainment ventures caused local authorities to pass local ordinances preserving segregated racial zoning.

The arrival of the nickelodeon, like the penny arcade, flaunted the consumer exclusion awarded whites through segregation. The 1909 investigative report into the content of motion pictures at five and ten cent theaters launched by the *News Leader* set off a chain of high profile attacks on nickelodeons servicing African American patrons, as the paper claimed the Dixie and Pekin theaters exhibited "entertainment more elaborate than the entertainment provided at any other five cent picture shows where the black man is not admitted."<sup>34</sup> The headline boldly printed on the front page-- "NEGROES ARE GETTING MOST FOR THE PRICE"-- evoked panic over white consumer benefits as locals wrote to the editor attempting to defend the paltry conditions of their theaters.<sup>35</sup> Within the year, City Building Inspector Henry Beck, a vigilant and active bureaucrat, shut the two houses down due to "unsafe conditions."<sup>36</sup> He cited that he stages blocked rear exits and were erected without proper permits, and "sanitary conditions" were

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<sup>33</sup> Brooks, "Incorporating Race"; *People's Pleasure Park Co. v. Rohleder*, 61 S.E. 794 (Va. 1908). Brooks argues the Courts decision hinged on two general principles: one, it wished to uphold the legal foundations of civil rights in the case, since racializing the corporation may have undermined equalities in all contractual and property rights owned by African Americans; and two, they hoped to not stifle the credit market, since they feared creditors and lenders would grow more cautious in lending if corporations were marked by inequalities or disabilities through race, ethnicity, etc.

<sup>34</sup> "Picture Theaters Run to Scarlet," *RNL* 28 February 1909.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*; "The Five and Ten-Cent Theatres," *RNL*, 25 February 1909.

<sup>36</sup> *RNL*, 22 May 1908.

deemed inadequate, despite the *Newsleader's* report acknowledging the Dixie as "clean, well kept and [where] good order is enforced."<sup>37</sup>

The tense racial climate surrounding new amusements, particularly by the time of the nickelodeon boom, potentially dissuaded Wells from investing in the outlet. But this did not sanction a universal rejection of motion pictures by the showman. In fact, he enthusiastically embraced the medium, attempting to profit from its novelty, promoting film as a product of cultural uplift and refinement, and resorting to movies in times of difficulty as a feature product in live theater. Wells' early embrace of cinema mimicked many profit-seeking entrepreneurs espousing positive rhetoric to increase film's overall popularity. In 1906, for example, Wells purchased the territorial rights of the Hale's World Tour for the entire South, introducing the region to some of the 500 mocked-up Pullman carriages which treated paying customers to a simulated train ride via projected travel scenes, sound effects, and mechanical swaying of the car. The number of trains Wells purchased is not known, but at least two operated in Richmond: one was stationed in an empty lot beside the Bijou, and the other was installed at the Idlewood Amusement Park. The rides were for whites only and did not raise the ire of local authorities on account of race. In the summer of 1906, however, Henrico County authorities arrested, tried, convicted, and fined Wells \$2 for violation of the Sabbath Day law, an event to be discussed in detail in a later chapter. Losing money in the venture, Wells established a precedent challenging the city's blue laws, which he found outdated, too strict, and harmful to the business climate of the city. Waiting until late afternoon so as to not interfere with church activities, and even

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<sup>37</sup> "Picture Theaters Run to Scarlet," *RNL*, 28 February 1909; Thorpe, who managed the Dixie, was suspiciously dragged into several high profile events including the city's "motion picture queen trial." She was sued for \$10,000 by Mrs. Sadie L. Skeggs for "alienating the affections" of J. Franklin Skeggs, a popular silver engraver in the community. Charges were mysteriously dropped weeks against Thorpe's wishes that denied any affair and wished to clear her name in court. Shortly thereafter city authorities harassed for stocking highly flammable film in the basement of the Dixie and accused her of running an unauthorized exchange center, charges she again vigorously denied. *RNL*, 27, 28 March 1911.

banning the sale of alcohol, he operated what he considered “harmless” amusements, including the Circle Swing, Mystic Shute, Carousel (he even turned off the music), and display of motion pictures—including the Hale’s World Tours.<sup>38</sup> During the criminal case, Wells addressed the educational and uplifting benefits of film as his central defense. Referring to the travel films displayed in the Hale’s cars Wells testified, “. . .it wouldn’t be a bad idea if all of the schools in the State instructed their pupils from these scenes. . .there is only about one percent of the people who will ever travel through the country that is graphically pictured by these slides.”<sup>39</sup>

Like the majority of popular priced and vaudeville theaters at the time, motion pictures served as a staple product in the repertoire of Wells' entertainment venues. Before the nickelodeon boom—which typically emerged in 1907-8 in the South, slightly later than in other regions—his theaters were the primary exhibition sites of film for many urban Southerners. Prior to the early 1910s, the level of utilization he embraced on a daily basis beyond motion picture's tendency to begin programs or serve as "chasers" cuing patrons to a show's end is difficult to discern. Like many of his peers, Wells attempted to exploit the medium as one of visual novelty, and because of the region's difficulty in supporting live theatrical circuits, he may have done so out of necessity. This was most evident in the weeks introducing and concluding the summer months, a season which forced many entrepreneurs to close their doors because of the heat which paralyzed an already scant distribution of shows. In June of 1906, for example, he purchased Nicholas Power’s “Cameragraph,” one of the most reputable machines on the market, to entertain patrons at his string of outdoor theaters servicing the amusement parks he owned in

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<sup>38</sup> *RNL*, 23 July 1906.

<sup>39</sup> *RNL*, 25, 30 July 1906, 6 April, 15 June 1907. *Virginia Reports: Reports of Cases in the Supreme Court of Appeals in Virginia*, Vol. CVII, June 1, 1907-March 1, 1908 (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperd, 1908), *Wells v. Commonwealth*, 107 Va. 834. 834-843.



Atlanta, Richmond, Norfolk, Birmingham, and Nashville.<sup>40</sup> In June of 1908, Wells outfitted the Bijou in Atlanta, and other indoor theaters throughout the region, with the novel sound film system "Cameraphone" to fill the off-season and profit from the nickelodeon craze. Generating over 100,000 admissions during the summer, Wells purchased a competing small-time house, the Pastime Theater, in September of that year to provide the machine a temporary home and squeeze as much money out of it while the Bijou resumed its live season.<sup>41</sup> But even unreliable conditions during the winter season affecting all classes of theater sometimes pushed Wells to lean on cinema. In 1908, for example, the "popular-priced" booking agency Stair and Havelin, who were minority shareholders in and primary suppliers of one arm of Wells' circuit, were forced to supplement packaged programs of melodramas and musical comedy with motion pictures because of struggling business in the region.<sup>42</sup>

In October 1908, Wells transformed Richmond's Colonial Theater into the first 10-cent vaude-film theater of a thousand seats or more in the city, emulating the conversions of William Fox, Siegmund Lubin, and Marcus Loew's high-class theaters to a format intermixing film and live variety acts.<sup>43</sup> This "small-time" model set the standard for urban motion picture exhibition throughout much of the 1910s, and historians typically cite its establishment as central to the widespread growth in popularity of motion pictures during the demise of large nickelodeons. The more spacious and fancily decorated theaters drew patrons from the store-front venues because they provided greater comfort, service, and higher quality entertainment at affordable prices. The policy, as it is also commonly acknowledged, attracted clientele away from higher-classed

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<sup>40</sup> *RNL*, 28 June 1906; *RD* 30 June 1906.

<sup>41</sup> *AC*, 14 June, 07 September 1908.

<sup>42</sup> *NYDM*, 25 July 1908; *Variety*, 13 June 1908.

<sup>43</sup> "Song and Picture Show," *RNL*, 19 October 1908.

theaters who would not have ventured into a nickelodeon to watch film, thus increasing the medium's popularity.

From 1908 to 1910, the local press lauded the Colonial as the “most profitable amusement venture” ever launched in Richmond. The numbers provided by Wells backed their assertion: during the two year period the house averaged 67,000 paid admissions per month, representing 2,700 patrons a day.<sup>44</sup> Other than the 600-seat Lubin Theater, operated by Samuel Galeski, Wells' chief small-time competitor in the city, “not one of the picture shows downtown seem[ed] to be making money for the owner,” according to a *News Leader* reporter.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the impressive attendance figures provided by the Colonial in Richmond, the vaude-film model was not consistently profitable for Wells in most southern cities. This is surprising, since most histories of the small-time transition posit the hybrid space between a nickelodeon and big-time vaudeville as a veritable gold mine for many entrepreneurs. The legend of innovators like Loew and Lubin, who moved into national-scale production and distribution of film, dominate historical remembrances of such pioneers. They tend to perpetuate the assumption, however, that these exhibitors were successful because they predicted the robust future of motion-pictures and this anticipation allowed them to trump their peers. Indeed, the growth of the feature film would lead to the conversion of the majority of small-time venues into the picture palaces which dominated first-run exhibition and profits of the classical Hollywood period, and for some emphasizing film was a lucrative strategy in the conversion. But new research is revealing that many vaude-film theaters failed at an alarming rate when transitioning

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<sup>44</sup> “Second Anniversary of Colonial Theatre,” *RNL*, 26 March 1910; “Think Wells is Bluffing,” *RNL*, 9 April 1910.

<sup>45</sup> *RNL*, 22 February 1909.

to a small-time format, and for reasons not attributed to some sagacity pertaining to the future of motion pictures.

Paul Moore's recent study of early exhibition and moviegoing in Toronto, for example, traces the meteoric rise of the Griffin Amusement Company, an enterprise launched in 1906 by former circus agent John Griffin who dominated nickelodeon-era motion picture exhibition in the city. Between 1910 and 1911, Griffin transitioned to the small-time format, inaugurating one of the largest circuits in North America through the leasing of more than 150 theaters stretching across Canada. By 1913, however, his venture quickly dissolved and he retreated to operating fewer than twenty venues scattered throughout the outskirts of northern Ontario. Questions remain about the forces responsible for his abrupt failure. Detailed accounts of the company's business dealings do not survive, but Moore suggests it may have been a combination of several factors, including a depleting film supply in the face of increasing demand by exhibitors, or that his leasing of older theaters in commercial districts left him vulnerable to entrepreneurs willing to profit from new construction within neighborhoods. But it was the greater expansion into live entertainment and higher wages of variety acts that Moore believes doomed Griffin from the start, intimating that cheap vaudeville ruined the profitability of the circuit as he was unable to cover the overhead of leasing the larger theaters.<sup>46</sup> Moore contends Griffin had a "tendency to trust in traditional rather than innovative forms of business management, which had a compound effect in providing traditional rather than innovative forms of moviegoing."<sup>47</sup> Moore is more than likely correct in his assessment of the forces leading to Griffin's inability to maintain a successful chain of profitable theaters, but to imply he lacked foresight into the profitability of motion pictures and future of entertainment may boost the idea that he lacked entrepreneurial

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<sup>46</sup> Moore, *Now Playing*, 84-92.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

insight. This understanding is a legacy of the few trade journals and local newspapers which offer glimpses into the economics of exhibition in lieu of detailed business records. The trade press enthusiastically engaged in a rhetorical campaign to propel motion pictures into a higher class of amusements. In the early 1910s, *The Moving Picture World's* editor W. Stephen Bush, in particular, worked tirelessly to improve the industry's image and chronically instructed exhibitors to defend against practices he believed prevented cinema's progression, including the mixing of film with vaudeville, inclusion of advertising with daily programs, and producer-conducted bookings.<sup>48</sup>

Varying environments, social concerns, and cultural demands surely challenged each entrepreneur in unique ways during the small-time transition, and for some the exhibition of film may have given them an advantage over their competitors. But Wells (and Griffin presumably) was forced to lean on vaudeville. For both showmen, regionalism undoubtedly served as a detriment to innovation. Like the South, the far reaches of Canada certainly presented geographic challenges to the exhibition of film. Both territories were near the bottom in the pecking order of film exchanges, as the distribution of the most recent films to areas with smaller markets did not justify the costs of quick and mass circulation. Neither could possibly charge the prices some larger markets charged, which hindered them in their ability to regularly exhibit the best and most recent productions. For Wells, the failure to consistently exhibit the same pictures concurrently, or close to their initial distribution, weakened the cultural currency attributed to film in the region. Innovation requires competent entrepreneurs with relevant technology, financial support, and a recognized need.<sup>49</sup> The failure to secure the best attractions stifled

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<sup>48</sup> Richard L. Stromgren, "The Moving Picture World of W. Stephen Bush," *Film History* 2 (1988):13-22.

<sup>49</sup> Luecke and Katz, *Managing Creativity and Innovation*, 96.

profitable demand. Despite numerous attempts at marketing film, first-class quality vaudeville paid the bills during the vaude-film transition.

The overemphasis that vaudeville stymied the growth of film for a brief period or was the bane of small-time establishments is subject to individual businesses and the communities they served. Wells' business records show the quality of variety acts was perhaps the most important factor to his vaude-film success. In 1912, Eugene Koneke, Vice President and Secretary of the WWV, Wells, Wilmer, and Vincent, detailed the company's operating procedure to Nathan Appell, a manager combination of two large WWV theaters in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, the Majestic and Colonial. In a letter responding to the profit potential of mixed-arts theaters in small cities at the time, he writes "You know my theory of these towns is to try and get the rent out of the combination houses and no more; I believe the big profit is in the vaudeville houses. I believe we would be better off in Harrisonburg not to try to play pictures or little old "Jim Crow" attractions in the Majestic."<sup>50</sup> In March 1914, despite the accelerated circulation of feature films throughout the nation, Walter Vincent echoed his colleague's statement in a reply to Appell concerning his inability to garner healthy profits regularly. He wrote, "The combination houses are certainly doing no business. The picture shows are having a pretty hard sledding right now and the vaudeville is flourishing. What then, is the answer? Is it not that every theatre owner should play up to the vaudeville and strong while it is flourishing and get the money?"<sup>51</sup> The profits generated by WWV's only two class "A" theaters, the Academy (Norfolk) and Colonial (Richmond) underscored this logic; their class "B" and "C" houses, which were outfitted as combination or cheap stock with a greater emphasis on motion pictures, struggled to break

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<sup>50</sup> Eugene Koneke to Nathan Appell, 15 October 1913, Nathan Appell Papers, Box 54, Folder 8, Harvard Theater Collection, Harvard Depository, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>51</sup> Walter Vincent to Nathan Appell 14 March 1914, Nathan Appell Papers, Box 54, Folder 9, Harvard Theater Collection, Harvard Depository, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

even.<sup>52</sup> As a result, Wells' faithfulness to film as the centerpiece entertainment in his combination houses was constantly in flux. Prior to his full-fledged adoption of the feature film in 1915, most attempts by Wells to outfit his theaters to motion-picture only generally failed from a financial perspective. In 1913, for example, when the WWV circuit struggled to find quality vaudeville acts during the Thanksgiving holiday, they pondered closing the doors rather than "resorting to motion pictures" only.<sup>53</sup> Wells, like other managers, struggled with the transition to feature films, but yet made this change anyway. As during the rest of his career, Wells was always innovating and desiring to be on the cutting edge of the entertainment industry.

Indeed, historians are seeking to better understand the significance and popularity of motion pictures in the small-time conversion. The lively and enlightening exchange between film historians Ben Singer and Robert Allen over the audience composition and commercial viability of middle-class consumers of small-time theater in Manhattan within the pages of *Cinema Journal* best underscores the complexity of this transition. In addition to the social makeup, degree of class consciousness, and general acceptance of motion pictures by theatergoers at the time, some issues raised from the debate questioned the interplay between live acts and film in the venues, the popularity and desirability of film as entertainment in the transition, and the overall discursive construction and dissemination of motion pictures during this period. General conclusions which can be drawn from the debate is that defining social class is challenging, and small-time audiences in New York City, and more than likely the nation, were quite diverse. Moreover, Singer cautions against uniformly accepting that the small time transition appealed to

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<sup>52</sup> Walter Vincent to Nathan Appell, 22 September 1916, Box 54, Folder 17, Harvard Theater Collection, Harvard Depository, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>53</sup> Walter Vincent to Nathan Appell, 22 October 1913, Box 54, Folder 8, Harvard Theater Collection, Harvard Depository, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

everyone in the middle class though, referring to the widespread anti-vaudeville discourse written by social critics and progressives of the era circulating within many national periodicals, newspapers, and social surveys lambasting the mixing of variety acts and cinema.<sup>54</sup> He questions to what degree the "genteel" impacted small-time's development, and cites the real challenge is determining whether the criticism was a true reflection of the middle class versus how much it may have influenced audience perceptions.

Wells experienced a similar critique. In 1911, the Richmond YWCA conducted the "Know Your City Survey" in an effort to review all "recreational opportunities" for young women of the city. The two vaude-film theaters at the time, Wells' Colonial and Lubin's Theater, were both rated as "fairly good," acquiring the most positive feedback out of all options of public amusement.<sup>55</sup> "The ventilation is fair, the auditorium is never totally dark, and a very respectable class of people patronizes them," noted Mrs. Bingham. She found the vaudeville "rather cheap," but admitted the shows were "considered very good" to many people. She also praised the venues for their efforts to rent films from the "Trust," and cautioned readers to the fact every other exhibition outlet in the city drew from independent manufacturers which lacked any central uniformed censorship body.<sup>56</sup>

To better understand the vaudeville/film relationship during the vaude-film transition, historians must acknowledge the diversity which existed between the qualities of variety acts, circuits, and houses. Singer points out that critics often failed to differentiate 'cheap vaudeville' from 'small-time vaudeville,' in their antivaudeville discourse, even though replies were drawn

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<sup>54</sup> Ben Singer, "New York, Just like I Pictured it. . .," *Cinema Journal* 35, no.3 (Spring 1996): 118.

<sup>55</sup> "Amusements," *Know Your City Survey, 1911*, Y.W.C.A. Records, Box 35, Folder 20, Special Collections, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

from visits to nickelodeons and larger theaters.<sup>57</sup> The greater number of businesses needing acts to fill programs led to some watering down of live entertainment. But the distinctions designating one show or act from another are just as elusive as pinning down a definition of middle class for the era, and historians must allow greater scrutiny in analyzing such taxonomies. The caliber of acts and circuit tiers were multifaceted and superfluous, ranging in degree from cheap, small time, medium-small time, medium time, big-small time, little-big time, and big time.<sup>58</sup> Differences denoting each classification were always in flux and were determined by such factors as geography, price of the act, and year, to name a few.

In the early 1910s, small time generally played three to four times a day at five to ten cents per ticket. Wells' primary profit venues aspired to operate somewhere above this, between medium time to little-big time, similar to the Pantages or Sullivan and Consadine circuits in the Midwest and West. But Wells' offerings could fluctuate in quality from week to week depending on varying circumstances. The acts, booked primarily from the UBO agency, would perform twice a day with ticket prices starting at twenty-five to fifty cents. Wells would often sublease the Keith rights to aspiring entrepreneurs in cities where this policy failed, and he sometimes crafted deals where competing theaters functioned as try-out houses so the best performances could be culled and circulated within his Jake Wells Enterprises.<sup>59</sup> In cities like Atlanta, Richmond, and Norfolk where he owned multiple types of theaters, Wells attempted to refurbish

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<sup>57</sup> Singer, "New York, Just like I Pictured it . . .," 120.

<sup>58</sup> Allen Churchill, "The Heyday of Vaudeville," *Liberty, Then and Now* 1, no. 14 (Fall 1974), 22. John E. DiMeglio, *Vaudeville, U.S.A.* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973).

<sup>59</sup> "Princess Company Buys Three New Theaters," *The Nickelodeon*, 15 December 1910, 339. In December 1910, for example, Wells joined forces with Louisville's Princess Company which owned several moving picture theaters in the city. After a successful venture into vaudeville the previous summer, principal investors W. Allen Kinney and Irvin C. Simon wished to expand in the theatrical business, purchasing Wells' Bijou Theater in Evansville, Indiana, Lyric Theater in Chattanooga, and Orpheum in Birmingham. The showmen also entered agreement to exchange acts between the Wells' circuit and the newly formed Princess Theatrical Exchange, and secured the lease to Keith vaudeville in several southern cities, including Nashville and Chattanooga. The Kentucky businessmen provided Wells a "try out" house with the Hopkins Theater of Louisville.



or build a new theater each season, selling the lavishness and newness of space to accommodate the policy.

Lesser quality acts simply attracted fewer customers, forcing Wells to dip into the five and ten cent range, which did not generate enough profits after paying the massive overhead and lease of the palatial theaters. Kyle Thomas, for example, reveals an active community in Knoxville attempting to "culturally reconstruct" the city in the model of New South progress and Old South traditionalism. City leaders, boosters, and middle-class clubs wished to gain access to the same quality entertainment of New York City to show an openness to popular culture and use it to cultivate a sophisticated image of development, but bounded it to traditional values and beliefs when possible. In 1909, when Wells opened the Bijou to the city, he was forced to respond "to the entertainment demands" of the community. In addition to top-quality vaudeville, he promised "48,000 feet of new film each week" of the best quality, and "not any of the cheap arcade movies."<sup>60</sup> This "demand" was multidimensional, and thrust upon Wells in every market. It was both ideological and material. It was a highly visible way to showcase a progressive urban society on par with the rest of the nation. Inextricably linked to downtown commercial districts, taking in the same acts that graced stages in Chicago or New York was symbolic for these Knoxville residents of new modern experiences of consumption linked to upwardly mobile social identity, conspicuous display and consumption. Strong beliefs in the Old South and Lost Cause provided an emotional and psychological fastener to traditionalism, which added and intensified regional demands for genteel traditions.<sup>61</sup> The genteel pursuits in the region therefore could have

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<sup>60</sup> Kyle Thomas, "Of Paramount Importance," 24.

<sup>61</sup> James Charles Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 88-90.

qualities existing beyond the social politics of conspicuous consumption and displaying sophistication, to also exhibit a sense of regional pride or identity.

Between 1913 and 1914 the distribution of feature films four reels or longer and bundled into a standardized package grew popular throughout the nation, accelerating the transition of theaters to motion pictures only.<sup>62</sup> The growth of the feature pushed Wells to experiment more with making motion pictures the focal point in his vaude-film theaters, and initial attempts showed some profit. In May 1914, Vincent wrote to Appell confirming the potential, “Have never seen a picture policy in conjunction with vaudeville that drew any money except this feature film policy.”<sup>63</sup> A wholesale turnover, however, was hindered by several factors beyond the genteel as evidenced in WWV's records. For one, the corporation had several contractual agreements to honor with vaudeville booking agencies guaranteeing a specific amount of stage time. “I am hoping they will be a big thing and I do not know but what they will,” wrote Vincent to Appell. He continues, “In fact, I am inclined to believe they will, but how are we going to make up in other directions for the expense involved? We must give more than three acts and I do not see how we can give less than four.”<sup>64</sup> Not only was WWV concerned that the wasted acts may take away profits from the feature showings, but they were more fearful the broken agreements would lead to “indifferent vaudeville” in the future, barring any failure of the new policy.<sup>65</sup> Yet, calmer heads prevailed, and they understood their connections and long-time service should allow them to easily acquire quality acts if they switched back to their standard

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<sup>62</sup> Richard Abel, “The ‘backbone’ of the business: Scanning signs of US Film distribution in newspapers, 1911-1914,” in Frank Kessler and Nanna Verhoeff eds. *Networks of Entertainment: Early Film Distribution, 1895-1915*, 89.

<sup>63</sup> Walter Vincent to Nathan Appell, 18 August 1914, Nathan Appell Papers, Box 54, Folder 9, Harvard Theater Collection, Harvard Depository, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

operating procedures.<sup>66</sup> Similar concerns surrounded contractual agreements they had with the General Film Company, which for years serviced the WWV houses with the daily turnover. “We are loath to part with the regular film service for fear that we might not get it back again should we need it,” wrote Vincent, “whereas we know we can get the vaudeville any time we want it.”<sup>67</sup>

Customer taste levels and the irregular popularity of certain features also posed a problem in the transition. In September 1914, Vincent wrote to Appell about the unpredictable policy in the Southern theaters, “Some way or other, it has seemed to me that it is almost impossible to make feature pictures and vaudeville work out well together, each one doing better separately. However, before we learned that, and acting upon the best judgment of all of us, you know we signed up for the Paramount Pictures. Now, I believe they should be tried out for the four weeks we are obliged to keep them and the price should be made ten cents all over the house and that we should use an orchestra, a singer and frame up the stage very prettily.”<sup>68</sup> But even embellishing the theater did not guarantee customers. Appell informed WWV that in Harrisburg, despite offering the most luxurious space in the city, patrons were being lost to other theaters who exhibited features. Appell wrote, “... all we have to offer is a nice theatre...My observations show that small city picture fans prefer to go to a stuffy room for that sort of entertainment rather than to a comfortable theatre. They seem to be imbued with the idea that they do not enjoy pictures in theatres as well as in a store. I have talked to many people about this and that really seems to be the case.”<sup>69</sup> Other factors may have enticed entertainment seekers to skip WWV theaters, including film selection or geographical proximity, but it is revealing that Appell

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Walter Vincent to Nathan Appell, 24 September 1914, Nathan Appell Papers, Box 54, Folder 9, Harvard Theater Collection, Harvard Depository, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>69</sup> Nathan Appell to Stan Koenek, 29 September 1914, Nathan Appell Papers, Box 54, Folder 9, Harvard Theater Collection, Harvard Depository, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

seemed to believe viewers were more conditioned, or preferred seeing film in smaller venues. Perhaps they enjoyed being closer to the screen, or the fans of film remained loyal to the venues which originally offered motion pictures as their primary entertainment.<sup>70</sup> Whether the Southern theaters experienced these same tendencies is unknown. The cultural sophistication afforded by the beautified space may have been more inspiring to potential customers in the region given its bearing on the experience and value rendered to one's identity or partaking in consumerism. But the predisposition to enjoy vaudeville over film, or vice versa, regardless of spatial preferences, was more than likely a universal issue for all vaude-film owners transitioning to features. In September 1914, Appell informed WWV offices, "Have determined not to book any more features at the vaudeville house that are over five reels long. Have come to the positive conclusion that patrons of a vaudeville theatre do not care for extremely long subjects, and then again, it makes it hard to give two good performances a night."<sup>71</sup> Creating a balanced program catering to varying expectations presented a challenge. Other issues WWV faced were the establishing of competitive pricing structures to pay for the large theaters, and profit against smaller competing houses showing feature-length films, or the prospect of too many theaters in certain cities. "South of the Mason-Dixon line, where we are in partnership with the Wells interests," wrote Vincent, "we are eliminating theaters rather than making them competitive,

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<sup>70</sup> Nathan Appell to Walter Vincent, 14 October 1914, Nathan Appell Papers, Box 54, Folder 9, Harvard Theater Collection, Harvard Depository, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Appell penned a letter to Paramount telling the company that one in four films were liked by "Eastern picture people." The fact he isolates part of his audience as film buffs in essence highlights the divide between customer's expectations in the multimedia venues.

