



Bert Lytell and Betty Compson in *To Have and To Hold* (c. 1923); see page 26.

A Century of Jamestown in the Cinema

By STEPHEN PATRICK

For exactly one hundred years, filmed accounts and derivatives of the Jamestown story illustrated and romanticized this history onto the silver screen. And for this past century, Arlingtonians have enjoyed those narratives in a changing spectrum of cinematic venues.

Arlington County citizens marked the fourth century of the founding of Jamestown in 2007 through celebrations, performances, exhibits, book clubs, tree plantings, and on and on. Repeatedly, an innocent question was asked about the relationship between far ago Stuart England's colonization of far away Jamestown with the northern Virginia county of Arlington. True, Captain John Smith, leader of the colony, explored the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries in 1608, and sailed up the Potomac to the spot that now is the Arlington shoreline, but seemingly any direct connections rest there. But Arlingtonians have a far deeper and more personal connection to early Jamestown, and that history is one hundred years old this year.¹

The Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition centered on the 1907 World's Fair; a sprawling celebration near Norfolk with exhibition buildings, states' showcase houses, reenactment tableaux for the audiences, and an exuberant presentation of the American past seen through the lens of the Progressive Era historians who portrayed the American story as a steady theme focused on the rights of man and the pursuit of happiness. Perhaps some people from Arlington were fortunate to travel by train or overnight steamship from Washington to Norfolk to see the Exhibition, but many more saw it in film. Newsreel cameras captured the glorious fairgrounds and the many events in 1907 in an Edison film called *Colonial Virginia: Historical Scenes and Incidents Connected with the Founding of Jamestown*. Modern Arlingtonians can enjoy those jumpy, grainy flickering images of the Exposition at the Jamestown 2007 center today.

The ensuing century has returned again and again to the Jamestown story, and Arlington residents have viewed that story for one hundred years in many forms and places. The historical plot line was a sure fit, offering intrepid colonists guided by swashbuckling military men braving the unexplored land. Settlers confront the unknown native peoples in a strange landscape, searching for their fortunes and a permanent hold in the name of the British crown before the Spanish can claim it. Captain Smith is charged with mutiny against the company. The climate, disease and starvation nearly kill them all. In March, 1622 the Natives

rebel in warfare. And through it all, the first instance of American democratic rule is born. Added to this hearty stew of plot lines were romanticized stories of the young Pocahontas saving Captain Smith's life, quite literally with his head in her lap, and John Rolfe's romance and marriage to Pocahontas, and movie magic was born.

The timeliness and romance of the Jamestown story caught the eyes at the Thomas A. Edison Film Manufacturing Company in 1908. Director Edwin S. Porter's storyline for *Pocahontas: A Child of the Forest* sticks to the accepted legends and portrays a teenage Indian princess Pocahontas rescuing Captain Smith. She is wooed by and marries John Rolfe, who whisks her off to England where her glamorous life is tragically cut short by illness and death. The film industry was new, and the film critic was already there nipping at the heels of the makers—reportedly a critic noted that Pocahontas looked like a “Chinese ballet dancer” and the rest of the Indians had a resemblance to a bunch of vaudeville comedians.²

Arlington County residents in 1907 enjoyed a wide variety of cinemas—all in the District of Columbia. But for the price of the Washington and Fairfax trolley to Georgetown, the spectrum of film and stage show entertainments appeared at the cheap little nickelodeons, a term coined in 1905, and coincidentally countered in 1907 by Louis B. Mayer with his first “home of refined entertainment” in a new “movie palace” called the Orpheum. An example cinema advertisement appeared in the Washington Post on Sunday, November 22, 1908, for the Alhambra, located at Seventh and E Streets, NW. The ad touted the film *Colonial Virginia*, noting it was

Historically Correct In Every Detail

See the arrival of the Settlers

See the first Indians and the oyster

See the destruction of Jamestown by fire

This is positively the first time this picture has been presented. Come spend a pleasant evening. Bring the children to see the funny picture. Performances begin today promptly at 2 p.m., running continuously until 10:30 p.m.

