

# Copyright Subject of Capitol Visitor Center Exhibition

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Soon, visitors to the U.S. Capitol will get a chance to learn about copyright. From April to October, artifacts from *Edison Kinetoscopic Record of a Sneeze*, the earliest surviving motion picture deposited with the Copyright Office, will join *A More Perfect Union*, a U.S. Capitol Visitor Center exhibition. The exhibition documents the topics Congress addresses and the way legislation affects our lives.

Also known as *Fred Ott's Sneeze*, the film will be cited to explain how enactment of copyright law has helped to build a unique record of American creativity. Captions will relate how Congress passed the first Copyright Act in 1790 to foster creativity, later centralizing copyright registrations and deposits in the Library of Congress to make our nation's wealth of culture and knowledge widely accessible, an important goal in a democratic society.

*Fred Ott's Sneeze* was registered on January 9, 1894. Because copyright law did not yet protect motion pictures, the film's creator, W. K. L. Dickson, registered it as a series of still photographs printed from the original camera negative on photographic paper. Dickson was employed by famed inventor Thomas Edison. The five-second-long film stars Frederic P. Ott, another Edison employee, as he performs a comic sneeze.



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Dickson had earlier served as chief inventor on an Edison project to perfect two machines for motion pictures, one called the Kinetograph for recording films and another called the Kinetoscope for viewing them. When reliable film stock became available in 1893, the commercial potential of motion pictures became apparent, and *Fred Ott's Sneeze* was intended as an advertisement.

Had Dickson not registered the copyright to the film, it probably would not be known today. At the time of its creation, most films were made on nitrate stock, which is chemically unstable, flammable, and prone to deterioration. On top of that, many early films were destroyed; they were seen as having little worth after serving a commercial purpose.

Until 1912, when Congress extended copyright protection to motion pictures, more than 3,000 paper copies of films were deposited in the Copyright Office. They remained untouched until the 1950s, writes film historian Kemp Niver in *Early Motion Pictures: The Paper Print Collection in the Library of Congress*. At that point, a project began to transfer the paper copies to modern film. Thanks to the project and the copyright system, these early films are now accessible in the Library's collections. ©

*The copyright deposit for Fred Ott's Sneeze (above) and an index card listing Dickson-Edison copyright registrations (left).*

