

ADDRESS: 1600-10 N 15TH ST

Name of Resource: Sigmund Lubin House at 1608 N. 15th Street

Proposed Action: Designation

Property Owner: Beech LLC

Nominator: Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia

Staff Contact: Alex Till, alexander.till@phila.gov

OVERVIEW: This nomination proposes to designate the property at 1608 N. 15th Street and list it on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. A semi-detached, three-story, brick rowhouse with a prominent Italianate cornice stands on the property. It was the home of Sigmund Lubin and from 1897 to 1899, served as his primary workplace and studio. The nomination contends that the property satisfies Criterion for Designation A for its association with Mr. Lubin, an important early motion-picture pioneer, who grew to become an international icon in filmmaking, equipment manufacturing, and exhibition. In addition, the property was the primary location for some of Lubin's earliest filmmaking experiments.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the property at 1608 N. 15th Street satisfies Criteria for Designation A.



NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT
PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM (CD, EMAIL, FLASH DRIVE)
ELECTRONIC FILES MUST BE WORD OR WORD COMPATIBLE

1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE *(must comply with an Office of Property Assessment address)*

Street address: 1600-10 N. 15th Street (nominated area limited to 1608 N. 15th Street)

Postal code: 19121

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Siegmund Lubin House

Current/Common Name: Oxford Village

3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Building

Structure

Site

Object

4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

Condition: excellent good fair poor ruins

Occupancy: occupied vacant under construction unknown

Current use: Residential

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and site/plot plan of the resource's boundaries.

6. DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and photographs of the resource's physical appearance, site, setting, and surroundings.

7. SIGNIFICANCE

Please attach a narrative Statement of Significance citing the Criteria for Designation the resource satisfies.

Period of Significance (from year to year): from 1897 to 1899

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: c. 1860

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: _____

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: _____

Original owner: _____

Other significant persons: Siegmund Lubin

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

- (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,
- (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,
- (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,
- (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,
- (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,
- (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,
- (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Please attach a bibliography.

9. NOMINATOR

Organization Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia Date 4/30/2024

Name with Title Matthew Havens, Advocacy Intern Email hstark@preservationalliance.com

Street Address 1608 Walnut St, #1702 Philadelphia, PA 19103 Telephone 215-546-1146

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA 19103

Nominator is is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: 4/30/2024

Correct-Complete Incorrect-Incomplete Date: 6/12/2024

Date of Notice Issuance: 6/13/2024

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: Beech LLC

Address: Suite 300

1510 Cecil B. Moore Ave

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19121

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: _____

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

Designated Rejected

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The Siegmund Lubin House was historically located at 1608 N. 15th Street, but currently is part of a larger parcel known as 1600-10 N. 15th Street. The proposed boundary to be designated, based on historic deeds before consolidation, is as follows:

All that certain lot or piece of ground with the buildings and improvements thereon erected situate on the west side of Fifteenth Street at the distance of ninety-one feet northward from the north side of Oxford Street in the Forty-Seventh Ward, formerly the Twentieth Ward of the City of Philadelphia aforesaid:

Containing in front or breath on the said Fifteenth Street twenty-three foot six inches and extending in the length or depth westward that width at right angle to the said Fifteenth Street one hundred and seventy-two feet ten inches to Sydenham Street bounded northward by a message and lot or ground eastward by the said Fifteenth Street southward partly by a three feet wide alley leading westward into said Sydenham Street and westward by the said Sydenham Street.

Being No. 1608 N. 15th Street (Figure 1).

OPA Account # :881146248



*Figure 1. The boundary of the property proposed for designation is outlined in red (Map Registry # 013N060204).
Source: Philadelphia Atlas*

6. DESCRIPTION

Built in the c. 1860s, the building at 1608 N. 15th Street (Figure 2) is set in a North Philadelphia urban context of predominately three- to three-and-a-half-story rowhouses of mid-to-late nineteenth-century architectural styles mixed with twenty-first-century development (Figure 3). This property is constructed in a modest Italianate style and takes the form of a semi-detached residential rowhouse featuring a three-story, two-bay, red brick main block with a flat roof and almost full-width, three-story brick rear ell with a low pitch shed roof and a flat roof on its west end. Its facade features a brick front with brown colored stone water table and door surround and is crowned with a large overhanging cornice supported by a row of decorative brackets.

After years of vacancy in the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the entire 1600 block of N. 15th Street was redeveloped, and multiple buildings on the west side were restored and rehabilitated, including number 1608 (Figure 4). The building is currently part of Oxford Village, a privately developed apartment-style housing facility for Temple University students, with the whole complex addressed as 1600-1610 N. 15th Street.



Figure 2. 1608 N. 15th Street. View northeast from N. 15th Street, October 16, 2023. Source: Philadelphia Atlas.