Perhaps never again in history has the oyster been given top billing over the fiery destruction of a town, but then again, the Alhambra's tag line noted,

“5¢ - The Pictures That Are A Bit Different - 5¢.”³

Though the cinema establishments were all in Washington, DC, in 1907, a new venue had come to the Virginia side of the Potomac, quite literally at the banks. An amusement establishment opened in 1906 called Luna Park, near South Glebe and Jefferson Davis Highway. This retreat and playground featured rides, a skating rink, lagoon, dance hall, restaurant and picnic grounds, all served by the Washington, Alexandria and Mt. Vernon electric railway trolley cars. The promoters created further inducements for visits by offering such features as circuses, concerts, and of course, special showings of motion pictures. The *Washington Post* noted the free motion pictures offered at Luna Park, and in the summer of 1907, “the highest grade of animated pictures ... the park has to offer.”⁴ The movies had come to Arlington County, or more precisely, Alexandria County, as it would be known until 1920.

The popularity of the tercentenary of Jamestown created a strong popular interest in the romance of what might arguably be called the Pocahontas-Smith-Rolfe triangle, however inaccurate that might be. The 1908 Edison film about Pocahontas was followed quickly in 1910 with the eponymous *Pocahontas*, starring Anna Rosemond in the Thanhouser Film Company’s adaptation for screen. The New Rochelle, New York, film company cast actors Frank Crane as John Rolfe and George Barnes as Captain Smith in the photoplay, which was based on the 1841 poem by Lydia Howard Huntley Sigourney.

Needless to say, the popularity in film of the Jamestown story did not begin in the cinema, and the literary tradition had the story well covered before the advent of the movies. In addition to Mrs. Signourney’s poem, popular author and native Virginian Mary Johnston (1870-1936) penned a serial for the popular *Atlantic Monthly* magazine in 1899, and Houghton Mifflin published the compiled story as a popular historical novel in 1900. The story, *To Have and To Hold*, earned a coveted honor when the *New York Times* claimed it to be the best seller of the year. Johnston’s novel unfolds through the telling of a cavalier gentleman, Captain Ralph Percy, who is encouraged by John Rolfe to select a bride from women shipped from London to Jamestown. Percy selects the headstrong Lady Jocelyn Leigh, unaware that wicked Lord Carnal is on the next ship from England to claim her as his own. This melodrama was Johnston’s second novel, and like her first, *Prisoners of Hope* (1898), she combined romance and history. Her works included short stories, poetry, drama, women’s suffragist pieces and no less than 23 novels. Her 1903 book, *Pioneers of the Old South*, returned to the Jamestown theme, and the film industry eagerly gobbled her popular stories for the cameras.

New York’s Kalem Studios released a version of Johnston’s story about the seventeenth century mail-order bride business as a comedy short called *The*

Wives of Jamestown in 1913, directed by a veteran director from the Biograph Company, Sidney Olcott, and starring Kalem's two leading actors: Jack J. Clark as the lead, with his real life wife Gene Gauntier as Lady Geraldine. However, Miss Johnston's book *To Have and To Hold* became a full length feature film in 1916 by Jesse L. Lasky's Famous Players Company, the year that Lasky and his brother-in-law Samuel Goldwyn joined forces with Cecil B. DeMille and Adolph Zukor to form Paramount. It was directed by George Melford (director of *The Sheik* with Valentino in 1921) and starred heart-throb Wallace Reid as Captain Percy, while the character of Lady Jocelyn formed the film debut of a native Virginian, Mae Murray (1889 – 1965), fresh from headlining in the Ziegfeld Follies in 1915 and destined to be known as “the girl with the bee-stung lips.”

Just as the motion picture industry expanded and flourished, so did the suburbanization of northern Virginia along trolley lines and automobile suburbs. By the mid-teens, the Clarendon area family did not need to travel to the District to take in a show, and could count on at least some entertainment in the county. Miss Lillian Freele advertised in the Clarendon Directory in 1915 that The New Clarendon supplied “all the Latest Releases of Moving Pictures ... every Tuesday and Saturday Evenings [sic].”⁵ The Richmond Theater, today known as the Old Town Theater, opened on King Street in Alexandria in April 1914, and by the early 1920s the Palm Moving Picture Theatre opened in the Arlington County neighborhood of Del Ray, then called the Town of Potomac, on Mt. Vernon Avenue at Oxford Street. The City of Alexandria would not annex the Town of Potomac until 1930.

