

VITASCOPE HALL: THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE AMERICAN MOVIE THEATER

In New Orleans 1896, the city's famed Canal Street was the commercial and social hub of the city. Like other major cities, the street was lined with 3-4 story buildings. The first and sometimes

second floors of these buildings would serve as commercial shops and services, such as clothing stores, drug stores, service companies, and entertainment spots.



The building located at the corner of Canal and Exchange Place had been the home of a series of standard retail outlets for decades. However, the building would soon get a fresh new look and purpose which would land the facility in the record books.

In July 1896, business partners William Rock and Walter Wainwright were busy preparing for their new business, an enterprise that would be like no other seen in New Orleans – or anywhere in the United States at that time.

Rock and Wainwright fitted their new retail space with 400 benches and chairs that they had acquired from a local bankrupt funeral parlor. A large white cloth was tightly stretched across a frame that was mounted at the front of the room. Sheets of black canvas were hung across all of the windows to block out the sunlight.

Once the necessary equipment was installed, the partners planned their opening.

On Sunday, July 26, 1896, Messrs. Wainwright and Rock opened the doors of their new risky enterprise -- and ushered in a new era in American cinema.

Vitascope Hall,

623 CANAL STREET.

THE VITASCOPE

Is no longer at the WEST END, but is now at the above, where daily exhibitions will be given, with an entirely new series of pictures.

See Niagara Falls.

COMMENCING TO-DAY.

From 10 a. m. till 5 p. m. and from 7 p. m. till 11 p. m.

Admission - - - - 10c.

WAINWRIGHT & ROCK,

SOLE OWNERS AND MANAGERS.

The above advertisement appeared in the *Daily Picayune* on July 26, 1896.

“POP” ROCK BRINGS FIRST MOVIES TO LOUISIANA

William T. Rock (top right) was born in Birmingham, England and came to the United States as a young man. In 1886, he formed the Ball Electric Illuminating Company handling arc lamps. In 1896, he was contacted by Raff & Gammon to do some electrical work for them.



At that time, Raff & Gammon had acquired the rights to sell territorial use of Thomas Edison's new moving picture camera called the Vitascope. Unlike the single-user viewing equipment that was in general use, this new camera projected images on a screen which could be seen by any number of viewers at one time. Edison had purchased the camera from its inventors Thomas Armat and Francis Jenkins. Originally called the Phantoscope, Edison promptly renamed the camera "Edison's Wonderful Vitascope" and marketed the camera as his own.

While working for them in New York, Raff & Gammon asked Rock to take some of their Vitascope territory, but the best they had to offer was Louisiana. Rock purchased the Louisiana rights for the use of the Vitascope for \$2,500 (\$1,500 for the Vitascope and another \$1000 for accessories and training).

With the Vitascope in hand, Rock headed down to Louisiana in late spring of 1896. Along with him came Walter J. Wainwright, a carnival showman and former tightrope walker, and Walter A. Reid, a projectionist from Koster and Bial's live performance music hall.

At that time, it was common for movie exhibitors to show their films at existing amusement venues, such as parks, vaudeville theatres, etc. After looking around New Orleans, Rock, Wainwright and Reid found the perfect location on West End and Lake Pontchartrain.

West End Park was a popular entertainment center with a big bandstand which extended out over the water for band concerts, vaudeville acts and prominent stage personalities to appear. This area could also accommodate dances and fireworks displays. The park offered one other benefit to Rock -- it was located at the end of a streetcar line which provided the electrical power necessary to operate the Vitascope.

Although outdoor viewing was not ideal, audiences flocked to see the "moving pictures" and were AMAZED! Rock had entered into a contract with the West End Park for four weeks. After packing in the crowds, he renewed the contract and continued playing the West End Park for several seasons.

Impressed with the positive response he had received, Rock, along with Walter Wainwright, made the decision

to open an indoor location dedicated solely to exhibiting films. The idea was quite risky, since no one knew if the movies, without other entertainment, would draw crowds. Rock and Wainwright would soon get their answer.

On July 26, 1896, Vitascope Hall became the first indoor seated theater dedicated strictly to exhibiting films in the United States. It was located at 623 Canal Street in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Information for this article can be found in *Louisiana Film History: A Comprehensive Overview Beginning in 1898* available on Amazon or on the website HollywoodOnTheBayou.com.

Since 1996, we have been petitioning local and state officials to mark this location so that locals and tourists can appreciate the significance of the location. We are happy to report that we have been in contact with the state Department of Culture who are now actively working on placing a plaque on the building marking it as the location of the first seated indoor theater in the United States.