THEODORE HUFF MEMORIAL FILM SOCIETY

Program for Wednesday July 3, 1937, at the Adelphi Hall, 74 5th Avenue, New York City

D.W. GRIFFITH and
THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

America
1924

STARRING

NEIL HAMILTON
CAROL DEWRSTER
LIONEL BARRYMORE

The eve of Independence Day seems to be a most appropriate time to revive Griffith's great epic of the Revolutionary War. (He himself opened the film on February 22nd, Washington's birthday.)

For comments and information incorporated into these notes, I am most grateful to

NEIL HAMILTON
MAJOR GEORGE J. MITCHELL JR.
SEYMOUR STERN

William K. Everson

****

There will be an intermission at the end of part one of "America".

****
"1776" (or "The Hessian Renegades") American-Biograph, 1909. One reel. Directed by D.W. Griffith, photographed by G.W. Bitzer, with Mary Pickford and Owen Moore.

Although "1776" is scarcely as important or obvious a blueprint to "America" as was "The Battle" to "The Birth of a Nation", it nevertheless has a basically similar pattern, winding up with the successful routing of the Hessians by a band of American rebels. 1909 was a particularly important year for Griffith; in his second year as a director he was already putting into effective his theories of dramatic cutting (as in "The Lonely Villa"), and was making films that had something to say as well as something to show ("A Corner in Wheat"). From a purely artistic standpoint, "1776" hardly represents Griffith's peak achievements in 1909; like "Deerslayer" of the same year, it is a good, smoothly told adventure story which does not try to be anything else. To Griffith, the Old West and the Civil War still held far more appeal than the Revolutionary War. It was Edison, far more than Griffith (or Ince) that was to turn out, and in considerable numbers, stories of the American Revolution.

* Erratum: we referred above to a 1909 Griffith production, "Deerslayer". This should have read "Leatherstocking".

* * * * * * * * * * * *

"AMERICAN" Produced and directed by D.W. Griffith; released by United Artists; from a story by Robert W. Chambers; adapted to the screen by John L.E. Pell; Assistant to Mr. Griffith: Herbert Sutch; photography by Hendrik Sarto, G.W. Bitzer, Marcel Le Picard and H.S. Sintzenich; editors: James and Rose Smith; art direction by Charles M. Kirk; Director of construction: W.J. Bantel; Scenic artist: Charles E. Boss.

The Cast

Nathan Holden ............................................. Neil Hamilton
Nancy Montague ........................................... Carol Dempster
Captain Walter Butler ................................... Lionel Barrymore
Judge Montague ........................................... Erville Alderson
Captain Hare ............................................. Louis Wolheim
Joseph Brant, leader of the Mohawks .................. Riley Hatch
Charles Philip Edward Montague ....................... Charles Emmett Mack
King George III ........................................... Arthur Donaldson
Samuel Adams ............................................. Lee Peggs
John Hancock ............................................. John Dunton
William Bennett .......................................... Charles Bennett
Lord Chamberlain ........................................ Downing Clark
Thomas Jefferson ......................................... Thomas Walsh
Patrick Henry ............................................. Frank McGlynn, Jr.
Richard Henry Lee ....................................... P.R. Scammon
Sir Ashley Montague .................................... Sidney Deane
General Gage ............................................. W.W. Jones
Captain Montour ......................................... E.R. Roseman
Hiakatoo, Chief of the Senecas ........................ Harry Semalls
Paul Revere ............................................... Harry O'NEILL
Captain John Parker ..................................... H.A. Van Bousen
Major Pitcairn ........................................... Hugh Baird
Jonas Parker .............................................. James Miliady

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

"America" follows basically the same pattern as "The Birth of a Nation" and "Orphans of the Storm". Taking contrasting groups of "high-born" and "low-born" characters, Griffith weaves them neatly into his historical story. The build-up is slow; political intrigue, plot and counterplot, as the machinery of war is set in motion; then a cavalcade of furious and spectacular action until the first climax - and the end of the first half of the film - is reached. Then in part two, the process starts all over again, but already from a much higher pitch, building to a mighty and typical Griffith climax of two battles intercut, one with the other, and an exciting "ride to the rescue".