<sup>71</sup> Nathan Appell to Stan Koenek, 29 September 1914, Nathan Appell Papers, Box 54, Folder 9, Harvard Theater Collection, Harvard Depository, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Appell subsequently canceled 19 October exhibition of *The Traffic* and 21-22 November showings of *Damaged Goods*.

believing that the only way we can make money.”<sup>72</sup> These problems were a sampling of the conundrums of the emergence of multiple-reel film in the system of short features Wells and other exhibitors of the period had to negotiate.

In 1915, Wells converted the majority of his vaude-film and legitimate venues to strictly motion pictures. Otto Wells, now part owner of the Wells Amusement Company, discussed the needed changeover of the Wells Theater in Norfolk from a stage theater to a moving picture house to the local newspaper the *Virginia Pilot*. During the late summer of 1915, Otto described the policy and promotion Wells and he adopted for the transition:

The moving picture has reached a stage where it is assuming the same importance as the dramatic, operatic, and other branches of stage production. In recognition of this, the Wells theatre will become the home of the idealized motion picture on a scale of perfection and beauty that, it is promised, will not be surpassed by any theatre in the country devoted to moving picture presentation. Concededly the finest, most complete and only all fireproof theatre in the South, it has all the necessary features to begin with to make it so. An immense Moeller pipe organ is to be installed. This big instrument will occupy the space where the two lower boxes on each side are situated and the keyboard will be placed and operated in the orchestra. All the effects that are produceable by an orchestra will be possible on this instrument. The picture screen will be set well back on the theatre stage which is to be decorated and arranged in a Japanese garden with all the wealth of cherry blossoms so distinctive of the Flowery kingdom. Projecting machines of the latest and most effective design will be installed and the programs of pictures will be shown daily from 11 a. m. to 11 p. m. The prices will be five and ten cents. A complete typhoon fan cooling and ventilating system will also be a feature.<sup>73</sup>

But not all Southerners were accepting of the change, as motion pictures continued to struggle to find cultural legitimacy among the genteel. In late 1915, when Wells attempted to

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<sup>72</sup> Walter Vincent to Nathan Appell, 14 March 1914, Nathan Appell Papers, Box 54, Folder 9, Harvard Theater Collection, Harvard Depository, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts; for more information concerning the overcrowding of theaters in Richmond, and exhibitors exploring ways to overcome this see, *Playgoer*, 13 November 1915.

<sup>73</sup>*Virginia Pilot*, 15 August 1915; The prices Otto listed were for matinee performances only; nightly performances jumped to 15, 25, and 50 cents.

transform the Forsyth Theater in Atlanta to motion pictures exclusively, he was sued by building owner Asa G. Candler, owner of the Coca-Cola formula and trademark, for breach of contract. The issue revolved around the theater's status as "first class" as defined by the content it provided, and questioned the status of film to be labeled as such. In 1908, the Georgia Theater Company, of which Wells was a principal investor and president, purchased the lease of the newly constructed venue for ten years from the Khan Theatrical Circuit Company for \$20,000 with plans to operate it as a first-class vaudeville house.<sup>74</sup> A restrictive covenant placed in the original lease directed the lessee to operate the house "as a first-class theater catering to the best class of people."<sup>75</sup> In April 1910, the Forsyth opened its doors with Keith Vaudeville as its main attraction, specially arranged by Wells with direct jumps from New York City. "It is the highest class of vaudeville possible to secure," Wells reportedly wired to the *Atlanta Constitution*, "and the fact that the Keith people are interested in the theater assures Atlanta theatergoers the very best talent available the season to continue just so long as the patronage justifies."<sup>76</sup> For the 1912 season, Wells slightly reduced the strength of vaudeville to maintain medium-time standards necessary for profits. Up until the lawsuit by Candler, Wells juggled programming at the Forsyth between stock companies and the medium time policy, depending on the city's ability to support two vaudeville theaters and his ability to secure and transfer talent.<sup>77</sup> When Wells transitioned to motion pictures exclusively, after extending the lease upon the terms and conditions set out in the original agreement, Ansley asked the court to intervene, interpreting the original clause of "first class" as "character of performance within the building, rather than of the building itself" and

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<sup>74</sup> Members of Georgia Theater Company included: Jake Wells, president; E. M. Horine, vice-president; H.L. DeGive, secretary and treasurer; V. H. Kreigshaber, with officers and directors.

<sup>75</sup> *Asa G. Candler, Inc., v. Georgia Theater Co. et al* (No. 692) Supreme Court of Georgia, 14 June 1918, in the I, 102 (St Paul: West Publishing Company, 1918); for biographical information on Candler see, John R. Hornady, *Atlanta, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Atlanta: American Cities Book Company, 1922), 319-393.

<sup>76</sup> "Forsyth House Opens April 11," *AC*, 3 April 1910.

<sup>77</sup> "Forsyth will Present Stock," *AC*, 21 September 1912.

"catering to the best class of people." Fulton County's superior court judge George L. Bell sided with Wells and blocked an injunction levied by Candler to prevent the theater's turnover granted "the pictures exhibited were first class and catered to and attracted the best class of people." Ansley appealed the decision to the Supreme Court of Georgia, where the trial hinged on the discursive meaning of "first-class entertainment" in 1908 versus 1915. Lawyers for Wells and the Georgia Theatre Company's argued their clients exhibited "first-class moving pictures, showing first-class productions by the leading 'artists of the screen.' Candler's evidence hinged on the term included in the agreed 1910 lease, "high-class vaudeville," and original construction of the building as designed for theatrical performances. The Court, however, deemed Bell ruled in error since the term "theater" in 1908 did not encompass motion pictures, even within subordinated conceptions and definitions of the medium. Candler believed Wells' operations within the property should maintain a "reputation and a name" "to protect the property to the end that its value might be increased rather than decreased." The case underscores the genteel's reluctance to associate film as a form of high-brow art, and highlights the issues Wells navigated as he worked to promote film as a legitimate form of entertainment.

In November 1915, following the success of his territorial exhibition of *Birth of a Nation* and experimentation in multiple-reel feature film exhibition with Paramount and Fox productions, Wells offered the first regular installment of big production feature films. They were to serve as the focal point of his newly turned-over theaters when he obtained the rights to show pictures from the ill-fated Triangle Film Corporation.<sup>78</sup> Founded by Harry Aitken, producer of Griffith's epic and owner of the Mutual Film Corporation, Triangle set new standards in film production, as outlined by film historian Rob King, employing the greatest stage actors of the

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<sup>78</sup> Benjamin B. Hampton, *A History of the Movies* (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1970), 140-146.

day such as DeWolf Hopper, Weber and Fields, and George Fawcett, and increasing the production values to levels unheralded in the industry.<sup>79</sup> The company's goal was to produce a product that would appeal to elitist theatergoers and establish canons of genteel culture within the medium. The company, like Wells as an exhibitor in the South, attempted to merge popular culture with upper-class desires and refinement, and present movie-going on equal footing as theater attendance. Following a successful premiere of Triangle productions on Broadway, Wells boasted to a *Richmond News Leader* reporter: "Richmond is the first city of its size in the United States to have the plays produced by the Triangle Film Corporation. Until I secured the rights for the South these plays had been shown only in larger cities. Those who know me best know that I am not given to indulging in superlatives. But you cannot speak of the Griffith-Ince-Sennett combination without becoming over-enthusiastic."<sup>80</sup> Wells attempted to tap into the cosmopolitan benefits the premier offered to boost interest. To further enhance the spectacle of the new features, Wells employed a fifteen-man orchestra to accompany the presentations and installed a special new screen to improve the projection.<sup>81</sup> The Triangle productions seemed to be the perfect vehicle to satisfy genteel demands of popular culture in the region. The films, however, bombed. "Our business in Richmond and Norfolk with Triangle Pictures is something ghastly....," wrote Vincent to Appell when the latter asked headquarters about exhibiting the films.<sup>82</sup> The WWV co-founders' explanation supports some of the reasons Triangle failed nationwide, according to King. "In all technical details the pictures are superior to the general run; of that, there is no question," wrote Vincent. "They do lack, however, draught. In other

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<sup>79</sup> King, "Made for the Masses with an Appeal to the Classes".

<sup>80</sup> *RNL*, 20 November 1915; Triangle Films was founded by Harry Aitkin, promoter of the Mutual Film Company, D. W. Griffith, director of the *Birth of a Nation*, and two other "master directors" of moving pictures, Thomas Ince and Mack Sennett. The Triangle Film Corporation was the forerunner of regularly produced large feature films.

<sup>81</sup> *RNL*, 17, 18, 20 November 1915. Hampton, *A History of the Movies*, 140-145.

<sup>82</sup> Walter Vincent to Nathan Appell, 04 December 1915, Nathan Appell Papers, Box 54, Folder 14, Harvard Theater Collection, Harvard Depository, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



words, why Frank Keenan as a star in motion pictures? He is an old ‘has been.’ To be sure *The Coward* is a splendid picture, but Mary Pickford in a Triangle Picture would be worth three times Frank Keenan.”<sup>83</sup> Indeed, King identifies the employment of old stage actors, their histrionic performances, and a failed marketing campaign as drawbacks for the company. Most telling in King’s argument is his belief the company also failed because the “masses” identified and declined to stomach the genteel impulse built into the logic of the productions and the film’s teasing of cultural uplift.

Ironically, in order to profit from the films with Southern audiences, Wells and his partners sought this particular genteel audience recognition. In an attempt to advertise the failing productions, Vincent suggested if “they were exploited in such a way as to make the ordinary person feel it was a picture entertainment away (sic-way) over his head....” they may profit.<sup>84</sup> King also notes the failure of the upper class to attend the productions as a sign the genteel had not warmed up to the prospects of cinema yet nationwide. The higher than normal rental fees hurt Wells as well, in addition to the studio demanding exhibitors show the films at high prices of one to two dollars to maintain a status of high-art.<sup>85</sup> These prices kept many movie fans away from Wells’ theaters, and supporting King’s conclusion, genteel culture rejected the film in the South.<sup>86</sup> Cinema’s reputation and status within the region would only gradually improve. Not until the large Hollywood studios moved in by the mid-1920s and constructed the grandest of picture palaces did the genteel culture fully embrace cinema.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. In this reference, draught is understood as failure to pull one’s weight, or not seeing the financial returns of one’s stardom.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> WWV paid \$300 for four days of exclusive exhibition rights a week, which Triangle originally priced at \$450. In comparison, two days of Fox films were priced at \$100 a week; Walter Vincent to Nathan Appell, 06 December 1915, Nathan Appell Papers, Box 54, Folder 14, Harvard Theater Collection, Harvard Depository, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>86</sup> King, “Made for the Masses with an Appeal to the Classes,” 28-30.

As presented here, two identifiable characteristics mediating the development of motion pictures within the South during the first two decades of the twentieth century were race and the genteel. The genteel provided a semblance of cultural sophistication to many urban communities in the region, satisfying a desire for cosmopolitanism and progress, while easily embracing many of the South's conventional social patterns, values, and beliefs. As a dominant ideology enveloping the status and experiences of cinema, the genteel acted as an ideal mediator between the forces of modernity and traditionalism many urban regional communities grappled. When motion pictures and other forms of commercial entertainment threatened to upset segregation and specific white privileges the system awarded, the same forces fueling the bourgeois support of the genteel stepped in to regulate experiences and understandings of the new outlets of public leisure. Race, more than social class or any other factor, determined the political, economic, and social opinions attributed to the introduction of public amusements in the region, and influenced the structure of cultural hierarchy. The distinctive boundaries of high and low culture fashioned in the region challenged many entrepreneurs in their attempt to specifically market motion pictures. The medium's cultural currency failed to evoke the cultivated experience necessary to fulfill cosmopolitan desires and conspicuous consumption. As the next chapter argues, one force capable of managing this gap was film's celebration of the Lost Cause.

## CHAPTER 5

SOUTHERN INFLUENCE ON EARLY CIVIL WAR FILMS AND THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF A MODERN LOST CAUSE SHRINE, 1908-1915

Anyone who tells you that the South has “forgotten,” even though half a century may have elapsed, put him down in the “loony” class, for there is just as much red hot Rebel blood manifested when occasion demands it as there was in the days of ’61. I know, for I’ve seen it. And, by the way, Biograph, that was one of the finest war pictures we have had in many moons.<sup>1</sup>

*Moving Picture News* – Hot Springs, Arkansas

On September 27, 1915, Wells premiered *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) in the South on a week-long stand to patrons of the Academy of Music in Norfolk, Virginia. The showman secured territorial rights for the provocative road show attraction in five Southeastern states.<sup>2</sup> “I have seen this picture eight times,” wrote Atlanta resident Lindsay Holmes prior to the film’s arrival to the Gate City in December, “and am anxious to see it again. It is history, filled with exact truths, and is artistic to a degree that no one would have thought possible in connection with a work of this time only a short while ago.”<sup>3</sup> On December 6, 1915, a posse of Ku Klux Klan marched down Peachtree Street to mark the film’s opening night at the Atlanta Theater. The film’s week-long engagement attracted close to 20,000 patrons with some traveling from as far away as Florida to take in the spectacle. So many people were left ticketless that Homer George,

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<sup>1</sup> “From Our Western Correspondence,” *The Moving Picture News* (11 February 1911).

<sup>2</sup> “Disputed Picture will be shown in Norfolk,” *RNL*, 23 September 1915; for record of the southern cities the film toured before Atlanta, see: “Display Ad 13,” *AC*, 28 November 1915.

<sup>3</sup> “Indorses ‘Birth of a Nation,’” *AC*, 18 October 1915.

the theater manager, specially arranged to keep the film in Atlanta an extra week.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the film's overwhelming popularity was acknowledged nationwide as it became the highest grossing movie of its era. Most historians contend the film's success illustrates the respectable reputation and maturity cinema had assumed by the mid-1910s, while also alerting the public to the medium's ideological consequences.<sup>5</sup> D.W. Griffith's interpretation of the Civil War and Reconstruction, advocacy of white supremacy, and idyllic antebellum depiction of the Old South impressed itself on the public consciousness and historical remembrance for decades to come. Scholars have exhaustively researched and analyzed the film, focusing on its production value, economic success, semiotic and aesthetic configuration, and ideological and social impact. Scant attention, however, has been paid to the production, distribution, exhibition, and reception of the bevy of Civil War films produced prior to its release.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the divisive film did not emerge from a historical vacuum; rather it was a culmination of literary, filmic, and theatrical traditions celebrating an artificially constructed heritage and nostalgic recollection of America and the War. From 1908 to 1915, the years leading up to and marking the conflict's fiftieth anniversary, film manufacturers released a total of 345 motion pictures exploring themes associated with the

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<sup>4</sup> "Birth of a Nation to Stay in Atlanta for Six More Days," *AC*, 11 December 1915; "Hundreds Brought to Atlanta by 'Birth of a Nation,'" *AC*, 13 December 1915; for more information on the film's premier in Atlanta, see: Steve Goodson, *Highbrow, Hillbillies, and Hellfire: Public Entertainment in Atlanta, 1880-1930* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 102-106.

<sup>5</sup> For some of the numerous studies analyzing *The Birth of a Nation* see: Janet Staiger, "The Birth of a Nation: Reconsidering its Reception," in *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Films* (Princeton: University Press, 1992); C.J. Robinson, "In the Year 1915: D.W. Griffith and the Whitening of America," *Social Identities*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1 June 1997), 161-192; Everett Carter, "Cultural History Written with Lightning: The Significance of 'The Birth of a Nation'" In: *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context*, ed. Peter C. Rollins. (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 9-19; Robert Lang, *The Birth of a Nation: D.W. Griffith, Director* (Rutgers University Press, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Most scholars do not critically address pre-*The Birth of a Nation* American Civil War films in their studies when analyzing it as a genre or cultural product; even when the cinema is of primary focus. See recent studies by Brian Steel Wills, *Gone With the Glory: The Civil War in Cinema* (Oxford: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2007); Gary W. Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know About Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Jenny Barrett, *Shooting the Civil War: Cinema, History, and American National Identity* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2009).

Civil War as their primary subject matter.<sup>7</sup> How many of these films Wells secured is unknown, but their popularity and value to exhibitors was unprecedented.

This chapter explores exhibition and reception of these films in the South. It reveals how appeals from Southern audiences and showmen were integral to shifting textual practices in Civil War films, primarily the embrace of a reconciliation discourse popular in other cultural mediums. The industry's initial portrayal of the conflict was inconsistent, with the discourse fixed in alternative forms of popular culture, but regional appeals helped encourage changes. This activism provided one of the earliest recognitions of a Southern market within the film industry. For many Southerners, reception of these films assumed a memorial function celebrating a fabricated and invented history central to preserving the past and defining the region's identity. Cinema emerged as a popular and integral outlet for participation in Lost Cause tribute and memorial, a region-wide cultural project of Civil War remembrance, education, and ritual celebrating an idealized and romantic remembrance of the South. The circulation of such films in the region fostered an unofficial or democratic popular history of the conflict largely removed from the area's official guardians of the Lost Cause, such as women's clubs—particularly the United Daughters of Confederacy—veteran's groups, and in few cases government agencies. As a cultural movement that thrived on its public visibility, the cinema served as an accessible and alternative historical “monument” to the statues, ceremonies, books, and parades crucial to the construction of collective memory and imagined history. The act of going to the movies could be considered an alternative instrument of Lost Cause ceremony and

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<sup>7</sup> John B. Kuiper, “Civil War Films: A Quantitative Description of a Genre,” *The Journal of the Society of Cinematologists*, Vol. 4, 1964 - 1965 (1964 - 1965), pp. 81-89. From 1897-1961, a total of 495 Civil War themed films were produced. Companies manufactured the largest amounts between 1908 and 1915. The numbers are as follows: 1908=12; 1909=21; 1910=33; 1911=74; 1912=55; 1913=95; 1914=30; 1915=25.

education intensely formative to collective history and an activity of shared public culture critical to the politics of identity.

Between 1908 and 1915, a host of individuals, groups, and businesses memorialized and profited from the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War, including a number of pioneering American film manufacturers.<sup>8</sup> Prior to the period of the “Grand Jubilee,” producers all but ignored the subject matter despite its prominence in popular fiction and the theater. Film historians note several factors for the industry’s delay, including the imperfections of contemporary narrative filmmaking; concessions to perceived audiences of specific ethnic, social class, or regional likeness possibly disinterested in the theme; and self-imposed safeguards for fear that the cinema’s indexical qualities conveyed realities of war as too graphic and therefore potentially controversial.<sup>9</sup>

The first narrative film depicting the War was Kalem’s *Days of ’61* (1907). The picture tells the story of two childhood friends and West Point classmates who, split by sectional loyalties, assume opposite sides during the conflict. Pitted against one another in battle, the Union soldier fails to follow through with a command from his superior ordering him to capture his Confederate friend. The former is sentenced to death by hanging for disobeying orders, but is saved in the end by a pardon from President Lincoln.<sup>10</sup> What is characteristic about this film and the majority of the earliest motion pictures depicting the conflict are their emphasis on northern

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<sup>8</sup> In 1913, production companies created 95 Civil War films total, marking the watershed of these topical motion pictures. The subject and style of the genre centered on melodramatic struggle, spectacle, and violence. Adapted from 19<sup>th</sup> century literary traditions and stage melodrama, typical subject matters included fear of loss and death, apprehension over unwarranted murder and suicide, terror because of split families, exciting battle scenes, display of heroic deeds, and more.

<sup>9</sup> Eileen Bowser, *History of the American Cinema: The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 177-179; Evelyn Ehrlich, “The South and Film: Origin and Development of a Genre,” in Warren French, *The South and Film* (Oxford: University of Mississippi, 2008), 70-82; Robert Sklar, *Movie-made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975), 18-31.

<sup>10</sup> Bowser, *History of the American Cinema*, 177-179; Ehrlich, “The South and Film”.

heroism, victory, and point of view. At the time, this blueprint was unique to the cinema and did not comply with narrative designs of other forms of popular culture. Historian Nina Silber and other scholars have thoroughly detailed the widespread acceptance and distribution of the “Reconciliation Cause” in popular literature and live theater beginning in the 1890s with its embrace of Lost Cause nostalgia and imagery.<sup>11</sup> This interpretation of the Civil War wished to preserve the overly folkloric and inventive remembrance of life before the conflict in an effort to displace war guilt and reconcile regional differences. The Lost Cause myth entailed an idyllic and harmonious South which harbored quintessential American values unscathed by the evils of war and ills of modernity. The myth also refashioned many of the causes, events, and consequences of the War, which became entrenched in the public memory and popular history of the era. These included favoring secession based on Constitutional divide; maintaining a general ignorance to slavery; placing an emphasis on southern sacrifice and honor; avoiding ethical judgments and blame in accord to events of the war; and the cultivation of a society privileging whiteness.<sup>12</sup> Specific narrative formulas in popular culture perpetuating the Lost Cause included the reunion of “divided kinsmen” and intersectional romance. The earliest narrative films adopted elements of this schema, but identified almost exclusively with Union heroes as agents of action and identification in stories as opposed to other cultural forms which perpetuated a southern point of view and romantic remembering of the past.

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<sup>11</sup> Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); David Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten*, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> For the principal studies defining the Lost Cause and its characteristics see: Rollin Gustov Osterweis, *The Myth of the Lost Cause, 1965-1900* (New York: Archon Books, 1973); Comer Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1873-1913*, Volume 2 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973); Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980); Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and Emergence of the New South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Various hypotheses attempt to explain why cinema bucked contemporary cultural trends and in essence adopted a “Unionist cause” in its earliest storytelling formula. One belief is that the strong Northern viewpoints were a consequence of the studios’ locations in the aforesaid region, and its catering to the area’s imagined audiences.<sup>13</sup> Film manufacturers simply did not conceive of southern viewers. The number of licensed local exchanges in Dixie was marginal, and logistical challenges prevented the region from circulating up-to-date productions. Commenting on the prospects of Lost Cause-influenced productions circulating in the region, an anonymous author in the *Moving Picture World* supported the market logic ignoring the South. He wrote, “Now a picture play showing as a climax a glorious victory by the good old fighting Confederates would no doubt receive a great hand throughout the territory I have mentioned, but the applause and huzzas do not pay either the renter nor the manufacturer.”<sup>14</sup> Political concerns may have also been an influence. In 1910, an editor for the *Motion Picture World* justified the lack of Civil War-themed films in general on an appeal to “avoid bringing up unpleasant [sic] memories.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, lingering Southern fall-out and banishment of the anti-slavery novel “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” in the region certainly influenced the editor’s and film producer’s positions. The United Daughters of Confederacy (UDC), the definitive custodians of Confederate culture in the region, effectively barred the story from circulating in the South through any form, including books, live entertainment, or film.<sup>16</sup> In 1915, for example, when a daring theatrical producer, Walter S. Baldwin, attempted to present the play in Atlanta for the first time in the city’s history, the UDC petitioned the mayor to prevent its premier, claiming Stowe’s story

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<sup>13</sup> Eileen Bowser, “1911: Movies and the Stability of the Institution,” in Charlie Keil and Ben Singer, eds. *American Cinema of the 1910s: Themes and Variations* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers, State University Press, 2009) 60.

<sup>14</sup> “Observations by our Man About Town,” *The Moving Picture World* 6, no.24, (18 June 1910): 1041

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> In 1902, for example, the UDC in Kentucky voted to ban adaptations of the play in the state. See “Uncle Tom’s Cabin has Been Prohibited,” *AC* 14 November 1902.



“would be inimical to the growing spirit of unity and peace which is desired between the two sections of our country by all Christian people.”<sup>17</sup> Although particular details are unknown, Baldwin was forced to revamp the play to abide by specific Lost Cause discourse and rename the production "Old Plantation Days."<sup>18</sup>

Attention to cinema’s capacity to depict historical realism and “truthfully” portray events was also significant to the exhibition of a Northern perspective. Historian Evelyn Ehrlich suggests motion picture similarities to photography may have conditioned audiences to expect greater accuracy in the war’s event via the cinema in comparison to stage productions or popular literature.<sup>19</sup> Many of the turn-of-the-century generation’s perceptions of the conflict were shaped by the widespread circulation and prominence of war photography, possibly moving audiences to demand historical accuracy and truth visually. This requirement was intensified by the cinema’s considerable emphasis on actualities and its documentary-like composition prior to its narrative transition. Other than Edison’s 1904 one-reel adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, non-narrative “historical reconstructions” of battles such as Vitagraph’s *Sheridan’s Ride* (1908) and Lubin’s *Scenes from the Battles of Gettysburg* (1908) were the primary types of Civil War-themed moving pictures distributed.<sup>20</sup> For film manufacturers, an accurate depiction of the war, as detailed visually, involved Northern victory and restoration of the Union. Any other result or alternative vehicle to meet this end potentially sparked controversy and a rejection of the medium. These concerns are evidenced in Biograph’s release of D.W. Griffith’s first Civil War-themed film, *The Guerrilla* (1908). Prior to the start of the film, the studio presented a slide warning viewers “events could have taken place during any civil war, but to give it atmosphere

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ to Show Next Week but Under New Name,” *AC*, 19 February 1915.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Ehrlich, “The South and Film,” 74.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-75.

(we) have timed it during the Civil War of the U.S.”<sup>21</sup> Although the War functioned as the setting for a melodrama about a Northern officer’s harassment by a group of enigmatic outlaws in stolen Confederate uniforms, the statement dually acknowledges and cautions against the polemic nature of the topic and sidesteps demands for historical accuracies and realities by providing it a charge of happenstance to boost the diegetic atmosphere.

