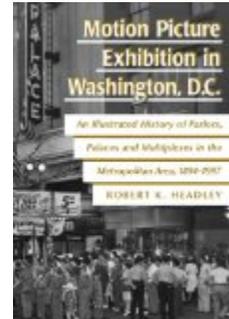


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Robert K. Headley.** *Motion Picture Exhibitions in Washington, DC: An Illustrated History of Parlors, Palaces and Multiplexes in the Metropolitan Area, 1894-1997.* Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1999. ix + 398 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7864-0544-2.

Reviewed by Andrew Brodie Smith (Washington, D.C)  
Published on H-DC (February, 2002)



Anyone who attends commercially released movies in Washington knows what a dismal experience it can be. There are a few good places to catch a film—the Uptown in Cleveland Park for example—but many of our movie theaters are cramped, uncomfortable places, with screens only slightly larger than sports-bar televisions. It was not always this way. In the nineteen twenties, a glittering cluster of palatial and beautifully appointed movie theaters flourished around 13th and F Streets downtown. Many of these houses featured live stage shows and symphony orchestras. In segregated Washington, African Americans had their own theater district on U Street, anchored by the Republic and the still-functioning Lincoln.

In his book, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington, DC*, Robert K. Headley details the history of these movie-going hubs of the golden age of movies and much, much more. Covering more than 100 years of film exhibition in the nation's capital, Headley's is an important story well told—the saga of ambitious local theater owners, powerful, vertically integrated, movie studios, local and federal regulators, the decline of downtown, and of race relations. Few cities can claim a history of its motion-picture exhibition and distribution as complete and as well researched as this one.

Small, independent operators dominated nearly the first two decades of movie exhibition in Washington. The first theaters were typically small, cramped, hastily converted storefronts. During this so-called Nickelodeon period, immigrant and African American entrepreneurs found opportunities that would later be denied to them. In 1910, four of the nine African-American theaters opened were black owned.

The Nickelodeon era was immediately followed by

a period of increasing regulation and capitalization of film exhibition. The once-cottage industry now had to contend with fire regulations, theater taxes, censorship, and the licensing and unionization of projectionists. As more money flowed into this increasingly popular form of amusement, exhibitors built the first movie palaces in the city along 9th Street between G Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. These grand establishments were designed to legitimize the movies in the eyes of the middle class and to attract an even larger audience.

It was in these heady days that a man by the name of Harry Crandall rose to the top of the movie world in Washington, becoming the king of local exhibitors. By 1920, Crandall had acquired a chain of ten major theaters in Washington and Virginia, and controlled some of the finest theaters downtown and, increasingly, in the neighborhoods. His establishments were popular, in part, because he ingratiated himself to the communities where his theaters stood, allowing civic and religious groups to use his houses when movies were not being shown.

Crandall's luck turned dramatically and suddenly on the night of January 28th, 1922. As the orchestra played during an intermission at his Knickerbocker Theater at 18th Street and Columbia Road, the roof collapsed. Nearly two feet of snow had fallen the previous 24 hours, and the accumulation was too heavy for the structurally flawed building to withstand. Ninety-eight people would die, including six members of the orchestra and its conductor. 133 others were injured. As a gesture of sympathy, Crandall closed all his Washington theaters for the next five days. He later would be cleared of any negligence, but not so for the designer of the Knickerbocker, Reginald Geare, who was at the time Washington's lead-

ing architect of movie palaces. After the disaster, Geare would never build another theater. His last had been the Lincoln in 1921. The accident not only ruined his career but also likely led to his suicide. His foremost patron, Harry Crandall, would succumb to the same fate a decade later.

The late twenties represented a time of increasing vertical integration of the motion picture industry by the powerful movie studios. They bought out local exhibitors and brought others to their knees with exclusionary distribution practices. In 1928, Warner Brothers purchased Crandall's circuit from him for more than a million dollars. For the first time, but not for the last, an outside conglomerate dominated commercial film exhibition in the nation's capital. Crandall would count his money only for a brief joyous moment, as most of his profits from the Warner deal evaporated in the stock market crash of 1929. Increasingly desperate, over the next several years he tried to climb his way back into motion-picture exhibition, but large corporations now dominated the business. In 1937, despondent over the loss of his theaters, Crandall killed himself. His body was found in a gas-filled room at the Parkside Hotel on I Street with a suicide note that was published the next day in local newspapers.

The success of the Justice Department's antitrust suits against the motion-picture industry in the late thirties and early forties, forced the major Hollywood producers to divest themselves of their nationwide theater circuits. This gave local independent exhibitors a fresh opportunity after the Second World War. The effect of the change was soon seen in the Washington area. Between 1945 and 1952, thirty-one new theaters were constructed in and around the city, most of them in the suburbs. Local independent firms built all but one.

In the forties, drive-in theaters began to appear at the edges of suburbia where land was cheap. This new kind of movie-going venue continued to increase in popularity, even as in-door theaters began to close in the mid fifties, in part, because of competition from television. Between 1953 and 1961, only eleven new theaters were constructed in the Washington area—all were drive-ins.