The best of "America" is Griffith's best, but the film as a whole is rather below the standard of "The Birth of a Nation". Its chief fault is in the often unduly protracted love story between Neil Hamilton and Carol Dempster, which is further lengthened by comments on the seemingly hopeless love between those of "different stations". There is not necessarily too much of this footage, but it is rather badly placed at times. The "Romeo and Juliet" balcony scene - played with Hamilton on horseback - is a charming sequence, but one's attitude tends to be one of impatience, since it is inserted just as we have been prepared for Paul Revere's midnight ride -- but before the ride actually begins.

The other faults of "America" are singularly minor ones, and some were not even inherent in the original version. For example, in our black-and-white print, certain glass shots and backdrops seem not only obvious, but also unnecessary. Originally, these served a definite purpose in lighting, and probably appeared quite magnificent on toned stock. And two of the characterisations are quite poor. The blame for this must, alas, attach to Griffith rather than to the players in question. Arthur Dewey, physically well suited to the role of Washington, plays it in an aloof, stiff, God-like manner -- as though he were already President. And that lovely and very fine actress Carol Dempster, unfortunately shows that in this particular film she was merely a puppet on a string. When Griffith commands her to play a scene like Mae Marsh, she does a fine imitation; on other occasions, she takes Lillian Gish as her model. When she is on her own, her performance often seems most uncertain, which, perhaps, is understandable. Certainly this was not a question of inexperience on her part, for she was fine in "The Love Flower" (a beautiful and neglected Griffith film of 1920 that deserves revival) and was even better in "Isn't Life Wonderful?" (which Griffith made as his next film following "America", and with the same three leading players - Hamilton, Dempster and F.ville Alderson).
Incidentally, Griffith was reportedly very much in love with Miss Dempster at the time, but she did not reciprocate and turned down his proposals of marriage.

Because of the basic similarity in plot, several situations in "America" seem not unlike those in "The Birth of a Nation" — most specifically, the heroine's visit to an army receiving center for the wounded. Much of the spectacular climactic material can trace its ancestry back past "The Birth of a Nation" to Griffith's Biograph one-reelers. Those of you who remember "Fighting Blood" (a 1911 Griffith one-reeler shown by this society last year) will recognise many shots — the troop of cavalry wheeling around in a huge semi-circle, the closeups of children cowering before the onslaught of the raiders — here improved, developed, perfected, but not radically different.

As always of course, the battle scenes are the highlights of the production — and what magnificently organised scenes they are. Every extra, knowing exactly what to do, performs as an individual and not as part of a mob; heroic tabloids (father and daughter clutching each other, staring death in the face with courage and determination) and little vignettes of personal action are brilliantly interwoven into the frieze of panoramic spectacle.

The idea that eventually resulted in "America" was born in May of 1923, when the Daughters of the American Revolution addressed a letter to Will Hays, asking why no film on the American Revolution had been made. Since, in Hays' opinion, Griffith was the only man qualified to undertake such a venture, he personally suggested to Griffith that he make it. Griffith was interested, visited Lexington, Concord and other landmarks, and decided to make the film.

The bulk of the film was shot at the Griffith Studio in Mamaroneck, New York. Huge sets were flung up there — the British Houses of Parliament and the Lexington "exteriors" among them. The battle of Lexington was filmed in this studio. Other scenes were filmed at the Shirley and Westover plantations in Virginia along the James River, and in old Williamsburg. The Johnson Hall battle sequence was shot just south of Washington, and other battle scenes were shot along the Putnam County Border in New York state. Many of the locations used by Griffith are virtually unchanged to this day, and New Englanders will recognise stretches of the Boston Post Road, and glimpses of Long Island Sound, in many scenes.