In 1909, Kalem produced the first narrative film conforming to Lost Cause conventions of Southern empathy in storytelling with the *The Old Soldier’s Story* (1909). Followed up by D.W. Griffith’s *The House with Closed Shutters* (1910) and *The Honor of His Family* (1910), these pictures paved the way for the industry’s full embrace of the reconciliation theme and romantic Southern slant, a trend that by 1911 was all but uniform in American filmmaking. What compelled this shift? How did the industry move from Northern to Southern identity and sympathy so quickly and dramatically? The answers are extensive. Some scholars recognize the move as a pattern stemming from the sheer volume of films produced by War “buffs” D.W. Griffith and Thomas Ince, who both were direct descendants of veterans and captivated personally by the subject.<sup>22</sup> Others understand the transition as a logical outgrowth of the popularity and pressures of the anniversary in general with its intense rhetoric for reunification. The discourse fit perfectly in an industry in transition attempting to standardize and sell its product through a variety of formulaic and mass appealing measures. The Lost Cause’s refusal to assign responsibility for causes of the War limited ethical judgments from viewers, thus serving as a premium vehicle for emerging classical narrative and thematic forms which embraced a

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 76-77.

<sup>22</sup> Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith’s the Birth of a Nation: A History of “The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time”* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

politically neutral cinema, a hallmark of the classic Hollywood cinema.<sup>23</sup> Some critics of the era believed international audiences were also influential to the change. William Lloyd Wright, columnist for the *Moving Picture News*, remarked a few years after the mainstream adoption of a Southern perspective, “invariably the Confederates always win, although everyone knows that honors were even, and that this end is played up so that the stories will be more popular abroad.”<sup>24</sup> Film historian Richard Abel confirms the industry's concern with international markets, but with the focus of improving domestic distribution of American films as opposed to foreign productions. Changes in the genre provided an improved agent to "Americanize" the movies and profit from a growing nationalism through the display of invented historical traditions. Moreover, Abel supports the auteur argument by emphasizing the contributions of women script writers extending storytelling traditions of “confident women” and “girl spies” novels with a southern point-of-view.<sup>25</sup> Kalem’s Gene Gauntier was integral to this development. A pioneering female screenwriter and actress, she penned roughly three hundred screenplays from 1906 to 1920 before retiring from Hollywood. The brainchild behind one of the first serials in early film history, and storylines centering on female heroism and agency in general, *The Adventures of a Girl Spy*, Gauntier provided audiences an action-packed picture in which she starred as a cross-dressing Confederate spy. Told from a Southern perspective, the series grew incredibly popular nationwide and spawned several copycat serials.<sup>26</sup>

The creative impact of filmmakers and their importance to plot development and Lost Cause conventions in early Civil War motion pictures are unquestionable. Gauntier’s memoirs,

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<sup>23</sup> Bowser, 1911, 60.

<sup>24</sup> William Lord Wright’s Page,” *The Moving Picture News*, 31 May 1913.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Abel, *Americanizing the Movies and “Movie-Mad” Audiences, 1910-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 143.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 144; Karen Ward Mahar, *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 104-105.

coupled with increasing historical research into transitional-era filmmaking—particularly at Kalem—present a clear impression of the ad-libbed construction of motion pictures at the time. Scholars such as Janet Staiger and Charlie Kiel have traced the evolving “modes of production” during this period and have, for example, revealed the workings of a short-lived “director system” operating roughly from 1907 to 1909. This arrangement involved a director, screen writer, and camera operator working with a general scene, in which details and the completion of a story were largely improvised. What transpired between the filmmaking years of the Grand Jubilee was an experimental era yet to perfect the regimented and standardized producer setup associated with the classical structure of production allowing for greater personal details, beliefs, and outside influences to seep their way into the film.<sup>27</sup>

Largely ignored in the auteur position, however, in regards to the emergence of the Southern point-of-view are the region’s impressions on the industry. In 1908, Kalem opened a new studio in Jacksonville, Florida to escape filming in the brutal New York winters, launching an industry-wide trend of Northern manufacturers seeking seasonal production sites in Dixie. Co-founder of Kalem, Frank Marion, noted the initial motivations for adopting Lost Cause narratives sympathetic to the region were due in large part to the atmosphere, people, and landscape of the city.<sup>28</sup> Paying closer attention to film’s verisimilitude and mise-en-scene, the studio used the locale to generate a certain mood and ambiance with “real southern scenes, taken among the palms and moss-covered pines.”<sup>29</sup> In 1909-1910, Kalem produced a series of “Southern stories,” which included several Civil War pictures due in large part to residents’

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<sup>27</sup> David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press), 116-119; Charlie Keil, *Early American Cinema in Transition: Story, Style, and Filmmaking, 1907-1913* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001) 26-27.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Allen Nelson, “Florida and the American Motion Picture Industry, 1898-1980,” (Ph.D. diss, Florida State University, 1983)

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 137, 141.

appeals for plots compassionate to the environment, regional mores, and presence of the city's leftover "vintage locomotives and steamboats" from the era dotting the landscape.<sup>30</sup> The films captured such forces to present a set of images and beliefs representative of agrarian traditions embedded in characteristics of the Old South.

Similar appeals were made by motion-picture audiences in the region to change the protocol of Civil War representation. The genre films drew large audiences within the region even before the embrace of Lost Cause conventions. In June 1908, for example, Mr. Bandy, a theater manager in Charleston S.C., screened *Days of '61* (1907), to 2,400 and 2,100 people respectively on consecutive nights. Bandy remarked that "They (patrons) are blocked across the street and all traffic is stopped."<sup>31</sup> Regional exhibitors and viewers increasingly underscored the subject matter's profit potential, but questioned the disregard for Southern romanticism. In 1910, before cinema's complete embrace of "confederate culture," E. G. Henson, manager of the 500-seat Rex Theatre of Charlestown, West Virginia, seemed particularly flummoxed about the lack of Southern-themed films, and solicited a question for film producers and exhibitors nationwide to ponder: "Why do all Civil War pictures have the Northern army come out ahead?"<sup>32</sup> Henson remarked that any Civil War-themed film he presented secured a "crowded house."<sup>33</sup> When the Confederacy is portrayed in a negative light the audience response typically ensured a negative reaction—or as the manager suggests, the film "gets the goat."<sup>34</sup> Henson continues, "Everyone knows the South won some battles in those hard years of fighting, and a picture with the Southern army coming out ahead would simply set 'em wild down here... Send it down here we

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Gene Gauntier's memoirs, published in 1928 in the *Ladies Home Journal*, also allude to the locale's influences on filmmaking.

<sup>31</sup> "Trade Notes," *Moving Picture World* (8 June 1908), 543.

<sup>32</sup> "A Letter Which Makes Us All Feel Good," *Moving Picture World* (28 May 1910), 883.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

will wear it out.”<sup>35</sup> Some exhibitors, however, feared the political repercussions of a shift in empathy. New Orleans theater manager Ernst Boehringer, for example, anticipated possible backlash to Kalem’s initial southern emphasis from regional viewers who were “still sensitive on matters pertaining to the Civil War.”<sup>36</sup> “There is an old maxim which bids us ‘let sleeping dogs lie,’” remarked Boehringer, “and any film likely to promote sectional prejudice is best kept north of the Mason & Dixon line....”<sup>37</sup> Boehringer’s prediction was off the mark, as the Lost Cause films thrived in the region.

Indeed, specific details involving the practices and experiences shared while moviegoing in the era are meager. But some insight into regional reception of Lost Cause war pictures is unearthed through “The Man in the Bath,” a ghost columnist for the *Hot Springs Daily News* in Arkansas and frequent contributor to the industry journal *The Motion Picture News (MPN)*. Originally from New York, he provided week-to-week reports about the general climate of cinema in the resort town, including detailed reports of film distribution, exhibition, and reception. Most telling in his accounts are the popularity and success of Civil War films sympathetic to the South. From January 1911 to October 1912, the period “The Man in the Baths” reported weekly to the *MPN*, he singled out only two films successful enough to demand a return engagement to the city: Kalem’s *Grandmother’s War Story* (1911) and Champion’s *With Stonewall Jackson* (1911).<sup>38</sup> Specific plot details are missing, but both pictures supported Lost Cause romanticism with empathy to the South. “You might not think so Champion,” he wrote, “but that picture warmed up a score or more of stout old Rebel hearts, and the theater rang with

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> “Let Sleeping Dog’s Lie,” *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, 19 July 1909, pg.1, cited in Nelson, “Florida and the American Motion Picture Industry, 1898-1980,” 142.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> “From Our Western Correspondence,” *The Moving Picture News* (15 April 1911) & (06 May 1911); Four theaters were open in Hot Springs at the time. Roughly 76 different films were screened weekly.

Rebel yells.”<sup>39</sup> What is most interesting to note in the reports is that both films returned via audience request.<sup>40</sup> In Lynchburg, Virginia, the city’s only vaudeville house, the Trenton Theatre, exhibited Kalem’s *The Siege of Petersburg* (1912) to “thousands” of patrons in just two days.<sup>41</sup> Reports suggested the film experienced good runs throughout other Virginia cities, too. Guest columnist to the *MPN*, “The Lady in the Baths,” wife of “The Man in the Baths,” praised Kalem’s particular regional focus and heralded them by reporting “Kalem is the prime favorite in these parts.”<sup>42</sup> What limited resources are available documenting box office numbers and audience reception more than support her claim. Wells’ recurring contract with the General Film Company presented the showman with many of the Motion Picture Patent Company’s best war themed products produced by Kalem, Biograph, and Edison. In markets like Richmond, where he held this license exclusively, the profits were undoubtedly high.<sup>43</sup>

By 1912, Kalem marketed and distributed many of their Civil War pictures as feature event films. Pitched by traveling press agents, theater owners had the option of purchasing additional components such as uniquely composed piano or orchestral scores, elaborate advertisements and colored posters, and turn-key press packets.<sup>44</sup> Proprietor Sydney M. Nutt, owner of Hot Spring’s new 600-seat motion-picture theater the New Central, secured the bundled package of the studio’s *A Spartan Mother* (1912), a story about a widowed Confederate mother who urges her son to continue the fight through pictures of his deceased father and brother. This strategy proved particularly vital to Nutt since locals did not believe the city could support a

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<sup>39</sup> “From Our Western Correspondence,” *The Moving Picture News* (22 April 1911).

<sup>40</sup> “From Our Western Correspondence,” *The Moving Picture News* (06 May 1911).

<sup>41</sup> “Lynchburg, VA.,” *The Moving Picture News* (30 August 1912).

<sup>42</sup> “From Our Western Correspondence *The Moving Picture News* (04 September 1912).

<sup>43</sup> Amusements,” Know Your City Survey,” 1911, YWCA, Box 35, Folder 20, Virginia Commonwealth University Special Collections.

<sup>44</sup> Herbert Reynolds, “Aural Gratification with Kalem Films: A Case History of Music, Lectures, and Sound Effects, 1907-1917,” *Film History* 12:4 Color Film (2000), 417-422.

large first-run theater with its considerable overhead.<sup>45</sup> The film became the “talk of the town” and the establishment sold out for three consecutive days.<sup>46</sup> In May 1912, Nutt again booked the all-inclusive combination of Kalem’s *War’s Havoc* (1912), a story about a female Confederate spy and her faithful slave who together commandeers a hijacked train to collide with an oncoming locomotive filled with Union soldiers. Again, Nutt profited with a three day run of “great business.”<sup>47</sup> The studio’s special engagements were also successful nationwide, drawing large audiences in the Midwest and New York City.<sup>48</sup> Wells exhibited return engagements of the four-reel Thomas Ince Broncho studio feature event film, *The Battle of Gettysburg* (1913).<sup>49</sup>

The overall popularity of the Civil War genre following its embrace of Lost Cause conventions is unquestioned. Perhaps the most vexing mystery is how intensely the medium embraced the celebration and depiction of Confederate culture. Abel suggests cinema’s affinity for sympathizing with the South was more pronounced than in other cultural modes and praxis of the era when measured against a reconciliation spirit emphasizing sympathy for both sides.<sup>50</sup> One explanation for the bias is its emotional appeal to immigrant viewers who could identify with the defeated and “alien” South in its quest for assimilation. This genre, Abel concludes, constituted a larger cadre of emerging narrative films, including the western, which celebrated American myths and acted as an agent of meaning for its viewers, presenting a “usable past” and an

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<sup>45</sup> “From Our Western Correspondence,” *The Moving Picture News* (06 April 1912).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> “From Our Western Correspondence,” *The Moving Picture News* (11 May 1912).

<sup>48</sup> Abel mentions the circulation of the Kalem features in Cleveland, Des Moines, and other Midwestern towns. He notes roughly 150 exhibitors purchased the presentations in New York City. Abel, *Americanizing the Movies*, 148.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Vincent to Nathan Appell, 14 August 1914, Nathan Appell papers, Special Collections, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, Harvard University. Appell was a theater manager in Pennsylvania under the Wells, Wilmer, and Vincent corporation which operated several of holdings in Richmond and Norfolk, Virginia and Savannah, Georgia. Correspondence between Appell and his superiors reveal some details about the properties in the region.

<sup>50</sup> Abel, *Americanizing the Movies*, 143.



acculturation channel for an “imagined community of nationality.”<sup>51</sup> Although the importance of immigrant spectators to early film history is potentially over-embellished, particularly in the South where they comprised very little of the overall population, the notion that these films functioned on a similar level in Dixie because of its vastly perceived distancing from characteristics of a national ideal is warranted. For Southern moviegoers, the Lost Cause War films dually offered a vehicle to reimagine and defend an idealistic regional identity and gateway to a shared national public culture. Understandings of the Lost Cause and film in relation to intensifying experiences of modernity may also explain the auspicious pairing. One argument for the popularity of Lost Cause culture, as argued by historians Cynthia Mills and Nina Silber, supports the idea that it may have helped cope with vast social and economic changes of the era—“the celebration of a common heritage in a confusing new world.”<sup>52</sup> Historian David Currey expands on this thesis to suggest it combated the era’s deterioration of morals and shows a gradual move away from Victorian culture.<sup>53</sup> The general consensus amongst scholars, therefore, positions the Lost Cause as an antidote to the ills of modernity, which may have possessed added significance for Southerners. Despite widespread advocacy of New South progress and development through industrialization and modernization circulating the region, for many, notions of the rural and countryside living remained the preferred way of life.<sup>54</sup> Traditional cultural values and practices found in Lost Cause rhetoric originated and thrived in a romantic construction of a Southern rural community. The Old South, portrayed as problem-free, with idyllic environments, and harmonious social relations, emphasized a cultural homogeneity

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 141-150.

<sup>52</sup> Cynthia Mills and Pamela Hemenway Simpson, “Introduction,” in *Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscape of Southern Memory* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), xxii. Silber, *Romance of Reunion*.

<sup>53</sup> David Currey, “The Virtuous Soldier: Constructing a Usable Confederate Past in Franklin, Tennessee,” in Mills and Simpson, *Monuments to the Lost Cause*, 133-139.

<sup>54</sup> See Don Harrison Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

perhaps more desirable for Southerners, since discourses of rurality were arguably more intense in the region than others.

The impassioned appeal to Southern audiences may have also been manifested in the activation of collective remembrance. French philosopher Maurice Halbwach theorizes historical knowledge is made permanent through support and solidarity from an “affective community” of similar being and identity.<sup>55</sup> The cinema offered a space where visual imagery of the War impressed the past on individuals, providing a link to formulate collective memory. This activity is central to the social construction of “imagined communities” and group identity formation as conceptualized by Benedict Anderson. Southern camaraderie in this regard is expressed by the numerous shouts of “Rebel Yells” documented by contemporary observers in the shared ritual of moviegoing.<sup>56</sup>

The popularity of these films in the region may also be understood as an appeal to the unconscious. Film scholar Philip Rosen supports psychoanalytic conceptions of fetishism and castration as employed by theorists in the 1970s to cinema to better understand the involvement of spectators to historical narrative film. The attraction is manifested in the picture’s gap between the “likeness and being” of historical authenticity, and between the viewer’s piloting of the inconsistencies between knowledge and belief, or interpretation and some ultimate truth.<sup>57</sup> This theory may be even more significant when considering early Southern moviegoing historically, given the region’s memorialization practices to the War through cinema. If the Lost Cause narratives act as the normative events of substitution for overcoming the loss of the War, then

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<sup>55</sup> Interpretation of Maurice Halbwachs’ *On Collective Memory* cited in William Guynn, *Writing History in Film* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 170-172.

<sup>56</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>57</sup> Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 178-184.

moviegoing, in particular potential repeat viewings of such films as evidenced in return engagements in Hot Springs, potentially act as a fetishistic ritual to overcome and safeguard against trauma associated with historical truth. Repeat viewing potentially provided mastery over lingering guilt and horror associated with events of the war and remembrances of the past. This event is even more significant when one considers the fleeting experience of cinema at the time with daily program changes and a culture which lacked film collection.

The motion picture theater as a space for collective gathering where both commemoration and the process of historical revision occur is overlooked in the grand scheme of Lost Cause dissemination and its influences on the nation's historical memory during the early twentieth century. According to William Guynn, the cinema presents places of memory which activate a process of collective remembrances by its audiences, signifying the past to their identity in the present and allowing audiences to dually renovate historical knowledge and translate their future via internalizing the visual information and experience of cinema.<sup>58</sup> This hypothesis is cultivated through French historian Pierre Nora and his theories pertaining to the relationship between history and memory in the modern world. Emphasizing the power of place in the formation of collective memory, Nora believes "memory clings to places just as history clings to events."<sup>59</sup> Place, he suggests, embodies three designations and each one is critical to the formation of group memory: the material, the functional, and the symbolic.<sup>60</sup> For moviegoers at the time, the motion picture theater can be realized as presenting a physical space where a social effort was made to transmit history to a group. It correspondingly subsumed a "symbolic aura" which left a lasting impression on audiences, as cinema provided a modern sensory experience stimulating emotional

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<sup>58</sup> Guynn, *Writing History in Film*, 177-178.

<sup>59</sup> Interpretation of Pierre Nora's *Realms of Memory: Conflict and Division* cited in Guynn, *Writing History in Film*, 176.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

and ideological appeal for new encounters of the past. Such events were heightened by Civil War cinema's penchant to display moments of spectacle. The majority of the genre not only portrayed exaggerated melodramatic themes based upon the breakup and reunification of the family unit, but also vibrant battle scenes and specific war-related action events which took viewers into a world of novel fascination complete with sound effects, bright lights, and visual explosions.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, as a genre, the dramatic flair of Lost Cause historical fiction often times traversed beyond concern with historical accuracy and realism to enhance the emotional appeal and the spectacular capable of resonating with the audience.<sup>62</sup>

Moviegoing, therefore, can be understood as enacting a memorial function integral to the formation of the nation's historical memory, and to Southerners' significance to a shared public culture. Memorials served as a group mechanism to bolster their relationship to the past, link themselves to former generations, and employ history to negotiate the present and the future. Historian David Blight best defines the memorial process involved in the creation of historical memory as "how cultures and groups use, construct, or try to own the past in order to win power or place in contemporary times."<sup>63</sup> What is particularly intriguing about the ownership, exposition, and function of Lost Cause war cinema in the South is that it was largely divorced from the unofficial interpreters of the War: The United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). Embracing a tradition of limited government in the region, the construction of memorials, the preservation of the past, and crafting of historical consciousness was almost strictly confined to

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<sup>61</sup> The genre accentuated the melodramatic formulas analyzed in Ben Singer's, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

<sup>62</sup> Rosen, *Cinema Mummified*, 192-193.

<sup>63</sup> Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 191.

voluntary organizations composed primarily of white club women.<sup>64</sup> The UDC's goals were to preserve Confederate heritage and revise history through education and ceremony, shaping people's behaviors and beliefs through the promotion of antebellum mores and positive values taken from the War. Indeed, their most significant achievements for the Lost Cause were the massive construction of stone monuments, the filtering of school textbooks to include pro-Confederate perspectives, and care for aging veterans. Although mindful of film as a meaning-making medium, its emerging utility in education and learning, and power to "document" history, the UDC, as a regional body, largely evaded praising or exercising the medium in commemoration activities. Why as a regional organization did they exclude cinema in this project? Furthermore, how can this exception be understood in the grand scheme of Lost Cause distribution, ownership, and influence within cinema?

The historical importance of women to the state of film exhibition and reception in the South is overwhelming. Not only did they constitute a significant proportion of cinema's consumers in the era, but by the early 1910s, in a similar spirit to the cultural activism embraced in Lost Cause promotion, many prominent club women and groups assumed a vested interest in the activities and events of local motion picture theaters. In communities throughout the South they campaigned for and served on local censorship boards, pressuring exhibitors to adhere to specific morals, traditions, and southern behaviors. Jake Wells, for example, faced UDC censorship in Richmond when then president of the local Chapter, Mrs. Norman V. Randolph, demanded the city police chief stop exhibition of *The Vampire* (1912) due to suggestive dance

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<sup>64</sup> Women were perceived by southern leaders as natural heirs to preserve the past, based on strong regional beliefs of "republican motherhood" and the "cult of domesticity." For more information see: Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

scenes.<sup>65</sup> Such activism verified the group's concerns of the power of film to shape and espouse specific ideology and memories. But why did the UDC not embrace the medium for Lost Cause tribute and ceremony?

The UDC's exclusion of cinema's commemorative capabilities can be understood as a combination of factors. For one, the group's ardent promulgation of agrarian traditions and an idealized Old South cautioned them from publicly advocating the use of modernizing forces, like cinema, despite the rhetoric espoused by the Lost Cause. Such disregard is emblematic of the precarious position these women straddled between modernity and tradition. As Kathy Cox adroitly argues, the group's success and public visibility challenged fixed notions of gender and spatial hierarchies in the region. Although the organization occasionally embraced a certain admiration and use for new business and industry, wholesale adoption was never an option. In fact, the term New South, with which outlets of popular culture were associated, was virtually an expletive in the group's vocabulary.<sup>66</sup> The group's renunciation may have also derived from cultural hierarchies and taste levels at the time. Although many club women and moviegoers in the region were respectable middle-class citizens, most UDC members at the leadership level were from social elites. This class standing may have dissuaded the group from overcoming certain low-brow stereotypes of cinema. Mrs. Randolph, for example, exposed her ignorance of cinema when in an editorial defending her complaints over *The Vampire* she confessed it was only the second time she had ever seen a "picture show."<sup>67</sup> Her trips to the theater were more

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<sup>65</sup> "Lid Clamped on 'Vampire in Theatres,'" *Richmond News-Leader*, 21 November 1913.

<sup>66</sup> Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*, 37-38; 41-45.

<sup>67</sup> "'The Vampire' Question Again," *Richmond News-Leader*, 25 November 1913.

than likely largely confined to the legitimate stage variety where the majority of Civil War films were not shown.<sup>68</sup>

Contemporary debates concerning the social and political utility of cinema and its merit as education or entertainment within public debate may also have influenced the group. Lee Grieveson's research into early motion picture censorship and regulation has exposed the medium's delimiting public role in its transition to classical Hollywood cinema. Critical debate over the capacity of film narrative to impress ideology, utilize nonfiction versus fiction, show boundaries of "realism," and display the medium's indexical qualities gave way to a series of legal judgments at the local, state, and federal level classifying motion pictures as "harmless entertainment" removed from serious political consequences.<sup>69</sup> Such decisions were critical to the discursive formation of mainstream cinema, and as Grieveson concludes, entrenched a set of assumptions and ideas among people disallowing cinema to engage in the political.<sup>70</sup> The Grand Jubilee and mass production of War films transpired in the crux of these deliberations, and some of the same issues are found circulating amongst the UDC and the organizations' stance on cinema.

Embedded in contemporary debates over "realism" was cinema's capacity to capture or represent historicity. This facility partly stemmed from cinema's transition from actuality filmmaking to narrative, and conceptualizations of indexicality. Robert Allen understands this evolution as primarily initiated by producers to relieve costs rather than through audience demands—narratives were shorter in length and allowed for greater control over filmmaking.

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<sup>68</sup> The longer feature film productions, like *The Battle of Gettysburg* or *The Birth of a Nation* played in legitimate houses, but the majority of one and two-reel films were exhibited in nickelodeons and small-time vaudeville theaters.

<sup>69</sup> Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

Some viewers consequently lamented the loss of actualities, he notes, as they struggled to overcome the predisposition of “mass desire for sites of the real.”<sup>71</sup> Other early concerns involving historicity and cinema rested upon Barthes’ notion of the “reality effect” and the privileging of historical evidence.<sup>72</sup> Modern historiography has always depreciated film in this regard. Historical representations, whether as period films or “true stories,” failed to claim a specific documentary authority and factual convincingness.

In an attempt to alleviate such prejudices, studios often advertised the earliest war pictures as “correctly historical” and as harnessing didactic attributes. An advertisement for Pathe’s *Abraham Lincoln’s Clemency* (1910), in which the President pardons a sentry convicted of dereliction of duty, is detailed as “instructive, historical, and educational.”<sup>73</sup> *Days of ‘61* emphasized historical realism, which included the imitation of actual historical figures, depictions of average soldier heroes versus ranking officers, and the tendency to show “realities of war” such as general violence and death.<sup>74</sup> As an organization, the UDC served as overseers of what they considered historical truthfulness, and sought to renovate historical “errors.”<sup>75</sup> In 1908, for example, the UDC established the position of Historian-General to shepherd the revisionist project. In 1909, Mrs. Cornelia Branch Stone, former honorary President of the UDC Texas Division, perhaps best illustrates the group’s concerns in her admonition published in *Confederate Veteran*, the United Confederate Veteran’s (UCV) national publication and

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<sup>71</sup> Robert C. Allen, “Film History: The Narrow Discourse,” in *Film: Historical-Theoretical Speculations* (1977 Film Studies Annual, Part 2), ed. Ben Lawton and Janet Staiger (Pleasantville, N.Y.: Redgrave, 1977), 13-16.

