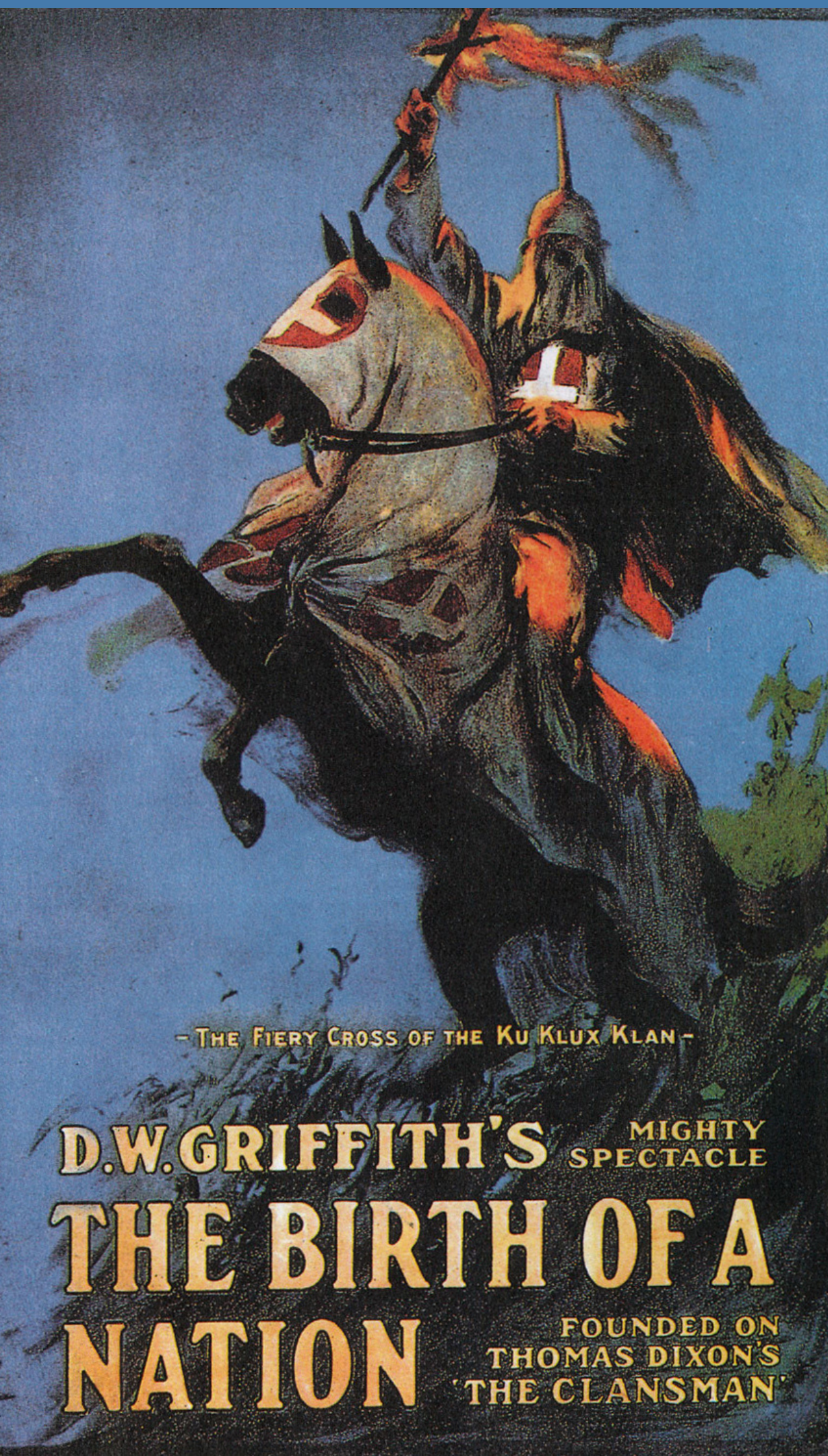


# My Semester at the Woodrow Wilson House

Elizabeth Hashimoto  
Winter/Spring 2023

Theatrical release poster for *The Birth of a Nation*, distributed by Epoch Film Co, Unknown Author. 1915. *Chronicle of the Cinema*. 1st ed. (London: Dorling Kindersley), p. 111.