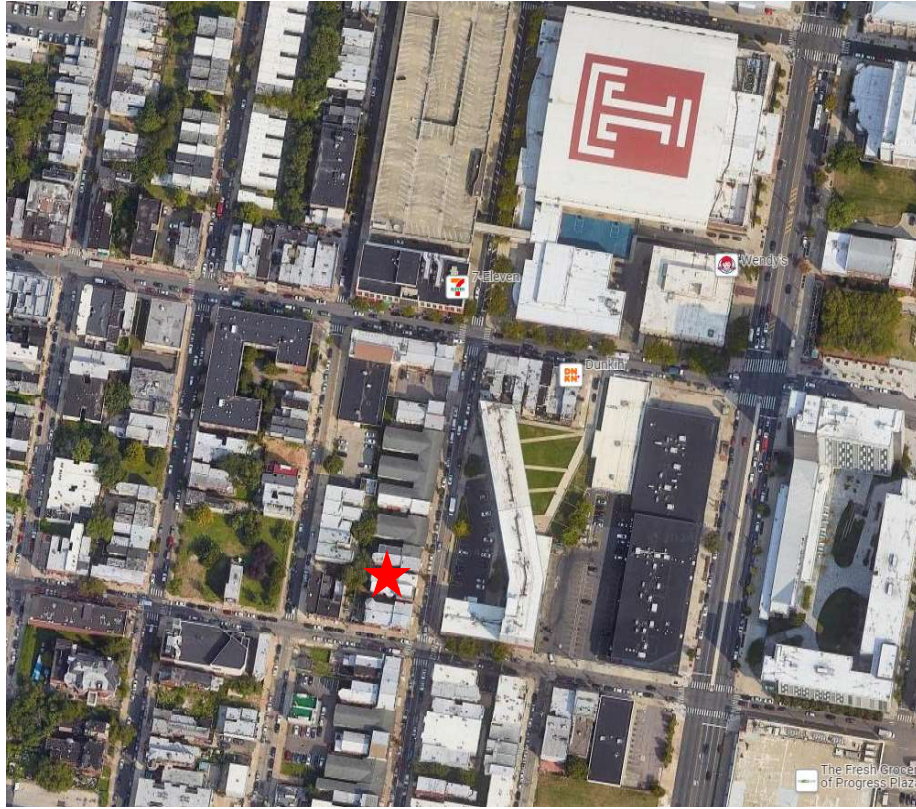


Figure 3. Aerial view of 1608 N. 15th and surrounding area. 1608 N. 15th Street is labeled with red star. c. 2024. Source: Google Maps

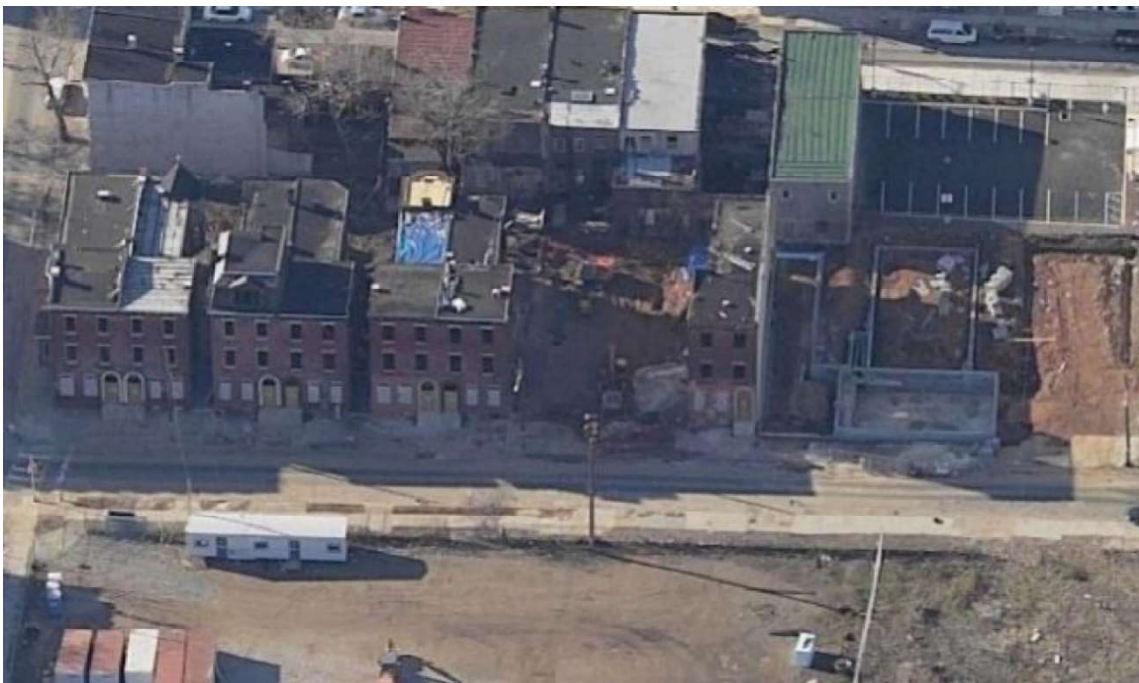


Figure 4. Birdseye view of the 1600 Block of N. 15th Street, looking west. 1608 is five rowhomes from the left. December 21, 2003. Source: Philadelphia Atlas.

