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Boston And The Birth Of A Nation: Cradle of the Modern Civil Rights Movement
Susan Powell

In February 1915, the epic film, The Birth of a Nation, premiered in Los Angeles to an eagerly anticipating and highly enthusiastic audience. Through a flurry of racial controversy, it then opened in New York and moved to Boston, the home of the abolitionist movement and the former locale of a young idealistic pastor named Thomas Dixon, author of The Clansman, the novel that had inspired the film. Boston became the touchstone of the protest movement against pioneering director D.W. Griffith’s blockbuster film as it was released into Northern city theaters. Major newspapers closely covered the events in Boston, as did the black media, particularly the virtual African-American paper of record, the Chicago Defender. As a result, the race question, intensified by the film’s portrayal of derogatory black stereotypes and glorification of the Ku Klux Klan, was presented to the public and a racial dialogue that affected both black and white America began.

Even as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People battled The Birth of a Nation in New York, sensational newspaper ads ran in Boston announcing the April 10, 1915 opening of “D.W. Griffith’s mighty spectacle” at the Tremont Theater. The local NAACP was already preparing to get the film banned, but William Monroe Trotter, editor of Boston’s militant black paper, The Guardian, was not going to let the NAACP take the lead by muscling in on what he considered his territory. Before the movie opened, he and a force of two hundred black
citizens (including NAACP members) held a meeting with Mayor James Michael Curley, the colorful showboating politician. Griffith and his attorney also attended. The black delegation requested the Mayor ban the film “saying it would be a detriment to the negro race, causing race feeling and hatred.”\(^1\) Curley was not interested so much in the defamatory nature of the film as he was about any allusions to sexual immorality. Before he listened to any witnesses, Curley made clear the statutes regarding censorship:

> if a play, film production, or any such form of amusement is indecent, immoral or tending to corrupt the public morals, the mayor, with the approval of the police commissioner, may censor the production, and then, if both find it objectionable, the mayor may forbid its production.\(^2\)

That only three opponents had seen the film blunted the delegation’s objections. Curley himself, moreover, seemed to go out of his way to defend the film. For every argument against showing the movie, the mayor had a rejoinder. He compared Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* and its portrayal of Jews with *The Birth of a Nation’s* depiction of blacks. Trotter then gave a “lengthy and lurid” speech, reminding Curley of the support he had gotten from black voters. Speaking for the film’s defenders, John F. Cusick, attorney for the photoplay company, gave Curley the official report from the National Board of Censorship that praised the movie for its educational and artistic value. Cusick then revealed that “the first production of this photoplay was in the East Room of the White House, before President Wilson and the members of his Cabinet. They declared it wonderful.”\(^3\) According to the press, the blacks in the chamber began to hiss loudly. Two police officers had to maintain order as Cusick

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\(^1\)“Negroes Hiss Wilson’s Name,” newspaper clipping, *D. W. Griffith Papers*.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid.
disclosed that not only had the President thought the film wonderful as well as educational, but that the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, his colleagues, and a number of congressmen also saw the picture and praised it, too. This revelation brought even louder hissing from the opponents. Griffith and Cusick then used their main defense of the film; a justification they and their defenders would use for the next sixty years: the biggest villains in the film were white men and only two villains out of six were “colored.” Griffith pointed out that protests like the NAACP’s could mean Indians had the right to protest Westerns where they are shown as killers of white men. Griffith cleverly read letters from the Knights of Columbus and Catholic priests in New York who wanted to take the children of their parish schools to see the picture. Griffith told Curley he would eliminate the notorious scene in *The Birth of a Nation* of the black renegade Gus’ intended rape of Flora Cameron if the mayor wanted it. Curley then announced,

> My power is limited in this matter. I do not want to make political capital out of it, and I do not want to hurt a legitimate film doing business. You people seem to want everything pertaining to the negro cut out of this picture. Are there not good negroes and bad? Are there not bad whites as well as good? Do you want the assassination of Lincoln cut out? Why, the white people of the country would protest that. You must remember that history cannot be denied.”

4 Ibid.

Trotter interrupted Curley’s condescending speech by again reminding the mayor how the black citizens of Boston had supported him in the last election. Curley replied that the film would open as scheduled, but that he would have a municipality censor present at the show as well as the Police Commissioner’s censor in order to see if the film violated the law. If it did, it would then be banned, but, at that moment, he said there was
He disingenuously claimed he was personally staying out of the decision.

