Chapter Two

How World War I Shaped the State of West Virginia

Naval Ordnance Plant in South Charleston

On August 29, 1916, Congress authorized the building of the Naval Ordnance Plant to be located between U.S. 60 and the railroad in South Charleston, West Virginia. The plant took two years to build as it was rather large, spanning the distance of 900,000 square feet, and it began operating in May of 1918. According to Secretary of Navy Josephus Daniels, this naval base was the first in U.S. history to be placed away from seawaters; however, West Virginia’s natural resources of coal, oil, and gas combined with its “moral environment and splendid citizenship” is why Congress chose the location of South Charleston. Military equipment such as armor plates, gun forgings, and projectiles for battleships and cruisers were all manufactured at the plant and were used by the U.S. Navy in World War I.1

Lt. (j.g.) David M. Giltinan, U.S. Naval Reserve Forces. Smith-Giltinan Collection

Navy Reserve officer, Lieutenant David Giltinan, was assigned to be the inspector’s assistant of the Naval Ordnance Plant in South Charleston on January 31, 1918, and arrived to serve out his duty just 5 days later. On February 20, 1919, he was relieved from duty, but chose to continue to work at the plant as a civilian. The U.S. Navy awarded him the victory medal in 1922 for his outstanding service.2

The plant closed down in 1922 but was reopened in 1939 for World War II production, closing down again in 1946. A company known as FMC purchased the plant in 1961 and it was used to produce armored vehicles for the Vietnam War.3 The complex was later leased to the American Motors Corporation as an automobile body parts stamping plant and was later used by other automobile companies, remaining a stamping plant until 2012.4

Nitro

Once the site of the peaceful villages of Lock Seven and Sattes, the area was transformed into the World War I boom town of Nitro, which was founded on January 2, 1918. The town is believed to be named after nitroglycerin, but this is a common misconception. According to Historian Bill Wintz, Nitro’s name derived from nitrocellulose, which was used to manufacture smokeless gunpowder and other explosive devices.5 The plant was one of three chosen by the U.S. government under the Deficiency Appropriations Act to relieve a severe shortage of gunpowder. The act provided for the construction of three huge explosive plants, each with the capability to produce 500,000 pounds of gun powder.6

Nitro’s location, 14 miles away from Charleston, was chosen because it...
met the criteria of being secure from coastal attacks and climatic conditions, as well as having access to railroads, waterways, and raw materials. The large complex, known as Explosives Plant C, was three miles long and one mile wide. Explosives Plant C was built in just 11 short months and thousands of workers, supplies, and materials arrived practically overnight. The town's housing facilities included 28, 200-bed army barracks to house 5,000 unmarried men in Companies E and F of the 20th Infantry, who served as guards to protect the plant from being the target of enemy attacks, as well as rows upon rows of prefabricated brown bungalows for workers' families. In addition, the town contained schools, a police department, a fire department, a grocery store, a hospital, and a recreational center or assembly building, where townspeople could go to the movies, buy a soda, candy, or tobacco.\(^2\) The assembly building also served as a Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), a gathering place where men would sing war songs such as “Keep Your Head Down Fritzie Boy,” “Hoss of Picardy,” and “Over There.” Men who worked nights in the plant would go to the YMCA to write letters home to their families because paper and envelopes were free to all. The men would also listen to the phonograph, which was a sound device that played records.

During the 11 months that Explosive Plant C was in operation, 110,000 people were on its payroll. Although there was a high turnover of people coming and going, there were 41 different nationalities of workers,\(^10\) which included those of Eastern European descent and Native Americans.\(^11\) Unskilled workers such as carpenters or horseshoers' assistants were paid an hourly wage of 40 cents,\(^12\) equalling between six and seven dollars today.\(^13\) Steam shovel engineers and electricians were paid 85 cents,\(^14\) which would be between 13 and 15 dollars today.\(^15\) Lead burners were paid a dollar or more per hour,\(^16\) equaling between 15 and 17 dollars today.\(^17\) There are several first-hand accounts of what it was like to live in the town of Nitro which explain the impact that the Spanish influenza had on townspeople. In one account, a worker at the plant, New Jersey native Parker Terhune, described how train loads of workers with influenza, who had just arrived to Nitro, were immediately escorted to the hospital. Terhune also said that army barracks and other buildings had to be converted to hospitals because there were so many ill men.\(^18\) Another worker from Iowa recalled the effect that influenza had on its townspeople, as he emphasizes, “I saw many boxes with the bodies of soldiers who were being shipped back home, all victims of the Spanish influenza.”\(^19\)

