

## Mary Childs Nerney to George Packard

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Document source: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4966>

Student LaunchPad: <http://edsitement.neh.gov/LaunchPad/Launch-birth-nation.html>

April 17, 1915.

Mr. George Packard

1522 First National Bank Bldg.,

Chicago, Ill.

My dear Mr. Packard:

I am utterly disgusted with the situation in regard to "The Birth of a Nation". As you will read in the next number of the *Crisis*, we have fought it at every possible point. In spite of the promise of the Mayor to cut out the two objectionable scenes in the second part, which show a white girl committing suicide to escape from a Negro pursuer, and a mulatto politician trying to force marriage upon the daughter of his white benefactor, these two scenes still form the motif of the really unimportant incidents, of which I enclose a list. I have seen the thing four times and am positive that nothing more will be done about it. Jane Addams saw it when it was in its worst form in New York. I know of no one else from Chicago who saw it. I enclose Miss Addam's opinion.

When we took the thing before the Police Magistrate he told us that he could do nothing about it unless it lead to a breach of the peace. Some kind of demonstration began in the Liberty Theatre Wednesday night but the colored people took absolutely no part in it, and the only man arrested was a white man. This, of course, is exactly what Littleton, counsel for the producer, Griffith, held in the Magistrates' Court when we have our hearing and claimed that it might lead to a breach of the peace.

Frankly, I do not think you can do one single thing. It has been to me a most liberal education and I purposely am through. The harm it is doing the colored people cannot be estimated. I hear echoes of it wherever I go and have no doubt that this was in the mind of the people who are producing it. Their profits here are something like \$14,000 a day and their expenses about \$400. I have ceased to worry about it, and if I seem disinterested, kindly remember that we have put six weeks of constant effort of this thing and have gotten nowhere.

Sincerely yours,

Mary Childs Nerney, Secretary.

Source: *NAACP Records*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

**Additional relevant resources.** Please read the material at the following links:

An [article from the \*New York Times\*](#) reporting on a hearing in 1922 when D.W. Griffith decided to release *Birth of a Nation* “for commercial purposes:”

[http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?\\_r=1&res=9503EED7153AEF33A25750C0A9649D946395D6CF](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9503EED7153AEF33A25750C0A9649D946395D6CF)

A [photograph of the KKK's 1925 march](#) in Washington, D.C.:  
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6689>

[Foes of Klan Fight \*Birth of a Nation\*](#)

[http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?\\_r=1&res=9503EED7153AEF33A25750C0A9649D946395D6CF](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9503EED7153AEF33A25750C0A9649D946395D6CF)

After reviewing the Nerney letter and the material at the links provided, answer the following questions:

- 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?

***Birth of a Nation*, the NAACP, and the Balancing of Rights**

- What does the photograph of the Klan's 1925 march in Washington, DC, tell us about the size and influence of the Klan?

After reviewing the details in these three documents, discuss the larger issues as a class:

- 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*?