East Elevation/ Façade

The front façade faces east on N. 15th Street and is marked with a blue Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission marker for Lubin on the sidewalk. It is constructed with a stretcher or running bond red brick (Figure 5) and is set on a brown-painted masonry water table with two small, rectangular glass-block basement windows. On the northernmost part of the façade, a simple, four-step, white masonry staircase with metal railings leads to a round-arched door opening made of the same brown stone with a decorative central keystone, giving access to a slightly recessed modern metal and glass door and round-arched transom. South of the entrance opening and directly above the water table are two rectangular one-over-one sash windows. The second and third stories each have two rectangular one-over-one sash windows. Each of the six window openings have thin, rectangular slightly projected masonry sills and flush masonry lintels, and appear to be filled with recent replacement windows. All the sills and lintels are painted similar to the water table and round-arched door opening, except the first-story window lintels, which are not coated with paint. The most elaborate part of the building's façade is the cornice featuring seven equally spaced decorative wooden brackets extending from the soffit and slightly past the bottom edge of the frieze. In between each bracket are three small dentils.

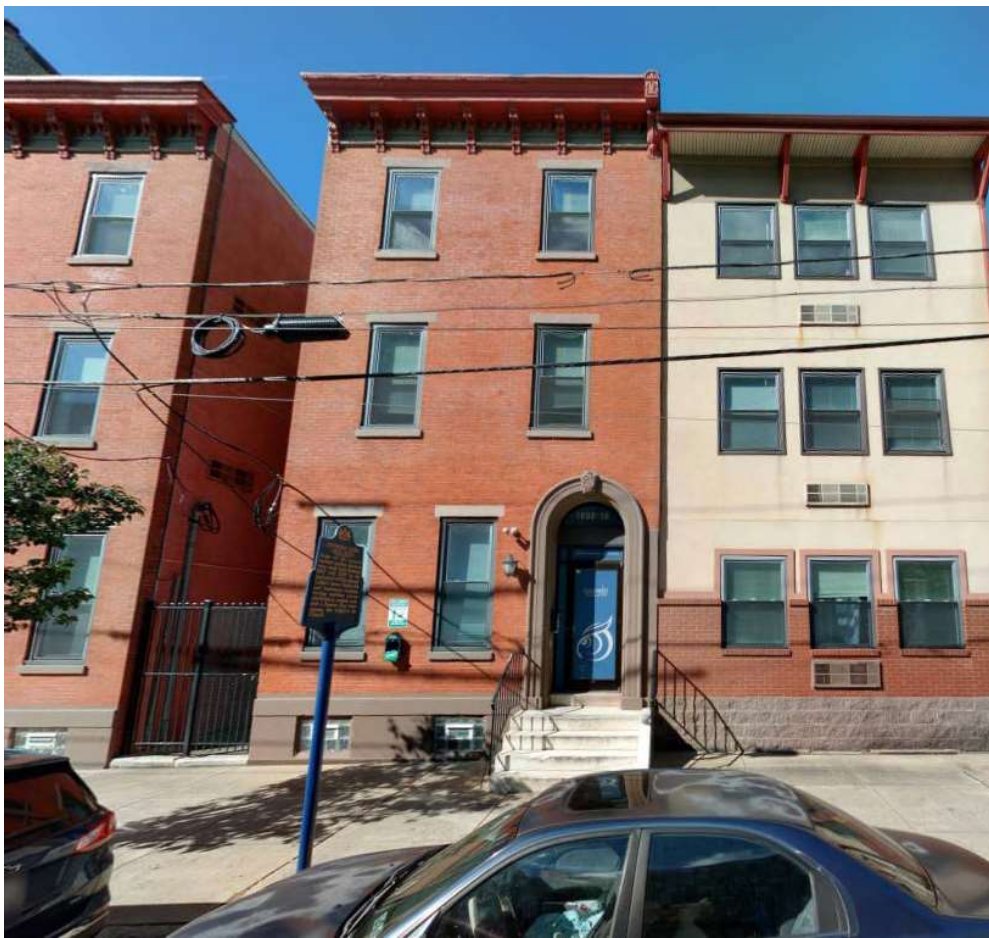


Figure 5. Façade of 1608 N. 15th Street, October 16, 2023. Source: Philadelphia Atlas.

South Elevation

The main building block has one rectangular window on the first story. The rear ell has three bays of double-hung windows. The somewhat idiosyncratic location of some of these windows suggests that at least some of those on the rear ell have been modified (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Birdseye view of 1608 N. 15th Street, looking northwest. April 14, 2023. Source: Philadelphia Atlas.



Figure 7. Birdseye views of 1608 N. 15th Street, looking southeast. April 06, 2023. Source: Philadelphia Atlas

West Elevation

The most prominent feature on the building's west or rear elevation is the two-story bay on the end of the rear ell. The projecting bay extends from the second story to the roofline (Figure 7). The two angled sides of the bay each have narrow, rectangular windows on each story. The central bay panel has two narrow, rectangular windows on each story. The rear elevation of the main block has one rectangular window on each floor to the south of the rear ell.

