

## 1. "Art [and History] by Lightning Flash"

Begin by reading "Art [and History] by Lightning Flash': The Birth of a Nation and Black Protest," which provides important background about the film.

- ["Art \[and History\] by Lightning Flash': The Birth of a Nation and Black Protest"](#)
- What motivated Thomas Dixon and D.W. Griffith to engage in racist attacks on African Americans in the early years of the 20th century?
- In what ways was Woodrow Wilson involved in the film *Birth of a Nation*? Why was his involvement significant?
- Why did Griffith expect problems with the opening of the film? What steps did he take to counter the anticipated criticism?
- Why did the NAACP decide to launch a campaign to censor this film?

## 2. NAACP: The Campaign to Censor *Birth of a Nation*

Read the following documents and respond to the questions that follow. Downloadable worksheets are provided for some of the documents.

- [Jane Addams interview, March, 1915](#)  
[PDF worksheet version](#)
- [Letter by Mary Childs Nerney, Secretary of the NAACP, April, 1915, to George Packard](#)  
[PDF worksheet version](#)
- [New York Times reporting on a hearing in 1922 when D.W. Griffith decided to release Birth of a Nation](#)
- [A photograph of the KKK's 1925 march in Washington, D.C.](#)
- What were the main points in Addams' critique of the film?
- What were the strengths and weaknesses of her analysis of the film's treatment of post-Civil War history?
- How would you describe the tone of her comments?
- Why did Addams, a white woman, serve as the spokesperson for the NAACP?
- With whom did the NAACP meet to protest the showing of *Birth of a Nation*?
- Why were these officials targeted?
- To what extent were the efforts of the NAACP successful?
- What issues were most troubling to Nerney? Why?
- What is the tone of Nerney's letter? Was it justified?
- What reasons did Walter White give for petitioning the Motion Picture Commission to revoke Griffith's permit to show *Birth of a Nation*?
- On what grounds was the Commission authorized to revoke a permit?

- Based on the information provided in this article, should the permit have been revoked? On what grounds?
- What does the photograph of the Klan's 1925 march in Washington, DC, tell us about the size and influence of the Klan?
- Why did the NAACP, which had a record of defending First Amendment rights of free expression, urge officials to prohibit the showing of the film and/or delete certain scenes?
  
- Why were local and state governments reluctant to censor *Birth of a Nation*?
- What do these documents reveal about the NAACP as an organization?
- What do these documents reveal about the nature, extent, and acceptance of racism at this point in American history?
- Was the NAACP justified in trying to censor *Birth of a Nation*?