<sup>72</sup> In so-called “objective history,” Barthes believes the “real” is nothing but an unformulated concept sheltered behind the absolute words that express it. This situation he calls “the reality effect.” By constantly asserting this happened, historical discourse satisfies our civilization’s taste for the reality effect via documentaries, museums, etc. See: Roland Barthes, “The Discourse of History” in his *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard, B. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

<sup>73</sup> “Bonita” *The Augusta Chronicle*, 12 November 1910.

<sup>74</sup> Ehrlich, “The South and Film,” 74-76.

<sup>75</sup> Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 101-107.



unofficial voice of the UDC. Distressed over moving pictures historical accuracy and “representation of battle scenes,” she feared historical film renounced “truth” to emphasize emotion and drama. Indeed, for the Lost Cause movement, sentimental remembrance prevailed over reality, and early narrative film’s sensational and escapist qualities seemed like a perfect tool for refashioning historical memories into mythologies. Stone warned against “misleading” details “infecting [sic] the minds of Southern children.”<sup>76</sup> She recognized “nothing more impressive to the mind of a child than pictures....if used to portray partisan prejudices and not to represent the truth of history should be avoided more strictly even than the misleading histories that have been imported into Southern schools.”<sup>77</sup> But because film could not easily be edited, and its production of intellectual property existed outside the group’s control, they rejected the medium. For the UDC, historical memory was far from democratic. Cinema, as a participatory and interactive form of popular culture, potentially threatened the group’s power, despite espousing a similar set of values and beliefs.

The UDC’s refusal to harness the power of motion pictures in their Lost Cause projects may have also stemmed from the lack of permanency attributed to the medium. Anchored in time and space, physical monuments make memories eternal by realizing them in permanent form. Dolly Blount Lamar, president of the United Daughters of the Confederacy’s Georgia Chapter, the movement’s most active architect, made clear that memorials articulated in “permanent physical form the historical truth and spiritual and political ideals we would perpetuate.”<sup>78</sup> The

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<sup>76</sup> “Warned About Moving Picture Shows,” *Confederate Veteran* XVII (4 April 1909), 151.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, “Woman’s Hand and Heart and Deathless Love”: White Women and the Commemorative Impulse in the New South,” in *Monuments to The Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscapes of Southern Memory*, eds. Cynthia Mills and Pamela H. Simpson (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 66-69. For more sources about the UDC and monuments, see: Mills & Simpson, *Monuments to the Lost Cause*; Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*; Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton University Press, 1997).

daily turnover of programs and short shelf life of film stock may have characterized cinema as too fleeting an experience and lacking durability for utility in future generations.

Despite the national organization's aversion to cinema, cursory research shows some participation at the local level. Perhaps the closest the UDC came to adopting a film as a full-scale Lost Cause tool is when the executive branch of the Georgia Division in 1913 created a committee to oversee a storyboard contest for the "person writing the best story of the War Between the States." A \$10 prize was offered for a "splendid story of southern valor and patriotism." The UDC appointed Atlanta's Mrs. Howard McCall to oversee the contest and requested she investigate into securing its "presentation in moving picture shows all over the United States."<sup>79</sup> It is unclear who won, or whether the story was picked up by a film manufacturer, but the contest does show an attempt at branding authorship over the War and the Lost Cause within the industry. The UDC's most common use of cinema failed to harness the medium's ideological or instructional prowess. In Eatonton, Georgia, cinema served as mere entertainment to more official rituals, as The Dixie chapter and R.T. Davis camp viewed war scene films at the moving picture theater as part of their Memorial Day festivities before religious services and grave decorating.<sup>80</sup> Most often local UDC affiliates employed cinema for fundraising activities. Theater owners in Macon, Georgia, with encouragement from the UDC and other local booster groups, exhibited motion pictures of the Little Rock reunion in 1911 for a week with all proceeds going to benefit the city's fund for its own general Confederate veteran's reunion.<sup>81</sup> In Jackson, Georgia the small UDC chapter earned much more money allying with the

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<sup>79</sup> Executive Board of U.D.C. Hold's Interesting Session," AC, 02 March 1913.

<sup>80</sup> "Georgia Towns Plan for Memorial Day," AC, 26 April 1914.

<sup>81</sup> "Macon Raises Funds for the Next Reunion," AC, 08 August 1911-08; "Fund to Entertain the Veterans," AC 13 August 1911.

local motion picture theater than selling ice cream at a nearby drugstore.<sup>82</sup> In LaGrange, Georgia, the UDC chapter gave special matinee and evening showings of motion pictures in the Grand Theatre in order to help pay for Memorial Day exercises.<sup>83</sup> The Atlanta chapter endorsed the city's Confederate Veterans censure of some theaters in town who advertised proceeds for the week were donated to help former disadvantaged soldiers.<sup>84</sup> The groups feared imposters were collecting the donations promised for the "real old soldiers" to travel to a veteran's reunion in Richmond.<sup>85</sup> The UDC took charge of two of Atlanta's largest motion picture theaters to assure proceeds reached the proper people, employing young members as featured music and vocal entertainment and recruiting the Boy Scouts to pass out programs during the accompanying day-time parade.<sup>86</sup>

By 1913, some critics within the industry cautioned the Civil War film's eliciting of southern sympathies had "outlived its usefulness."<sup>87</sup> But for Southerners, its Lost Cause legacy and consequences to Hollywood, regional identity, and historical memory emerged as a central means for rewriting history and instrument of power in the formation of collective memory. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* marked the crowning deliverance via cinema for the South's vindication of the war, marketability of the medium in the region, and regional entryway into a national mass culture based on southern terms. Indeed, the film was the zenith of a practice and experience in the region that had been understood and shared through hundreds of Lost Cause genre films in the years prior. Grace Elizabeth Hale calls the *Birth of a Nation* an "early

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<sup>82</sup> "Jackson, GA," AC, 17 July 1910.

<sup>83</sup> "LAGRANGE, GA," AC, 14 April 1912.

<sup>84</sup> "U. D. C. Celebrates the Birth Of Admiral Raphael Semmes," AC, 24 September 1915.

<sup>85</sup> "Georgian Opens Today for Veteran's Benefit," AC, 15 August 1915-08-15, Mrs. May King Foster represented the local U.C.V. chapter, Camp Stonewall Jackson. She was the only woman adjutant of a confederate veteran camp in the South; See also "Picture Theater Will Run for Old Soldiers," AC, 11 July 1915.

<sup>86</sup> "Movies Open Today to Aid the Veterans," AC, 02 May 1915.

<sup>87</sup> "William Lord Wright's Page," *The Moving Picture News* (13 May 1913).

twentieth century symbol of modern white South's triumphant coming of age."<sup>88</sup> The film, more than any comparable component, impressed a fabricated remembrance of controversial events into a shared national public culture. Even the UDC eventually recognized the significance of cinema to fashion historical memory. "Daughters of the confederacy in all the years of their existence and in all their places of power," wrote Lamar, "could not reach the audiences that this presentation of *The Clansman* has...."<sup>89</sup> Mrs. S.E.F. Rose, official Historian of the Mississippi Chapter of the UDC and ardent Klan supporter confided, "*The Birth of a Nation*" have, like a flame of fire, burned into the hearts of men and women and left an impression stamped too deep to ever be eradicated."<sup>90</sup> The group's approval can be understood as more than just an affirmation of the film's content and faithfulness to Lost Cause discourse, to also include a general acknowledgment to the currency of cinema and the act of moviegoing in general as a new tool for the reproduction of cultural memory. Cinema served as a modern space to forge a popular understanding of the Lost Cause through what Eric Hobsbawm recognizes as "invented traditions."<sup>91</sup> Although not affixed in space and time, like monuments, plaques, or parades, Lost Cause cinema served as a shrine for Confederate sympathy, and moviegoing, a public ritual akin to other Lost Cause celebrations. For nearly a decade before the *Birth of a Nation*'s premier, Civil War film reception in the region served as a "ritualized practice" which provided a space where history could be exploited, refashioned, and interpreted by southerners outside of official cultural boundaries. For exhibitors like Wells, partaking in this celebration helped mediate the problems arising from the tensions between modernity and traditionalism.

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<sup>88</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, "Granite Stopped Time: Stone Mountain Memorial and the Representation of White Southern Identity," in *Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscapes of Southern Memory*, 219.

<sup>89</sup> "Mrs. Lamar Makes Impressive Report on U.D.C.'s Work," *AC*, 21 November, 1915.

<sup>90</sup> "The Ku Klux Klan and 'The Birth of a Nation,'" *Confederate Veteran* 24:4 (1 April 1916).

<sup>91</sup> Cited in Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield*, 191-193.

## CHAPTER 6

## RELIGION, PLACE, AND CINEMA IN THE NEW SOUTH CITY

“I believe in preaching, but I also believe in innocent amusements.”<sup>1</sup>  
(Jake Wells, 1906)

The early history of motion pictures and other sites of public amusements in the South was inextricably linked to local power structures. The theater’s sharing of public space with congregations, governments, and civic organizations, albeit in multi-use opera houses, auditoriums, and other venues manifested this relationship in most communities. Countless theater owners offered their private spaces as hubs for civic rituals, including hosting graduations, club presentations, town hall meetings, charity events, and housing touring evangelist and religious services.<sup>2</sup> An almost universal penchant for local communities to actively shape cinema, fueled throughout the region by a pronounced cultural hegemony defined through the forces of Protestantism and evangelical Christianity, perhaps best denotes the connection. Protestant sects and religious citizens probed virtually all forms of popular culture which potentially threatened established cultural and political authority, and as a result Wells, as one of the region’s prevailing showman, faced many challenges. This chapter explores Wells’ negotiation of evangelical culture, paying particular attention to the active role Protestants assumed over the development and operations of sites of commercial entertainments in the region. Emphasizing the showman’s role in the social creation of urban space and the power of place and cultural geography in the region, this chapter details how public amusements and

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<sup>1</sup> *RNL*, 23, 24 July 1906.

<sup>2</sup> Allen, “Relocating American Film History”; Waller, *Main Street Amusements*.

religion collided in a modern battle to mediate cultural experience.

Foremost in determining social and behavioral standards during the era and fountainhead for the populace's customary attitudes and beliefs, the church unquestionably controlled the region's daily activities. By the 1890s, Evangelism and mainline Protestant's energies in the South shifted from primarily addressing personal and interpersonal salvation to emphasizing a greater concern over societal conditions and social ethics, as a swelling tide of modernity altered values, behaviors, and experiences. Many white Southern evangelicals believed they harbored a special regional destiny to establish moral strictures for individuals and society which could influence lost souls nationwide. Born out of a detached experience of deprivation following the Civil War and due to the historical nexus between evangelism and southern identity, the region's white Protestants nurtured "a peculiar responsibility" to foster spiritual and moral excellence. The degree to which evangelism embraced specific morality campaigns, influenced public policy, and affected the status quo varied between local communities depending on what issues were prominent, the prevailing denominations, and the social make-up of the community. Universal matters included drinking, gambling, and Sabbath observance, but the region's urban areas presented unique conditions, prompting Protestantism to spread its web of influence to include problems distinctly common to larger cities, such as campaigns to stamp out prostitution. Impelled to wage war against modernizing forces threatening to disrupt or destroy traditional ideological, racial, social, and cultural power structures, evangelicalism naturally assumed a vested interest in the fruition of commercial entertainments in these localities, since they often originated outside of the region, harbored new technologies, and promoted new customs—all of which were perceived as foreign and threatening to its hegemonic control. Cinema epitomized this threat, and by the early 1910s, it symbolically served as the cultural outlet most threatening

to an evangelical way of life. As a result, southern exhibitors faced religious scrutiny of cinema in nearly every community in the region.<sup>3</sup>

Vital to perhaps all regional exhibitors' success was the development of close-knit relationships with local religious leaders. Although most managers opened their doors to a whole range of community activities, the hosting of religious lectures, sacred concerts, and other church activities benefitted exhibitors by engendering the theater's identity as one of charity helping to boost spirituality and win the trust of some skeptics. Film historian Terry Lindvall, examining elements of such accords in Norfolk, Virginia, concludes this relationship served as a booster of traditional cultural support, as exhibitors did their part to "enhance the quality of life and virtue in the community" for their economic livelihood.<sup>4</sup> In the port city, Wells hosted the Annual Lenton noonday services at the Granby, welcomed touring evangelist Irwin D. Richardson to the Colonial, accommodated a city-wide Baptist revival in the Majestic, and showed an eight-hour religious film series about creationism and the history of the Scripture in the Wells.<sup>5</sup>

In Knoxville, Tennessee, Wells carried a similar relationship. In 1911, some of Knoxville's religious groups were part of a larger collection historian John Kyle Thomas discovers as "demanding" the exhibition of multi-reel films and ultimately persuading Wells to transition the Bijou into primarily a motion-picture house.<sup>6</sup> Wells promptly exhibited the first multi-reel films to the city, both consisting of religious themes, *The Inferno* and *Oberammergau*, a German version of the passion play.<sup>7</sup> In the 1910s, Thomas finds urban religious groups emerging as representative of a burgeoning and influential middle class fostering a growing

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<sup>3</sup> Kyle Thomas, "Of Paramount Importance"; "Allen, "Relocating American Film History."

<sup>4</sup> Terry Lindvall, "Cinema Virtue, Cinema Vice: Race, Religion, and Film Exhibition in Norfolk, Virginia, 1908-1915," in *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, ed. Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 91-106.

<sup>5</sup> Lindvall, "Cinema Virtue, Cinema Vice," 99-100.

<sup>6</sup> Kyle Thomas, "Of Paramount Importance," 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

coalition of support for motion pictures, despite the city's reputation for "conservatism and defense against outsiders."<sup>8</sup> Searching through the records of the Knox County Association of Baptists, the city's largest religious organization, Thomas did not find any entry explicitly criticizing motion pictures between 1907 and 1920, including the prospect of censorship or Sabbath violations, despite harsh judgments against other amusements.<sup>9</sup>

The relationship between religion, Wells, and the movies in Knoxville were certainly exceptional. Robert Allen believes the close ties between ministers and entrepreneurs represented in the aforementioned cities are not indicative of the majority of the South, particularly when one considers potentially more guarded rural areas. Forgoing Allen's rural claim, the majority of contemporary urban histories of the New South also commonly present religious communities embracing traditional religious values despite the demand and implementation of modern ideas, services, and industry.<sup>10</sup> Conflicting evidence suggests that scholarly understandings of the juncture between cinema and other commercial entertainments with religion during this time are wanting and complex.

This chapter specifically investigates the intersection of public amusements and religious culture to define place in the New South city. Place, in this regard, is a particular portion of space with a distinctive identity born out of a specific history, capable of distinguishing itself from other settings. As an analytical tool, place is capable of defining identity and determining a balance of power functioning in an area. Moreover, it can reveal how physical environment

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 19, 26-28.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>10</sup> William B. Wheeler and Michael McDonald, *Knoxville, Tennessee: Continuity and Change in an Appalachian City* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1983); Edward J. Cashin & Glenn T. Eskew, eds, *Paternalism in a Southern City: Race, Religion, and Gender in Augusta, Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001).



manages experience in a particular space.<sup>11</sup> Negotiation of place in New South cities was unprecedented in the determination of social, economic, and cultural activities. A surge in growth, compounded by a wave of social reform during the era, generated increased segmentation of physical boundaries where specific experiences were strictly defined and regulated. Contemporary historical research, for example, shows that many New South communities devoted a special intensity to defining spatial arrangements, particularly with matters of racial segregation—a structure in which cinema played a defining role.<sup>12</sup> This chapter reveals a similar demarcation of place through public amusements’ attempt to establish boundaries within religious environments, in the process challenging spirituality, character, experience, and power associated with space.

In April, 1911, various Christian denominations united to oppose construction of the proposed three-story 1,200 seat Lyric Theatre at the corner of Eighth and Grace Streets in Richmond, Virginia. Leased by Wells for a term of 10 years, the site was to serve as the new exclusive home for U.B.O. productions and high-quality moving pictures before city officials passed an ordinance preventing the construction of amusement houses within “one hundred and fifty feet, in an airline, of the main entrance to any church devoted to regular religious worship.”<sup>13</sup> The controversy stemmed from the theater’s potential breach of presumably fixed political and cultural boundaries of the city’s physical environment shaped through years of history and local conditions. The area in question was Capitol Square, home to the State Capitol,

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<sup>11</sup> For a few general works exploring place and the “spatial turn” in historical studies see, Philip J. Ethington, “Placing the Past: ‘Groundwork’ for a Spatial Theory of History,” *Rethinking History* 11 (2007): 465–93; Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Hanchett, *Sorting out the New South City*.

<sup>13</sup> “An Ordinance”, *Ordinances and Certain Joint Resolutions of the City Council of Richmond*, 7 June 1911, (Richmond: William Byrd Press, 1914), 192.

City Hall, Executive Mansion, St. Paul's Episcopal Church and St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church. Sandwiched between the city's commercial/entertainment sector of Broad Street and financial districts fanning out along Main Street, the space served as the core of not only the city's, but state's bureaucratic, financial, and spiritual functions.

The exact date the theater construction plans of Wells and his associates, Henry S. Wallerstein, owner of the property and New York architect Charles A. Horn, leaked to the public is unknown. The proposed site for new vaude-film Lyric Theater sat opposite the cathedral of St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church, the city's oldest of five Catholic churches constructed in 1834. The site also lay a block away from St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Consecrated in 1845, its 225-foot steeple overlooked the city's skyline. Ground had not yet broken on the Lyric's construction, when on April 6 1911, Bishop Van De Vyver of the Catholic diocese lodged a formal complaint to Building Inspector Henry P. Beck and Mayor D. C. Richardson pledging the proposed theater a "nuisance," and asking for nullification of its building permit.<sup>14</sup> Both authorities expressed regret towards the Bishop, but intimated that they lacked jurisdiction to prohibit construction unless it failed to meet code or revealed itself a public nuisance once in operation. The failure of any legal process to halt the Lyric's construction rallied the religious community to band together in an effort to dissuade Wells and his associates through "moral suasion" from pursuing their plans.<sup>15</sup> In an unprecedented coming together of Protestants and Catholics in the city, the vestry of St. Paul's and congregation of St. Peters formed a joint committee to rally community support, acquiring additional assistance from ministers of Broad Street Methodist, Centenary Methodist, and Seventh Street Christian churches in their quest.

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<sup>14</sup> "Churches Oppose Wells Playhouse," *RNL*, 7 April 1911.

<sup>15</sup> "To Fight Theatre with Moral Suasion," *RNL*, 11 April 1911.

Opposition to the Lyric aimed to preserve the area's spiritual identity and symbolic influence over politics. When asked by a *News Leader* reporter why he objected the theater's construction, a prominent member of St. Peters replied, "Objections! There are so many I can't enumerate them." "In the first place," he continued, "the invasion of Grace street [sic] by a business distinctly objectionable from many viewpoints is against public policy."<sup>16</sup> His frustration sprang from the prospect of a commercial enterprise assaulting the perceived sacredness of Grace Street, whose name officials changed from "G" Street in 1844 because of the considerable number of churches spanning the road.<sup>17</sup> His anxieties, however, were perhaps elevated by the recent construction of Thalheimer's Office Building, the chain department store's regional headquarters.<sup>18</sup> Also of concern was the Lyric's potential to pollute the "appearance" of the neighborhood. Not only would its "flaming posters, lithographs, and other objectionable matter" debase the area, but the "dignity of the approach to the Virginia state capitol, the executive mansion, and state library" were threatened.<sup>19</sup> Grace Street was one of the primary arteries leading into the bucolic square surrounding the Capitol, funneling visitors past a string of public monuments celebrating famous Virginia leaders.<sup>20</sup> In addition to denoting a hallowed highway, the street signified the mutual recognition between church and state and their illegitimate alliance upholding power, leadership and enduring principles over politics and culture. Moreover, because of their proximity to the Capitol, the two churches, St. Paul's and St. Peter's, assumed an unauthorized rank as heads of their respective denominations. "This opposition springs not from narrow or liberal antagonism to plays or playhouses," a *News Leader*

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<sup>16</sup> *RNL*, 7 April 1911.

<sup>17</sup> "Grace Street Commercial Historic District," National Park Service, accessed 21 March 2010 <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/richmond/GraceHD.html>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *RNL*, 7 April 1911.

<sup>20</sup> The Washington Equestrian Monument, erected in honor to glorify Virginia's support for the nation's independence adorns the area.

editorialist opined. Instead, the social prestige and influence of the “venerable cradle of the Catholic church” in the state and the “metropolitan Episcopal church of the Virginia diocese” were at stake.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the churches held significance in regards to the civil religious beliefs associated with the Lost Cause. In the 1890s, the United Daughters of the Confederacy placed Tiffany stained glass windows in St. Paul’s, memorializing the house of worship for many Confederate leaders during the War, including Robert E. Lee, Jeb Stuart, and Jefferson Davis.<sup>22</sup> St Peter’s served many leaders as well, including Gen. P. G. T. Beauregard.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the theater’s threat to the churches’ influence and power symbolically, opposition to the site was also concerned with the mediation of experience within the designated space. “The religious atmosphere, if I may so term it,” the St. Paul’s member confided, “the elements of which are quietude, calm and repose, will be polluted by the presence of a vaudeville theater.”<sup>24</sup> The city block offered a sacred space, much like the Sabbath, in which elements were not to interfere with divine worship. Of particular interest here is the notion of quietude. Historian Ted Ownby has traced four qualities structuring evangelical culture in the region which Protestants were expected to practice in order to achieve a sacred, controlled, and provident lifestyle; harmony, self-control, prayer, and silence.<sup>25</sup> The church stressed the latter as a necessary condition to express abstinence and self-restraint from Satan’s desires. A Presbyterian minister of the city suggested “a man’s soul needs a time when it can get away from business,

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<sup>21</sup> *RNL*, 15 April 1911.

<sup>22</sup> Shepherd, *Avenues of Faith*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 206.

<sup>24</sup> *RNL*, 11 April 1911.

<sup>25</sup> Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 12, 104-105.

the cares, the worries, the temptations of the world and hold communion with its God.”<sup>26</sup> Wells’ theater upset this desired peace.

Within days of the religious community’s protests, Wells apparently wished to capitulate to their demands. Rumors circulated throughout the city that he wanted out of the deal, but was locked into lease agreements with the U.B.O. and Wallerstein and forced to pay the rentals whether workers completed construction or not.<sup>27</sup> It is difficult to determine the validity of this report, since Wells virtually stayed mum on the situation. Wells, as will be explored later in the chapter, had already tested the limits of religion and commercialism when he challenged old-standing blue laws while operating the Idlewood Amusement Park. Wells probably believed, like some, that this portion of the city was turning over to business, but treaded lightly on pushing the matter, as he knew the influences of the religious community on public opinion and feared future economic backlash.

On April 20, 1911, the church committee, Wells—who traveled down from his booking headquarters in New York—Wallerstein, and the architects, met behind closed doors in the prestigious Academy of Music, which housed the showman’s regional legitimate stage offices. A mutual agreement of silence added speculation to the then-sensationally bandied about story that the theatrical interests were poised to render a new plan of attack and negotiations had failed. The only details to leak out of Wells’ camp confirmed destruction of the standing building lying on the proposed construction site. Within a week, news surfaced claiming the city council was in favor of creating the 150 foot ordinance to stop the theater. The source of the speculation was never identified, but a prominent member of the board of alderman reassured the public any such

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<sup>26</sup> Shepherd, *Avenues of Faith*, 93.

<sup>27</sup> *RNL*, 11 April 1911.

bill would be “killed.” “I have talked with five other members of the board this morning and they are all opposed,” the board member divulged to a *News Leader* reporter.<sup>28</sup> Some on city council, however, favored construction and its potential economic benefits to the city. A prominent member of the board of alderman predicted the area of the city would “be given over to business soon” and rationalized he’d like to see a theater constructed rather than a department store, since the former would be closed on Sunday and not attract customers at all hours of the day. He summed up the general climate of the city as favorable to Wells’ plan, affirming “The business people are for the theatre as a body, as are the majority of citizens.”<sup>29</sup> Entrepreneurs like Wells, however, had to tread carefully between competing interests of business and religion.

On May 4, 1911, the vestryman penned a letter to city council, which they made public, supporting the 150-foot protection boundary as “wise,” “expedient,” and “conducive to the public morals of the welfare of this community.”<sup>30</sup> Presumably the group asked Councilman Mills to sponsor such a bill, and three weeks later the ordinances committee of city council met to discuss the matter. For three hours, the council debated the measure in the committee room, a new location to accommodate the mass of religious supporters in attendance. A number of local religious leaders took part in the proceedings, with only Wallerstein’s attorney, James W. Gordon, representing the interests of the playhouse. The law passed the committee in a unanimous vote. As expected, the June meeting of the city’s common council passed the ordinance into law as expected with only three members of the board in opposition.<sup>31</sup>

Noteworthy here is the coming together of Protestants and Catholics in the city to preserve the status of place against amusements. In his study of the religious climate of

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<sup>28</sup>“Theatre People Scorn Ordinance,” *RNL*, 03 May 1911.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> “Vestryman Approve Anti-Theatre Ordinance,” *RNL*, 6 May 1911.

<sup>31</sup> “Theatre Ordinance is Recommended,” *RNL*, 23 May, 14 June 1911.

Richmond during this period, Shepherd maintains the city's Protestant population possessed a "radiated hostility" toward the Roman Catholic Church. This resentment was rooted in basic religious differences, nativism, and anxieties concerning a political religious machine which was shared by many nationwide.<sup>32</sup> These fears took on added dimensions in the city, and many others in the South, when regional conditions such as a small immigrant population and strict observance to separation of church and state were taken into account. In Richmond, Catholic leaders tended to isolate their churches from organized community religious activities and spoke openly of their opinions concerning Protestants' intolerance and fanaticism, further souring the relationship. A couple of priests earned the adoration of local Protestants in recognition of their role in city-wide social reform activities, but the only events outside opposition to the Lyric that the two sides joined forces for were a soup and bread line during the Spanish Flu epidemic and a Memorial Day service following the end of World War I.<sup>33</sup>

The most significant impact of the Lyric challenge is that it united the religious community to pressure city authorities to draw up a resolution restricting theatrical operations to a defined zone, promoting sanctity of place over commercial interests. In 1913, two years after Wells' challenge, one of his future business associates, but current competitor, Moses Hoffheimer, proposed plans to build a motion-picture theater in the historical Church Hill area of the city, a mile east of the Broad Street business district. The historic neighborhood was anchored by St. John's Episcopal, the oldest church in Richmond and a historic landmark, which welcomed several sessions of the Virginia Convention supporting the American Revolutionary War.<sup>34</sup> Similar to the churches adjacent to the Capitol, the neighborhood prided itself as a sacred

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<sup>32</sup> Shepherd, *Avenues of Faith*, 206.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 217.