North Elevation

The Lubin House is attached on its north elevation to a new three-story rowhouse, which is also part of the 1600-10 N. 15th Street parcel.

7. SIGNIFICANCE

The Siegmund Lubin House, historically located at 1608 N. 15th Street, is historically significant and should be listed individually on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, pursuant to Section 14-1004(1) of the Philadelphia Code. The property satisfies Criterion for Designation A because it "is associated with the life of a person significant in the past." From 1897 to 1899, the subject property was the home and primary workplace of Siegmund Lubin (Figure 8)¹, an early motion picture pioneer who eventually grew to become an international force in filmmaking, equipment manufacturing, and exhibition. The property itself was also the prime location for some of Lubin's earliest experiments in filmmaking before expanding his business to other parts of the city and the nation.

Period of Significance

The period of significance begins in 1897, the year Siegmund Lubin started experimenting with motion pictures and film on the property at 1608 N. 15th Street, to 1899, the year he moved his productions to 912 Arch Street.

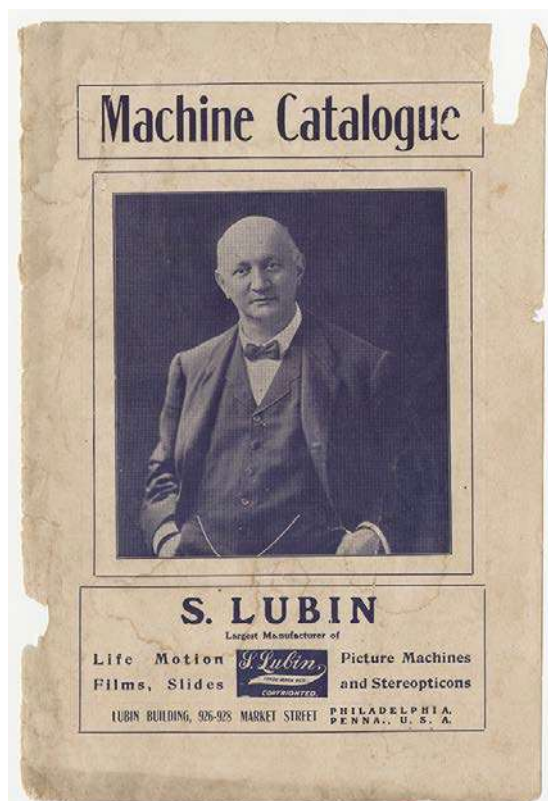


Figure 8. Siegmund Lubin on the Front Cover of the Machine Catalogue ca. 1909

¹ Front Cover (Page 1), ca. 1909, Machine Catalogue (Sales Catalogue). Free Library of Philadelphia: Philadelphia, PA. <https://libwww.freelibrary.org/digital/item/40953>

Background of 1608 N. 15th Street

The area around 1608 N. 15th Street was historically located outside the original boundaries of the City of Philadelphia and instead covered portions of multiple families' large private estates. The subject property was acquired as part of a larger parcel in 1767 by John Little in what was then part of Northern Liberties Township (Figure 9).² The area was later absorbed into the District of Penn, incorporated in 1843, often called "South Penn" in contrast with Penn Township to the north. It was bounded to the south by Spring Garden District and on the east by Northern Liberties and Kensington at 6th Street.³

By the early 1840s, with the founding of Girard College, urban development began to creep into the southern part of Penn Township. A detailed look at an 1853 map of Philadelphia and the surrounding townships, districts, and boroughs shows that the area west of Broad Street, north of W. Thompson, and south of Columbia Avenue was not laid out with streets or developed at that time (Figure 10). Neither N. 15th Street nor W. Oxford Street had been extended into this area during this time.



Figure 9. Detail of Landowners in 1777 overlay in Philadelphia. The area of 1608 is pointed out by a red arrow.

² "Mapping West Philadelphia: Landowners in October 1777," John Little, accessed March 1, 2024, <https://maps.archives.upenn.edu/WestPhila1777/view-parcel.php?pid=279&popup=1>.

³ 1. William Bucke Campbell, "Old Towns and Districts of Philadelphia; an Address Delivered Before the City History Society of Philadelphia, February 26, 1941," Internet Archive, January 1, 1970, <https://archive.org/details/oldtownsdistrict00camp/page/100/mode/1up>, 103.



Figure 10. Detail from the “Map of the Vicinity of Philadelphia from Actual Surveys, 1853 showing Penn District and surrounding districts. The area of 1608 is pointed out by a red arrow.

A decade later, after the Consolidation of the city in 1854, an 1862 map of the City of Philadelphia shows extensions of W. Oxford and N. 15th Streets as open public streets into the area of 1600 block of N. 15th Street (Figure 11). Also, this Smedley map shows that the 1600 block of N. 15th Street had ten buildings constructed all along its western side, most likely each block consisting of two semi-detached rowhouses, for a total of twenty rowhouses. After the Civil War, North Philadelphia, along with the rest of the city, underwent a dramatic transformation. Philadelphia boomed as immigrants arrived at the ports, freed African Americans migrated from the South, and the city’s economy shifted to modern industries. Technological advancements fueled by this industrial boom eventually would earn Philadelphia the nickname “Workshop of the World.”⁴

⁴ Philip Scranton. “Large Firms and Industrial Restructuring: The Philadelphia Region, 1900-1980.” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 116, no. 4 (1992): 419, 422. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20092757>.