The first sequences filmed were those showing Paul Revere's midnight ride to alert the minute men. This sequence alone took some two weeks to shoot, and involved many of the locales that figured in the historic ride. The Old North Church itself, and not a studio replica, was used in these scenes. The ride itself is a superbly created sequence, starting with some beautiful glass shots across the river, and moving right into the beautifully lit and photographed ride. After two or three reels of historical exposition, this is the first real action sequence and re-confirms that Griffith was still a master craftsman, despite those rather halting opening reels — and much talk from latter-day "historians" about "America" representing "Griffith in decline". The ride sequence was filmed with an Akeley camera equipped with a gyro tripod, which was mounted on an automobile that tracked along beside — or in front of — the rider. Vincent J. Farrar (who photographed many Monogram and Columbia westerns until his death a few years ago) was the assistant cameraman who operated the Akeley in this sequence.
Harry O'Neill, who plays Paul Revere, was constantly and cheerfully drunk throughout the entire sequence, but was such a fine horseman that it had no effect whatsoever on his ability to sit a saddle. The records showing that Revere's horse was a balky animal that gave Revere a great deal of trouble, Griffith went to some lengths to find a similarly obstinate horse for his recreation of the ride, finally coming up with the spirited "Leaping Danger" -- which in one scene falls over backwards on its rider.

It would have been difficult for Griffith to film the gigantic battle sequences of Bunker Hill, Lexington, Concord, Merriman's Corner, Johnson Hall -- and the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown -- without the full cooperation of the U.S. Army, and secret of war John W. Weeks authorised Griffith to use elements of the 16th Infantry, 13th Infantry and 3rd Cavalry. One of the officers in charge, working directly under Griffith, was Major Jonathan M. Wainwright (who can be seen leading the cavalry charge at Johnson Hall), who later led the heroic defense of Bataan in 1941-42, and died in 1953.

The battle scenes were staged with the maximum of accuracy and realism. (The battle lines at Lexington were duplicated to a man -- 800 British versus 77 Americans. The drum used by the Minute Men in the film is the original drum used in that battle, and the reconstruction of the skirmish is based very largely on the famous Doolittle drawings).

After the infantry men arrived at Somers, N.Y., they were put through a rigorous training schedule prior to the filming. They had to become familiar with the various uniforms they were to wear (British Regulars, Continental, Scottish Highlanders etc.) and were drilled in the complicated arms manual of the day. Using old Revolutionary War manuals, they were shown how to load and fire the old muskets. The American rebel armies of 1775 fought in close order, the front rank firing a volley and passing their muskets to the rear. The rear ranks fired, and in this way a continual fire was maintained. In the final assaults, the British charged in close ranks with the bayonet. Their charges were so dynamic and well handled that few troops could stand up to them. The Bunker Hill battle was fought by the British forming a semi-circle at the foot of the hill, and marching to the top in close ranks. On the first two assaults, the British were beaten back. Then they discarded their heavy knapsacks, advanced at a faster pace, and over-ran the American lines -- though with a loss of some 2500 men. All of this detail is repeated in Griffith's recreation of the Bunker Hill fracas, complete with General Howe's famous order: "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes!"

There is one strange omission in "America" -- Washington's crossing of the Delaware. Seymour Stern points out that this was no oversight on Griffith's part, and was done at the specific request of W.R. Hearst. Hearst's Cosmopolitan vehicle for Marion Davies, "Janice Meredith", also dealt with the Revolution War. It was a big film, but apparently not a very good one. Its action included Paul Revere's ride (Ken Maynard played Revere) and the skirmish at Lexington, but it lacked a really spectacular sequence. Hearst asked Griffith not to do the Delaware sequence, so that it could be the highlight of his picture, and D.W. agreed. No money changed hands, but when "America" was released, the Hearst papers put all their weight into endorsing it without reservation -- a token of far more value than a purely monetary one. The Delaware scene was certainly extremely well done, and on a large scale, but "Janice Meredith" was generally quite inferior to "America". (Incidentally, W.C. Fields appeared in it as a British sergeant.)
The scenes of Washington at Valley Forge were the last ones to be shot -- due to an unexpected dearth of snow. The unit had been waiting for snow far too long, and when it finally came, everybody scrambled into action so that the whole sequence could be finished as quickly as possible. By that time, the premiere date had already been set, and time was running out.