In 1922, Paramount did a remake of *To Have and To Hold*, this time starring popular leading man Bert Lytell, who later succumbed to the sound film era, and film veteran Betty Compson, who made more than 200 films between 1915 and 1948 before running a company called Ashtrays Unlimited. Nevertheless, the picture gave the best of the story line, complete with imprisonments, fake marriages, shipwrecks, pirates, duels, suicides, and virtually anything else that had little to do with the real Jamestown venture.

While Mary Johnston's original novel was doing so well in the cinema, her 1903 book, *Pioneers of the Old South*, was placed into film production and appeared under the simple title *Jamestown* on November 4, 1923, directed improbably by a man named Edwin Hollywood. The main character of Pocahontas was capably rendered by the darkly handsome Dolores Cassinelli, born in Chicago but wisely claiming Genoa, Italy, as her home. Interestingly, this was not a regular studio production, but rather was produced by the Yale University Press in its “Chronicles of America” series, and released by the Pathé Company. The four-reel featurette was never destined to be big box office, and

found itself in programs such as a church notice listed in the *Washington Post* in 1925 offering “Our Godly Heritage” with Miss Gretchen Hood, soprano, and Lewis Corning Atwater, organist, along with the “educational film” about Jamestown.⁶ Arlingtonians thumbing the papers for entertainment might have noticed that the Washington Auditorium, downtown at Nineteenth and E Streets, NW, offered the Jamestown photoplay free of charge. Claiming abundant parking space, the ad nevertheless gives specifics for Arlingtonians who would have boarded Washington streetcars in Rosslyn heading into Georgetown to take the G Street line.⁷

The first two decades following the 1907 Tercentenary celebration saw almost no end to the mania for retelling the story at Jamestown. The mind-boggling range of productions relied on a formula good for drawing audiences that enjoyed costume dramas portraying a romanticized ancient American past. Although frequently focused on adventure, as a love story, a swashbuckler, or a thriller, perhaps it is the Jamestown story as a comedy that puzzles us the most today. Hot on the heels of Yale’s American Series telling of Pocahontas came Universal Picture’s production of *Pocahontas and John Smith*, released in the autumn of 1924. This one-reel comedy short came in Universal Studio’s Hysterical History Short series. This film obviously did not contribute anything significant to the national understanding of the importance of Jamestown and the first settlers, but it earns a place in Jamestown film history.

Noting the contemporary American popular taste for history illuminates our understanding of this film craze. A sizable confluence of forces in society merged in the early and mid-Twenties, producing this golden age for the Jamestown story. The popular taste for historical romance / costume feature films embraced and drew energy from the 1907 Tercentennial Exposition that was followed by the 1920 Plymouth Pilgrims Tercentenary. Americans’ fascination with our national past grew to an immense popular craze as we approached the United States Sesquicentennial in 1926 and the George Washington Bicentennial in 1932. In this period one finds the roots of the American leisure activities that included Rockefeller’s restoration of Colonial Williamsburg in 1926 and the promotion of the Yorktown Battlefield’s 125th anniversary in 1931. American history was suddenly very big business, and nowhere more so than in Virginia.

The suburbanized middle class residents of Arlington County boomed, and they gained numbers significant enough to merit the development of full-fledged cinemas here in the county. The Ashton opened its doors in 1925 on Wilson Boulevard in Clarendon. A cinema that also had a bowling alley, the Ashton presented the county with the new trend in having a local movie house for easy access. Trips into Washington for shopping, dinner, and a movie certainly remained popular, but suddenly the residents of Arlington County

could avoid downtown traffic, or save the trolley fare. The kids could walk or ride bikes to the local theater and enjoy entertainment. Though the building of additional theaters paused for the Depression years, new theaters began to be opened by the later 1930s. Again, the Second World War halted building, but just after the war, a news article proudly boasted, "Seven Modern Theaters Give Arlington County the Latest and Fullest in Motion Picture Entertainment." These cinemas included the Ashton, plus the State in Falls Church (1936), the Wilson in Rosslyn (1936), the Buckingham on Glebe Road at Pershing in 1939, and the Arlington on Columbia Pike at Fillmore (today's Cinema 'N' Drafthouse) built in 1940. The Lee, in East Falls Church, was joined at the end of the war by the Glebe, at 2130 North Glebe Road, near Lee Highway, in 1945.⁸