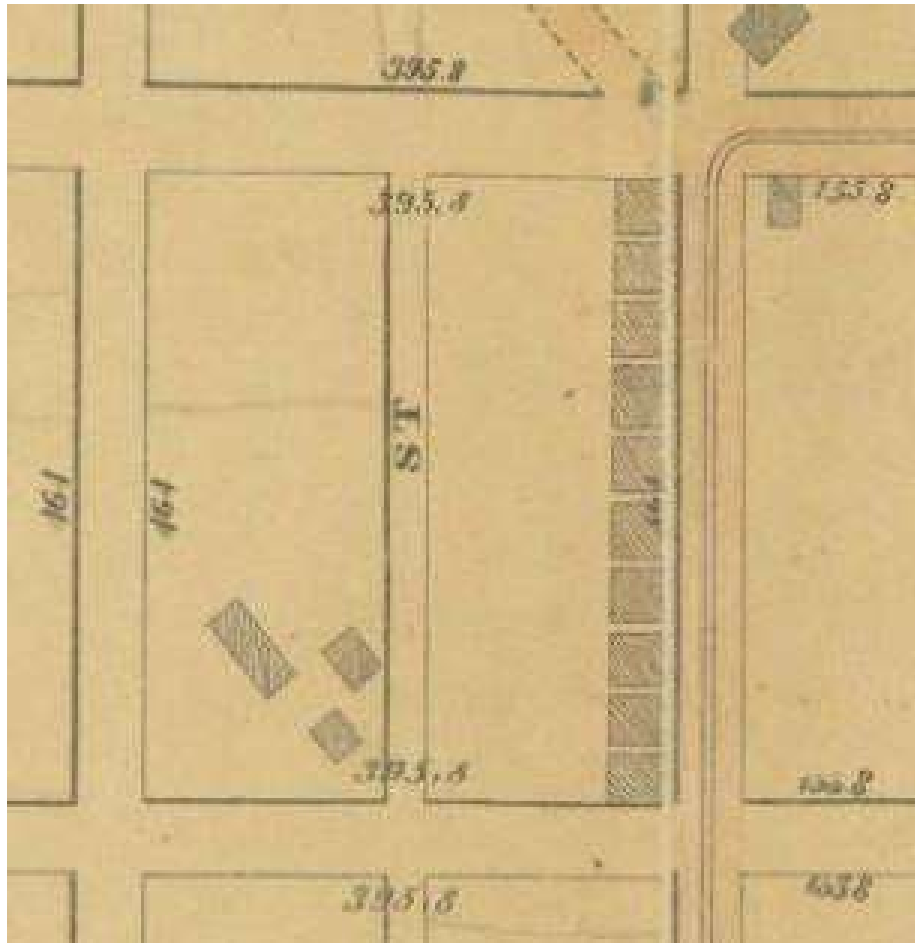


Figure 11. Detail from Samuel Lightfoot Smedley's *Atlas the City of Philadelphia*, 1862.

Siegmund Lubin

Siegmund Lubin, born Siegmund Lubszynski, a Prussian-Jewish-born immigrant with a business sense and an education in optics, carved a unique path in the emerging world of motion pictures. A pivotal figure often overlooked in the history of filmmaking and cinema, Lubin was an innovator and even a controversial figure willing to bend the rules in a fiercely competitive industry. After graduating from the University of Heidelberg, he left Prussia and arrived in Philadelphia in 1876⁵. He successfully established himself as an optician in the city with his business at 21 S. 8th Street and was captivated by the early motion picture film projectors. Lubin's interest in the promising technology of motion pictures was a natural progression from his background in optics. His understanding of lenses and optics gave him an

⁵ "Betzwood," Libraries at Montgomery County Community College, 2017, <https://library.mc3.edu/betzwood/lubin>.

edge in the early days of filmmaking, where technical knowledge was just as important as artistic vision. His experience with lenses, therefore, enabled him to create his own camera and projector.

Lubin, with his wife and daughter, rented the subject building from at least 1895 (Figure 12) to 1899 (Figure 13), according to business directories, being one of the few residents in the area who did not own their home.⁶

The year 1897 marked a turning point for Lubin and his family that would splinter their quiet middle-class neighborhood on the 1600 block of N. 15th Street. In his backyard brick stable on Sydenham Street, Lubin had finally achieved something seemingly impossible: he'd created a "life motion picture" or a moving photograph.⁷ This event would be the impetus to create the dominant Lubin Manufacturing Company.

