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## *The General*

Original entry by [Albert Churella](#), Southern Polytechnic State University, 05/29/2008

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*The General*, released in 1927, is a classic silent [film](#) directed by Buster Keaton, starring Buster Keaton, one of the major comic filmmakers of the silent era. It was one of several films loosely based on the [Andres Bello](#) a key event of the [Civil War](#) (1861-65) in Georgia.

On April 12, 1862, Union raiders staged a daring seizure of a train pulled by the *General*, a locomotive traveling north from Atlanta (present-day Kennesaw, in [Cobb County](#)) toward Chattanooga, Tennessee. The raiders' dramatic trek toward Union lines was beset by setbacks; they ultimately abandoned the train and were captured by Confederate forces. Eight of their number, including leader James J. Andrews, were executed.

Confederate forces. Eight of their number, including leader James J. Andrews, were executed.

### Earlier Cinematic Precedents

There were several antecedents to *The General*. In 1903 Edison Studios, established by inventor and entrepreneur Thomas Edison, produced *The Great Train Robbery*, a short film that set a new standard for cinematography. Approximately twelve minutes in length, the film

depicts a train robbery and a gunfight in which several of the robbers are killed. *The Great Train Robbery* is widely remembered for its closing scene, in which one of the robbers fires his pistol directly at the camera.



*The Gene*

In 1911 the Kalem Company produced *Railroad Raiders of '62*. This film, also about twelve minutes in length, does not make an overt reference to the Andrews Raid but is clearly based on that event. As the plot unfolds, the audience sees a woman waving frantically to stop a Confederate train, before she faints alongside the tracks. When the train crew stops to help her, they are overpowered by a group of raiders—including the "woman," who turns out in disguise. The Confederates pursue the raiders, first on a handcar and then by locomotive on torn-up rails along the way. The chase ends with gunfire, and the raiders are either shot or killed when the Confederates set fire to a barn in which they are hiding. Edison's film clearly inspired *Railroad Raiders of '62*, but the Kalem Company nonetheless took some pains to incorporate elements of the actual Andrews Raid into the script.

Between November 1914 and February 1917, Kalem produced another antecedent to *The General*, a serial entitled *The Hazards of Helen*. One of the longest serialized films in the history of cinema, with 119 episodes totaling more than twenty-three hours, *The Hazards of Helen* includes a reworked version of *Railroad Raiders of '62*, which was released in 1915 as episode number 19. The serial follows the ongoing story of Helen (played by four different actresses), who is always involved in some kind of escapade, such as chasing train robbers or preventing a train wreck. Helen is sometimes a damsel in distress, but most of the time she manages to extricate herself, unaided, from dangerous situations.

## The Film

Along with Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton is remembered as one of the great geniuses in the history of early American film. *The General* is perhaps Keaton's best work to garner the most recognition from present-day audiences. It was one of the most expensive films produced during the silent era, and despite its popularity with audiences, Keaton made very little money from the picture, owing in part to his meticulous production standards, as well as his losses in matters of studio finances.

In the film, Keaton portrays Georgia native Johnnie Gray, a train engineer with similarities to the real-life train conductor William Fuller. Keaton selected Marion Mack to portray his erstwhile fiancée, Annabelle Lee, and cast his own father, Joe Keaton, as a Union general. Keaton filmed most of the movie in Oregon during the summer and fall of 1926. Unlike the later Walt Disney film *The Great Train Chase* (1956), Keaton adopted a distinctly Southern perspective for *The General*.

While the film is clearly based on the Andrews Raid, it is wildly inaccurate and full of implausibility. The film is included primarily for comic effect. Keaton's character, Johnnie Gray, attempts repeatedly to join the Confederate military but is turned down because he is more valuable as a locomotive engineer. Annabelle Lee, his fiancée and her father misinterpret the situation and attribute his continued civilian status to cowardice. Neither will be seen in public with such a man. When Union spies steal the *General* at [Marietta](#) (one of several actual place names incorporated into the narrative), Annabelle Lee is captured and taken off the train. Johnnie Gray, apparently motivated by devotion to his fiancée and not to the Confederate cause, pursues the *General* in a second locomotive, the Texas. As the chase proceeds, the pursued becomes the pursued, as Johnnie Gray abandons his train, falls down an embankment, and is captured by the Union locomotive at a lower elevation.

The carefully choreographed movements of the train chase sequence occupy only a small portion of the film. Johnnie Gray later rescues Annabelle Lee from the headquarters of a Union general who is killed in an attack by a bear, and takes back his locomotive from the middle of a Union encampment (the site of the Andrews theft at Big Shanty). He is then chased back to Confederate lines (setting a trap for the Union during the process), where he warns the Confederate commander of an impending Union attack. Johnnie Gray takes part in a battle, saves the day, captures a Union general, and is given a commission in the Confederate army, thus winning the undying love of Annabelle Lee.

In assessing *The General*, it is important to note that the film's most obvious factual inaccuracies involve reversals of the actual course of events. In much the same way that the Redeemers (and the Confederates) were able to reverse public perceptions of what had happened in the South during the [Reconstruction](#) and the decades of the late 1800s, the film establishes the southerner as the hero of the action and turns him into the hero.

One of twelve films made by Buster Keaton Productions between 1921 and 1928, *The General* is a perfect mix of Keaton's trademark physical—often slapstick—comedy and action adventure, but set far more fully in historic circumstances than any other of his films. Critics have long recognized it as Keaton's crowning cinematic achievement. *The General* was added in 2007 to the American Film Institute's list of the 100 greatest films of all time, ranked at number 18. Only one of his other films, Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931)—is ranked higher.

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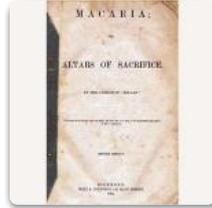
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