The big movie palace era of the 1930s and 1940s focused increasingly on other themes in the films screened. Musicals, mad-cap comedies, and wartime thrillers diverted the national attention from the hardships the country faced, and historical dramas about seventeenth-century settlers lost currency. However, Carole Lombard and Frederic March appeared in the first ever Technicolor screwball comedy called *Nothing Sacred* from David O. Selznick International Pictures, released on Thanksgiving Day, November 25, 1937. The comedy-love story contains a theatrical tableau popular in Depression Era movies. Lombard's character, Hazel, goes to a New York nightclub featuring a big production number called "Heroines of History" who were riding on horseback. None other than our own Pocahontas appears, played by Monica Bannister, complete with a stunt double named Dorothy Rodgers. In the thirty years that film versions of Pocahontas portrayed everything from lover to heroine to comedienne, this was her first appearance as a horseback stunt rider!

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them. Inventor Charles Jenkins began a network of experimental "Radiovision" broadcast stations beginning with his television studio in Wheaton, Maryland, in 1928, and Dr. Allen DuMont opened an experimental station in Washington, DC, in May 1945. But television was only a promise for Tomorrow. However, DuMont's station began regular programming in August 1946, and was assigned the call sign WTTG-5 in 1947. That same year, Arlington's first drive-in movie theater opened near National Airport, following a new trend that had started with the first commercial drive-in that opened in New Jersey in 1933. The Lee Highway Drive-In opened in 1954, and the Super 29 opened in 1956.⁹

The Jamestown story would be there for a new era, and United Artists released *Captain John Smith and Pocahontas* on November 20, 1953 in which Captain John Smith, played by Anthony Dexter, is captured and sentenced to death, but Pocahontas, starring Jody Lawrence, intervenes and, against all historical records, is married by Smith! Smith is forced to return to England, later coming to save Jamestown again from starvation and Indian threat, only to find that Pocahontas, thinking he is dead, has remarried. Smith returns to England, perhaps leaving the audience to puzzle out the marriage's legal ramifications on the drive home. A year and a half later, hopefully the shaky historical facts were clarified for Arlingtonians who watched *Television Reader's Digest* on the ABC network on Monday, March 21, 1955 at eight p.m. The dramatization entitled "America's First Great Lady" starred Richard Ney, John Stephenson and Gloria Talbott in the Smith/Rolfe/Pocahontas roles, but how many eyes followed the story is hard to say, especially considering that Burns and Allen were on the same time slot at CBS and *Sid Caesar's Hour* was on over at NBC. Presumably Queen Elizabeth got better television ratings during her October 1957 visit with Prince Phillip to Jamestown on the event of the 350th anniversary.

If Thomas Edison's company could capture the times with the Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition in 1907, think what a difference half a century could make! Experimental filmmaker Robert Breer pressed new frontiers with his six minute Pop Art film *Jamestown Balloos* in 1957, the year of the 350th anniversary. Eleven years later he went on to win the Max Ernst Prize for this film, in which he made strong political and cultural critiques portrayed in war motifs and pinup images. Breer's short film relates to the Surrealist collages of Max Ernst, with repeating images of Napoleon, banal landscapes, and human forms with separable parts that join and fly apart in unpredictable ways. His imagery here evokes both surreal dream logic, as well as anticipating Pop Art's use of emotionally charged moving images lifted from diverse sources just a few years later. Arguably, hardly anyone in Arlington ever saw this film at the time, though it was included in the National Gallery of Art's "Cinema of the Avant-Garde: A Retrospective Review" in 1988.¹⁰

For completely different reasons, probably very few Arlington residents saw, or at least would claim to have seen, a 1961 “blue movie” called *Not Tonight, Henry*, distributed by Foremost Films and made by director W. Merle Connell, a purveyor of low-quality films shot in burlesque houses. This was apparently Connell’s great art piece, and for once he filmed in color and included a story line in which a hapless married man dreams of the great sirens of the past – from Cleopatra to Lucrezia Borgia to Empress Josephine. Now nearly fifty years old, the film is all innuendo and fade-to-black and virtually harmless, but includes one of the last film scenes of Pocahontas made until our own time. Notably, Betty Blue, Playboy’s Playmate of the Month (November 1956), appeared as a rather robust Pocahontas. The soft-porn film industry outlet in Arlington until 1982 was the Byrd Theatre at 104 South Wayne Street, opened in 1947.¹¹