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*learning about museum work and  
researching Wilson's racial legacy*

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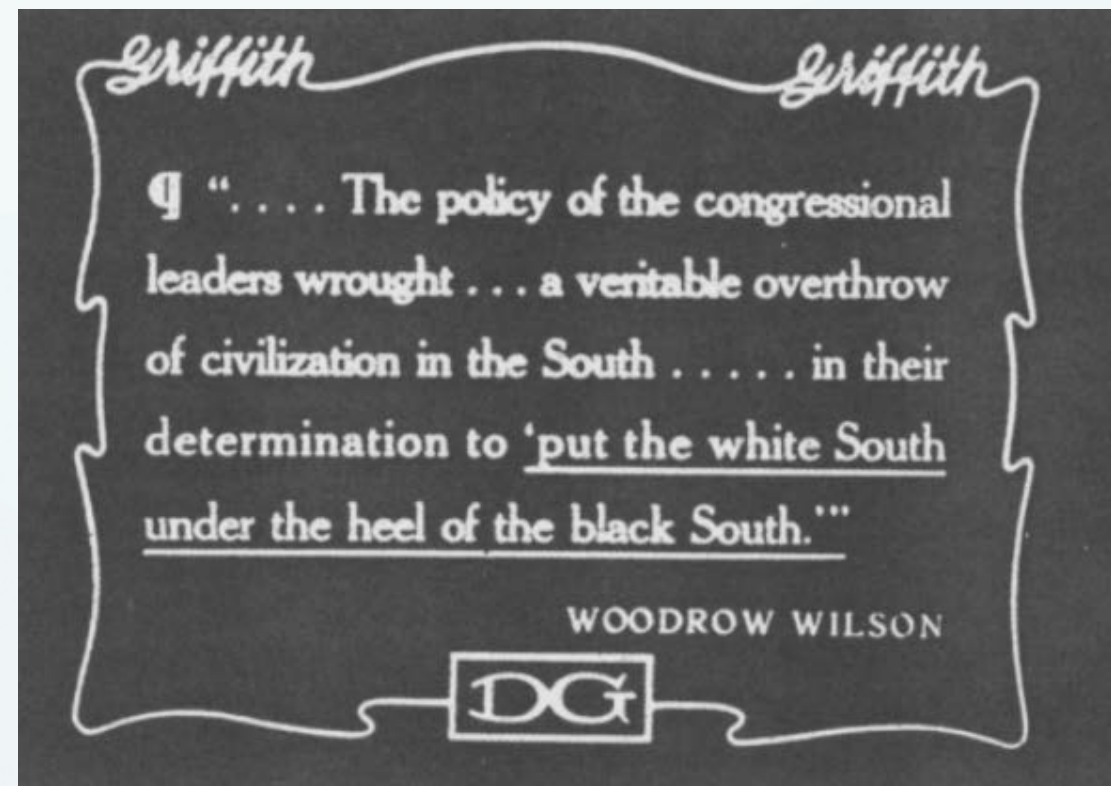
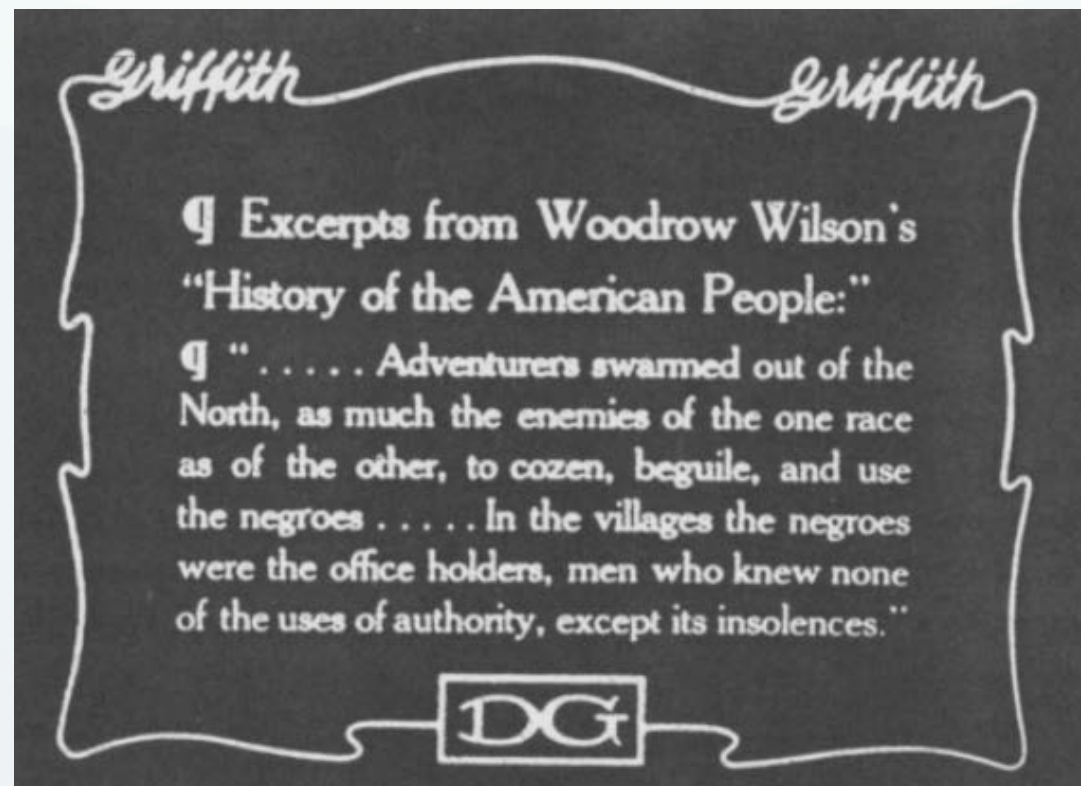
# Hi, I'm Elizabeth Hashimoto

