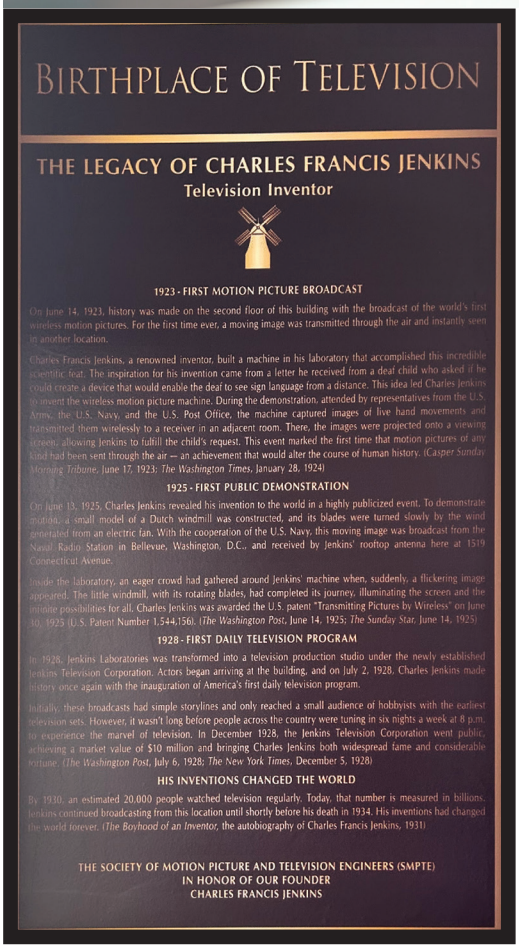

The Charles F. Jenkins Building: 100 Years of Television

BY RUSSELL POOLE

On an unassuming block just off Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C., a cluster of psychiatrists' offices occupies the second and third floors of 1517-1519 Connecticut Avenue. However, if you look at the plaque that hangs at the entrance to the building, you'll uncover a deeper history—one that has shaped the media landscape of not just the U.S. but the entire world.

The building once housed the laboratory of Charles F. Jenkins, a technologist and engineer who focused on the motion picture industry. Jenkins founded the Society of Motion Picture Engineers, an organization that would later incorporate Jenkins' other major accomplishment: television.

It was in this lab 100 years ago that Charles Francis Jenkins demonstrated a crude form of television to invited guests, with the images of a rotating toy windmill being wirelessly transmitted from a scanner set up by Jenkins at a U.S. Navy facility several miles away. (Some two years earlier,

SMPTE Past President Renard T. Jenkins examines a signed copy of a book by Society founder C. Francis Jenkins. (Displayed with Jenkins are replicas of the toy windmill and electric fan used in the 1925 Washington, D.C., television demonstration.)

Peter Hiotis, who sponsored the June 13 event and is lobbying for a nearby street plaza to be named in C. Francis Jenkins' honor, explains the significance of Jenkins accomplishments to guests at the reception.

Jenkins had demonstrated the transmission of hand movements in the lab to a viewing device in an adjacent room in his Washington, D.C., laboratory.) These very early accomplishments helped to usher in a new era of media, which changed the way in which storytelling takes place, information is exchanged, and individuals connect with one another.

100 Years of Television Event

I attended an event celebrating Charles F. Jenkins and 100 years of television. The event took place in Jenkins' former laboratory and was attended by representatives from SMPTE, the Navy, the National Association of the Deaf, and the Smithsonian. The evening was hosted by the owner of the building, Pete Hiotis, who wanted to raise awareness of the building's place in television history.

"To be involved with something that changed the world is an incredible feeling," said Hiotis. "It's even more incredible that these innovations were inspired by a letter from a deaf child asking Jenkins to invent something so they could access media through visuals and sign language. But people don't know anything about that history. I think if they were told, they would be just as inspired as I was."

Hiotis noted that Jenkins, in his 1925 demonstration, relied on a toy windmill propelled by a small electric fan as a moving image source. (Hiotis provided a toy windmill replica and a period electric fan for attendees to view at the June 13 event honoring Jenkins.)

A Collaborative Process

Though Jenkins created and held the patents for the technology that made television possible, this innovation was not created in a vacuum. From the Navy to the U.S. Patent Office, many played a role in creating this industry. However, it's worth mentioning that television wouldn't exist if it weren't for the deaf community.

