



Article: Early Motion Picture Fragments at the Library of Congress (Abstract)

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Abstract: Early Motion Picture Fragments at the Library of Congress

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The practice of submitting positive paper print copies of early motion pictures to secure copyright began in 1894. It wasn't until 1912 that a copyright law was written to accommodate the new medium of cinema. As a result, the Library of Congress holds a truly unique collection of positive gelatin silver photographs, contact prints from the original nitrate negative movies. The paper print copies have fared somewhat better than their nitrate masters (most of which no longer exists). Indeed it is the paper prints that provide much of what is known about early cinematic history.

Paper prints were submitted as either a full record of all frames in a film, or by presenting choice segments from individual scenes called fragments. The fragment collection contains a wealth of information currently unavailable to researchers: many of the films represented exist only in this fragmentary form and no place else. Some of the fragments contain intertitles that are not present in motion picture copies; other fragments are marked with tinting records, which can help restore films to their original color.

The fragments arrived to the Library of Congress in a wide variety of physical formats: rolled, cut into individual frames, cut into strips and stacked, enlarged and mounted. Providing safe access to these treasures required developing strategies tailored to the unique formats and in some cases extremely poor condition. This paper will discuss the condition assessment, and logistical challenges surrounding the treatment and rehousing of this treasured collection.

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