<sup>34</sup> The church is the famous site of Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty, or give me death," protest, and welcomed

place, as evidenced by its name and its position overlooking the city, symbolic of its religious influence over the community. Hoffheimer believed the city ordinance barring Wells did not apply to "high-class moving-picture theaters" specifically, since the types of theaters were not strictly defined in law. When the prospective entrepreneur approached city council with an amendment to the bill allowing for his plans to develop, the Church Hill residents and a "large delegation of church folk" emphatically opposed it, fearful the neighborhood would turn into "Theatre Hill."<sup>35</sup> Their opposition prompted council to strictly define a safe-zone where all theaters could operate, partitioning a section of the city bounded by Laurel and Eighteenth Street and Marshall and Main streets, essentially enclosing the commercial district where Theater Row already resided.<sup>36</sup> In addition to outing the church as hypocritical because of some films they had exhibited, an incensed Hoffheimer chastised the business community for not supporting his plans. "I hear the ministers have voiced their protests," railed the impresario, "I have yet to hear of business men raising their voices against the building of churches and restricting the career of the minister."<sup>37</sup>

Wells, in fact, publicly backed the residents of Church Hill. In addition to avoiding any more conflicts with the religious community, it was in Wells' best interest to oppose a competing theater in the neighborhood, since a large contingent of the regular "motion-picture" fans frequenting the Colonial, the "Colonialgoers," resided there.<sup>38</sup> The business community at large shared similar motives and was fearful the new venue could potentially draw customers away

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hundreds of Colonial leaders in opposition to British rule. For more information on the Church Hill neighborhood see, Virginius Dabney, *Richmond: The Story of a City* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990).

<sup>35</sup> "Hoffheimer to get Rehearing on Theatres," *RNL* 2 May 1913.

<sup>36</sup> "Ordinance on Theatres is Signed," *RNL*, 17 May 1913; "An Ordinance", *Ordinances and Certain Joint Resolutions of the City Council of Richmond*, 7 June 1911, The zoning also allowed for building in a small district within Manchester on the city's south side, where a small commercial district with theaters existed. The law stayed in effect until the 1920s with the construction of Byrd Theater in the Carytown section of the city.

<sup>37</sup> "Hoffheimer wants to Know Reason why," *RNL*, 6 May 1913.

<sup>38</sup> *RNL*, 10 December 1913.



from the main thoroughfare of the commercial district. The rezoning efforts awarded to Church Hill's desire to preserve the sacredness and symbolic status of place associated with the neighborhood physically reinforced the link between theaters, the commercial district, and the mutual relationship underpinning the city's economic and cultural promotion. Wells also did not want to alienate patrons over the issue of place, since he had multiple businesses in town and still wished to be respected as upholding morals, just like his running of clean baseball teams or introduction of polite vaudeville.

### **The Sabbath**

One issue virtually every commercial entertainment entrepreneur like Wells confronted in the South was the honoring of Sabbath laws. Throughout the 1700s and 1800s, communities nationwide passed statutes banning a wide range of leisure or business activities on the holy day to preserve time and space for religious service, rest, and reflection.<sup>39</sup> The rise of new amusements near the turn of the last century spawned the amendments of many “blue laws” to specifically outlaw entertainments such as theater and moviegoing and the playing of sports. In the South, evangelism inspired communities to enforce and regulate Sunday activities more than other regions. Historian Arthur Schlesinger, for example, locates a growing secularization in the North by the turn of the century, forcing many Northern cities to ignore specific statutes.<sup>40</sup> Increasing outlets of popular culture threatened the moral fabric of the evangelical lifestyle in the South, challenging traditional practices of virtuous teachings through not only the church, but also the sacredness of the family unit, the home, and domesticity. New technologies and secular

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<sup>39</sup> Sunday closing laws, first enacted by British Parliament in the mid-1600s, restricted work other than labor of “necessity and charity.” Federal, state and local governments in America adopted similar statutes in the late 1700s, defining more specific measures delineating acceptable activities throughout the nineteenth century deemed essential, like transportation or vital service measures.

<sup>40</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City, 1878-1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 333-336.

activities promoted new customs and values which manifested social change and threatened to usurp the cultural hegemony maintained by the church. The threat was so profound that cultural historians understand the emergence of popular culture in the region as one of the primary motives fueling evangelism's shift from disciplining individuals and congregations to policing society's behavior at large.<sup>41</sup> In particular, motion pictures, and the threat they posed to Sabbath laws in the region crystallized the fundamental questions facing the New South: what values and traditions should be upheld or discarded, and who was to reconcile such differences?<sup>42</sup>

Upholding blue laws became a symbolic gesture in an escalating battle of identity politics where the religious community pursued a discourse of increasing marginalization as cultural guidance. Shepherd finds strict observance of Sabbath laws as one feature establishing a "sacred path of grace" in urban religious cultures throughout the region to combat everyday occurrences usurping Protestant power, which as a Richmond Methodist layman remarked in 1909, "...a struggle in the city to keep from moral and spiritual bankruptcy."<sup>43</sup>

Wells was one of the first businessmen in the South to openly challenge Sabbath laws in the courts, as they pertained to commercial entertainments. On Sunday, July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1906, he and employee George W. Puckett were charged by Henrico county officials for operating a circle swing on the property of the Idlewood Amusement Park, a trolley park located adjacent to the city-owned Reservoir Park on the periphery of downtown Richmond. Wells purchased Idlewood earlier in the year through the newly incorporated Richmond Amusement Corporation, making the park one of five "mechanical wonderlands" he operated in the mid-1900s.<sup>44</sup> Spending more

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<sup>41</sup> Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 189-192.

<sup>42</sup> Goodson, *Highbrows, Hillbillies, and Hellfire*, 97.

<sup>43</sup> Shepherd, *Avenues of Faith*, 84.

<sup>44</sup> *Wells v. Commonwealth*, 107 Va. 834, Virginia Reports: Reports of Cases in the Supreme Court of Appeals in Virginia, Vol. CVII, June 1, 1907-March 1, 1908 (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperd, 1908), 834-843; Local ministers urged officials to step in and arrest Wells, *RD*, 31 May 1906.

than \$85,000 to lease and refurbish the park's collection of rides, attractions, and shows, Idlewood opened to big crowds during the summer, drawing upwards of 20,000 visitors on Independence Day alone.<sup>45</sup> In order for the park to sustain profit, however, Wells required it operate on Sundays, similar to his other parks in Norfolk, Atlanta, Birmingham and Nashville.<sup>46</sup> Wells opened the park unmolested on Sunday, June 1<sup>st</sup> 1906 and continued operating on every Sabbath without disruption for seven weeks. He heedfully waited until 4:00 p.m. to open the gates, so as not to interfere with religious services; he also banned the sale of alcohol, and operated machines which were found inoffensive, including the Mystic Shute, Carousel (of which he turned the music off), Roller Coaster, and Hale's World Tour. Tried, convicted, and fined by the county circuit court, Wells appealed the case to the Virginia Supreme Court questioning the criminality of the Sunday observance statute and its enforcement.<sup>47</sup>

In 1900, Richmond's clergymen organized the Sabbath Observance League to investigate local violations of blue laws and lobby local authorities to better implement existing statutes. The group's activities sprouted a vigilant community which increased the evangelical resolve in the local area. In 1901, for example, the Observance League legally shut down some local saloons breaking the law, and led a city-wide campaign warning storeowners against conducting Sunday business. In 1904, in response to the Observance League's actions and increasing religious pressure, the General Assembly amended existing Sabbath Laws, making offenses criminally punishable and open to fines. This augmentation allowed for Wells' arrest. Although Henrico County's Justice of the Peace, James T. Lewis, apprehended more than sixteen of Wells'

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<sup>45</sup> *RNL*, 05 July, 1906; 25 February 1911; Carlton Norris McKenney, *Rails in Richmond: The History and Technology of the Street Railways of Richmond, Petersburg, and Hopewell, Virginia* (Richmond: Old Dominion Chapter, National Railway Historical Society, 2002), 114.

<sup>46</sup> Wells had just recently purchased Ponce de Leon in Atlanta and operated some amusements on Sunday. His resort at Ocean View in Norfolk operates on the Sabbath for more than two years prior to the Idlewood challenge.

<sup>47</sup> *Wells v. Commonwealth*, 107 Va. 834, 834-843; *RD*, 23 July 1906.

employees and two newspaper reporters on location to report the impending events, Wells and Puckett were the only violators charged. Lewis ordered the former to pay a mandatory \$2 fine in addition to a peace bond of \$300. Several weeks later, Wells defended his actions through the press. “I am not trying in any way to be overbearing, or to over-ride public sentiment,” the amusement operator contended “I simply want to know if I can run innocent amusements here on Sunday...so that they [Richmond area amusement seekers] will not be forced to go away from the city on Sunday to find it.”<sup>48</sup> Wells’ comments show he still wished to portray himself as a moral businessman.

Wells’ challenges to the Sunday regulations and the controversy it stoked reveals a society wrestling over the intensity and proliferation of evangelism’s embrace to teach and shape social behavior. Early challenges like the “Idlewood case” queried the boundaries of the social ethics movement in regards to public policy, law, and civil rights. Upholding the region’s enduring belief in a strict separation of church and state, in addition to fear of splintering denominations and upsetting wealthy donors, most white Protestant leaders shied away from political conflicts.<sup>49</sup> Virginia’s Sunday law at the time, as contained in section 3799 of the code, specifically stated it was not based on “any religious tenet or belief, and cannot be solely as one of a religious measure, but solely as one of police regulation on the ground of public policy.”<sup>50</sup> Sabbath regulation in regards to popular culture challenged this stance.

Throughout the region, ministers, denominational leaders, and religious groups openly pressured civil authorities to criminally persecute Sabbath violaters. When rumors swirled following Wells’ trial that religious leaders urged authorities to take action against the showman,

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<sup>48</sup> Shepherd, *Avenues of Faith*, 95; *RNL*, 23 July 1906.

<sup>49</sup> Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 172-174.

<sup>50</sup> “Jake Wells fined \$2” *RNL*, 02 November 1906.

debate followed. “A Law prohibiting Sunday excursions is unconstitutional in its motive,” a “workingman” penned in reference to the Idlewood case. “It is an attempt to use the power of the State to enforce upon one class of citizens the religious opinions of another class.”<sup>51</sup> He continued, “The preachers have a right to preach that it is wicked to go on an outing on Sunday. They have no right to enforce their teaching with a policeman’s club. If they can persuade people to abstain voluntarily from Sunday outings, that is their privilege. But it is wrong for them to ask of the legislature to compel men to take their advice.”<sup>52</sup> Evangelicals countered such attacks through a flood of editorials in local papers and many ministers incorporated the case into weekly sermons. “It does seem to me that this so called ‘Sunday innocent amusement’ is conducive to and encouraging a spirit in our age to forget that the Sabbath should be kept holy and not made to be a day of amusement and frolicking,” wrote churchgoer George Benson. “I voice the sentiments of nearly every Christian when I say we the people of Richmond would be a thousand percent better off if we did not have Idlewood if it is going to be allowed to run on Sunday.”<sup>53</sup> Rev. Maxey of Union Station Methodist Church warned the congregation of the evils of Idlewood, proclaiming “The downfall of every civilized nation that has failed began in neglect of the sacred day.”<sup>54</sup> One devout local woman even pressed authorities publicly to consult the Bible when deciding Idlewood’s fate.<sup>55</sup> The religious community’s concerns hint at supporting a spiritual space, rather than condoning specific rides or shows presented at the park.

In the spirit of New South economic development, Wells’ primary defense advocated the fiscal rewards generated for the community. He believed that on average 2,000 area residents patronized Sunday-opened parks over one hour away through popular rail/amusement travel

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<sup>51</sup> “Workingman and Sunday Outings,” *RNL* 02 June 1908.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *RNL*, 30 July 1906.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *RNL*, 1 August 1906.

packages, and were spending on average \$3 to get to their destinations.<sup>56</sup> The consumers Wells imagined were of the laboring classes. Although advancement in worker's rights and improving incomes allowed for greater leisure time, many lower to lower-middle class amusement seekers worked on average five-and-a-half to six days a week, leaving Sunday as the only day for rest, relaxation, and business transactions. This reality often divided southern communities and emerged as the central sticking point in religious debate concerning Sabbath observance and leisure.

Wells largely avoided the religion/policy breach in his defense in Henrico circuit court, instead confronting the letter of the law and the code's wording. "A good many ministers are of the opinion that only churches should be open on Sunday," Wells confided, "but there are others, more liberal minded who think the laboring people should have some rights, and that the working man and his family should enjoy innocent pleasures on Sunday."<sup>57</sup> Virginia's code of 1904 contained language almost universal throughout the region, defining violation of the law as work performed outside of "necessity or charity" indispensable to preserving "life, limb, and health or property of one's self or family...."<sup>58</sup> Wells questioned the nature of work itself. He claimed if providing work to employees at places like Idlewood to help support their families is not charity than his understanding of charity was uncertain. Wells also advocated respectability, maintaining the amusements could be operated in a dress suit, since the tasks consisted primarily of managing an electric switch. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, he also singled out the educational benefits of motion pictures in his defense. Referring to the operation of the Hale's World Tour, Wells said "it wouldn't be a bad idea if all of the schools in the State instructed their

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<sup>56</sup> *RNL* 23, 24 July, 02 November 1906; The two parks Wells implicated were located in West Point and Buckroe Beach in Hampton. Both were over 60 miles away by rail.

<sup>57</sup> *RD*, 23 July 1906.

<sup>58</sup> *RNL*, 2 November 1906.

pupils from these scenes...there is only about one percent of the people who will ever travel through the country that is graphically pictured by these slides.<sup>59</sup>

Wells also touted several large cities in the region which allowed “pleasure parks” to operate on Sundays as alternative spaces of leisure or with special conditions. Record of the detailed testimony does not exist, but Wells probably discussed circumstances surrounding his management of Ocean View Park in Norfolk, and Ponce De Leon Park in Atlanta. In the port city, officials allowed for some amusements to operate on the Sabbath to help combat the evils of prostitution, despite some pressure from local church groups.<sup>60</sup> In Atlanta, the Evangelical Ministers Association worked tirelessly in the mid-1900s to prevent Ponce de Leon Park from operating on Sundays by appealing to the city criminal court to shut the park. Wells, who in 1903 first leased the outdoor theater located on the premises, the Casino, and in 1906 purchased the park outright under the auspices of the Ponce de Leon Park Association, dodged any closure. To soften religious criticism, in addition to shutting down potentially offensive rides, Wells offered “sacred concerts” each Sunday following local services, and volunteered the Casino free of charge to local ministers wishing to use the space as a pulpit.<sup>61</sup> Shockingly, the religious community’s failure to mobilize in strong opposition against Wells may have allowed for Sunday operations. The Reverend A. R. Holderby of the city divulged to an *Atlanta Constitution* reporter that not “one half of the churches will make any protest” against Wells’ perceived desecration of the Sabbath. He continued, “Many church members are mixed up with the street railway company and so it will not do to attack a great minded corporation...it is bad enough the street railway should control the city, but far worst when it is allowed to control the churches and

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<sup>59</sup> *RNL*, 25 July 1906.

<sup>60</sup> Lindvall, “Cinema Virtue, Cinema Vice,” 96-97.

<sup>61</sup> *AC*, 04 July 1905, 04 June 1906.

throttle the gospel.”<sup>62</sup> Even religious leaders were not immune to New South economic investment.

Despite Wells’ spirited defense in the Richmond case, the jury found him guilty after only ten minutes of deliberation. In addition to a \$2 fine, the court placed Wells under a \$5,000 bond for one year, which he appealed. Wells’ appeal reached the Virginia State Supreme Court the following year, but failed to address any advanced reform to the constitutionality of blue laws. In *Wells v. Commonwealth*, Wyndham R. Meredith, the showman’s attorney, ultimately sought for the appellate court to define whether Idlewood constituted an “offense against morality and decency” as written in the code, which would have had major repercussions for public amusements. The court, however, sidestepped the larger issue, instead using the case to clarify the criminality of the law, the penalty imposed, and methods of forfeiture as set forth in section 3799 of the Code. Wells ultimately won his case because of a technicality in the code, which stated if the accused was charged with a misdemeanor then forfeiture could only be recovered by criminal warrant, whereas if the crime was not deemed as such, penalty could only be imposed by civil warrant.<sup>63</sup> Henrico authorities had failed to charge Wells with a misdemeanor yet pursued and pushed through forfeiture. More far-reaching, however, was Wells’ circle swing operator George Puckett’s appeal against paying the fine himself, which also reached the state appellate court. Justices reached the opinion that the employee, and not the employer, was liable for any penalty imposed because of violation of the Sabbath law. The Idlewood case upheld the Sabbath law against mediums of commercial entertainment, and crushed Wells’ potential for profit. He sold the park within the year, and lost nearly \$72,000 of

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<sup>62</sup> AC, 8 May 1905.

<sup>63</sup> *Wells v. Commonwealth*, 107 Va. 834, 834-843.



his original investment.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, throughout his career, Wells would have to gauge when to fight his battles both legally and in the minds of the consumers.

### **Motion Pictures and the Sabbath**

The growth and popularity of motion pictures presented some of the greatest challenges to regional Sabbath defenders, demanding that Wells and other showmen confront evangelical hegemony and outdated public policy. By the early 1910s, cinema emerged as the prime mover for religious protest movements seeking to preserve Sunday observance in many Southern communities. Historical research, such as Gregory Waller and Steven Goodson's case studies of Lexington and Atlanta, discusses cities embroiled in a struggle of "status politics," revealing communities anxiously pursuing a balance between modernity and traditionalism with the opening of theaters on the holy day. Exploration into Jake Wells Enterprises allows for an exceptional channel to analyze the evolution of this struggle against forms of public amusements, in particular the changes made in the religious communities' opposition. Analyzing further the events surrounding the opening of theaters on Sunday in Atlanta reveals drastic shifts in defense of blue laws by Protestant leaders, emphasizing rhetorical strategies of provincialism over religiosity, and increasing discourse regulating consumer behavior.

By the early 1910s, evangelical culture identified a maturing consumer culture and commercialization of the Sabbath as the main factors infringing on the region's standards of faith and worship. Many workers in the urban South, under intense economic development, flaunted some blue laws preventing specific commercial activities. In 1907 in Richmond, for example, Protestant leaders launched an investigation into businesses violating the Sabbath and reported

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<sup>64</sup> "Receivership for Idlewood Park," *RNL*, 10 September 1908.

44 stores in the city operating one Sunday.<sup>65</sup> In 1911, because of a backlog of permits “besieging” city hall, Atlanta’s mayor announced an end to special Sunday work permits “except in cases of pulling an ox out of a ditch.”<sup>66</sup> These pressures were intensified by the region’s maturing consumer market, increasing wealth, and growing number of outlets providing commercial entertainments. The rapid growth of motion pictures and their relevance to the commercial district of Southern cities raised anxiety levels for most Sabbath defenders. They feared their influence over the economy would unleash a domino effect where Sunday openings would persuade other businesses to adopt similar operating procedures. In July 1907 in Richmond, for example, religious leaders urged lawmakers to limit retail clothing and furniture stores hours outside Theater Row on Saturday nights, but without success. They feared the late closing times set at 11:00 pm caused worshipers to be tired and inattentive in service, or led to their absence all together.<sup>67</sup>

Large-scale battles between exhibitors, Sabbath defenders, and authorities took place in most of the region’s larger cities, including Memphis, Houston, Montgomery, Jacksonville, Birmingham, and New Orleans.<sup>68</sup> In 1913, controversy gripped Atlanta when theater owners planned the first organized effort to operate on a Sunday. On March 9<sup>th</sup> 1913, S.A. Lynch, the infamous owner of Southern Enterprises, a subsidiary of Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, which attempted to monopolize exhibition in the entire region later in the decade, applied to city hall to open his newly purchased Peachtree Theater on the Sabbath. Pledging to donate any proceeds to charity and promising to exhibit pictures religious or educational in subject, a host of

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<sup>65</sup> Shepherd, *Avenues of Faith*, 95.

<sup>66</sup> *AC*, 28 January 1911.

<sup>67</sup> *RNL*, 23 July 1907.

<sup>68</sup> *Nickelodeon*, June 1912; *AC*, 22 March 1913; Goodson, *Highbrows, Hillbillies, and Hellfire*, 96.

other exhibitors requested the Mayor's permission and were approved.<sup>69</sup> Most exhibitors cited economic growth and increased business for the community, particularly from outlying factory workers who only received Sunday off from work, as justification for opening.<sup>70</sup> Others tapped into paternalistic sympathies and social uplift concerns citing that Sunday operations would keep the lower classes from engaging in other immoral activities. Similar to the majority of regional legislation, authorities could only stop exhibition legally if the pictures or venue contributed to a disorderly or immoral nature. The Mayor tapped several religious leaders to monitor each venue and assure that they did not violate "religious observance of the day." Nine of the city's eleven theaters dedicated to regularly showing motion pictures opened their doors at 2:00 pm free of charge to huge numbers. An official tally showed 44,106 patrons attended, and reports suggested on average there was a wait of 15 to 20 minutes to sit down. All proceeds collected through charity donation boxes located in the lobby minus operating expenses were given to two families of recently killed firefighters. The press reported crowds were "orderly" and composed of "all walks of life," including a number of local dignitaries.<sup>71</sup>

Wells' Bijou Theater, now showing motion pictures with small-time vaudeville, was one of two houses not open that Sunday. The other venue, the Vaudette, closed because the manager was out of town, but no explanation can be located as to why Wells' theater remained dark. Wells may have been a bit cautious because of his past history challenging religious leaders, or maybe he wished to see how events unfolded and the community reacted before assuming any

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<sup>69</sup> Goodson outlines the Atlanta motion picture Sabbath challenge in great detail, see: *Highbrows, Hillbillies, and Hellfire*, 94-107. Montgomery, the seller, attempted to open the previous Sunday and charge regular admission but was promptly shut down by police.

<sup>70</sup> AC 18 March 1913; *Atlanta Georgian*, 17 March 1913. Isolated openings of commercial businesses occurred regularly in the city.

<sup>71</sup> AC, 17, 22, 24 March 1913.

economic risk. Whatever the reason, Wells opened the Bijou the following Sunday to support the exhibitor's charity drive to help tuberculosis victims.<sup>72</sup>

When news spread that exhibitors planned to make Sunday showings a regular event, many Protestants reacted disapprovingly. Oakland City Baptist church members, for example, pledged to boycott the theaters in the future.<sup>73</sup> The congregation of St. John's Methodist passed a resolution urging the mayor and police board to stop future "Sabbath desecration."<sup>74</sup> Dr. Bricker warned the exhibitors they risked losing "100,000 church members as patrons...and with them the entire public will ultimately lay down on you."<sup>75</sup> Associated Charities set up a motion-picture show at Wesley Methodist to accommodate supporters of the boycott.<sup>76</sup> Dr. Dunbar Ogden of Central Presbyterian believed the movie men were operating a "scheme," taking a percentage of sales with nearby stores benefitting from the large crowds; "commercial greed is their only aim," professed the Doctor.<sup>77</sup> Despite ramped up protests, an estimated 30,000 people attended the secular outlets. Spectators were treated to religious pictures such as *The Star of Bethlehem* and *The Crimson Cross*, in addition to educational and scenic films like *Glimpses of Montana*.<sup>78</sup>

Unlike in some Southern cities, the religious community in Atlanta was divided between those embracing the benefits of modernity versus those upholding traditional belief and cultural practices. Many churches, for example, utilized motion pictures for religious instruction. In 1913, prior to the Sabbath challenge by local exhibitors, Wesley Memorial Church exhibited films of religious content during Sunday evening services, which preceded Rev. W. R. Hendrix's

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<sup>72</sup> AC, 17 March 1913.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> AC, 18 March 1913.

<sup>75</sup> AC, 22 March 1913

<sup>76</sup> AC, 08, 17, 18, 19 March 1913.

<sup>77</sup> AC, 24 March 1913.

<sup>78</sup> AC, 22 March 1913.

sermons praising the medium. Finding film a “great adjunct to interesting services” the pastor praised film for the “vivid touch” it offered for making “lasting impressions” of religious instruction.<sup>79</sup> Later in the spring the Methodist church began offering free Sunday afternoon screenings for “instructive entertainment” of the congregation.<sup>80</sup> Dr. George L. Hanscom, pastor of the Gate City’s Central Congregation church presented a pro-cinema sermon praising the medium’s “educational and instructional force” despite his central role in previously prohibiting Sunday openings of motion picture theaters in Jacksonville, Florida, another city within Wells’ network.<sup>81</sup> Others praised the medium’s potential for social uplift, similar to many exhibitors. Dr. W. W. Memminger, of All Saints’ church in Atlanta approved of Sunday exhibition. As long as the venues continued their charitable operating procedure, the minister believed cinema served “a crying need in the city” for recreation which would divert “much mischief-making.”<sup>82</sup> Waller finds a similar impulse driving pro-cinema advocates in Lexington, who feared idleness and other forces may potentially urge one to partake in dangerous entertainments.<sup>83</sup> Religious leaders perceived the potential for film to lure in more potential worshipers.

A shifting urban religious culture and address of the notion of cosmopolitanism were the main forces driving a wedge between religious supporters and opponents of upholding the Sabbath law. Goodson and Waller both emphasize modernity as a threat to traditional cultural authority of Protestants as the primary opposition to exhibitors violating blue laws. As one Atlanta minister believed, the negligence represented a “bastion of moral order in a nation giving way to spiritual bankruptcy.” He feared the city would assume mores and behaviors found in New York City, where one minister claimed his “wife could not walk alone a block on

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<sup>79</sup> “Moving Pictures Precede Sermon,” *AC*, 13 January 1913.

<sup>80</sup> *AC*, 08 March 1913.