*The Birth of a Nation* premiered before a packed house that “sat for nearly three hours more dazed than anything else by the spectacle;” a work of art so “wonderful and so beautiful, and so full of life that it robs one of the power of criticism.” The review rhapsodized Griffith’s artistic genius and power. The press disclosed that although Griffith may have feared a hostile reaction, he instead found a very appreciative Boston audience. During an intermission speech, he told the spectators that when he heard their applause when Dixie was played, he realized that “we are all Americans.” The next day the official censors reported to Mayor Curley that they “concur in the conclusion that the photo play entitled ‘The Birth of a Nation’ is not ‘obscene or immoral or tends to injure the morals of the community.’” However, to placate the black community with the “fullest possible measure of justice,” Curley requested certain offensive scenes be eliminated. But Trotter and his colleagues were not satisfied, telling Curley that they still found the film objectionable and that they were also refused tickets at the box office. The mayor agreed that the film was an insult to the black community and “that had he had the power he would stop the play at once,” but that there was “nothing more he could do under existing laws” and it was now a “case for the courts.”

Mayor Curley’s political compromise satisfied Trotter not at all. On April 17, he led about five hundred black activists to the Tremont Theater where they attempted to break up the evening screening of *The Birth of a Nation*. The police had received advance notice that “colored men were

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6 Ibid.
to make a demonstration on the theater” that evening and had stationed 260 uniformed and plainclothes officers around the theater and Boston Common. When the management refused to sell tickets to the black men, they began to crowd into the lobby. Trotter was arrested at the ticket window when he vigorously demanded that he be allowed to purchase a ticket.9 Trotter and his cohorts, including several white men, “assumed such an attitude” that he and five others were arrested and charged with disturbing the peace.10 While being led away, Trotter was punched in the jaw by a police officer.

The treatment of Trotter and the continued showing of the film outraged Boston’s black community. The next afternoon, for more than three hours, over a thousand men and women met in Faneuil Hall while an overflow of five hundred gathered in the square outside to hear speeches denouncing The Birth of a Nation. Speakers included Trotter, J.C. Manning, formerly a black Republican of the Alabama legislature, 85-year old Franklin B. Sanborn, who had helped to finance abolitionist John Brown, and Michael J. Jordan of the Irish National League. Ministers of Boston’s leading black churches were also on the platform, as well as Rolfe Cobleigh, an editor of The Congregationalist, the magazine of the National Congregational Churches. Trotter began by attacking Mayor Curley, who had defended oppressed races while a Congressman, “yet finds himself unable to stop a play that is objectionable to the colored race, now that he is Mayor.”11 Curley was repeatedly hissed and jeered by the crowd, as was Woodrow Wilson. Franklin B. Sanborn declared that Thomas Dixon and D.W. Griffith were distorting history by asserting that the nation was

Klux Klan as the founding fathers instead of Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson. *The Birth of a Nation* would “prove to be the birth of Hell and damnation in this country,” declared J.C. Manning. To loud cheering he claimed that while the film shows a black man pursuing a white girl,

> I can go to Montgomery, Ala. tomorrow and find 300 white men chasing colored girls and they will not be prosecuted by the law. These pictures are a part of a propaganda to destroy the spirit of liberty in the North and to enable the old slave oligarchy to dominate in the Nation once more. They reflect on every virtue and sacrifice of the North that made it possible to preserve the Union.

When the meeting ended, the protestors agreed to meet at the State House the next day to petition the governor to ban the film.

The next morning, in a scene that would become familiar fifty years later, two thousand people singing “Nearer My God to Thee” marched up Beacon Street to the state capital, where Trotter and sixty supporters were admitted to see Governor David Walsh. A negotiation was worked out with Trotter that if the municipal court, under a 1910 blue law, found any part of the film to be obscene, immoral, lewd, or have a tendency to injure the morals of the community, then the film would be prohibited. The Governor also pledged to recommend to the state legislature “the immediate passage of a law prohibiting the production of such plays.” Trotter triumphantly announced the decision to the waiting crowd, which dispersed peacefully and all demonstrations planned against the theater were cancelled.

