Emergence of Moviegoing (1897 - 1926)

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To better understand the evolution of moviegoing in Chapel Hill during its early stages, and how moviegoing affected other areas of the Chapel Hill Community we used sources such as the Daily Tar Heel, the UNC Newsletter, as well as the Yackety Yack, the UNC yearbook, and created a timeline tracking significant events. The most noteworthy events were marked, such as the emergence of the Pickwick and other theaters in Chapel Hill.

Other noteworthy events included moments that reflected trends associated with the film industry and moviegoing culture, such as the rising importance of stars, the conflict between the stage and the screen, and the association between movies and moviegoing and the conflict between rural life and urban modernity.
The Pickwick’s Peanut Pandemonium Performed by Past Pupils

The Pickwick movie theater, opened on Franklin street in 1909 (“The Pickwick Theatre” 2), gained a notorious reputation as a raucous hangout for UNC students. Marion R. Alexander in an article published on June 16, 1929 in the *Asheville Citizen-Times* details this semi-violent moviegoing tradition. Alexander writes about the crowds of students “arming” themselves with peanuts for “self-defense or offensive purposes” before rushing the box office and claiming a seat in the back of the theater to pelt other moviegoers with peanuts and to avoid being a victim of one of the “flying missiles” themselves (Alexander 18). Local newspapers corroborate this moviegoing ritual of student “Pickwickers”, as advertising shows that peanut throwing seems to have been an indispensable part of the moviegoing experience at the Pickwick. Amidst a large ad advertising the Pickwick’s showings in *The Daily Tar Heel* on March 18, 1916, an ad from the Carolina Peanut Company appears in the center saying, “Peanuts! What is a Pickwick without peanuts?... Boys, we appreciate your patronage and will give you the best...” ("The Pickwick Program" 3). Besides the local newspapers, the University’s yearbooks at the time made mention of the peanut throwing at this theater, with one student bio in a 1921 *Yackety Yack* recounting the custom in poetic prose saying, “the indefatigable frequenters of that grotto of the peanutted pantomime, known in the patios of the proletariat by the Dickensic name of ‘Pickwick Palace’” (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill 100).

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. *Yackety Yack*, 1921.
https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/27432?ln=en#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&r=0&xywh=-1572%2C-156%2C5125%2C3114
Mabel Thompson Hill, “Goddess of the Pickwick”

Music is closely associated with the Pickwick theater. Throughout the research process, many ads and op-eds on the Pickwick mentioned music, but there was no credit given to the performer. *The Daily Tar Heel* reported in 1909 that Pickwick’s “static color pictures” were accompanied by “songs,” which were “often quite beautiful” and were rendered on “piano,” which added to the “pleasantness” of the theater (9). Four years later in the 1913 yearbook, “instrumental music” was mentioned, accompanied by a picture (UNC 369). In the far-left background, we can see a hint of the pianist, who we now know as Mabel Thompson Hill. This picture gives the Pickwick pianist personhood. Though Hill’s name is not mentioned in the advertisement, we see her sitting at her piano, the lone woman in a sea of male spectators. Hill is not the focus of this picture – her back is turned from the camera and facing a corner and positioned left of the screen, which is the focal point of the image. Hill is literally marginalized at the Pickwick and in the photo. Movies, however, were not the only attraction at the Pickwick for students. Mabel Thompson Hill’s music was deemed a celebration in the midst of the “nerve-racking cataclysm” of finals in the 1914 *Yackety Yack* (UNC 44). Though almost entirely erased from the historical record, Hill was integral to the Pickwick and its atmosphere.
Using StoryMap JS, we overlaid the spaces of early moviegoing in Chapel Hill onto an interactive map (linked here) with the current organization and landmarks of the town.
Using archival photos from Wilson Library, we compared the original locations of movie theaters in Chapel Hill to their contemporary counterparts.

The Pickwick’s first location at 105 E. Franklin St in 1909 (left) compared with the location in 2021.

The Carolina Theater’s first location at 123 E. Franklin St in 1927 (left), compared with the same location in 2021.