- I am from the Kingdom of Hawai'i
- Art History and Museum Studies graduate student at Georgetown University, class of 2023
- I hope to work in the art museum world after graduation
- I enjoy both analyzing and creating works of art



# My Project

- As an art history major, I am interested in how fictional works have the power to influence real world opinions
- I choose to research Wilson's decision to screen *The Birth of a Nation* at the White House in 1915
- Many visitors ask about Wilson and this movie, and I wanted to produce something to help educate them



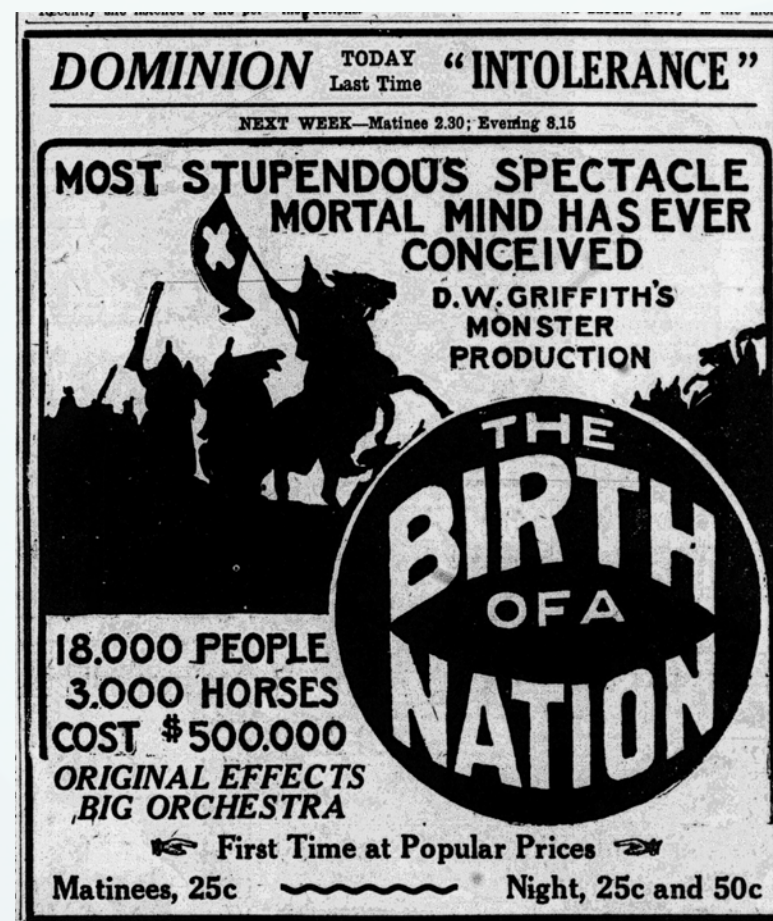


# Research Methods

- Engaged with research papers about Wilson's racial attitudes and policies, as well as the history of and themes in *The Birth of a Nation*
- Watched "Wilson in an Age of Racial Reckoning" online seminar
- Interviewed Wilson history expert John Milton Cooper
- Performed visual analysis of contemporary newspapers and posters advertising the film

