THIS TABLET MARKS
THE SITE ON WHICH THE
HON. JOHN P. HARRIS
IN JUNE 1905
OPENED THE WORLD'S FIRST
ALL MOTION PICTURE THEATRE
THE NICKELODEON
THIS WAS THE BEGINNING OF
THE MOTION PICTURE THEATRE
INDUSTRY

DEDICATED BY THE
HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WESTERN
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Address of William H. Stevenson at the Unveiling of Harris Memorial Tablet

Distinguished guests and fellow citizens, also those everywhere who are listening in on the radio;—at this noon hour we have met here today to give honor to whom honor is due and to mark with an imperishable bronze tablet the site upon which was conceived an infant industry which has grown to be the fourth largest business enterprise in the world today. The outpouring of citizens at this hour proves that we as Pittsburghers are indeed proud of this great distinction.

In a store room which occupied this site previous to the erection of the Frank and Seder building, John P. Harris, a native son of Pittsburgh, in the year 1905 opened the world’s first moving picture theatre.

As early as 1897 moving pictures were shown in the theaters of Pittsburgh and New York City as an incidental number on the program and many within the sound of my voice will remember that sterling actor, Beaumont Smith as he appeared on the stage of the old Avenue Theater, pulling down his cuffs and announcing dramatically in a stentorian voice that we “would now see life-like moving pictures on the screen produced by that marvelous invention, the Lumieres Cinematograph.” The lights were dimmed in the theater and the audience gazed with awe and wonder for five minutes at a small crude motion picture.

These motion pictures were on the programs of many vaudeville houses as a special feature until almost eight years after the first exhibition of them, when in 1905 Harris originated the idea of having a moving picture show exclusively. Thereupon he rented the store room which was on this site, bought ninety-six chairs, secured one of those early crude projectors (which is on exhibition in one of the
adjoining windows) and was ready for a business which proved better than his most sanguine expectations.

The price of admission to this moving picture theater was five cents, commonly known as a "nickel". A life time friend and associate of Mr. Harris, Mr. Eugene L. Connelly, who is seated on this platform, has what is enjoyed by few men in history, the great distinction of coining a new word; for it was he who christened the world's first moving picture theater a "Nickelodeon", which became a household word throughout the country and represented the most popular priced amusement of that period.

The small theater was a success from the start and as I have said, had a seating capacity of ninety-six chairs. The doors were opened at eight in the morning and closed at midnight. Fifteen minutes was the length of the film. The audience changed continuously and as many as ten thousand saw the picture in one day. The average daily attendance was seven thousand.

As Harris originated the moving picture theater, he was also the first to visualize the great future for this form of public amusement and opened nickelodeons in Philadelphia, Buffalo, Rochester, N. Y. and in Cleveland, Ohio.

The nickelodeon in Pittsburgh continued for five years. During that period, John P. Harris and Harry Davis formed a partnership for the purpose of making films for exhibition and sale to other nickelodeons. A notable outdoor film was one showing the dedication of St. Pauls Cathedral, Fifth Avenue and Craig Street, in 1905.

The establishment of that first nickelodeon on the spot where we today dedicate this tablet, marks an important epoch in the annals of American industry and no phase of it is more spectacular or amazing than the growth and development of moving picture artistry. The moving picture industry has grown from the store room with a crude projecting machine, a cheap screen and a few chairs to the beautiful and commodious million dollar movie palaces of today. Indeed, five million dollar theaters devoted to this form of entertainment are now not uncommon.

There are over twenty thousand motion picture theaters in the United States today representing an investment of almost two billion dollars; into the box offices of these theaters one hundred million patrons pay ten million dollars
weekly.

We are indeed filled with awe and wonder when we contemplate the history of the moving picture industry during the short span of twenty-five years since Mr. Harris began his great adventure.

The nickelodeons were successful and Mr. Harris broadened the scope of his activities in varied and wholesome entertainment. He was an outstanding figure in the development of the moving picture industry throughout the United States occupying a commanding position in the field of entertainment and photoplays.

At the time of his death he was president of the Harris Amusement Company operating sixty theaters throughout seven states contiguous to Pennsylvania.

John P. Harris was born in Pittsburgh 1871. He attended the public schools and like many typical American boys began earning his living at a tender age. His bright blue eyes, his cheery countenance and manner attracted many leading men who remained his life long friends.

Although successful in his chosen business and interested in many enterprises he gave much of his time and means to charity and public affairs. He was elected to the Senate of Pennsylvania in 1922, and 1924 was a dominant factor in the battle for ballot reform and in strengthening the election laws of the commonwealth. At the very moment of his death in January 1926, he was leading the fight on the floor of the Senate for ballot reform.

Thus ended the eventful life of Senator John P. Harris. In all that he undertook he met with a unique and what seemed a natural and deserved success.

As the creator of the world's first moving picture theater he has brought fame and renown to his native city and the people of Pittsburgh will forever hold in fond remembrance his contribution to the growth, prosperity and cultural life of this great city he loved.

Footnote:—

Thousands of persons crowded Smithfield street between Diamond street and Fifth avenue at noon yesterday to witness the unveiling of a bronze tablet on the Frank & Seder store building, marking the site on which the late State Senator John P. Harris opened the world's first all-moving picture theater in 1905.

The tablet, bearing an inscription stating that the founding of the "Nickelodeon" was the "beginning of the motion picture theater industry" was unveiled by the late theater magnate's youngest daughter, Miss Geneva A. Harris.
Speakers at the ceremonies joined in lauding Senator Harris for his foresight in appreciating the importance of the young industry.

Addresses were made by Mayor Kline, William H. Stevenson, president of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, and former Governor Carl E. Milliken of Maine, now secretary of the Motion Picture Producers of America.

Dr. Clinton E. Lloyd, dean of theater arts and dramatic literature at Duquesne University, read an address by Edward F. Albee, former head of the Keith-Albee vaudeville circuit. The invocation was offered by Rev. Dr. E. J. Van Etten, pastor of the Calvary Episcopal church, and the benediction by Rev. Father Alvin W. Forney, pastor of St. Phillip's Catholic church, Crafton.

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