<sup>81</sup> *AC*, 16 March 1913.

<sup>82</sup> *AC*, 17 March 1913.

<sup>83</sup> Waller, *Main Street Amusements*, 130-132, 185-190.

Broadway after dark without being insulted.”<sup>84</sup> A newspaper editor in Lexington, quoted by Waller, perhaps best reveals the church’s guidance slipping as a result of modernity. “Lexington is not a cosmopolitan city. It is a peculiar town. To an unusual degree it preserves the tradition of pioneer days, when the church was the center of social life.”<sup>85</sup> Few religious leaders championed motion pictures as evidence of civic progress of New South economic and cultural development at exalted levels like pro-business advocates. The Ponce de Leon discussion noted above supports the fact that some opponents may have been swayed by direct commercial interests. Yet others believed modern culture and the urban environment could function in balance with traditional ways.<sup>86</sup> Dr. Hanscom, of the Central Congregation, in fact, opposed strict interpretation of blue laws for Atlanta specifically because of its “cosmopolitanism.” These proponents recognized the urban culture’s diversity in population and social class and the need for alternative beliefs and activities. Protestant churches in the era used modern practices and specialized interest to fashion interdenominational activities and foster religious diversity under the umbrella of evangelism. Some Protestant leaders even offered support for the Jewish community, which was in favor of Sunday showings with special conditions.<sup>87</sup>

A characteristic missing from previous historical research into the topic of cinema and challenges to Sabbath laws is the church’s rhetorical move away from religiosity to sectionalism to curry support.<sup>88</sup> The perception of nationally circulated motion pictures as more difficult to alter and produced with the masses in mind made it more susceptible to a “foreign” stigma when compared to other popular amusements. Wells and his peers could easily deactivate an amusement ride they found threatening, or alter live entertainment they deemed harmful and still

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<sup>84</sup> AC, 22 March 1913.

<sup>85</sup> Waller, *Main Street Amusements*, 131.

<sup>86</sup> AC, 16 March 1913.

<sup>87</sup> AC, 25 March 1913.

<sup>88</sup> Waller, *Main Street Amusement*; Goodson, *Highbrows, Hillbillies, and Hellfire*.

potentially operate within any boundaries deemed acceptable by Protestant culture on Sundays. Motion pictures, to some critics, lacked these freedoms. Cinema therefore teased out the link between regional identity and evangelism to underpin spiritual and moral excellence. Speaking out against the Atlanta exhibitor's actions, Dr. John E. White of the Second Baptist church reminded the community, "The south is today the leader in the conservative observance of the Sabbath, and we do not wish to see this custom departed from." He continued, "We represent southern ideals and the safeguard of the southern moral standards which have been left to us by our southern forefathers....the city occupies a position of influence, and any action she takes will send her impression abroad. Atlanta is a city set upon a hill."<sup>89</sup> Similar to the preservation of religious character and symbolic power through the prevention of the construction of vaude-film and motion picture theaters in Richmond, White channeled a similar identity via the power of place born out of a shared regional history to build social and civic solidarity. Moreover, the rhetoric of sectionalism masked increasing levels of political interests religious leaders assumed over cinema's threat to blue laws and, in most communities, probing into methods of film censorship.

On March 30, 1913, entering the third weekend of charity shows by Atlanta's exhibitors, City Attorney Mason ruled the theaters closed, and proprietors, who had been lobbying for the prospect of Sunday show for profit, were told their ultimate goal was unattainable. Weeks later, Alderman James W. Maddox presented an ordinance to city council banning Sunday exhibition outright, even if for charitable reasons. When the Maddox ordinance came up for vote in the general city council meeting, members rejected it almost unanimously. Alderman Nutting, the leading voice against the ban, ironically cited religion's use of moving pictures as the primary

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<sup>89</sup> AC, 22 March 1913.

reasoning to discard the law. He declared the ordinance would force the closure of church exhibitions on Sunday, which had increased in number as an alternative site for community boycotters.<sup>90</sup> Whether swayed by economic growth or encouraged to preserve personal liberties, the city council's motivating factors are unclear. Ironically, city council also tapped into sectionalism by way of the Lost Cause to soften their decision in the eyes of the religious community. They pointed out that any ban may be fuel to shut down the city's Cyclorama, a 358-foot-long rotating, cylindrical painting complete with music, narration, and three dimensional figures detailing events of the Battle of Atlanta, which operated for profit unabashed on Sundays for years. Its closure, in fact, would have cut \$5,000 from the city coffers.<sup>91</sup> Lost Cause and a shared history identified by place mediated differences between pro-business and Sabbath supporters.

Throughout the mid-1910s, Wells and other exhibitors remained targets for Sabbath defenders when operating for charity. John A. Manget, a wealthy Methodist layman, swore out warrants against Atlanta exhibitors on multiple occasions in his crusade to prevent a "wide-open Sunday."<sup>92</sup> In 1916, he charged Wells and five other managers for violating the Sabbath observance. Wells operated the Bijou and Lyric for twenty six Sundays in a row to benefit a host of charities related to World War I. Manget attempted to prove that Wells pocketed charitable donations for profit in an act of criminal activity. "This so-called charity feature is misleading rot," Manget claimed. The layman claimed to have evidence exposing that only 10% of money

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<sup>90</sup> AC 22 April 1914.

<sup>91</sup> AC, 22 March 1913.

<sup>92</sup> AC, 29 February 1916.



taken from the contribution boxes went to various charity groups.<sup>93</sup> Nothing ever came of the charges. Sabbath in Atlanta and most other regional cities weakened some during the Great Depression, as increased need for charity allowed many critics to turn a blind eye to Sunday operations. Blue laws gradually disappeared throughout the twentieth century.

As Goodson and Waller argue, the Sabbath struggle against motion pictures altered perceptions of cinema for many in the region, and acted as a stepping stone to increased concerns over censorship by the religious community in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Indeed, in Atlanta, Richmond, Memphis, and other cities Wells operated in, religious communities intensified their desire to control the content of cinema and pressured local authorities to establish censorship boards through the energy and mobilization of Sabbath defense. This opposition could not be realized, however, without redeeming the church's power and cultural identity through preservation of the urban landscape which served as a public reminder and form of public history to religion's authority over the community. Religious leaders wished to physically contain the threat of modern amusements before attempting to alter it from within.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, Out of the theaters cited, Wells' Bijou and Lyric were the most populated day-to-day. Although Manget did not specifically cite which theater he had evidence against, the \$75-100 collection figure seem to suggest it was one Wells' since during testimony it was acknowledged that the Victoria, a theater roughly half the size of the Lyric and Bijou, collected on average \$25.

## CHAPTER 7

## CREATIVE DESTRUCTION AND THE INDEPENDENT EXHIBITOR

From 1916 to 1919, following Wells' region-wide conversion of the majority of his large theaters to motion-picture houses, the showman, primarily under the auspices of WWV, targeted at least four Southern cities in an attempt to corner film exhibition: Richmond, Norfolk, Atlanta, and Savannah, Georgia.<sup>1</sup> In the summer of 1916, for example, Wells controlled six moving picture theaters in Richmond: the Bijou, Colonial, Isis, Odeon, Strand, and Little.<sup>2</sup> In March 1918, he acquired the 300-seat Victor Theater on 800 East Broad Street. Exactly one year later, Wells purchased and renovated the 440-seat New Theatre, a moving picture house located at 206 East Broad Street. That same month he demolished the old Colonial (the first Bijou) and started construction on a planned 1,900-seat picture palace, which had been delayed for nearly two years due to complications attributed to World War I. The larger more elegant theaters—the Colonial, Bijou, and Strand, which held more than 1,000 patrons apiece—were first-run houses ranging in price between ten, 15 and 25 cents with 50 cent box seats. The Odeon and Isis, which both sat close to 500 patrons each, were ranked as second-run houses. The Little, Victor, New and others

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<sup>1</sup> Richmond: Colonial, Lyric, Bijou, Strand, Odeon, Isis, Savoy, Victor, Academy, Little; Norfolk: Granby, Strand, American, Majestic, Colonial, Academy, Wells; Savannah: Bijou, Arcadia, Odeon, Folly, Savannah, Colonial; Atlanta: Rialto, Odeon, Strand, and Vaudette, *AC*, 14 March 1917; “Wells, Wilmer, and Vincent Letterhead, 1917” Nathan Appell Papers, Box 54, Folder 14, Harvard Theater Collection, Harvard Depository, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>2</sup> In December 1915, Wells purchased the old Lubin Theatre located at 808 Broad Street, formerly a vaudeville and nickelodeon theater built by Sigmund Lubin in 1909, and converted it to a moving picture theater named the Isis Theatre. One month later, in January 1916, Wells purchased the Superior Theater an old nickelodeon theater on N. Sixth Street between Broad and Grace, renovated it, and renamed it the Odeon. Later that year, in May 1916, he converted the Strand and Little Theatres to moving picture houses, both located on the one hundred block of W. Broad Street. In addition to the motion picture theaters, Wells still owned the Academy that housed stage productions in conjunction with high-class moving pictures, and owned the Lyric Theatre on 903 E. Broad St., which he constructed in 1914 to house Keith vaudeville performances.

operated as third-run venues, and opened at five and ten cents.<sup>3</sup> Wells wished to monopolize exhibition and duplicate the same financial safeguards he had achieved through controlling a variety of classes in live theater, where some venues operated solely to diminish risk and cover overhead for the entire operation. Moreover, he hoped to benefit from his knowledge of local tastes and his regional status as an amusement mogul in the transition, as he had in his past endeavors.

The profitability of this strategy looked bright for Wells, as many cities in the region appeared to have a thriving motion picture community. In 1916, the local press declared Richmond to be “movie-crazy,” reporting theater attendance estimated at 100,000 admissions each week.<sup>4</sup> Two local companies even published moving picture periodicals containing actor profiles, reviews of upcoming features, and advertisements of local theaters: *The Richmond Moving Picture Magazine* and *Screenland*.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as the cinema seemingly flourished, several forces converged to stifle Wells’ growth and financial stability, including the industry’s vertical integration, World War I, censorship concerns and a host of local challenges.

Wells, like many other independent exhibitors of the era, fell victim to the entrepreneurial forces of what Josef Schumpeter terms “creative destruction,” or the dynamic evolution of innovation capable of generating dramatic improvements to the quantity and quality of goods and services in a capitalist economy. New infusions of capital and technological advances allowed companies to form new levels of competition which offered advantages to consumers beyond price competition and local peculiarities. For Schumpeter, big monopolies were key

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<sup>3</sup> Hampton, *A History of the Movies*, 172. In 1919, the Strand served as the city’s theater for legitimate stage productions for one year, as the Academy closed for renovations.

<sup>4</sup> *RNL*, 13 April 1916.

<sup>5</sup> Fuller-Seeley, *Celebrate Richmond Theater*, 40-41. *The Richmond Moving Picture Magazine* was formerly the *Richmond Playgoer* (1907), a theatrical periodical published in the city. *Screenland* was produced only in 1916 and 1917.

ingredients to this transition. Hollywood's vertical integration provided new levels of control over the manufacturing and distribution of film, generating new consumer expectations and benefits which signaled the emergence of "mass culture." The institution of block booking, blind bidding, run-clearance zones, and other corporate strategies situated Wells and other entrepreneurs outside the Hollywood studio system in a process of "industrial mutation," where the economic structure from within the industry was in the process of being destroyed, only to be replaced by a new one. In the process, the chain theaters leapfrogged independent exhibitors operating within boundaries of a commercialization culture to offer and control a product increasingly demanding desirability and need associated with commodity culture. This chapter explores Wells' reaction to this transition. It explores the many leadership roles he undertook in national independent exhibitor agencies, revealing the misguided fortunes of many members and their failure to envision overarching changes in the industry. The chapter reveals Wells' fluctuating management of the local in his struggle to compete against the growth of national chain theaters, highlighting his appeal to the local in fights against censorship, but also transgressions of racial boundaries to financially survive changes in exhibition practices. The chapter also explores Wells' attempt to satisfy the movie demands of Richmond, Virginia, a city in which he monopolized exhibition for a period of one year, during which time it was devoid of national chain theaters. Operating outside a shifting entrepreneurial window and new industrial system, Wells failed to provide the service demanded by the community, which Richmonders deemed vital to the economic and cultural constitution of the city.

Wells' troubles started during World War I, as the conflict disrupted normal operations in theaters nationwide. Moviegoers were preoccupied by longer working hours and had less available time to spend on leisure, causing attendance to drop by the tens of thousands. Some

saved money as a wartime necessity and refused to spend it on amusements, while some found moviegoing an unpatriotic act. In October 1917, a federally enacted “war tax” on places of amusement was assessed worth ten percent on all admission tickets over ten cents, further dissuading patrons with marginal finances from patronage.<sup>6</sup> In December 1917, the federal Fuel Administration issued mandatory weekday “lightless nights” to help relieve depleting coal supplies. Wells and other theater owners who depended on electric display signs lit to attract customers protested the decision, but to no avail.<sup>7</sup> In 1918, the Spanish Influenza epidemic swept much of the South. In October, for example, to help combat the spread of the virus, the Richmond public health department closed all city gathering places for nearly six weeks. During the closure, Wells lost an estimated \$35,000 to 40,000 a week from forfeited ticket sales, but nevertheless paid his employees sixty percent of their regular salary, which further stretched him financially.<sup>8</sup>

To help defeat the ills of the war, Wells engaged in business practices suggested by the industry's trade journals. He continually booked a variety of war films and other nationalistic features in hopes of profiting from the patriotic fervor sweeping the community.<sup>9</sup> Wells also supported a variety of fund-raising activities related to the war, an activity he had practiced for years to curry favor with local communities, in an effort to use philanthropic measures as successful advertising and link moviegoing to a patriotic act supporting the war effort. In June

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<sup>6</sup> *RNL*, 17, 26 October 1917.

<sup>7</sup> *RNL*, 20 December 1917.

<sup>8</sup> *RNL*, 29, 31 October, 4 November 1918.

<sup>9</sup> For example, in June 1916, Wells presented the “most talked about movie of the year,” Paramount’s *At the Front with the Allies* (1916) a documentary with pictures from the allied front. In 1917, Wells profited off *Womanhood*, *The Glory of the Nation* (1917), a film about an American heroine who uses espionage to combat an alien force that invaded New York. Wells advertised, “It will make you stand up and yell, as it is making others. AMERICA AWAKEN!” Wells was also the first exhibitor in the city to show the United States official war films. In 1918, he booked Pershing’s *Crusaders* a “pictorial history of America’s part in the great war, living history, full of human interests and patriotic thrills. *RNL*, 23 July 1918.

1917, Wells voluntarily opened the Bijou as a meetinghouse for the Red Cross committee of the Richmond Central Trades and Labor Council to discuss ways of raising money for troops overseas. In September 1917, he presented a vaudeville festival at the Academy and showed free movies in his other theaters for a day to benefit the Richmond soldiers' tobacco fund.<sup>10</sup> The following week, at the Colonial, Bijou, and Odeon, Wells collected "old magazines" from patrons which he shipped to soldiers overseas.<sup>11</sup> In consultation with every other exhibitor in the city, Wells also endorsed the Four-Minute Men organization's efforts to raise money, allowing representatives to campaign from the theater stage before every movie in an effort to sell war stamps and bonds.<sup>12</sup> Despite these charity measures, business struggled.

### **Vertical Integration**

In 1918, Wells managed over forty theaters throughout the Southeast, about thirty of which were dedicated to the playing of feature films, making him one of the most influential exhibitors in the region. His supremacy of the exhibition field, however, was cut short by the rise of the national theater chain and maturation of the industry's vertical integration. Consolidation of film exhibition, distribution, and production, similar to the theatrical or vaudeville trusts that preceded it, allowed for a select group of companies to amass great purchasing power and control over all aspects of cinema. Wells' theaters served as the building block for the rise of Adolph Zukor's Famous Players-Lasky Corporation's (FPL) dominance of theater ownership and first-run exhibition in the region. In November 1919, Wells sold 32 of his theaters, excluding

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<sup>10</sup> *RNL*, 25 August, 13 September, 18 November 1917.

<sup>11</sup> *RNL*, 13 September 1917.

<sup>12</sup> *RNL*, 8 December 1917.

ten in Richmond and seven in Norfolk, to Stephen A. Lynch, owner of Southern Enterprises, a subsidiary of Famous Players-Lasky Corporation.<sup>13</sup>

In April 1919, Lynch and Zukor had formed Southern Enterprises with the sole purpose of buying up or taking controlling interest in every profitable theater throughout the region. Their primary goal was to weaken the growth of the First National Exhibitor's Circuit, which threatened the market share of FPL films in the territory and its movement to overtake the lucrative first-run market. Wells was one of the original 26 founding shareholders of First National, a group of independent exhibitors formed in 1917, who pooled their resources together to fund production and distribution of feature films to combat the overwhelming influence of Zukor. Initially holding a three percent share, Wells secured territorial rights for first-run exhibition and distribution in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and Alabama. In 1918, despite the company's temporary success signing stars Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin, he sold his shares to R.D. Craver and Frank Fernandina for unknown reasons.<sup>14</sup> The sale possibly aided Wells in his negotiations with Lynch to save his position in first-run exhibition in Virginia. Famous Players-Lasky's infamous tactics of bullying and intimidation which guided their theater expansion occurred most egregiously in the South. Zukor used Wells' string of theaters in key southern cities as the basis for a unique buying strategy in the region, in which the magnate aggressively targeted any house showing profitable box-office returns, paying little regard to a town's population or theater size.<sup>15</sup> By the early 1920s, Southern Enterprises

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<sup>13</sup> *RNL*, 7 February 1926; *Wid's Year Book*, 1920-1921 (New York: Arno Press, 1971) 73; *AC*, 05 November 1915; *Variety*, 09 December 1919; Richmond theaters included: Colonial, Lyric, Bijou, Strand, Odeon, Isis, Savoy, Victor, Academy, Little; Norfolk theaters included: Granby, Strand, American, Majestic, Colonial, Academy, Wells.

<sup>14</sup> "History of First National," *Variety* 21 April 1926; Wells probably failed to see ample return in his investment. The First National offices demanded the Pickford films be exhibited at uniform prices, sometimes at two dollars; the higher than average prices prevented patrons from soliciting the theater despite Pickford's popularity. See "Wants More Competition," *RNL*, 17 October 1925.

<sup>15</sup> Quinn, "Early Feature Distribution and the Development of the Motion Picture Industry," 251-252.

operated over 217 properties, and the stability and influence of Wells' former theaters served as the foundation for Zukor's buying spree.

Details of the buyout are not available, but Wells probably acknowledged that he would not be able to compete against well-financed national corporations without having greater influence in the circulation of film. If he failed to sell out, more than likely Zukor threatened to build a theater in every city Wells operated to provide competition. When exhibitors failed to comply, like the mighty E.H. Hulsey of Texas who owned eight theaters in large cities in Texas and 140 First National sub-franchises stretching to Arkansas, Lynch followed through on his threat, purchasing a theater in every competing town, including second and third-run houses.<sup>16</sup> Backed by millions of dollars of Wall Street investment, Lynch could afford to rent all major films on the market each week, leaving Hulsey with few options to attract customers and destined for failure.<sup>17</sup> When Robert Moran of the *Atlanta Constitution* asked Wells why he divested of his properties in the city after seventeen years, the showman replied, "I sold out in Atlanta because I was offered the price I wanted. The time had come when I had to make a change. I either had to build and improve houses here, or to sell. To let things go as they were was impossible. And it wasn't worthwhile...I have plenty to live on, and my houses in Virginia will bring all my brother and I will need."<sup>18</sup> When one analyzes the scenario in a historical perspective, Wells perhaps enjoyed a minor victory in the fact he was able to hammer out a deal preventing Zukor from targeting the largest cities in Old Dominion. But the event certainly left a bad taste in his mouth and fears of future intrusions by major Hollywood studios, as evident in Wells' zealous participation and leadership in local and national exhibitor protection agencies

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 252-253.

<sup>18</sup> "All Worries Gone, Jake Wells Plans to Have a Good Time," AC, 20 November 1919.



who sought to improve conditions and promote the interests of independent operators. Wells' quote reveals the inferior position the maturing studio system placed him in as an independent exhibitor, and the lack of options he had at his disposal to compete competitively against national chain theaters that controlled feature film manufacturing and its circulation. The superficial makeovers and beautifying of space could not satisfy shifting consumer expectations demanding a product that many started to envision as essential to the community.

### **Protection Agencies**

Wells' national recognition in media industries and previous participation in various interest groups naturally led him to assume leadership roles in exhibitor trade and protection agencies. In May 1917, prior to the Lynch buyout, Wells invited 41 Virginia theater owners to a conference at Richmond's Murphy Hotel to create a state branch of the Motion Picture Exhibitor's League of America (MPEL), an organization "having for its object the protection of the picture industry in this State, the promotion of co-operation between exhibitors and the development of the motion picture business."<sup>19</sup> In September 1917, Wells and his half-brother Otto hosted a three-day convention at their Ocean View resort in Norfolk to spearhead regional support for a new international exhibitor protective and promotion agency. With over 200 prominent figures of the moving picture world in attendance, including 50 exhibitors and over 75 producers and distributors, Wells wooed the invitees with several "sumptuous shore dinners" and a large evening ball attended by a number of screen stars.<sup>20</sup> Wells claimed the purpose of the meeting was to "promulgate and perfect an organization of the adjacent states to be represented for the purpose of handling matters of a purely local significance" and to create a group with

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<sup>19</sup> *RTD*, 26 May 1917, *Virginia Pilot*, 26 May 1917.

<sup>20</sup> Kitty Gordon, Alice Brady, and King Baggot were some of the many stars to attend.

“more independent control.”<sup>21</sup> The convention, however, did not go over smoothly and a bitter fight emerged regarding leadership between Wells and his followers and a rival faction in the group over the election of an association president and its future relationship to Hollywood.<sup>22</sup> In conjunction with Charles C. Pettijohn, an Indiana lawyer and owner of the film exchange company Affiliated Distributor’s Corporation, Wells helped form the American Exhibitors Association (AEA), an exhibitor’s interest group void of any large moving picture producing company’s influences. As president of the MPEL of Virginia, Wells announced the branch’s removal from the national MPEL and subsequently established the first branch of the newly formed AEA. On hand at the convention were leading exhibitors from Indiana and North Carolina who followed suit. Elected president of the new AEA, Wells and other attending members cabled to other state exhibitor organizations about the AEA formation, and within hours, over 25 bodies had split ties with the MPEL and joined. The *Virginian-Pilot* commended Wells’ guidance over the association’s formation, and was impressed that he “took the lead in boldly defying the big producers.”<sup>23</sup> Under Wells’ guidance, the AEA established a lobby group in Washington led by Henry Varner, North Carolina exhibitor and editor of several Southern newspapers, successfully reducing war measure tax increases within the industry.<sup>24</sup> The AEA never achieved large-scale influence or negotiating power, but Wells funneled his leadership tactics into another, more influential national exhibitor organization of the time, the Motion Picture Theater Organization of America (MPTOA), of which the showman was also a founding member.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 8 September 1917, 1545; Hampton, *A History of the Movies*, 247.

<sup>22</sup> *Variety*, 05 October 1917.

<sup>23</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 8 September 1917, p. 1545, 15 September 1917, 1667; *VP*, 1 September 1917.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Hampton, *A History of the Movie*, 254-256, 261-263. Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 145.

Organized in 1920, the MPTOA aspired to rid member theaters of a five percent distribution tax on film rentals, to “grapple” with a lingering music tax placed on copyrighted scores, and to develop more favorable contract agreements with national producers and distributors. The group’s primary intention, however, was to eliminate unfair competition in the exhibition field, and Zukor’s Famous Players-Lasky was their chief concern. Although much of Zukor’s pursuits occurred in the South and Midwest, exhibitors nationwide grew outraged over his theatrical conquests, high rental fees, and dirty tactics. Sydney Cohen, president of the MPTOA and owner of a theater circuit in New York, even labeled Zukor as the exhibitors’ “most dangerous enemy” at the organization’s first national membership meeting.<sup>26</sup> The majority of the MPTOA’s membership consisted of small independent rural theater owners, those most threatened by the rise of large theater chains. By 1921, nearly 12,000 operators claimed MPTOA membership, which was roughly three-quarters of the national theater total.<sup>27</sup> As the unofficial leader of independent exhibitors in the South, Wells was awarded a position on the national board’s executive committee, in addition to his executive seat on the state branch.<sup>28</sup>

By 1922, the MPTOA, in addition to the Federal Trade Commission’s investigation into the Famous Players-Lasky’s monopoly, slowed Zukor down. Through constant pressuring and threats to pull Paramount pictures from MPTOA-represented theaters, Zukor promised to abandon his “rough-shod” measures of theater expansion, in particular his conquest to take over second and third-run theaters in rural markets. Believing the battle was won, many smaller exhibitors within the MPTOA fled the organization. The group weakened as a result. Many other

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<sup>26</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 3 July 1920, p.44. *Wid’s Year Book, 1920-21*, 97,191.

<sup>27</sup> Hampton, *A History of the Movies*, 263-264.

<sup>28</sup> Wells remained on the executive committee until 1926.

exhibitors, like Wells, still valued the organization's protection, as a variety of issues continued to endanger independent operators, like block booking and censorship.

## Censorship

In 1922, Wells served as the leading industry spokesman opposing a proposal for the creation of a state-sponsored censorship board in Virginia. Throughout the 1910s, Wells had led the fight to ward off numerous attempts at censorship at the local level. In addition to the fervor stirred up by cinema's threat to the Sabbath in many communities, religious leaders, women's clubs, and other Progressives grew increasingly concerned over the medium's ideological impact, particularly amongst the growing number of children attending the cinema. In February 1916 in Richmond, spurred by the recent showing of *Damaged Goods* (1914), a film about a man who is sexually awakened and contracts syphilis from a prostitute, city alderman Joseph E. Powers, urged by local Protestant leaders, drafted an ordinance establishing a local censorship board for moving pictures. The plan proposed that a board of three serve as censors: the mayor, chief of police, and judge of the juvenile and domestic relations court.<sup>29</sup> The plan was hotly debated within the city for several months. The local press denounced the proposal. The *Richmond News Leader* believed that only 20 to 30 percent of the community members were regular moviegoing patrons and that if they viewed a dangerous film, human nature would guide their future decisions and not entertainment.<sup>30</sup> Local ministers, women's clubs, and educators pressured the city council to support the measure.<sup>31</sup> The majority of lawmakers, including Mayor Ainslie, disapproved of the need for a censorship board because all films shown in Richmond

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<sup>29</sup> *RNL*, 21 February 1916.