Convincing himself that the audiences in the city would appreciate films of various entertainments, Lubin decided to transform his backyard into a stage for captivating entertainment. Between 1897 and 1899, Lubin transformed his rear yard into a makeshift studio for a wide variety of short films, including stage performers, burlesque acts, and boxing matches. In addition, Lubin filmed inside his own home at 1608 N. 15th Street. In one indoor film, most likely utilizing the large room in the rear of the second floor where the large bay windows facing west and south provided enough lighting for film, Lubin staged a pillow fight between his daughter and his friend's daughter.⁸

Lovless William, cigars, 8002 Fkd av Hbg	Lozier H A (H A Lozier & Co), h Cleveland Ohio
Low Chas, express, 7 S Del av, h Haddonfield N J	Lozier H A & Co (H A Lozier), bicycles, 1724 N Broad
Low Frank H, liquors, 811 Psyk av	Lubbe Charles H, bellhanger, 1704 N 11th
Low Harrison, oysters 1425 Psyk av	Lubey Edward E, grocer, 1101 Cantrell
Low H A (Home Furniture Co), h 2325 N 19th	Lubin George, oysters, 403 Callowhill
Low Jacob F, liquors, 657 N Broad	Lubin Sigmund, optician, 21 S 8th, h 1608 N 15th
Low William, liquors, Ridge av e Wiss Creek Wiss	Lubinger Max, steamship agt, 712 S Front
Lowber H S, lawyer, 420 Walnut, h Mt A	Lubner Morris, dyer, 617 N Front
Lowd Percy I, knit goods, 148 Nicholson, h N Y	Luburg A J, trustee Central Storage and Warehouse Co, h 2250 N Broad
Lowden H C, stoves, 9 S 40th, h 4422 Market	
Lowe Albert C, frames, 907 Market, h 2022 N 13th	

Figure 12. Boyd's Co-Partnership and Residence Business Directory of Philadelphia City [1st] Year [1858] from 1895 listing Lubin's residence at 1608 N. 15th Street.

⁶ Joseph P. Eckhardt. *The king of the movies: Film pioneer Sigmund Lubin*. Madison, NJ, etc.: Fairleigh Dickinson U.P. etc., 1997. 16. Lubin and his family appear in various city directories at this address, including those issued in 1895 and 1899 (Figures 12 and 13).

⁷ Joseph P. Eckhardt, 16.

⁸ Joseph P. Eckhardt, 24.

452 LUB CO-PARTNERSHIP AND RESIDENCE DIRECTORY. LUK

Luberoff Solomon, mgr Jersey City Beef & Produce Co, h 1125 Poplar
Lubey Edward, grocer, 2104 S 11th
Lubey George S, printer, 1146 S 10th
→ Lubin Sigmund, optician, 21 S 8th, h 1608 N 15th
Lubner Morris, dyer, 617 N Front
Luburg A J (Central Furniture Co) and mgr Central Storage & Warehouse Co, h 2250 N Broad

LUDWIG PIANO CO (THE), 1715 Chestnut and 1729 Columbia av, John H Ludwig pres, Joseph F Allen v-pres, Harry H Schoepp sec
Ludwig & Waples (De Benneville K Ludwig and Erasmus B Waples), school, 43 S 18th
Ludy's C Sons (Jacob), hides, 1513 N Mascher
Ludy Jacob (C Ludy's Sons), h 2431 N 7th
Ludy Jacob, confectioner, 1938 Market
Luebbert Amandus, cigars, 626 Cumberland
Luerssen Christian F, cigars, 713 N 3d

Figure 13. Boyd's Co-Partnership and Residence Business Directory of Philadelphia City 1899 listing Lubin's residence at 1608 N. 15th Street

One of Lubin's first successes was a cinematic interpretation of the "Passion Play," a project filming a retelling of the story of Christ. Parts of this film were photographed in the Lubin backyard and in Fairmount Park during 1898.⁹ The Lubin House at 1608 N. 15th Street symbolizes the scrappy beginnings of American filmmaking. His home studio was an important foundational stage for his film journey. Pioneers like Lubin created these experimental films in improvised settings before large-scale studios became the norm. With his films expanding and his backyard too small, he moved his filming operations to a rooftop studio to accommodate his ambitions and demands. From 1899 to 1901, he continued to run his business from this rooftop studio at 912 Arch Street.¹⁰ Later, at the peak of the Lubin Manufacturing Company, he expanded his studio by building at sites at 20th and Indiana Avenue in 1911, known as "Lubinville" (Figure 14), and in Betzwood, Pennsylvania, where he built a state-of-the-art facility in 1912 across the Schuylkill River from Valley Forge.¹¹

Lubin not only produced motion pictures in studios; he operated small motion picture houses and sold projectors to aspiring exhibitors. He built a motion picture house on the midway at the National Export Exposition, held at 34th Street below Spruce Street in 1899. By some accounts, this was the first structure in America to be built exclusively as a motion picture theater.¹² By 1902, Lubin was already a prominent figure in Philadelphia's evolving entertainment scene. Beyond his own prolific film output, Lubin's business practices shaped the early film industry because he recognized the importance of distributions and exhibitions. He became one of the first movie moguls to establish a massive chain of theaters, giving him absolute control of where his films were presented. He established himself as an exhibitor by opening "Lubin's Auditorium" at 215 N. 8th Street.¹³ His ambition, however, did not stop there. By 1906, he acquired the prestigious "Bon Ton Theatre," also known as the "Gaiety Theatre," with

⁹ M. J. McCosker. "Philadelphia and the Genesis of the Motion Picture." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 65, no. 4 (1941): 417. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20087415>.