Washington remained segregated, including its motion-pictures theaters, well into the nineteen fifties. In the legitimate stage, Actor's Equity was forcing the hand of theater owners by prohibiting its members from performing in houses where African Americans were excluded. Equity met with stiff resistance in Washington. Rather than cooperate with the new desegregation policy, the National Theater closed down in 1948 and re-

opened as a movie house.

It was another five years before Washington began the desegregation of its movie palaces. In 1953, after years of conflict and resistance, downtown exhibitors began to quietly allow African Americans into their theaters. The grip of segregation held out longer in the suburbs. In 1960, two black men were arrested at Henry Hiser's Hiser Theater in Bethesda for sneaking in after having been refused entry at the door. Protests followed, after which Hiser sold out to the locally owned K-B circuit that had for some time a non-segregation policy. Even as they fought segregation, African Americans did not rush to desegregated white theaters, preferring to patronize their neighborhood movie houses with which they were long familiar. These were not primarily black-owned houses but white-owned establishments staffed and operated by African Americans.

For many decades, Abe Lichtman was the leading owner of African American movie theaters in Washington. His District Theaters included, among others, Washington's premiere black houses, the Howard and the Lincoln. In 1930, he also opened up Suburban Gardens, an amusement park for African Americans. By many accounts, Lichtman was well liked in the black community. He took proceeds from his theaters and made loans to black-owned businesses. He employed some 300 African Americans, paying them fairly and giving them generous benefits packages. Also, Lichtman founded a camp for poor African American boys in Dumfries, Virginia. In a sign of the esteem in which the community held him, Lichtman's theaters were left unharmed during the 1968 riots in Washington.

In the early and mid-sixties, baby boomers were coming of age and attending the movies in large numbers. Between 1966 and 1981, 67 new theaters with 157 screens opened in the Washington metro area. After an extended drought, new in-door theaters began to appear again, particularly in urban shopping centers. Antitrust policies continued to hold strong within the industry, so most of these new houses (approximately 85 percent) were independently owned. Unfortunately at this time, developers (with no special knowledge or love of the movies) replaced exhibitors and architects in determining the location and design of these new theaters. As a result, many of them were ugly and poorly conceived. The multiplex, for whatever it lacked in comfort, size, and luxury, was an idea whose time had come. Having several small auditoriums rather than a single large one, gave exhibitors much more flexibility in appealing to diverse crowds.

Films not attracting an audience could be relegated to smaller venues while larger screens could be saved for commercial successes. In the seventies, as the multiplex thrived in the area's suburban shopping malls, most of the once glorious downtown houses reached the end-of-the-line. With its tax base eroding, downtown Washington became less desirable to shoppers and amusement seekers. Fearful of crime, people were increasing unwilling to go there after dark. To survive, some of the remaining palaces began to show X-rated films.

In the mid-nineteen eighties, anti-trust laws put in place decades before were relaxed, and movie studios got back into the theater owning game. In a case of history repeating itself, a handful of national circuits with connection to the big Hollywood producers once again obliterated independent film exhibition in Washington. The last locally owned, first-run, circuit of theaters, K-B, sold out in 1994. Independents like the Biograph in Georgetown struggled on, showing X-rated films during the afternoon and avant-garde films at night. In the summer of 1996, however, the Biograph had to close its doors for good too, ingloriously replaced by a CVS pharmacy. The Key, another stalwart Washington independent, closed the following year. The lion's share of screens in the city is today owned by Toronto-based Cineplex-Oden which merged with Sony-owned Loews Theaters in 1997. Four other major outside firms control nearly all the remaining, first-run, commercial theaters in the Washington area: AMC, General Cinemas, National Amusements, and UA. A daunting market, to say the least, for any would-be independent exhibitor to face.

In addition to presenting the history of one hundred years of film exhibition in a compelling form,

Headley's book contains an impress 120-double-column-paged appendix which lists all—and gives detailed entries on most—of the known Washington-area movie theaters back to 1894. The appendix includes a wealth of information and is, in essence, a book within a book. The entry on the Fox, for example, runs over two double-column pages. The appendix will greatly aid researchers interested in 20th-century Washington and the history of urban commercial amusements.

The book is also richly illustrated, having somewhere in the neighborhood of a hundred photos. I only regret that the pictures were not handled in a more thoughtful manner. They seem to have been arranged somewhat hastily. It requires much flipping back and forth to find images of theaters discussed within the text. (There are no figure numbers.) Furthermore, the book's illustrations drop off suddenly after chapter nine, and the last three chapters contain no images at all. The effect is jarring. Frustrating too is the fact that the entries in the appendix do not refer to relevant illustrations included in the body of the book. It is a shame that a work so carefully researched and well written should suffer from production flaws that would have taken minimal time and energy to fix. Still, these mistakes do not detract too much from a book that exudes such generosity of spirit. It will be used and enjoyed by experts and the interested public for many years to come.

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**Citation:** Andrew Brodie Smith. Review of Headley, Robert K., *Motion Picture Exhibitions in Washington, DC: An Illustrated History of Parlors, Palaces and Multiplexes in the Metropolitan Area, 1894-1997*. H-DC, H-Net Reviews. February, 2002.

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