# Final Product

- I synthesized my research and compiled it into a brochure
- This format allows visitors to read the information while at the House or to take it home with them
- My project can serve a physical accompaniment to a future exhibit planned about Wilson and race



Newspaper ad highlighting the massive scale of the film.  
"The Birth of a Nation" at the Dominion Theatre [advertisement],  
Silent Film Music in Canada, accessed March 22, 2023,  
<http://biblio.uottawa.ca/omeka1/silentfilmmusiccanada/items/show/10>.



# My Brochure

## What can we take from this?

Wilson's racial prejudices extended far beyond allowing *The Birth of a Nation* to be shown at the White House. Even if the film had never been connected to him, or had never existed, the verified opinions that he held, and the legislative decisions he made during his years in office, are enough to illuminate his dismal views on race.

Wilson was unable to see the violence that opinions like his could, and did, lead to. His personal condemnation of certain acts of racist violence, such as the riots that broke out across America after the release of *The Birth of a Nation*, did not extend to a repudiation of the ideas that influenced those mobs. He critiqued how some Whites treated Black people, both before and after the Reconstruction period, but never advocated for abolition or for an overhaul of the system that placed Black people at the bottom.

For all of Wilson's sincere beliefs in progress and equality, these were not graces that he extended to Black Americans. His paradoxical views put forth a bold and inclusive view of America, one that still managed to ignore the struggles of Black Americans.

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2. Mark E. Benbow, "Birth of a Quotation: Woodrow Wilson and Like Writing History with Lightning," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 9, no. 4 (2010): 509-33, pp. 510-512, doi:10.1017/S1537781400004242.
3. *Ibid*, 515.
4. *Ibid*, 514.
5. Arthur Lennig, "Myth and Fact: The Reception of 'The Birth of a Nation,'" *Film History* 16, no. 2 (2004): 117-41, 120 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815447>.
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8. Morgan Foy, "How Woodrow Wilson's racist policies eroded the Black civil service," Berkeley Haas, October 27, 2020, <https://newsroom.haas.berkeley.edu/research/how-woodrow-wilsons-racist-segregation-order-eroded-the-black-civil-service/>.
9. Gestle, 96.

## Images

1. Theatrical release poster for *The Birth of a Nation*, distributed by Epoch Film Co, Unknown Author. 1915. *Chronicle of the Cinema*. 1st ed. (London: Dorling Kindersley), p. III.
2. Newspaper ad highlighting the massive scale of the film. "The Birth of a Nation" at the Dominion Theatre [advertisement], "Silent Film Music in Canada, accessed March 22, 2023, <http://biblio.uottawa.ca/omeka1/silentfilmmusiccanada/items/show/10>.
3. Actors costumed in the full regalia of the Ku Klux Klan ride on horses at night in a still from *The Birth of a Nation*. (Hulton Archive/Getty Images).
4. Members of the NAACP picket under the marquee of the Republic Movie Theatre in Flushing, New York, against race discrimination featured in the movie, 'The Birth of a Nation,' being played at the theater in 1947. (Library of Congress/Corbis/Getty Images).
5. Quotes from Wilson's own writing which Griffith inserted into *Birth of a Nation*. D. W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation*, (1915) screen capture by author.



## The Birth of a Nation and Woodrow Wilson

Elizabeth Hashimoto  
WWH Scholar  
Winter/Spring 2023

Fig.1. Poster advertising *The Birth of a Nation*.

On February 18, 1915, the new film *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by David Wark Griffith, was shown to President Woodrow Wilson in the East Room of the White House. It was the first film ever to be shown inside the White House and was watched by President Wilson, his family, and cabinet members.

The film went on to achieve massive commercial success as well as to generate immense controversy for its sympathies toward the South's side in the Civil War, its portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan as the defenders of White Americans, and its racist depictions of Black Americans. Civil rights groups protested the film across the country, and violence broke out after its screenings, resulting in Black people being attacked and lynched. The film's proximity to the president, and his perceived endorsement through the White House screening, gave the work added legitimacy as a valuable work of art.