It is worth recording that all of the principal "heavies" of "America" -- Walter Buter, the monstrous Captain Hare, and the not unsympathetic Indian, Joseph Erastus -- are all completely accurate recreations of the originals, and are not "disguised" under fictional names as they were in "The Birth of a Nation". Butler was possibly the most despicable individual participant in the entire war, although one hears him maligned far less than the at least well-intentioned Benedict Arnold. Historians agree that Butler "had not one redeeming feature" unless it be his magnetism and leadership. When the British at one point set a bounty fee of $2.00 for every American scalp, Butler's renegade army went berserk collecting scalps -- and when the British considerably cancelled their offer, Butler's blood-thirsty killings went on. He was so hated and despised even by his British allies that when he was finally killed in battle, the British didn't even bother to bury him, but left him for the wolves. And this was after Col. Mark Weil (later the first Mayor of New York) had shrugged his indifference when an Indian scout, looking at Butler's dead body, had asked permission to scalp it. Captain Hare (played here by Walter Long's successor, Louis Wolheim) was an equally bloodthirsty rogue. Incidentally, Resa Royce (the first Mrs Joseph von Sternberg) has a brief scene as one of Butler's "harem".

It is true that perhaps Griffith places too great a stress on the importance of Butler in the over-all picture of the war. In the latter half of the film, Butler becomes the common enemy, and the war between Britain and America is largely forgotten. This is undoubtedly due, at least in part, to Griffith's friendship for the British, and his desire not to offend. (Griffith had been much impressed with the British since he had made "Hearts of the World" for the British Government, and especially since "Intolerance" had been presented, by request, at Buckingham Palace). As such, he bends over backwards to stress the British "code of honor" in warfare. (Actually both the British and the Americans perpetrated some pretty cold-blooded massacres during the 1776 upheavals). When "America" was released in Britain, it was further doctored however. The title was changed to "Love and Sacrifice", and a number of eliminations were made. Lafayette was taken out completely, as were references to particularly crushing defeats. Titles were re-written to suggest that there was mutual respect, and little hatred, between the two peoples. Some of the titles were masterpieces of diplomacy -- among them one referring to the war as "a civil war between two groups of Englishmen", and another exonerating the King from real blame by placing the onus on the schemers who were "guiding his hand".

Griffith's innovations in "America" are few -- but there is artistry and showmanship in every frame. The mass movements of troops (which put those in "War and Peace" to shame) make wonderfully exciting uses of the panel shot -- the CinemaScope ratio -- and when Morgan's Raiders ride off at the end, there is a superlative natural panel, the riders framed by sky and foliage.

One device that is possibly a little overdone is the multiple action shot, where, in rapid cutting, the same moment of individual action is repeated from two or three different shots. Sometimes it works well -- as in the shooting of Orville Alderson; at other times (the death of Butler) it seems unnecessary. This may be the result of the influence of the film's editor, James Smith. Neil Hamilton has remarked that Griffith had a great deal of respect for Smith's
ability and judgement, and on occasion would even follow Smith's suggestions rather than his own instincts. (Smith edited "The Bat Whispers", shown by this society two months ago).

