

SOUNDS OF SILENTS

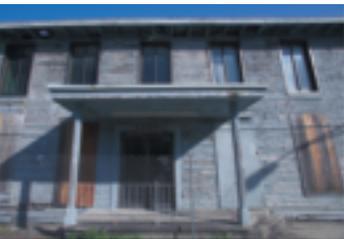
Forgotten Film Studio Gets Boost from Save America's Treasures

If one were seeking the film industry's origins, it probably wouldn't be in the run-down structures among the palms in the Jacksonville, Florida, neighborhood of Arlington. But during the silent era, the city was a center of moviemaking, with the Richard Norman Studios producing films by, for, and about African Americans.

One of the few silent film studios still standing, the site recently received a \$250,000 grant from the National Park Service-administered Save America's Treasures program. The structures include a former dark room, screening room, changing cottage, film storage area, set building, and garage to store props. Neglected for years, the complex will be restored with the help of the grant, matched dollar for dollar by the city.

White producer Richard Norman pioneered integration in the industry at a time when the challenges were immense. Theaters were segregated, and African Americans were routinely portrayed in films in a negative light. The Ku Klux Klan enjoyed a resurgence while D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* mirrored the nation's racism. An independent black cinema struggled to take root, but financing was difficult. There was no distribution system and relatively few African-American movie houses.

In the early years of the movies, filmmakers primarily shot in New York and Chicago but soon sought more comfortable climates. Florida was perfect—not only for its weather but its exotic terrain. In the 1900s, producers flocked to Jacksonville. Over the years, stars like Oliver Hardy, Mary Pickford, and Lillian Gish were regulars around town.



Left: Buildings that once housed the Norman Film Studios. Right: Posters, stills, and other memorabilia.

The studio made six features and a host of shorts. The filmmaking was frequently on the fly, with Norman often doing his own writing, editing, and distribution.

Ann Burt, head of Old Arlington, Inc., a local group instrumental in saving the place, says “most people would drive by these buildings and never have a clue of their history. One of the things that’s so fascinating about this site is how much still remains.” The scene she describes recalls the studio’s story: crude light boxes still mounted on the walls, along with leftover film canisters and a small screen in the projection room.

Her group struggled to get attention. People took notice in 2000, when the National Trust for Historic Preservation characterized the studios as “nationally significant.” Old Arlington, Inc., named after the neighborhood, convinced the city to buy the property. City officials plan to nominate the studio as a national historic landmark.

Over the years, wildlife invaded the unassuming bungalow-style buildings. But the most immediate threat today is water damage. Emergency repairs have kept the rain at bay while officials seek an architect for the renovation.

Planners envision the restored studio as a museum and tourist attraction.

For more information, contact Jody McDaniel, Recreation, Planning, and Grants Coordinator, City of Jacksonville, 851 N. Market Street, Jacksonville, FL 32202, (904) 630-3586, email jodym@coj.net.



RAY STANNARD/FEL BUREAU OF HISTORIC RESOURCES EXCEPT NEAR LEFT ANN BURT