On April 21, Judge Dowd of the Municipal Court ruled that the scene of the white girl leaping from a cliff to escape her black pursuer was

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
an offense against the existing law and unless the scene was eliminated within twenty-four hours, he would issue warrants for all those concerned with the production.\textsuperscript{15} The rest of the production he ruled within the law. Yet this ruling was pointless, since the management of the theater had already agreed to cut this scene on request of Mayor Curley. Curley naturally took credit for the elimination of the offensive scene in hope of deterring rising criticism among his black constituents.

The only option left to protesters was censorship legislation. Several different measures went before the Legislative Committee on Judiciary which, in essence, would control theatrical productions. Opponents of the film wanted the power of censorship in the hands of the Chief of the State Police while advocates wanted the mayor to have sole authority in such cases.

The NAACP began lobbying the legislature to vote for their version of the censorship bill while continuing to hold meetings within Boston’s black community. Eight hundred black women formed a protective league, “one of the largest gatherings of colored women ever assembled in this city,” in order to join the fight against \emph{The Birth of a Nation} and “for the maintenance and protection of our civil rights.”\textsuperscript{16} Two large mass assemblies were held on May 2, 1915. The first meeting, under the auspices of the NAACP at the Tremont Temple, featured only white speakers. At the same time, another meeting on the Boston Common included nearly two thousand people who heard black ministers declare “they prefer death to continued production here of ‘The Birth of a Nation’ and predicted ‘disgraceful scenes in Boston’ if the play is not

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\item \textsuperscript{15} “Fight is Taken to State House: Court Will Not Stop Birth of a Nation,” \textit{Boston Daily Globe}, April 22, 1915, 1.
\item \textsuperscript{16} “Colored Women Form a League,” \textit{Boston Morning Globe}, April 26, 1915, \textit{DWG Papers}.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
The next two weeks witnessed more meetings and more pressure on the legislature by Boston’s NAACP, black congregations, and ordinary citizens. Finally, on May 20, the State Senate enacted the bill that would make the Mayor, Police Commissioner, and Chief Justice of the Municipality the official censorship board. Protesters then petitioned the three-member board to stop performances of the film. On June 2, 1915, after forty minutes of deliberation, the censor board members “having given full consideration to the entire subject, have decided that the license of the theater should not be revoked or suspended.” Trotter tried in vain to meet with the censors. He then had to relay the news to his supporters that the film would continue to be shown. Disillusioned, black opposition thereafter essentially collapsed. Although blacks still picketed the film and police kept constant vigil at the theater, Boston’s protest against The Birth of a Nation never regained its former strength. By August 18, 1915, the film had been running for nineteen straight weeks, breaking all summer records and was even held over for two weeks due to public demand.

Though Boston’s black citizens failed to stop the screening of The Birth of a Nation, they were energized by their increased political leverage. Blacks were becoming an important voting bloc in the Northern cities and politicians such as Mayor Curley had to walk a very thin line in order to accommodate their black constituents while not offending their white supporters. As the movie continued its run throughout major Northern cities, most local politicians were becoming alert to the interests of potential black voters.

At the same time, other races and ethnic groups, such as Irish and

17 “Not Sure it is Best to Stop It,” Boston Daily Globe, May 3, 1915, 1.
Jewish Americans, began to speak out against distasteful stereotypes of blacks as a species of caricature that maligned their own cultures. Like African-Americans, other ethnic cultures thought “society had an obligation to protect its minority members from outrages to which only they were subject by virtue of their uniqueness.” Leaders of the Irish National League in Boston, such as Michael J. Jordan, gave blacks full support as they had been fighting caricatures of the Irish in popular forms of entertainment for years. *The Jewish Criterion* of Pittsburgh expressed its objection to *The Birth of a Nation* and gave credit to Boston blacks for showing Jews “a new effective method” in fighting degrading racial characterizations.

*The Jewish Criterion* asked its readers, “What has the Jew to do with the colored problem? We reply, that he must fight every manifestation of prejudice. When prejudice commences with the negro, it will soon attack the Jew.”