¹⁰ Joseph P. Eckhardt, 30.

¹¹ Woodall, Martha. "Region an Early Film Center." <https://www.inquirer.com>. August 18, 2007. https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/nation_world/20070818_Region_an_early_film_center.html.

¹² M. J. McCosker, 417-18.

¹³ Linda Woal, "When a Dime Could Buy a Dream: Sigmund Lubin and the Birth of Motion Picture Exhibition." *Film History* 6, no. 2 (1994): 161. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3814962>.

a 1000-seat capacity, and his theatrical empire started to expand rapidly.¹⁴ By 1908, he owned and operated four large theaters in the city alone: The Victoria at 913 Market Street (Figure 15), The Palace at (Figure 16), the Auditorium, and the Savoy at 1211 Market Street (Figure 17). Lubin's theater success soon was not confined to Philadelphia. His vision had extended beyond the city as he established a chain of theaters throughout Pennsylvania and along the rest of the East Coast of the United States.¹⁵



Figure 14. Crew of Lubin Manufacturing Company at Lubinville. Image from the Free Library of Philadelphia, Theatre Collection.

¹⁴ Linda Woal, 161.

¹⁵ Linda Woal, 161.



Figure 15. The Victoria (demolished in 1950). Image from Philadelphia Architects and Buildings, The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Irvin R. Glazer Theater Collection.



Figure 17. The Savoy (to the right of Howard Clothes). Image from Philadelphia Architects and Buildings, The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Irvin R. Glazer Theater

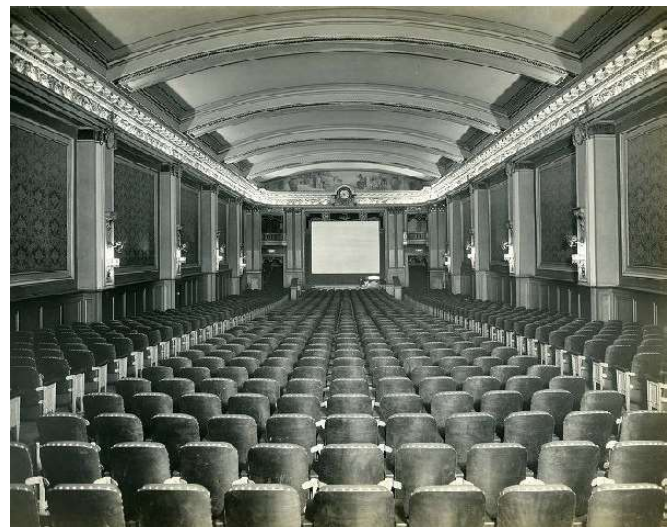


Figure 16. Interior of The Palace. Image from Philadelphia Architects and Buildings, The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Irvin R. Glazer Theater Collection.

The decline of Lubin's empire coincided with the rise of Hollywood. In 1914, Lubinville's fireproof vaults caught fire and exploded, leaving an immense loss of years of film material gone in an instant.¹⁶ Therefore, the Lubin Manufacturing Company succumbed to bankruptcy; however, its legacy remains undeniable. Lubin's early contributions to early film history encompass production, distribution, and exhibition. While his name may not resonate with the general public of today, historians and the film industry recognize Siegmund Lubin as an essential figure in the birth of modern cinema. PHMC revealed in 2007 the third and most recent historical marker for Lubin at 1608 N. 15th Street for being the place he lived and the site for his earliest film experiments (Figure 18). The other state historical markers dedicated to him are at 21 S. Eighth Street, at the site of his optical shop/business (Figure 20), and in Montgomery County, at the site of his Betzwood estate and studios (Figure 19).¹⁷ Lubin was awarded a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1960 (his first name spelled Sigmund) at 6166 Hollywood Blvd, recognizing his pioneering contributions to the motion picture industry (Figure 21). Lubin's markers and star serve as a reminder of his significant role in filmmaking's early development. His innovative productions and understanding of business and technology helped shape the industry we know today.