<sup>30</sup> *RNL*, 13 April 1916.

<sup>31</sup> *RNL*, 9 May 1916. Some of those in favor of the board included: Mrs. J. Allison, of the local committee of the National Civic Federation; the Rev. E.T. McFaden, Rev. Churchill Gibson Chamberlayne; Miss Adele Clark, and W.L. Prince of Richmond Academy, to name a few.

were censored by the National Board of Review and accompanied with a review slip upon their presentation in the city. In addition, the police chief routinely inspected moving picture houses and local theater managers were always willing to comply with any warning. Concerning the civic pressure, Ainslie stated, "It should be borne in mind that the theatre is a place of public entertainment and not for religious instruction or education. I dare say that no picture could be presented here but that some fault would be found with it by someone else."<sup>32</sup> In May, city council rejected the ordinance. The mayor spearheaded the voice of opposition to the bill. He claimed that no case of film display in Richmond had contributed to juvenile delinquency in the city, and believed that the ordinance was a waste of money because it created more government. Moreover, Wells and his peers convinced officials censorship efforts were best scrutinized in the hands of exhibitors, since it was in their best economic interest to attract and not offend customers.

In 1918, reform-minded ministers and clubwomen from Richmond conveyed their desire for political censorship to state lawmakers, as they advocated to the Senate and House committees on moral and social welfare for the establishment of a three-person state-sponsored moving picture censorship board. Despite the existence of the National Board of Review, the activists believed that improved state censorship of "indecent and vicious" films would deter "crimes of young people" that are "traced to the evil influences" of moving pictures.<sup>33</sup> Richmonders led the group of advocates, as 3,000 women of the city, representing the Association of Methodists Women for Social Service, signed a petition in favor of the bill to pressure the General Assembly to act.<sup>34</sup> Wells countered the appeal by gathering moving picture

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<sup>32</sup> *RNL*, 18 April 1916.

<sup>33</sup> *RNL*, 26 January 1918.

<sup>34</sup> *RNL*, 26 February 1918.

exhibitors from across the state at Murphy's Hotel to discuss the matter. The movie men targeted the Board's potential inefficiency, contending that "Review of all films by national bodies can be accomplished more thoroughly than by three men."<sup>35</sup> A censorship board posed financial concerns for exhibitors. Not only could the board prevent a picture from showing that may be extremely profitable for theater owners, but exhibitors were also forced to pay a fee for each film censored. Focusing on such concerns, Wells roused emotions at the meeting when he cited that without a censorship board exhibitors would save "approximately \$18,000 a year in censorship tax."<sup>36</sup> Luckily for state exhibitors, the bill died, however, it would not be the last time Wells and other state theater owners would battle with Progressives over a censorship board.

By 1921, over thirty-seven states had introduced censorship legislation, including Virginia. Only five states, however, had approved the need for a board: Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kansas, Maryland, and New York.<sup>37</sup> In 1922, in reaction to the increase in legislation, a number of producers and distributors created a national trade and business association similar to the MPTOA advancing the interests of the major Hollywood studios, aptly named the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc. (MPPDA). To prevent future legislation and calm fears over film censorship, the MPPDA created a set of self-imposed guidelines for cleaner films with the support of Cohen and other MPTOA leaders.<sup>38</sup> In 1922, when legislators in Virginia raised the issue of a censorship board again, however, the two national bodies did little to help Wells and his fellow exhibitors. It was becoming clear that national organizations could do little to help independent exhibitors in the face of larger issues sweeping the nation.

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<sup>35</sup> *RNL*, 30 January 1918.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston: Little, Brown 1976), 118-119.

<sup>38</sup> Hampton, *A History of the Movies*, 297-299. Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 82-85.

In January 1922, Senator G. Walter Mapp of Accomac County presented a bill to the Virginia Senate appointing a state censorship board to “regulate motion picture film and reels.”<sup>39</sup> Similar to the 1918 attempt at state censorship, Progressive ministers, women’s clubs and educators heavily supported the bill. The 1922 fight, however, was more high profile, as nationally-renowned figures such as playwright Thomas Dixon and Canon William S. Chase, rector of Christ Church in New York and national activist for moving picture censorship, testified against and for the bill.<sup>40</sup> Debates surrounding the bill as it worked its way through both houses of the General Assembly and the Committee on General Laws hinged on moral and political arguments similar to previous beliefs for censorship needs, although some new opinions unfolded. Perhaps the most interesting argument came from Chase, who alleged that the powerful movie trusts were to blame for immoral films. “The enslaved screen needs to be set free from the despotic control of four or five producers, who for selfish profit, have debauched the morals of the world,” contended Chase. “They have prostituted the movie art and literature. They have denied the liberty of the authors, actors, artists, distributors, and exhibitors.”<sup>41</sup> In response to Chase’s assertion, Wells believed that exhibitors, not producers, were to blame because essentially they were free of the trust’s influences and solely responsible for what they displayed. Again, Wells’ logic was starting to become out of touch with the reality of the large-scale influence of producers, as he was unable to recognize the power and amount of control the studio system provided over exhibitors. Wells did not have the same freedoms to choose and alter content with the national film distribution system, as he did with theater. Wells also argued that a censorship board was without popular support and blamed Progressives like Chase for

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<sup>39</sup> *Journal of the Senate*, Commonwealth of Virginia, 1922, 133.

<sup>40</sup> Dixon also appeared in Richmond in 1918 to fight against state censorship proposal.

<sup>41</sup> *RNL*, 27 February 1922. Interestingly, Chase felt that the large producers were intimidating the congressmen who opposed the bill, for fear that “the movie trust will seek to defeat them at the next election . . .”

fanatically fighting in favor of a law that they could not fully understand. “I honestly believe that not ten percent of the people who are advocating a censorship could attend the picture theaters, even with the most rigorous censorship,” argued Wells. “[They are] opposed to public pleasure and amusements whether moral or otherwise.”<sup>42</sup> Wells’ main defense was that he and other exhibitors had it in their best interests to “secure the best pictures obtainable with the view of maintaining a very high-class clientele for their theaters.”<sup>43</sup> In fact, in February 1922, the MPTOA of Virginia met in Richmond--under the auspices of Wells--to discuss the state censorship bill in detail and agreed to “oppose the manufacture of films, which for any reason, could not be exhibited for women and girls under 16 years of age in Virginia.”<sup>44</sup> This type of paternalistic attitude of exhibitors would presumably fail in the face of audience demands for mass-circulated films. In the 1910s and 1920s, as historian Jennifer Fronc argues, censorship battles forced local and state governments and communities to reassess fundamental moral views, forcing a redefinition of the local against national threats and outside mores, as well as raising essential questions about authority.<sup>45</sup> For Wells, the battle questioned his authority beyond the control of ideological content to include his relationship to local consumer markets. The state censorship battle signaled a critical juncture between Wells, his operations, and the local business community, placing added pressures on the entrepreneur to satisfy local commercial needs and consumer desires.

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<sup>42</sup> *RNL*, 28 February 1922. Wells believed the bill was without public support and if needed could obtain over 20,000 signatures against it within a week.

<sup>43</sup> *RNL*, 27 February 1922. When interviewed by a reporter from the *Richmond News Leader*, Wells claimed “We review every picture we receive in addition to receiving reports made on it by other exhibitors, and if it does not come up to the highest moral standard we do not take it.” Wells backed his statement up by saying that “We have eliminated entire scenes from pictures at times, even at the expense of spoiling the entire picture.”

<sup>44</sup> *RNL*, 9 February 1922.

<sup>45</sup> Jennifer Fronc, “‘Local Objection’ and ‘Local Public Opinion’: The National Board of Review and the Battle against Legal Film Censorship in Virginia, 1916-1922” (unpublished manuscript, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 2010), 1-32.



Upon advice from National Board of Review advisor, Wells made a concerted effort to “earn good will among the best elements of the public” by purchasing several “small, disreputable picture houses and turn[ing] them into Piggly-Wiggly grocery stores.” He “ruefully” reported to NBR headquarters that he did “not enjoy the grocery business,” nor did he find it lucrative, but he hoped it would demonstrate that he was not a smut peddler, but a businessman who was invested in the health of the community.<sup>46</sup> The Retail Merchants’ Association of Richmond (RMA) publicly decried the censorship bill, and backed Wells in his testimony. The RMA feared that the extra financial burden on exhibitors and laborious process of review and editing would limit the class of pictures theater owners would obtain, thus placing the city in a class with “small towns and deprive its people of the best pictures.”<sup>47</sup> But the “best” films were increasingly determined by studios and audiences rather than Wells’ best judgment. This was the reality of cinema’s “industrial mutation.”

Richmond authorities backed Wells’ claim that he and other local exhibitors showed only clean pictures, as the theater owner possessed letters of support from Mayor Ainslie, director of public safety William M. Meyers, and assistant of the Richmond public schools J. H. Binford. Ainslie stated, “I have not received over a half dozen complaints from citizens in three years concerning pictures in the city, and in no instance has any manager ever declined to comply with my suggestion for the elimination of any public scene.”<sup>48</sup> Despite the overwhelming disapproval of the bill by a majority of local bureaucrats, businesses, and by all exhibitors, the law passed the General Assembly on March 11.<sup>49</sup> Not all areas of the state were as well organized or as

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<sup>46</sup> Fronc, “Local Objection; and ‘Local Public Opinion,’” 20-21.

<sup>47</sup> *RNL*, 28 February 1922.

<sup>48</sup> *RNL*, 28 February 1922.

<sup>49</sup> *RNL*, 11 March 1922. Virginia General Assembly. *Acts of Assembly* (1922), Chapter 257, 435. The bill, H.B. 346, was passed in the Senate by a vote of 26 to 13, and the House of delegates 71-0. It was signed into law by Governor E. Lee Trinkle on March 15. Any exhibitor who showed a film without the board’s approval faced a fine of \$25-50

supportive of their theater owners as Richmond was towards Wells. Virginia was the only and last state to pass a state run censorship board after the formation of the MPPDA.<sup>50</sup> Wells felt abandoned by Cohen and other leaders of the MPTOA, since they favored the MPPDA's passive approach to fighting censorship through policing the industry rather than actively fighting for independent exhibitors. Although the censorship law passed, Wells grew erringly confident in his ability to bolster support among his peers.

On October 2, 1923, enraged by the lack of support by the leaders of the MPTOA, Wells proposed a new national exhibitor association to state members at a meeting in Washington D.C., designed to better protect and strengthen relationships between theater owners. The plan was to establish a 26-member body of exhibitors with one associate representing all theater owners within specific territorial regions. The organization was designed to operate much like the U.S. Senate where each representative possessed an equal vote, which gave more authority to less powerful groups of exhibitors in smaller markets including the South and Northwest. Its headquarters was located in Washington D.C., instead of New York City, unlike the MPTOA and MPPDA, and was intended to be more influential regarding national legislation that could affect exhibitors. The body's home in Washington also freed it from any powerful producer or distributor influences, like with the recent MPTOA accord with the MPPDA concerning political censorship. Wells designed the group to be more efficient than previous national bodies.

Hundreds of exhibitors across the nation favored Wells' plan. The majority of support came from

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for their first offense and \$50-100 for each additional infraction.. The board was composed of a three-man team appointed by the governor every two years. Exhibitors were charged a fee of one dollar per one thousand feet of film reviewed for an original copy and an additional fifty cents for each supplementary reel. Any exhibitor who showed a film without the board's approval faced a fine of \$25-50 for their first offense and \$50-100 for each additional infraction. Upon the bill's approval, Wells responded, "there is nothing that can be said except that we will try to look pleasant, accept the verdict of the legislature and do everything possible to make things easy for the board of censors when it is created." See, *VP*, 13 March 1922.

<sup>50</sup> The board lasted until 1966, longer than any other state censorship body.

theater owners residing in rural areas like Michigan, Minnesota, and northern California, those who felt most alienated by the national board. A telegram to Wells from Ross D. Rojers, a theater owner from Texas, best describes the approval of the plan. Rojers cabled:

Congress will be impressed more forcibly than ever before that the motion picture industry is one of the greatest factors of this nations business. You are to be highly congratulated for the idea advanced and I consider it every exhibitors and every exhibitor organizations duty to back the plan in every way. Such a thing as politics could not enter into this proposed plan with reference to producer distributor influence being exerted. Your plan if pushed to completion will eventually result in all exhibitors being treated fairly by Congress as to tax regulations and law regulations, and will also produce an understanding between exhibitors, producers, and distributors that will result in infinite good to all. Our company pledges its support to the proposed plan and I believe every exhibitor in the South will back you up.<sup>51</sup>

On October 31, 1923, Wells launched the Motion Picture Exhibitor's Alliance (MPEA). Several influential theater owners, including Wells, addressed the attending members and criticized the leadership of the MPTOA as "shameful," noting its inability to organize exhibitors properly, lack of fight against damaging legislation, and failure to repeal the existing war tax. Wells' address focused on failing exhibitor unity and stated that the "lack of cooperation was brought about by the growing indifference of the national organization because of its lack of accomplishments."<sup>52</sup> Ironically, exhibitor disunity prevented Wells' plan from gaining ground. Many theater owners heralded the plan, but were reluctant to join because they believed that Cohen's close cooperation with the powerful MPPDA president and former postmaster general Will Hays was crucial for repealing the war tax, which loomed over the industry five years after the conflict ended and especially hurt small exhibitors. Wells' association eventually fizzled out, and he ended up returning to the MPTOA under the Allied States Organization, a separate radical

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<sup>51</sup> *Film Daily*, 26, no. 4 (October 4, 1923), 1; *Moving Picture World* 13 October 1923, 560; Telegram from Ross D. Rojers to Wells, 10 October 1923, Located in Richard Watkins Carrington Papers, 1880-1933, Box 37, Folder 2, Special Collections, Alderman Memorial Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville. Rojers owned D. F. and R. Enterprises Inc. with theatres in Amarillo, Wichita Falls, and Plainview, Texas.

<sup>52</sup> *Film Daily*, 26, no.27 (November 1, 1923), 1-2.

faction within the MPTOA that adopted a more pro-active stance for preserving exhibitor rights and privileges for smaller independent theaters.<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, Wells' fracture within the organization awakened MPTOA leaders to act with more vigor. In 1924, Cohen vowed to make the MPTOA forces more "militant and solidly placed."<sup>54</sup> Cohen lived up to his promises by directly confronting lawmakers and was successful at repealing some of the damaging legislation that harmed exhibitors. In April and May 1924, for example, Cohen, accompanied by Wells and several other confrontational leaders of the MPTOA, successfully appealed to the House Committee on Patents against legislation that would lawfully ensure the Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers' tribute upon exhibitors playing copyrighted music.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Congress finally repealed the long overdue war tax. With the rescinding of such legislation, coupled with the state's relative freedom from the chain theater invasion, the future for Virginia exhibitors looked bright. In May 1924, Harry Bernstein, general manager of Wells' theaters in Richmond, told a *Moving Picture World* reporter that because of the recent developments, "Virginia exhibitors had little to complain about."<sup>56</sup> But many independent exhibitors were left powerless by the vertical integration of motion pictures, and were forced to adapt their businesses in different ways to cope with industrial changes.

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<sup>53</sup> *Film Daily*, 28, no. 47 (May 25, 1924), 1; 32, no. 39 (May 15, 1925), 1,4; 32, no. 40 (May 17, 1925), 1. *Moving Picture World*, 31 May 1924, 562. The Allied States Association was formed in May 1924. Membership included state representation from Virginia, Michigan, Illinois, Texas, Kansas, Indiana, North Carolina, and Minnesota. The ASA was largely ineffective, and if anything, weakened objectives set forth by the MPTOA because of internal squabbling. For example, in 1924, Wells and several other allied leaders who held prominent positions on different MPTOA boards (Wells was on the executive committee), boycotted the organization's annual convention in protests over recent leadership decisions. In 1925, again the MPTOA's annual convention was marred by internal dissension when the ASA threatened to break away from the organization if their numbers on the boards were not increased.

<sup>54</sup> *Film Daily Yearbook, 1924-25* (New York: Arno Press, 1971), 609.

<sup>55</sup> *Film Daily*, 28, no. 23 (April 27, 1924), 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 31 May 1924, 562.

## Racial Boundaries

The direction Wells assumed flaunted the region's strict racial boundaries, which previously his businesses ardently reinforced. Competition against a national oligopoly, in addition to other factors, pushed Wells to seek new revenue streams. Wells increasingly targeted the region's African American consumer market and cheap labor force, subsequently challenging established boundaries of segregation and white consumer and spatial privileges in places of public commerce and entertainment.

Prior to 1916, Wells did not operate any businesses catering to an all-black clientele. But as mentioned earlier, his larger theaters throughout the region were some of the only venues in their respective cities to possess a balcony suitable for segregated seating. The space helped provide Wells, when compared to other showmen; the advantage of capitalizing on a unidirectional and unequal economic form of integration amongst the black community eager to consumer nationally circulated entertainment. A separate entrance, box office, stair case and divided seating rendered African Americans "invisible" to white audiences and maintained established social, cultural, and economic Jim Crow structures. In June 1918, as a "war-time necessity," Wells unveiled this invisibility, staffing the Colonial, Bijou, Odeon, and Isis theaters with black female ushers. In addition to saving money by paying them less, regular white employees were scarce as they assumed higher earning jobs created or left vacant by the war. Only a few patrons lobbied "objections" to management according to the press, which stated they provided "excellent service."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> "Four Movies Using Colored Girls as Ushers," *RNL*, 7 June 1918.

In 1919, the urge for white capitalists throughout the region to further exploit African Americans within the realm of an already spatially-trapped consumer market intensified. The war demanded cotton and lumber from the region in record quantities, beckoning prosperity and promising lucrative business conditions for the future. The conflict also opened the door for more Southern blacks to assume permanent and better paying jobs than in the past, providing the community more disposable income and leisure time than in previous decades. In 1919, E.V. Richards, owner of the First National Exhibitor's Circuit in Mississippi and Louisiana, urged fellow regional operators in the *Exhibitor's Trade Review* to increasingly target "that portion of the Southern population."<sup>58</sup> If the regional exhibitor could overcome the "negro problem," it would allow for better rentals, longer runs, and more profits, Richards contended. For Wells, the rise of the studio system partly forced his hand. The dilemma all white entrepreneurs faced was finding a way to address the black community, which in most small towns and city centers made up anywhere from 30-60% of the population, and ease them into a commercial market bounded by segregation without harming established social and cultural protections. As Richards suggested, more black clients not only lined the pockets of white exhibitors, but in theory would benefit white consumers as extra capital could be invested to increase the quality of pictures circulating the region, which in turn could draw greater patronage at all levels. The tradeoff was a delicate balance Wells and his peers were encouraged to confront in an emotionally charged era to uphold racial integrity.

In the early 1920s, Wells' recognition of black consumers increased considerably. By March 1921, for example, he owned three of the four large black theaters in Norfolk: the Arcade and Manhattan operated as motion-picture houses, and the Palace, with a seating capacity of

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<sup>58</sup> "Negro is Important to Development of Exhibitor Prosperity in South, Is Assertion of E.V. Richards, of First National Circuit," *Exhibitor's Trade Review* 5, no. 7 18 January 1919, 562.

nearly one thousand, housed vaudeville booked by Sherman H. Dudley, founder of the "Dudley Circuit," the basis for the successful African-American vaudeville agency the Theater Owners Booking Association which serviced the "Chitlin' Circuit".<sup>59</sup> Wells also ramped up courtship of black customers in some of his racially integrated theaters, in the process testing the region's property, economic, and intellectual rights to white power and sensibilities. The main challenge revolved around Wells' dealings in the operation of the Strand Theater in Richmond. In 1919, John Mitchell Jr., one of the city's most successful black business leaders and editor of the long-standing African American newspaper the *Richmond Planet*, purchased the building for \$113,000 through the newly incorporated Unique Amusement Corporation. Originally constructed in 1911 by Moses Hoffheimer, member of a well-established and powerful white family in the city, the luxurious 1,220 seat playhouse stood nearly a half mile from the main commercial district on Broad Street, adjacent to the all-black community of Jackson Ward. In December 1914, Wells, who at some time earlier acquired the lease to the building, converted the venue to a medium-time vaude-film house, alternating feature film programs twice a week. Although positioned on the periphery of theater row, the luxurious theater largely catered to a "respectable class" of white patrons, and was equipped with a segregated balcony to service black customers. Following Mitchell's acquisition of the venue, Wells signed a three year lease for \$8,000 a year, continuing to run the venue as a primarily white movie theater with segregated seating in the balcony.

White business leaders attempted to buy out Mitchell's lease quickly after the transaction, since they had no legal means to shut him down, but they failed. Many were upset that Mitchell's

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<sup>59</sup> "Theaters and Churches Harmonize in Norfolk," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 11 March 1921.

ownership flaunted white "right of exclusion" power embodied in property ownership.<sup>60</sup> Even though Wells was operating the space, as he always had, community members were upset over the change in theater ownership. Throughout the 1900s and 1910s, Southern cities engaged in a series of measures which demarcated physical and commercial boundaries between blacks and whites, leading to the widespread growth of segregated neighborhoods and business districts. In Richmond, public amusements played an integral role in this development. In 1906, when the *People's Pleasure Park* court case established corporate investment bodies to be colorless, more attempts were made by African Americans to establish sites of entertainment for blacks. In 1910, for example, *Billboard* reported a group of black entrepreneurs wished to build a 1,500 seat theater--the first of its kind in region--in the business district on Broad Street, but for unknown reasons the plans never materialized.<sup>61</sup> In 1911, the Vonderlehr race segregation ordinance, which was Richmond's legal measure defining residential boundaries by race, was enacted to prevent Maggie Walker, educator, businesswoman, and first African American female banker, from renting the city's public auditorium for entertainment purposes.<sup>62</sup>

Wells operated the Strand theater as a white venue with a greater courting of black patrons, as evident in the lease and newspaper reports. The agreement drawn up between Wells and Mitchell specified that if African American customers made up the majority of patrons over whites then the manager was required to shut down the performance.<sup>63</sup> Black ownership, however, was allowed to override this safeguard with consent, which occurred frequently. On 24 April 1920, for example, they collaborated to open all seating in the Strand for an entire Saturday to black patrons for a special performance of Mary Pickford's *Pollyanna*. In March 1923, they

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<sup>60</sup> Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1708-1710.

<sup>61</sup> "Negroes of Richmond May Build Theatre," *RNL* 4 May 1910.

<sup>62</sup> "City Auditorium is 'White Man's Hall,'" *RNL* 4 August 1911; the article suggests the city attorney wished to test the ordinance in regards to all private venues as well.

<sup>63</sup> "Bamboula," *Richmond Planet*, 20 November 1920.



again opened the doors to an all-black audience on three separate occasions to support fundraising efforts sponsored by the Colored Elks Club, a group in which Wells was a member of the white faction.<sup>64</sup> In May of the same year, the Elks again secured the Strand and staged a minstrel show to raise money for the publishing of Giles B. Jackson's history book *Ante-Bellum Negro of the South*.<sup>65</sup>

What is poignant about the latter instance was the Colored Elk's arrangement for "special accommodations" of white patrons, whom they hoped would attend in "large numbers."<sup>66</sup> For many whites, race mixing equated to social equality between the races, and even the greater number of blacks in the gallery raised anxiety levels for some. By the early 1920s, the racial privileges awarded to whites within moviegoing was an established exercise of power reinforcing rights attributed to whiteness both in practice and at the symbolic level.<sup>67</sup> The moviegoing experience in racially integrated theaters acted as a ritualized choreography of performance delineating notions of race and place within a culture of segregation. White and black participants knew their roles and acted them out accordingly for each other and for visitors, etching in the public's memory the power structures afforded by whiteness.<sup>68</sup> The Colored Elk's "special accommodations" potentially flaunted this ritual, and was one of a series of incidents raising anxiety levels over public segregation. In 1926, to reinforce segregated boundaries, the Virginia General Assembly passed the Assemblage Act, the only law in the nation requiring segregation in places of public entertainment and meeting halls. Although supporters of the bill pointed to an event at Hampton University in which whites and blacks shared seating at the

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<sup>64</sup> "Colored Phund Phest Program," *RNL* 27 March 1923.

<sup>65</sup> "Colored Elks to Stage Minstrels Tomorrow Night," *RNL* 21 May 1923.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Allen, "Relocating American Film History," 78-79.

<sup>68</sup> Steven Hoelscher, "'Making Place, Making Race: Performances of Whiteness in the Jim Crow South,'" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no.3 (September 2003): 657-686.

auditorium as their primary grievance, the increasing numbers and visibility of black consumers at theaters potentially intermingling with whites surely intimidated some and factored into the debate. Wells' venues were not mentioned directly, but as a vital member of the business community his actions were considered. In February 1926, the board of directors of the Richmond Chamber of Commerce, of which Wells was a member, passed a resolution refuting the measure. Wells' personal and business attorney, Richard W. Carrington, former House of Delegates member and chairman of the Richmond Inter-Racial Committee, was one of several white leaders to speak out against the bill.<sup>69</sup> Regardless, the Assemblage Act remained and Wells and other exhibitors had to back off from violating the unwritten rules against racial mixing in public places.

### **Local Monopoly**

In January 1925, Wells gained exclusive control over all tiers of the exhibition field in Richmond, after purchasing First National's first-run houses the Broadway and National theaters for \$900,000.<sup>70</sup> A reporter from the *Richmond News Leader* believed Wells' monopoly was good for movies in the city because it would "result in better service for the public and better handling of the theatrical situation here under one management."<sup>71</sup> "Monopoly of the theatrical field, therefore, does not mean that the wishes of the theater going public can be disregarded because of lack of competition," stated Wells, "but implies an extra burden on the management. As the

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<sup>69</sup> Richard B. Sherman, "The 'Teachings at Hampton Institute': Social Equality, Racial Integrity, and the Virginia Public Assemblage Act of 1926," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 95, no.3 (July 1987): 289-290.

