

AFI Catalog Entries: Historical Research

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The Man in Ebony (1917)

This five-reel picture was produced, written, and directed by Dr. Rev. Thomas HB Walker, a minister, and author of several books, including a history of Liberia. Little is known about Walker's filmmaking career, but according to a 16 June 1917 article in the [Baltimore, MD] *Afro-American*, "his office is in Jacksonville, Fla., but for the past few days he has been making pictures in New York and Washington." The 23 August 1917 issue of the [Jacksonville, FL] *Jacksonville Journal* mentioned that Walker "took a number of actors to St. Augustine last Tuesday whom he worked in a scene for his next great photoplay production, 'The Man in Ebony,' which will present at the Strand Theater next Wednesday night." Although some sources have assigned a 1918 release date to *The Man in Ebony*, this 29 August 1917 screening at the Strand Theater in Jacksonville seems to have been the film's premiere. A 28 August 1917 piece in the *Jacksonville Journal* claimed, "This is the greatest film production of all colored faces and the most of them are Florida people. Forty actors and supers are in the cast, tho [sic] such familiar faces are that of Dr. R. L. Brown, Dr. S. P. Livingston, and Mr. Chas. M. Anderson, and others are seen." These are likely references to Richard Lewis Brown, Jacksonville's first African-American architect and Smart Pope Livingston, one of the few black physicians in Jacksonville in the early 20th century. The film was advertised as featuring heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson in the 20 October 1917 *Afro-American*, which also described the film as "showing the progress of the Negro in Freedom." Johnson lived outside of the United States from 1913 to 1920, so it is unclear how he may have featured in the film. The 30 August 1917 *Jacksonville Journal* claims that "the scenes representing Africa and the slave trade and the incidents leading up to the present were aptly laid. Dr. Walker and his sons received many compliments for this achievement," giving further hints as to the film's scope and suggesting that Walker's sons may have been involved in the production. The 8 December 1917 *Jacksonville Journal* advertises a combined screening of *The Man In Ebony* with *The Slacker's Dream*, another Walker film, in a combined "8 massive reels," calling it "the picture that was the sensation in Baltimore and Washington for over two weeks, where numbers waited and thronged the door for admittance, filling houses to an overflow in all the great cities."

The Triumph of Truth (1916)

This two-reel drama starred and was directed by Cleo Madison, with a story by J. F. Abbott and a scenario by Harvey Gates. The 9 September 1916 *Motion Picture News* claimed that Joe King was co-director with Madison, but he is not named in the copyright statement, although King and Madison did co-direct *Her Defiance*. According to a 22 July 1916 feature in *The Moving Picture Weekly* on Madison's directing career, she was "a student and close observer, and had been in pictures only a short time when she began to extend her interest beyond the day's work and toward the producing and the mechanical side of the profession. She made a special study of the camera itself, and she is one of the few directors who is able, if necessary, to film her own productions." *The Triumph of Truth* tells the story of a young woman named Clara Bordin, played by Madison, who lives in a small fishing village with her abusive uncle Old Pete, portrayed by J. F. Abbott, who also wrote the story. Clara is rescued from drowning by surveyor Albert Conglin (played by Tom Chatterton), but another rival for Clara's affections, local

fisherman Gene Vasure (played by Seymour Zeff), takes credit. Later Gene and his companions tie up Albert and set him adrift in a boat, but Clara comes to his rescue. According to a review in the 9 September 1916 *Moving Picture World*, "the story is conventional and has no great dramatic strength. At the same time it is pleasing in its general effect...The stretches of rugged coast are well pictured.". According to Anthony Slide's book *The Silent Feminists*, this and other two-reel shorts directed by Madison are thought to be lost, with the only known surviving film being *Her Defiance*.