Most significantly, while the resistance campaign in Boston was unable to suppress the film, it gave black organizations, mainly the NAACP, an issue that could rally a national black movement. While many NAACP leaders worried about the publicity they were giving the film, the reverse was at least as true: *The Birth of a Nation* was actually giving the NAACP publicity, introducing the association to people who otherwise would have never known of its existence. The squabbles among black leaders became secondary as the triumvirate of Booker T. Washington,

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W.E.B. Du Bois, and William Monroe Trotter for once sought familiar ground for a shared objective, even though each of their methods differed. While usually the pariah of the more combative factions, Washington called the film a “vicious and hurtful play,” and kept close tabs on all activities in Boston through letters and telegrams.\footnote{22 \footnote{Booker T. Washington to Samuel Edward Courtney, Tuskegee, Ala., April 23, 1915, \textit{Booker T. Washington Papers}, vol. 13, 277, University of Illinois Press.}}

In addition, while the New York protests were led for the most part by white NAACP leaders, Boston proved that blacks were perfectly capable of taking the reins themselves in the fight for their cause. And it was not just black leaders that conducted and participated in the protest, but average citizens who came together “locally in terms of the promotion of racial solidarity.”\footnote{23 \footnote{Stokes, Melvyn, \textit{D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation}, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 150.}} The NAACP increasingly relied on black clergymen to rally their congregations. Picketing, demonstrations, mass meetings, marches, and a progressively more vocal black media were new tactics of public protest. And the black press grew more prominent as its excellent front page coverage kept the story alive. As the movie opened in other large Northern venues, such as Philadelphia, Chicago, and Ohio, scenes similar to those in Boston occurred. The sustained protests against \textit{The Birth of a Nation} across the North and Midwest are a testament to the monumental efforts by the NAACP and local black communities to battle the wildly popular film. There was a continuous succession of meetings before local administrations, public hearings before city and state censorship boards, and cases brought before local and state courts. Black protesters, usually led by their local clergymen, united in the struggle against the movie by organizing demonstrations, lobbying legislatures, and in some instances, forming their own local NAACP...
chapters. Membership in existing branches multiplied rapidly. Just as the network of chapters strengthened the protest, the protest strengthened the chapters.

Protest against *The Birth of a Nation* was not only a political or legal issue, but it also was a moral one. In that Progressive age, when even Progressives ignored the race problem or considered blacks and other ethnic minorities inferior, it was the plea of these new activists, as the NAACP said, “to reach the conscience of America.” Inadvertently, D.W. Griffith, by creating one of the most remarkable instruments of popular culture that appealed to all classes of society, also forced segments of society to confront the racial question in a way that an editorial on Jim Crow laws might never have accomplished. While ordinary Americans sat in the theater and saw classic stereotypes that claimed, “this is how blacks are,” blacks were outside the theater saying, “No, that is how blacks are not!” According to film critic Richard Schickel, *The Birth of a Nation* “presented an opportunity to the minority that long deplored the racist habit of mind to place before thinking people a virulent example of that mind publicly at work, thus exposing its working to a criticism that had long been wanting.”

Finally, although a few areas prohibited the film from being shown or eliminated controversial scenes, for the most part, the campaign to stop the film was ineffective. And, not surprisingly, it was nearly impossible to ban the film in the South because of black disenfranchisement and the absence of NAACP chapters. But the success of protest against *The Birth of a Nation* cannot be scored by wins and losses. The crusade

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against *The Birth of a Nation* did not end the offensive depictions of blacks in popular culture and undoubtedly the film inspired the creation of a modern twentieth century Ku Klux Klan. However, the significance of the struggle against the film, as epitomized by the Boston protest, was the accomplishment of early twentieth century African-Americans to challenge and defy the reprehensible imagery of the Lost Cause ideology portrayed in the film. The furor, a pivotal point in redefining American popular culture, caused an awakening of a new black consciousness that became a cornerstone in the foundation of the modern civil rights movement.

In a letter to Booker T. Washington on May 3, 1915, African American businessman, Jesse H. Harris, expressed how the crusade in Boston affected him:

My dear Mr. Washington – You have heard of our fight here against the “Birth of a Nation.” We are still fighting and the best thing of all to my mind is that for the first time during my 27 years in Boston the entire Negro population is a unite. Now while at one of the hearings last week – as I looked over that vast crowd of Negro men & women – this thought came to me; this is a united people though in the manority [sic] now they are going to win. Why not enlarge this so I saw in my mind a meeting in this city in the Old Liberty hall – the speakers Washington, Walters, Du Bois – Trotter and others – where all things of the past would be buried. And a race of Ten Millions of Negroes would be united. A Nation would really be Born.26