<sup>70</sup> *RNL*, 3 January 1925. Letter from Wilmer, Vincent, and Wells Inc. to John Pryor, 24 October 1924, in Richard Watkins Carrington Papers, 1880-1933, Box 79, Folder 1, Special Collections, Alderman Memorial Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville. The acquisition gave Wells control of ten theaters in Richmond: the Academy (which still presented stage productions in conjunction with movies), the Lyric (which presented vaudeville and some movies), the Colonial, Bijou, Isis, New Victor (which he acquired from Amanda Thorpe in 1924) Odeon, National, Broadway, and the Strand (which he had recently repurchased in 1924 after letting his lease lapse in 1922, see *Richmond Planet*, 15 April 1922) the last eight showing strictly movies.

<sup>71</sup> *RNL*, 3 January 1925.

public is satisfied with the class of amusement offered, so the management prospers and vice-versa.”<sup>72</sup> Even though for years he fought to bust the trust and its monopolistic dealings, Wells believed his special management over the exhibition field in the city was possible because he understood the region’s taste and could provide the best entertainment possible. Vertical integration of the industry, the maturity of national chain theaters, and the rise of national exchange centers with increased standardization over the circulation of film doomed Wells’ efforts at profiting from his monopoly.

Within a year, many in the Richmond community grew angry and dissatisfied with Wells’ monopoly. In October 1925, a flood of editorials appeared in the local press, criticizing the quality of entertainment and service in Wells’ theaters. Many patrons believed Wells was depriving the city of early releases, and that some small towns with less than 10,000 people were getting films two months ahead of Richmond.<sup>73</sup> One patron cited Wells’ current “first-run” release, MGM’s *The Unholy Three*, starring Lon Chaney, which had played in nearby Charlottesville weeks earlier.<sup>74</sup> Another claimed to have viewed films in Berkeley, West Virginia two and three months prior to their release in Richmond.<sup>75</sup> A couple of readers came to Wells’ defense. A “Movieite,” who read the D.C. and Baltimore papers daily, defended Wells’ acquisitions, claiming he exhibited films a week before or immediately following the “high-class movie houses” of those cities.<sup>76</sup> Most likely, Wells, as an independent theater owner outside of the studio system, was not able to rent the major manufacturer’s films in a timely and consistent manner. By the mid-1920s, collusion between the top Hollywood companies allowed each rival studio to have first requests of star series or blocks of films before offering them to exhibitors

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<sup>72</sup> *RNL*, 3 January 1925.

<sup>73</sup> *RNL*, 15 October 1925. For specific examples of Wells procuring late movies see, *RNL*, 27 October 1925.

<sup>74</sup> “He Probably Reads Them,” *RNL*, 21 October 1925.

<sup>75</sup> “Thinks Richmond Late on Movies,” *RNL* 27 October 1925.

<sup>76</sup> “Defends Present Movies,” *RNL* 26 October 1925.

like Wells.<sup>77</sup> The showman's militant disposition and status in national organizations may have also hampered his procurement of major studio releases. The distribution arms of some of the large studios may have shut Wells out as an act of retribution for his past activities and outspokenness. Wells' adherence to independent exhibition policy may have also been a factor. The MPTOA encouraged members to rent films made by independent production companies to help combat the powerful trusts. Many exhibitors failed to strictly follow such guidelines because the majority of the trust's films were so popular that they needed them to draw patronage and make profits. But Wells' leadership amongst independent owners persuaded the showman to possibly strictly adhere to association principles and beliefs. Meanwhile, he risked alienating his own audience base.

Wells also refused to book the newly-released major studio films because he neither approved of nor consistently profited from their standard rental policies, which priced films based on a city's population and determined the length of the lease. Wells sent a letter out to all exchange centers and several trade papers, expressing his opposition to their failure to operate more flexibly and factor in individual exhibitor circumstances. He wrote:

It is utterly impossible for big modern theaters with large orchestras, enormous rents, and other correspondingly heavy operating expenses, to carry on if they are forced to play a picture for an entire week, when they doubtless would get fully 90% of the week's business in a three-day run. To my mind this is one of the most serious, if not vital, conditions confronting the exhibitors and the boiled-down question that presents itself is, why should the exhibitor be put to the expense of two day's operation of his theater for an amount of business that he could get in one day?<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Quinn, "Early Feature Distribution and the Development of the Motion Picture Industry," 247.

<sup>78</sup> *Film Daily*, 29, no. 4 (July 6, 1924): 1,5.

After three days of business, Wells typically failed to turn a profit with weekly rentals. In addition to poor selection, several forces could have influenced this deficiency. The city, for example, may have had too many venues in operation, or did not have a healthy movie-going public from a week-to-week basis. Wells had also lost one of his primary financial backers, and did not have sufficient capital to risk covering the overhead of his properties. Wells could not implement the multi-entertainment strategy he pursued with live entertainment where one theater could cover the losses of another. To allay any risk of further debt, he converted the National to a two-a-week policy within weeks of his takeover. The change forced Wells to show older-run films and pictures of lesser quality at the same prices he charged for the first-run productions. One customer harangued the “bug travesty” he had to sit through, a short film on the science of insects, to get to watch the “stale” feature.<sup>79</sup>

Much to the community’s chagrin, Wells also devalued the music presented at his theaters. In September 1924, Wells and the local musicians union, the Richmond Musicians Associations Charter no. 123, fell into a disagreement over pay raises for performances at the Strand. Unable to reconcile the difference, Wells attempted to employ outside musicians, but was denied when the union threatened to take the matter to national headquarters. The disagreement soured the relationship between Wells and the union, and when contract negotiations arose in the spring of 1925 concerning their employment he refused to rehire them. Wells was looking, again, for ways to save money, as the union demanded an increase in their wage scale and shorter working hours. He employed twelve “competent” organists from outside the Richmond union to perform the movie house music.<sup>80</sup> Feeling slighted by the feud, Richmond moviegoers were

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<sup>79</sup> “Movie News form the Sticks,” *RNL*, 15 October 1925.

<sup>80</sup> Letter from Wells to Richmond Musicians Association Charter no. 123, 29 September 1924, in Richard Watkins Carrington Papers, 1880-1933, Box 52, Folder 1, Special Collections, Alderman Memorial Library, University of

upset over the replacements, as the rich musical accompaniment of a ten to fifteen bodied orchestra was reduced to a single organ player. John I. Brooks, a patron of Wells, best expressed this anger. He wrote, “Besides being amazing, it is entirely unheard of, in fact very foolish. That which is the main attraction in a movie anyway—and always will be, no matter how good the particular movie may be—is the musical ‘accompaniment.’”<sup>81</sup> Wells further alienated moviegoers by diminishing the overall experience within his venues and not providing entertainment deemed essential by modern moviegoers.

What angered customers the most was that Wells failed to lower his prices despite the employment of organists, renting of substandard films, and the recent repeal of the war tax.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, one patron asked, “The older the feature the cheaper the price—we all know that. Where does the tremendous profit go?”<sup>83</sup> Utterly dissatisfied with Wells’ monopoly, the community believed a national chain theater would improve the moving picture field in the city. One theatergoer remembered the “excellent orchestra, competent and tasteful management, [and] acts of quality and beauty” the National Theatre had offered before Wells’ takeover. “When Mr. Wells got hold of it,” the disgruntled patron asserted, “good-bye acts, good orchestra, good management—merely a shell was left.” The moviegoer suggested, “What we need is to have some national chain establish a theater here and keep Wells on his toes.”<sup>84</sup> One movie fan wrote, “Wells is all right but his ‘movie’ policy is all wrong. The Richmond movie houses today are

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Virginia, Charlottesville; Letter from Richmond Musicians Association Charter no. 123 to Wells, 20 September 1924, Located in Richard Watkins Carrington Papers, 1880-1933, Box 52, Folder 1, Special Collections, Alderman Memorial Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville; *RNL*, 27 October 1925.

<sup>81</sup> *RNL*, 29 October 1925.

<sup>82</sup> *RNL*, 19 October 1925.

<sup>83</sup> *RNL*, 12 October 1925.

<sup>84</sup> *RNL*, 17 October 1925.

both dead and behind the times. It would be a good plan if someone would cut out all of the adverse comments out of the forum and send them to Mr. Wells for him to ponder over.”<sup>85</sup>

The Richmond Merchants’ Association placed even greater pressure on Wells when the group petitioned him to improve the quality of his theaters because they believed that the substandard pictures were hurting the city’s economy. As a large retail and business center, thousands of people visited Richmond every day to shop, and frequented the city’s movie theaters because they offered better films, service, comfort, and music than the smaller rural theaters outlining the surrounding areas. The Association believed the lesser quality films, lack of orchestras, and remaining high prices hurt the city’s prestige and reputation as an entertainment and commercial center, thus convincing would be visitors to stay at home.<sup>86</sup> As the association put it, “better amusements will bring larger crowds to Richmond . . . [and] will put those crowds in a happy frame of mind, and thus will encourage trade.”<sup>87</sup> The Merchants Association, which had recently pledged its support of Wells in the censorship fight, protested the State Senate’s proposed Motion Picture Admission Tax Bill, which would have raised taxes from five to ten percent on all individual admissions. The group believed the sales tax as unjust and unfair to single out a single business or industry. The group was more concerned that the taxes would further stress a fragile Wells monopoly which not only attracted business, but provided employment to many in the area. In 1925, Wells’ theaters in Richmond and Norfolk collected \$1,842,957.83 of gross receipts in total, and paid over \$100,000 to the already 5% fee.

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<sup>85</sup> *RNL*, 21 October 1925.

<sup>86</sup> *RNL*, 23 October 1925

<sup>87</sup> *RNL*, 24 October 1925.

He paid out \$490,855.16 or 26.6% of this income to employees, which in Wells' estimates contributed one-half of one million dollars annually to the communities.<sup>88</sup>

The *News Leader* also weighed in on the controversy, perhaps best summarizing the views of the business leaders in the community:

“The promotion of business as well as the satisfaction of Richmond people is involved. The prestige of the city, in the eyes of some people, is actually at stake. For there are tens of thousands of visitors, in the course of a year who come to Richmond and wish to include a bit of “good time” with their shopping or other business. They naturally expect Richmond to offer them better movies with better music, and drama of a higher standard, than they get in the smaller towns. What will be their conclusion if they go into a splendid movie-theatre and see exactly the same movie that was billed on their own Main Street when they left home? What will be their judgment of Richmond if the reels are run to the accompaniment of a groaning organ, played by a performer of modest equipment?...Are these visitors apt to go away with a high opinion of Richmond? Are they apt to boost the town and come back whenever they can? The Retail Merchants think not. That is why they are going to see Mr. Wells. And when they go, all of Richmond will stand behind them.<sup>89</sup>

After days of stalling, Wells met with the RMA and agreed in principle to offer better entertainment. Wells' ill-will towards the powerful movie trust, grudge against the local musicians union, and failure to conform to new distribution practices, impaired his ability to provide the city with the entertainment they desired and the business community needed. This must have been embarrassing for Wells, since he had always prided himself in the past as providing entertaining and morally responsible entertainment to the public. The city wished for

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<sup>88</sup> The city's Labor Council and Community Recreation Association also supported Wells in the fight against increased taxes. Leaders included: Miss Claire McCarthy of the Community Recreation Association; Mrs. J.K. Bowman, Business and Professional Womans Club; Mrs. James B. Richardson, Pres. Parents Teacher Association; Mrs. Bemiss Housewives league; Messrs. Morton and Greenway of the Labor Council; Mr. Wm. Swartzchild; Mr. Wm. A. Clark Retail Merchants; Mr Roy Dudley Richmond First Club; Mr. John Hirschberg.

<sup>89</sup> “Richmond Movies,” *RNL*, 23 October 1925.



outside competition to improve the quality of moving pictures in the area. Most notably they wanted what Wells feared most, a national theater chain house.

It was just a matter of time before the trust began moving in on Wells' control of theaters in Richmond and Norfolk, as the two cities were vital to bridging the gap between Northern and Southern theaters. By 1924, large theater chains owned nearly all first-run theaters in every city across America, with Zukor and First National making up the majority of ownership in the South.<sup>90</sup> In May 1925, Marcus Loew, owner of MGM, announced his intentions to construct large picture palaces in Richmond and Norfolk.<sup>91</sup> In June 1925, Zukor's Paramount-Famous-Player interest offered Wells \$1,500,000 for his Richmond theaters.<sup>92</sup> In May 1926, Wells sold the Wells Amusement Company and his interest in WWV to fellow business partners Wilmer and Vincent for just over \$3 million dollars: \$1.8 million for the Richmond houses and \$1.25 million for those in Norfolk.<sup>93</sup> Wells amassed a fortune from the sale of his theaters, but with it lost his status as Richmond's movie mogul, and in effect, theatrical leader of the South, as he was unable to adapt to the changing conditions within the moving picture industry due to the rise of the dominating movie trust.

Wells' failure in monopolizing exhibition in Richmond exposes a critical turn in the transition of popular culture into mass culture; one where a national market of amusements evoked commodification over commercialization. In the past, Wells had fashioned his shows and outfitted his venues to appeal to regional characteristics in an attempt to secure profit and satisfy

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<sup>90</sup> Hampton, *A History of the Movies*, 317; Quinn, "Early Feature Distribution and the Development of the Motion Picture Industry".

<sup>91</sup> *Film Daily*, 32, no.44 (May 21, 1925): 1.

<sup>92</sup> *RNL*, 19 July 1925. *RTD*, 21 June 1925.

<sup>93</sup> *RNL*, *RTD*, 7 May 1926. The sale included the National, Colonial, Broadway, Lyric, Academy, Bijou, Isis, Rex, Odeon, and Strand in Richmond and the Wells, Colonial, Strand, and American in Norfolk. Wells also owned two movie theaters in Hendersonville and one in Asheville, which were not included in the transaction. Nor did the sale include Ocean View resort. Otto went on to operate the park until the 1940s.

a general genteel aspiration patrolling the development of popular culture. The growth of the studio system, expansion of national chain theaters, and general maturation of cinema made motion pictures essential entertainment, a diversion or leisure activity that *had* to be attended or purchased. The power the industry wielded over film's circulation and national publicity made the medium essential to the economic and cultural makeup of the city.

One of the few bargaining chips most independent exhibitors believed they held against the power of national chain theaters was their appeal to and knowledge of the local, but even this leveraging could not be realized. National chains embraced the persistence of regionalism in marketing and operations to improve profitability. In Knoxville, for example, Zukor responded to the city's "regional variations" by retaining local managers of the theaters he purchased to maintain a link to local consumers and traditional cultural expressions. In 1921-23, for example, the Paramount Theater opened its doors for Protestant church services on Sundays, a tradition they continued regularly until the Great Depression. The offering mimicked strategies that prior local operators used to boost the venue's popularity and advertise the space as supporting the spiritual climate of the city, in the process masking undesirable attributes associated with commercialism. In 1922, Paramount Pictures, the parent company of Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, placed stock theatrical troupes in the Bijou and Strand in Knoxville to solicit a "revival of the theater's grand tradition" in order to restore financial stability to the holdings. Paramount, in fact, toured several stage troupes to accompany feature films throughout the region, responding to any lingering hostility to film generated by genteel culture and softening the cinema's image in the face of censorship battles and nationally publicized Hollywood star

scandals.<sup>94</sup> Wells' failure to realize any potentiality or advantage of the local under his monopoly of exhibition in Richmond shows the strategies' inferiority to overarching industrial changes.

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<sup>94</sup> Kyle Thomas, "Of Paramount Importance," 61-64.

## CONCLUSION

After selling the majority of his theater holdings to Paramount, Wells diversified some of his investments outside of theaters, including baseball and real estate development. In 1921, he purchased the struggling Richmond minor league franchise and constructed a new stadium on the city's Mayo's Island in hopes of bringing more competitive baseball to the city.<sup>1</sup> The team performed horribly in 1922, however, so he sold the franchise, although he retained ownership of Mayo Island Park and formed the Richmond Baseball Club, Inc. Without the time or energy to run the team, Wells knew he could be successful at running the stadium because it operated like an amusement house. Unfortunately, for Wells, the park became a financial burden. In June 1923, a fire ripped through the wooden grandstands at the park, causing \$20,000 worth of damage.<sup>2</sup> In 1924, Wells bought the entire island, took out a loan, constructed a modern 6,000-seat stadium complete with steel bleachers and opera-style seats in the grandstands, and renamed it Tate Field after his longtime friend and teammate Pop. The new stadium opened in 1926, but attendance at the Richmond games dropped remarkably compared to previous years; limited parking, bad seating arrangements, and the stadium's poor location were all to blame. Wells was \$42,800 in the red over the endeavor after the season. Moreover, the owners of the Richmond franchise contemplated breaking the leasing arrangement with Wells and building their own new stadium in the West End.<sup>3</sup> Like his recent collapse against the changing moving picture industry,

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<sup>1</sup>From 1906 to 1911, Wells served as president of the Virginia State League. It was more an honorary position given to him by the club owners. Wells gave the league little attention and ordered the secretary of the league to run the day-to-day operations.

<sup>2</sup>*RNL*, 9 June 1923.

<sup>3</sup>*RNL*, 14 November 1924. *RTD*, 15 April 1925, 4, 13, April 1926, 26 December 1926. Letter from Harrison and Bates Real Estate and Loans, Richmond to Wells, 23, April 1924, Located in Richard Watkins Carrington Papers, 1880-1933, Box 79, Folder 1, Special Collections, Alderman Memorial Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville. For financial debt see statements in Richmond Baseball Club, 1922-28, Box 55, Located in Richard

Wells failed at operating a modern baseball stadium, as a downtown location proved disastrous for game attendance because of the westward movement of the city's population into the suburbs.

Wells also experienced financial difficulties in his real estate investments, as he attempted to develop a string of golf course resorts. In 1924, during the heyday of his theatrical clashes, Wells was first exposed to the rest and relaxation of country club life courtesy of his lawyer, Richard Carrington. Aware of Wells' demanding lifestyle at the time, the lawyer successfully lobbied members of the Country Club of Virginia to give a membership to the exhausted theater owner. In a letter of congratulations and advice, suggesting Wells buy shares of stock in the club, Carrington expressed the need and usefulness of golf as relaxation for himself and Wells. "This life that you and I and most of us who have got a certain abundance of nervous energy is entirely too strenuous," the lawyer assured Wells. "We don't have time for meditation."<sup>4</sup> Always investing in new outlets of leisure and impressed with the peacefulness of the outdoor environment, Wells bought several large tracts of land on the Northern Neck and Glen Allen areas of Virginia and in Hendersonville, North Carolina, between 1925-1927, in hopes of constructing large residential golf neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup> Interviewed by a *Richmond News Leader* reporter after purchasing the tracts, Wells said he was "enjoying life in the open-air" and believed that "people are beginning to see the necessity for play. The hard road and the motor car

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Watkins Carrington Papers, 1880-1933, Box 79, Folder 1, Special Collections, Alderman Memorial Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

<sup>4</sup>Letter from Richard W. Carrington to Wells, 14,29 March 1924, Located in Richard Watkins Carrington Papers, 1880-1933, Box 79, Folder 1, Special Collections, Alderman Memorial Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville

<sup>5</sup>In January 1926, Wells purchased 1,100 acres in Glen Allen, Virginia and nearly 1,000 acres in Hendersonville, NC. He also owned two hotels in Hendersonville, including the Carolina Terrace and Park Hill Hotels, and two theaters, and aspired to turn the area into a tourist and resort city. Interestingly, Wells may have also been motivated to invest in golf because the game's popularity was also one of the blames for the 1926 decrease in baseball popularity in Richmond.

are persuading the man of fair-sized income to seek a salubrious climate and recreation.”<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, for Wells, the resort developments never materialized and he was saddled with trying to pay back several large loans he had received to purchase the lands.<sup>7</sup> Wells’ failure in real estate development was the right investment at the wrong time--thirty years later, the mass movement to suburbia and development of golf resorts would be highly profitable. During the 1920s, however, the automobile was still a novelty for many southerners, and the convenience of living on the periphery of the city or reaching a resort in search of rest and relaxation was limited. Wells’ new ventures away from moving picture exhibition were financial disasters.

During the winter of 1927, Wells was hospitalized for a nervous breakdown. The financial failure of his new baseball and real estate development endeavors undoubtedly contributed to the illness. Years of stress built up from traveling and battling against legislation, taxes, and separate entertainment trusts also added to his anguish. Even when Wells sold out of the moving picture industry, the constant traveling did not cease, as he split his days between North Carolina and Virginia each week, and often journeyed to New York City for business.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, the strenuous life he had led for years, compounded by recent financial failures, caused Wells to lose control of his own life.

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<sup>6</sup>*RNL*, 8 January 1926.

<sup>7</sup>The Glen Allen project never got off the ground, and in 1927, Wells sold his Hendersonville property for a loss with a half completed golf course.

<sup>8</sup>For an example on travel stress see, Letter from Wells to the Honorable D. Lawrence Groner, Judge of the District Court of the U.S. for the Eastern District of Virginia, 4 April 1925, Located in Richard Watkins Carrington Papers, 1880-1933, Box 79, Folder 2, Special Collections, Alderman Memorial Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville. In an effort to get out of jury duty, Wells pleaded, “ I am a legal resident of the City of Norfolk, Virginia, where I maintain a home and pay all of my personal taxes. I am actively engaged in the operation of a theatre and hotel and land development business in the City of Hendersonville, in the County of Henderson, in the state of North Carolina, which actually requires my personal attention, and I am forced to spend several days in each week there, and have spent perhaps more than one-third of my time there during the past several months. Anything which would prevent my presence there would involve large and serious financial embarrassment to me. My business requires my presence in New York on an average of a day or two every two weeks. Anything which would interfere with this would involve serious and heavy financial loss to me. . . .spending one-third of my time in the City of Richmond.”

In February 1927, doctors diagnosed Wells as suffering from depression. In March, holed up in a room for nearly ten days of the Park Hill Hotel in Hendersonville, another real estate investment, he grew utterly despondent. On March 16, B.M. Schaffer, a female manager of the hotel, convinced the melancholy Wells to take a relaxing spring automobile ride through the rolling hills south of Hendersonville in an effort to improve his condition. During the trip, the two pulled off the highway to pick recently bloomed flowers at a picnic stop. As the two wandered about, Wells sat down at a base of a tree and pulled a pistol from his pocket. Schaffer rushed to subdue him, but Wells prevented her from seizing the gun. He apparently muttered, "Life is not worth living," and shot himself twice in the head.<sup>9</sup> He died before reaching the hospital. Otto traveled to Hendersonville and escorted Wells' body back to Norfolk for funeral arrangements, where he was buried in St. John's cemetery. National periodicals and industry trade journals covered his death in detail, saddened, shocked, and puzzled over his suicide, and most paid a touching tribute to the longevity of his career and the fact his former holdings had become integrated into the systems of national chain theaters.<sup>10</sup>

This study has shown how Wells was instrumental in establishing and shaping the spread of public amusements and cinema throughout the region, while also examining this development in a larger social and cultural context. Using a spatial-analytic approach has provided analyses that more fully fleshes out the relationship between cinema and urban Southern societies which has been neglected in academic scholarship, particularly in the textures of everyday life and the shaping of cultural production and power. Similar concepts favoring location and geography were used to integrate theories of entrepreneurship into cinema history as a way to examine historical determinants of innovation and the institution's development in the South. The growth

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<sup>9</sup>*RTD*, 17 March 1927. *RNL*, 17 March 1927.

<sup>10</sup>*Variety*, 23 March 1927.

of Wells' circuits and theater chains improved the workings of entertainment networks throughout the region and facilitated a culture of entrepreneurship for nationally circulated amusements to flourish, ultimately allowing for the easy transition in which Hollywood established itself in the territory. Moreover, this development promoted the region's significance to national amusement industries, thus improving the quantity and quality of entertainments to circulate in the South.

Collaboration with Dixie's distinctive environments and social and cultural demands was also a force necessitating the evolution of public amusements and cinema in the region's urban areas. The configuration of a biracial society loomed large over cinema's development, and black versus white mattered more than class in determining its establishment. Sites of film exhibition emerged as modern battlegrounds to reinforce segregation and the privileges of whiteness in southern society. This study thus offers New South histories new veins of knowledge into the progression of Jim Crow in public places. Wells' story also reveals the power of the genteel over the growth of cinema in southern cities, a development which should urge film scholars to revisit and reconsider past arguments embracing theories of dominant ideology and bourgeois social control over the development of cinema. Religion emerged as the cinema's biggest opponent in the region. Wells' battle with religious leaders over defining identity experiences and related to place reveals new insights into shifting cultural practices presented by cinema and modernity. Moreover, it presents new research and avenues of study for New South urban historians examining the hyper-mapping activities and obsession with defining physical boundaries undertaken by many cities during the era. Cinema, place, and identity converged in the reception and exhibition of early Civil War films in the region as well. Motion picture theaters emerged as modern sites of commemoration to the Lost Cause, presenting a hegemonic celebration and



understanding of the war for Southerners which fashioned new historical memories of the past and new understandings of regional and national identity.

Wells' story also contributes to cinema history's understanding of the growth, influence, and significance of Hollywood's vertical integration on the economy and consumer culture of New South cities, as his attempt to control first-run exhibition outside of the studio system ultimately failed at multiple levels. Hollywood's control over the industry would provide a new level of satisfaction for the genteel and economic boosters demanding big-city status and cosmopolitanism. The studios strategically funneled profits into their control over first-run houses, and reinvested some of the money into the construction of gigantic picture palaces, signaling a new level of sophistication and homogenization with the rest of the nation. These modern, elegant theaters debuted new films at the same time as other regions, installed air conditioning, and provided new services satisfying the commercial district and customer. The studio system's polished publicity campaigns, star system, and display of conspicuous consumption further touted its benefits. The local and regional peculiarities Wells and his peers overcame introducing cinema to the region were easily appropriated by the national corporations. For the next twenty years, Hollywood's theater chains would maintain the status quo largely configured by race and religion. This, as well as their stranglehold over the industry, ushered in new forms of competition, rendering the culture of entrepreneurship which Wells had fostered obsolete to new variations.

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