Jenkins received a letter from a small child who heard about his many inventions. The child was deaf and wanted to experience the stories and media produced by the radio. The letter read, "All the other children are enjoying the radio, and I can't because I can only hear with my eyes. Please invent something so that deaf children can see sign language on the radio."

"History has shown time and again that when deaf individuals are included in conversations around technology and access, progress is faster and more equitable," said Kelby

1545-0279/25©2025SMPTE

Brick, COO of the National Association of the Deaf. "Efforts to exclude deaf people from essential communications—such as White House press briefings—not only marginalize our community but also hinder the nation's potential for innovation. This exclusion must end."

Jenkins went to work on fulfilling the girl's request, creating a radio that could transmit images instead of just sound. To honor the child's request, the first wireless transmission in June 1923 showed a pair of hands making slight movements in sign language. These videos were grainy, dim, and low-quality. They would go on to change the entire world.

"Television is just one example of how society benefits from the innovations and advocacy of deaf people," said Brick. "Another critical advancement is captioning, which has become an essential feature on screens both small and large. Deaf people's unique visual perception continues to drive inclusive innovation for all. We were not previously aware of the history of the building Pete referenced, and we are grateful for his efforts in bringing this to light and educating the community at large of this important development."

Once the technology improved, Jenkins arranged a public event with the help of the U.S. Navy. In June 1925, an image of a toy windmill, whose blades were turning thanks to the help of an electric fan, was broadcast from the Naval Radio Station in Bellevue, Washington, D.C., to Jenkins' lab. The demonstration had the attending crowd in awe and earned him a patent later that month.

Promoting Change and Cementing History

After these monumental successes, Jenkins set out to make this technology available to a wider audience. By 1928, Jenkins transformed his lab into a television studio and began broadcasting programs. On 1 July 1928, Jenkins produced the first daily TV program. Initially viewed by only a handful of technology enthusiasts, it quickly became popular in many American households.

By 1930, nearly 20,000 people were regularly watching television. As time marched on, that number only grew. Jenkins continued to broadcast from this laboratory until he died in 1934. Afterwards, the lab faded away, and the building moved on to other ventures. For a while, it was an air conditioning company, a clothing store, and a bookstore. Today, the building is home to a psychiatry practice, but the walls, floors, and ceiling still hold the history of Charles F. Jenkins and the first television broadcast within their foundation.

"We didn't know what he had in the beginning," said Hiotis. "It took a tremendous amount of research to extract what happened here. Mark Schubin from the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers greatly assisted in putting all the facts together. Determining how to showcase these facts properly so the world can have an accurate account of what happened here."

Hiotis not only wants to tell the story of this building but also aims to preserve it. He's currently seeking to earn 1519 Connecticut Avenue status as a historic landmark and is making his case with the Washington, D.C., Mayor's office to achieve that goal. Once the building is recognized as a landmark, he hopes to work with the Smithsonian to spread the history even further.

TRUE, POSITIVE CHANGE COMES FROM ADDRESSING A NEED, **FINDING NEW WAYS TO SHARE STORIES,** AND MAKING THE WORLD A MORE ACCESSIBLE PLACE.

Conclusion

The 100 Years of Television event at 1519 Connecticut Avenue was an eye-opening experience. Engineers often work together to accomplish great things, but it's easy to forget that innovation doesn't just happen because technologists are curious or bored. True, positive change comes from addressing a need, finding new ways to share stories, and making the world a more accessible place. The history of Jenkins' lab is the history of television—one that deserves to be preserved and celebrated.

"I would like to thank Pete H[iotis] for including SMPTE in this recognition of one of our founders, Charles F. Jenkins," said SMPTE Past President, Renard T. Jenkins. "Often, innovative leaders are resigned to the back pages of history. However, this event made a point of celebrating the documented history of an individual who sought to bring television to the masses through his experimentations and his successful demonstration of the first live motion images that were transmitted wirelessly."

"The National Association of the Deaf deeply appreciates Pete's effort to highlight the powerful history behind the invention of television, which was inspired by a deaf child's request to make radio accessible," said Brick. "This story—and many others—demonstrates how the contributions of deaf individuals have shaped technologies we now take for granted, including television, motion pictures, and even the light bulb.".

DOI: 10.5594/JMI.2025/FIIL5141
Date of publication: 15 July 2025