The Explosive Plant C had produced 350 tons of smokeless gun powder per day by the end of the war on November 11, 1918. On Armistice Day, Nitro had an enthusiastic celebration, with a parade consisting of some cars, military tanks, and a band.\(^20\) Four days earlier, the townspeople of Nitro had received a pre-Armistice Day report and celebration commenced until they discovered that the report was false.\(^21\) Within two weeks after the Armistice, 12,000 people left Nitro and there were not enough workers to sustain production. The director of the plant turned the operation over to the Ordnance Department on January 15, 1919. The government declared the plant surplus and began preparing to liquidate the property, as the plant was never fully utilized. The director then turned the operation over to the Ordnance Department. The plant was sold at auction to the Charleston Industrial Corporation. Nitro became the center of one of the most productive chemical industries in the world.\(^22\)

Excerpts from U.S. Signal Corp film. National Archives

National Guard

The West Virginia Legislature renamed the state militia the West Virginia National Guard in 1889. The National Guard is state military forces and an active component of the army when called into federal service by the president. In 1917, the infantry and the staff corps and departments were the two regiments of the National Guard. Heads of the staff corps and departments included Governor John J. Cornwell, Commander-in-Chief of the Executive Department; Major Thomas B. Davis, Adjutant General's Department; Major Gustavus H. Wilson of the Quartermaster Corps; Major Charles A. Wood, Ordnance Corps; Major Cassius C. Hogg and Captain William J. Blake of the Medical Department; and Captain Robert T. Colebank and First Lieutenant Nathan G. Matthews of the National Guard Reserve. In regards to the infantry, the First Infantry Regiment was organized in northern West Virginia and the Second Infantry Regiment in southern West Virginia. The Second Infantry had been activated on June 8, 1916, in response to President Woodrow Wilson's call for troops to pursue Pancho Villa on the Mexican border. The Second Regiment returned home on March 24, 1917, and shortly after, both it and the First Regiment were called on by President Woodrow Wilson to be federalized for service in World War I. By August 5, 1917, the two regiments, the enlisted men, and some of the officers of the quartermaster's corps were drafted into the U.S. service and were discharged from the militia. National Guardsmen did their military training at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, and were a part of the American Expeditionary Forces. These men would not return home until after the war. The West Virginia National Guard landed in Europe at the end of the war but saw no action in that conflict.\(^23\)

Citations

On July 28, 1914, World War I officially began when Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. In Europe and beyond, country after country was drawn into the war by a web of alliances. How could ordinary Americans be convinced to participate in the war “Over There,” as one of the most popular songs of the era described it? Posters—so well designed and illustrated that people collected and displayed them in fine art galleries—possessed both visual appeal and ease of reproduction. Flagg’s inspiration came from an image of the British Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener, designed by Alfred Leete. The illustrators used advertising strategies and graphic design to engage the casual passerby and elicit emotional responses. In contrast to the aftermath of World War I, the United States launched into post-World War II occupation of enemy territories equipped with fairly well crafted blueprints. In the case of Japan, committees of experts set up within the State and War Departments began discussing postwar plans within six months of the Pearl Harbor attack. The San Francisco Peace Treaty and the 1951 US-Japan Security Treaty catalyzed an ideological debate inside Japan and shaped party alignments for most of the Cold War. The Korean War also reshaped Japan’s postwar trajectory by igniting its economy.