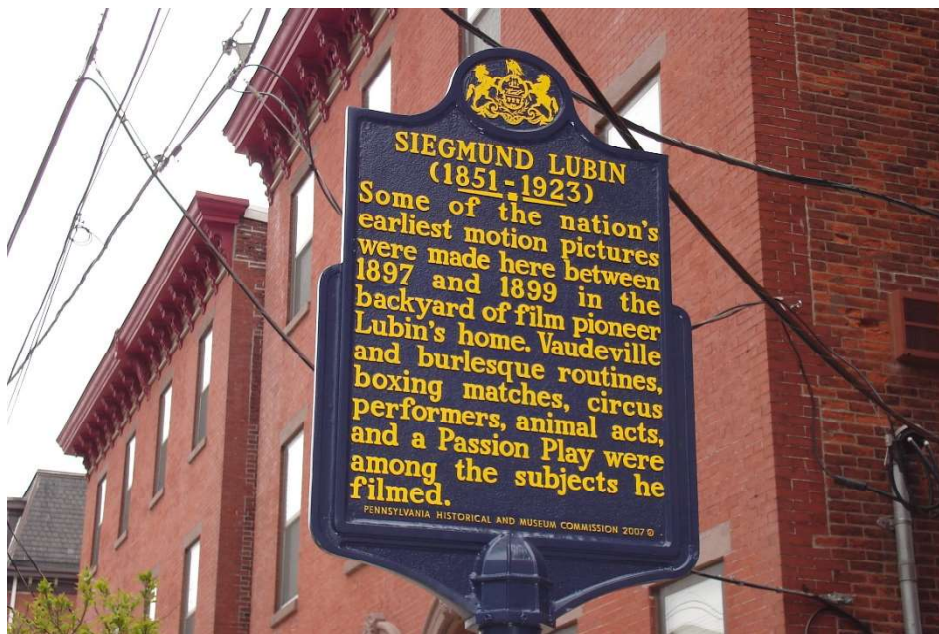


Figure 18. PHMC Marker outside 1608 N. 15th Street, Philadelphia. Image from PASHARE.

¹⁶ "Motion Picture News (Apr - Jul 1914)," Internet Archive, January 1, 1970, <https://archive.org/details/motionp09moti/page/n1061/mode/2up>.

¹⁷ Nathaniel Popkin, "The First Hollywood," <https://www.inquirer.com>, April 16, 2007, https://www.inquirer.com/philly/opinion/inquirer/20070416_The_first_Hollywood.html.

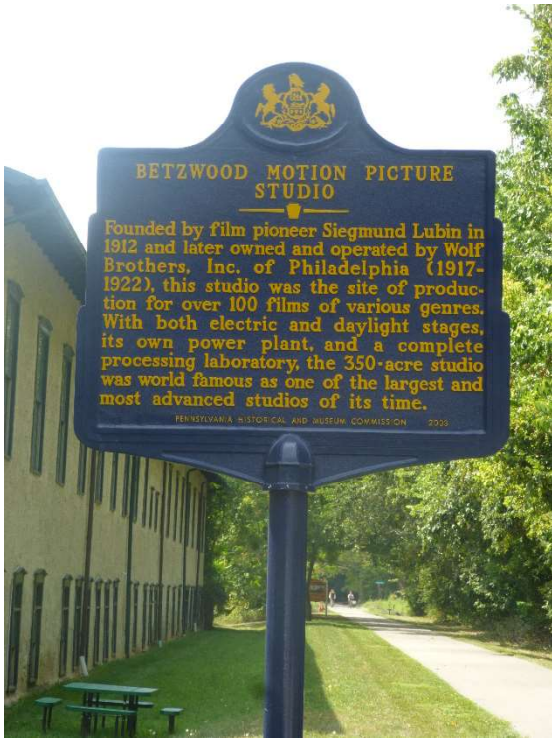


Figure 20. PHMC Marker in West Norriton Township, Montgomery County, PA. Image from PASHARE.

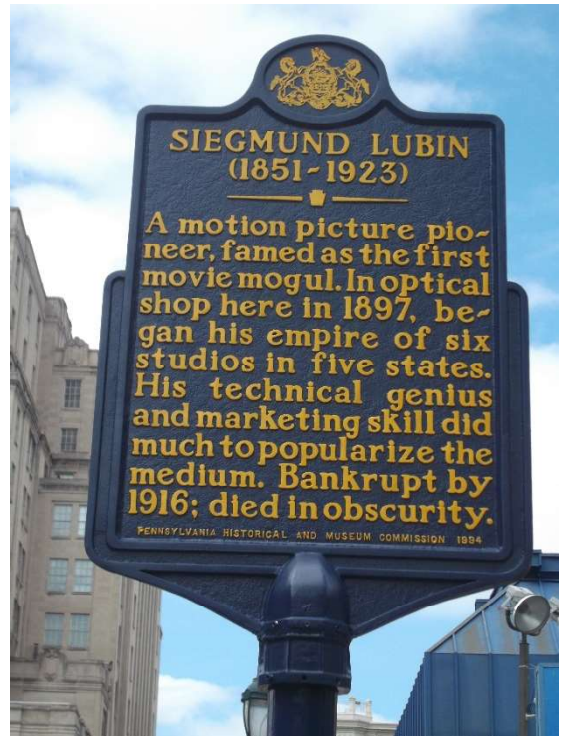


Figure 19. PHMC Marker outside 21 S. 8th Street, Philadelphia. Image from PASHARE.



Figure 21. Hollywood Walk of Fame, Lubin's star. Image from Los Angeles Times.

8: MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHIC SOURCES

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