Though Wilson's personal opinions about the film are, unfortunately, difficult to pin down, his verifiable opinions on race, as well as his introduction of segregation into the federal government, are in line with the racist ideas advanced in the film. 1

## Why did the White House showing of *The Birth of a Nation* take place?

Filmmaker and author Thomas Dixon Jr. was no stranger to the power of fictional media to influence public opinion. His novel *The Clansman* portrayed the Ku Klux Klan as the defender of Whites in the South after the end of the Civil War. Director David Wark Griffith developed this story into the film *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. As a way to circumvent potential censorship, Dixon sought an appointment with President Wilson, with whom he had previously corresponded. Dixon described the film as a technological marvel, but did not tell the president its subject matter.

Dixon must have expected some level of positive response to the film. Otherwise, he would not have brought it to the White House, since a condemnation from the president would have severely damaged the film's reputation.

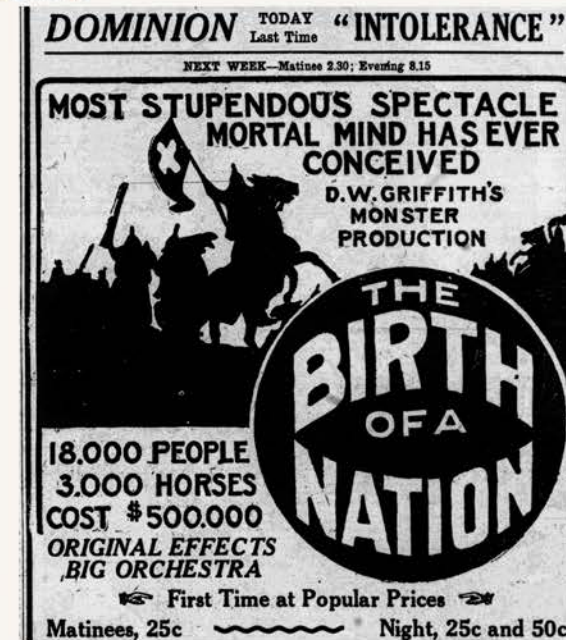


Fig. 2. Newspaper ad for the film.



Since Wilson was still in mourning for his first wife, he declined to go to the theater. Instead he let Dixon screen the film in the White House. While it was not his intention, Wilson's hosting of this private event in his home rather than his going to the theater added another degree of connection between the president and the film.

## How did the Wilson respond to the film?

One quotation attributed to Wilson is famously repeated: "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." 2

While this statement certainly seems to definitively showcase the president's feelings toward the film, it is unverified. After the showing, Griffith reported to a newspaper: "I was gratified when a man we all revere...said it teaches history by lightning." 3 He did not name Wilson, used "teaches" instead of "writing," and left out the second part of the quotation regarding the film's being "terribly true." The final form of the quotation was not attributed to Wilson until years later.

A woman who attended the screening recalled that the president watched the film in silence, and wordlessly exited when it finished. However, her account was given in 1977, with the length of time elapsed since the event making her testimony ambiguous at best. 4

Wilson's writings about race were used on the title cards in the film itself. At several points in the film, Griffith inserted quotations from Wilson's book, *History of the American People*, using them to bolster his points about the problems during the Reconstruction period.

Black contemporaries understood the film as a danger to their communities, petitioning to have it censored. The NAACP stated that it "put in graphic and highly dramatic terms certain issues that by now had passed into history and that for racial harmony were best forgotten." In the aftermath of *The Birth of a Nation*'s release, Klan recruitment numbers grew, and anti-Black violence broke out after some of the screenings. 6

Fig. 3. Still from the film, showing the Klan.

## How does this relate to Wilson's larger legacy on race?

Wilson described the enslaved as children, who were generally taken care of by white plantation owners. In *The Birth of a Nation*, Black people are easily manipulated by Whites, who do not have their best interests at heart. In the film's depiction of Reconstruction, the newly emancipated, all played by White actors in blackface, engage in dancing, drinking, and running barefoot around the halls of government, where they have now been made senators.