In the past dozen years, with the approach of the fourth century celebration, the film industry rediscovered the Jamestown story. In 1995 Walt Disney Feature Animations released *Pocahontas*, an animated heroine role model character for times that demanded strong women, not just men, for children’s viewing. Winning two Oscars and numerous other awards, the title character both speaks (voice by Irene Bedard) and sings (voice by Judy Kuhn). The cartoon spurred a number of productions, including *Pocahontas: The Legend*, also in 1995, starring Sandrine Holt as Pocahontas and Miles O’Keefe as Smith, directed by Danièle J. Suissa. A stop-animation puppet film called *Pocahontas: The Girl Who Lived in Two Worlds* followed in 1996, a cartoon film, *Young Pocahontas*, in 1997, and Disney’s sequel, *Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World* in 1998, in which Pocahontas travels to England.

National Geographic pursued the story on television with *The New World: Nightmare in Jamestown*, appearing on television on the National Geographic Channel on November 20, 2005, just in time for the always evocative Thanksgiving. Public Television had a go at the story as well, in the award-winning investigative series Nova on May 8, 2007, called *Pocahontas Revealed*. Meanwhile, Arlington residents could choose to go to a multiplex such as those at Courthouse or Ballston, or enjoy pizza and beer at the Cinema ‘N’ Drafthouse, or stay at home with HBO or a rented DVD, and watch Collin Ferrell as Smith, Christian Bale as Rolfe, and Q’Orianka Kilcher as Pocahontas in the 2005 film, *The New World*, that portrays Pocahontas falling apart over her conflicted loves for Smith and Rolfe. Terrance Malick wrote and directed this feature, released in January of 2006 by New Line Cinema, and he fell back on old plot lines.

The events at Jamestown lent themselves handily to motion pictures. Time and again the movie and television industry has returned to the dramas, crises and love lives at Jamestown, and relied on the historical plots to offer rich story material. Arlington residents have for the past century sought out this story in

the cinema and the television, and the result is a hundred year bond between the distant events of early Jamestown and the populace of this Northern Virginia suburban county.

Stephen Patrick, an Arlington resident, is a preservationist and historian who served on the Arlington County Jamestown 2007 Committee. He was already interested in how the nation observed the Jamestown celebrations in 1907 and 1957, and was struck by the motion picture footage shot by the Edison Company at the Jamestown Exposition in 1907 showing at the visitor center this year. The concept of how Arlington residents viewed cinematic depictions of Captain Smith and Pocahontas began to take shape when he next stumbled on a reference to films being shown in Clarendon in 1915. He is grateful for the support of the Arlington-Jamestown Committee, the Virginia Room staff, and the Arlington County Historical Society.

[Editor's note: Shortly after Mr. Patrick's final corrections to this article were submitted, news was received that he had died tragically and unexpectedly. Our thoughts and prayers are with his friends and family.]

End Notes

¹ For all production titles, casts, crews and credits, refer to the International Movie Database at <http://imdb.com>.

² Hal Erickson, for [allmovie.com](http://www.allmovie.com), quoting an unnamed critic for *Variety* magazine, at <http://www.allmovie.com/cgi/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:241596>

³ *Washington Post*, November 22, 1907, p. SM3.

⁴ *Washington Post*, August 18, 1907, p. E3; August 5, 1909, p. 4.

⁵ *Clarendon Directory*, 1915, p. 4.

⁶ *Washington Post*, May 23, 1925, p. 4.

⁷ *Washington Post*, July 10, 1926, p.4.

⁸ *Northern Virginia Shoppers Journal*, August 29, 1946, p. A16.

⁹ *Northern Virginia Sun Weekly*, April 27, 2000, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Washington Post Weekend*, January 22, 1988, p. WE24.

¹¹ *Northern Virginia Sun*, September 8, 1982, p. 1.