Strangely, "America" was not a popular success. Even if it had been a bad film, one would have thought that a big spectacle about the American Revolutionary War couldn't be anything but sure-fire at the boxoffice. But it wasn't, and the jinx extended to Ford's "Drums Along the Mohawk", and MGM's recent "The Scarlet Coat" too. Probably Disney's current "Johnny Tremain", the least ambitious of them all, will prove the most successful. It's typical of Griffith though, that after the failure of "America", he didn't attempt to recoup his losses by a retrogression to "safe" pictures. His very next film was very much of a masterpiece - and an almost certain "uncommercial" item even before the cameras rolled - the lovely and sensitive "Isn't Life Wonderful?".

Serious critical analysis of "America" is almost non-existent. Few of the current historians seem even to have seen it, being content to fall back on glib generalisations about "Griffith's decline". One writer dismissed it casually as "showing the influence of "The Covered Wagon", and let it go at that -- understandably, since he hadn't seen a frame of it! It is too bad that Griffith decided to include a number of covered wagons in "America" (regardless of the fact that they were in constant use during the war), for without them, there could be no possible hint of ANY connection with that film of a year earlier. Certainly "America" shows no signs of ANY influence other than Griffith's own.

The reviews of the time are interesting, but none too reliable. It should be remembered that the film opened in the New England territory first, and that the rave notices presented by Boston, Philadelphia, Lexington and other areas involved in the war - and in the film - were undoubtedly at least partially stirred by feelings of national patriotism and local pride. We reprint them as a matter of interest, and not as examples of critical analysis. Many of the raves are of course quite justified, but it does seem a little untoward to consider "America" as a film that is "better than "The Birth of a Nation" or as "the best film ever made".

"Most stirring thing of its kind ever made. It will set a new standard of achievement in the picture play, fully as high and as commanding as did "The Birth of a Nation" ..... With it Mr. Griffith passes definitely into the ranks of the immortals, and America may once more go serenely about the development of its newest art, confident that the peer of all film directors is one of her own"... NY WORLD

Something to be remembered, something greater than even Griffith has ever done ..... NY TIMES

A masterpiece of exquisite photography and flawless direction ..... TELEGRAPH

No-one can outdo Griffith ..... NY NEWS

A masterpiece of the screen..... SUN

We have seen many big pictures, but the writer cannot recall one since "The Birth of a Nation" when we so much desired to give voice to our enthusiasm" ...... EVENING WORLD
"America" is the best picture ever made .... Quinn Martin, NY World

"America" will be acknowledged the best work of D.W. Griffith so far, and if he doesn't make a better picture, no one else will ....... Boston Telegraph

"America", a real masterpiece, literally swept the audience off its feet. No other photoplay since Mr. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation" reaches the heights attained by "America" from a patriotic and dramatic as well as artistic standpoint" ............. The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin.

The critics were kindly non-committal about Carol Dempster's strange performance. They were most enthusiastic about Neil Hamilton however, and he was described by one writer as "another - but somewhat more formidable - Richard Barthelmess".

To conclude, two short passages by noted writers:

From Rupert Hughes, novelist and historian, to D.W. Griffiths: "Your picture "America" has shaken me up and stirred me so deeply in so many ways that I must express my profound homage. You have combined so many arts so greatly that your generalship is as amazing as your infinite success with detail. There are so many thrills, heartbreaks and triumphs that it is ridiculous to praise any one thing. But the whole sequence in which the son is brought to the bedside of the father by that divine deceiver, the daughter, overwhelmed me as one of the greatest achievements ever attained by any of the arts, froom Greek tragedy on".

And Frederick Landis, famous New York journalist, adds this nostalgic "blurb" for the film's quieter moments —

Through it all there runs the golden thread of love -- of love that rebukes the impure -- of love so constant it silences the cynic; of love, that chaste element which amid all profanation, still endures - the never-resting, never-tiring redeemer of life. It makes you a little bigger, a little better, a little more American that you ever were before".

Program Notes & Enquiries: Wm.K.Everson,2166 Broadway,New York City 24, NY. Committee of the film society: Dorothy Lovell (art-work); Edward S. Gorey; Charles Shibuk.