This portrayal echoes Wilson's words, when he wrote that enslavers acted with "moderation...[and] firm, but not unkind discipline," even when the enslaved acted "like a huge family of shiftless children." While Wilson also condemned the carpetbaggers (opportunistic Whites who arrived in the South to financially and socially profit from the conditions of the Reconstruction period) for their greed and manipulation, it was the end of slavery, and the "weak and incompetent" newly freed, he alleged, that allowed these new masters to replace the previous ones, who had acted with "affection and indulgence." 7

A similar desire to maintain "order" is on display with Wilson's expansion of segregation in the federal government. Under the guise of protecting White women from the feared sexual advances of Black men, a theme also found in the film, where freed Black men menace White women, Wilson's administration mandated separate facilities for Black and White federal workers. It also introduced a policy requiring that photographs accompany job applications, allowing for Black workers' applications to be discarded at the application level.

Black workers already in the administration were removed from higher-level positions, thus decreasing their salaries, which already tended to be lower than those of their White counterparts. 8

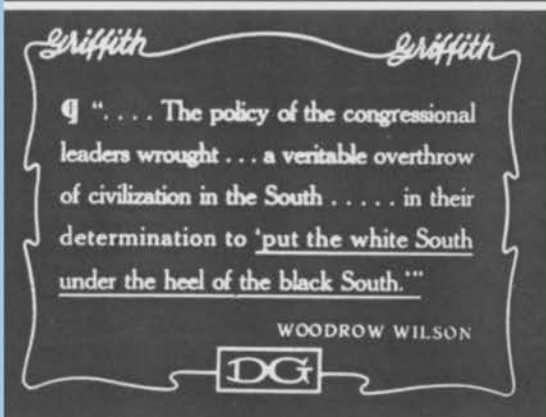
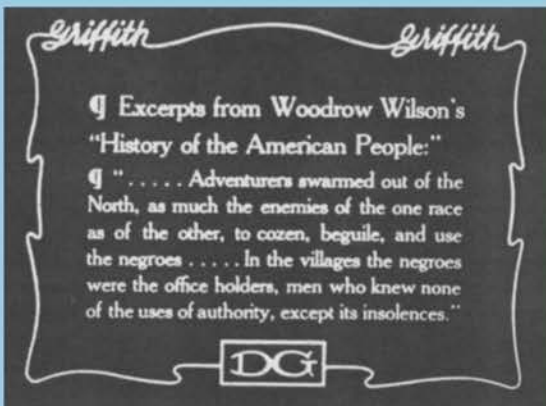
Wilson's program of federal segregation was couched in the language of protection, a "benefit" to employees of both races. What Wilson put into motion resulted in the reversal of gains made after the Reconstruction period and the exclusion of Black people from higher-paying positions, which had both material and social ramifications.

Wilson wanted to keep Black people in their "place" in society, and feared that mixing between the races would lead to discord. For progressive Wilson, liberty meant individuals' adjustment to their proper place in society under "right laws"- including racial ones. 9



Fig. 4. NAACP members protest the film.

Fig. 5. A title card in the film quoting Wilson.





# On Site Work

- Researched paintings in the house for a forthcoming art tour meant to attract those interested in art to the house
- Miscellaneous tasks around the house such as room set up, preparation for board of trustees meeting, and folding brochures



Ernesto Bensa (1866-1897), *Florentine Courtyard*. Framed color lithograph of watercolor. In Edith's bedroom.



Matoaks a/s Rebecka daughter to the mighty Prince Powhatan Emperour of Attanoughkomouck a/s Virginia converted and baptized in the Christian faith, and Wife to the wor<sup>th</sup> M<sup>r</sup> Tho: Rolff.

Reproduction of an oil on canvas painting by an unknown artist depicting Pocahontas, created after 1616. In Edith's bedroom.



Persian painting created before 1935. In Edith's bedroom.



Harrison Fisher (1875-1934) *The Greatest Mother in the World*. Chromolithograph on paper. In the nurse's bedroom.



# Conclusion

- This internship gave me a chance to engage in online and in-person museum work in a beautiful, historic structure
- I gained experience with the collections management platform re: discovery while researching paintings owned by the house
- I had the opportunity to create a project that brought together aspects of art analysis, museum education, and graphic design



# My Thanks To

Ms. Stacey, Elizabeth Karcher, John Pucher, Edith Michel,  
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