

The Liberty Bell Village

One hundred years ago, the Liberty Bell was a more prominent symbol of American patriotism than it is today. In 1915, during the onset of the Great War, the Liberty Bell was loaded on a wagon and taken on a U.S. tour with great fanfare. In 1917, while Nitrate Village One was under construction, the ring of the bell was recorded on a Victor Talking Machine and copies were sold to the public. John Philip Sousa wrote and recorded his march named, "The Liberty Bell." War bond drives were named after it. In 1918, an aerial photo of "The Human Liberty Bell" was taken at Camp Dix, New Jersey. Conceived by Mole & Thomas, famous for their "living photographs," it was made up of a formation of 25,000 soldiers. The Human Liberty Bell celebrated the new technologies of aircraft and photography much like aerial photographs of Village One, taken since its completion and throughout the last century. Even a prototype Liberty Bell trench helmet was proposed for U.S. troops, though never adopted.



Great War Bond Drive



*The Human Liberty Bell 1918
25,000 soldiers Camp Dix*



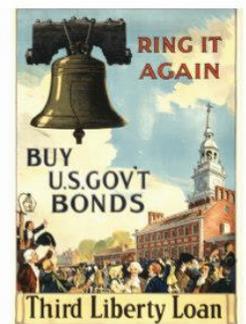
*Victor Talking Machine recording
Bell rung with gold hammer*



Prototype Liberty Bell Helmet

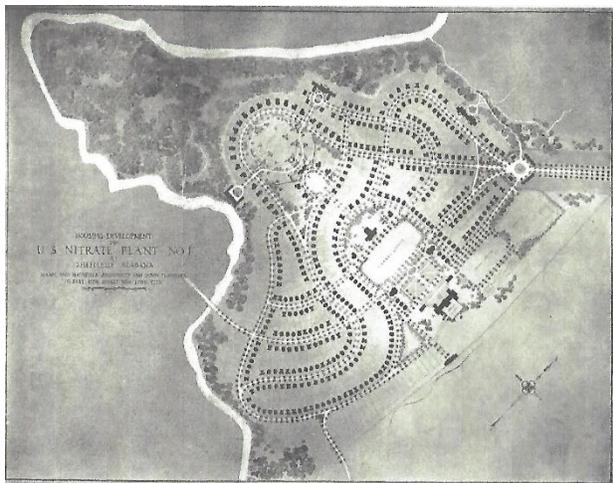


Bell on tour 1915

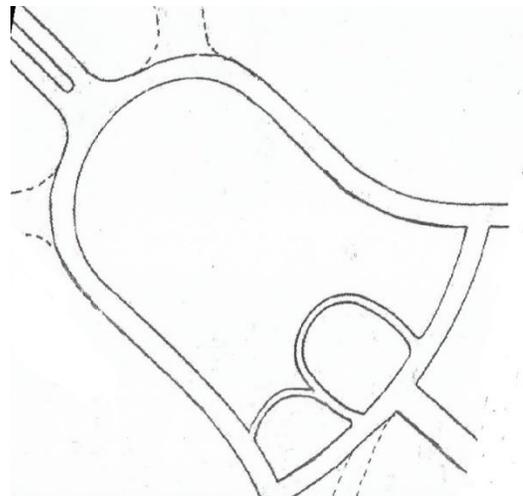


The unique garden city movement streetscape of Village One was designed by Mann & MacNeille Architects and Town Planners. The long curves of the main road were drawn out as a bell, with the schoolhouse appearing at the bottom of the bell's tongue, or "clapper". The original plan for the housing of U.S. Nitrate Plant No. One was a "new city" outside Sheffield, Alabama, complete with a shopping center, hospital, school, community building, barracks, over 400 houses, and even a communal parking garage. The inspiration (in part) for the bell shape came out of the engineers following the contours of the high ground, which was resistant to the annual flooding of the Tennessee river. The dam system had not yet been fully constructed.

By the time J.G. White Engineering was contracted to construct Nitrate Plant One in 1917, plans for the project had been scaled down from the 400 house city to a 100 house village, which would serve as housing and barracks for the U.S. Army Ordnance Department officers and enlisted men. The Army not only oversaw construction of U.S. Nitrate Village One, but also construction and daily operations of nearby Nitrate Plant No. One. Nitrate One was the first ammonium nitrate plant in U.S. history. It was an experimental plant that produced nitrate for the high explosives necessary for the U.S. to enter World War One. As a patriotic gesture during wartime, the bell-shaped roads around the main commons were paved in as the Liberty Bell. The horseshoe shaped road to the commanding officers' residences is the clapper. The roads at the top of the bell represent elements of the bell's "crown", with the center cul-de-sac (referred to as the hanger), being the "center post" and the two roads on either side could possibly have been the "ears and eyes". The two side roads were not developed until the 1960s. The distinguishing crack of the Liberty Bell was cut in as a long curving driveway off the Lt. Colonel's residence. A short section of road at the bottom left of the original Mann & MacNeille plan was altered to pronounce the bottom left corner of the Liberty Bell.



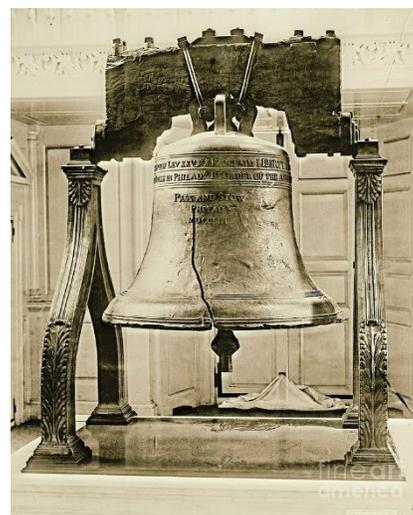
Original plan for Air Nitrate City by Mann & MacNeille.



Liberty Bell with hanger, clapper, and crack.



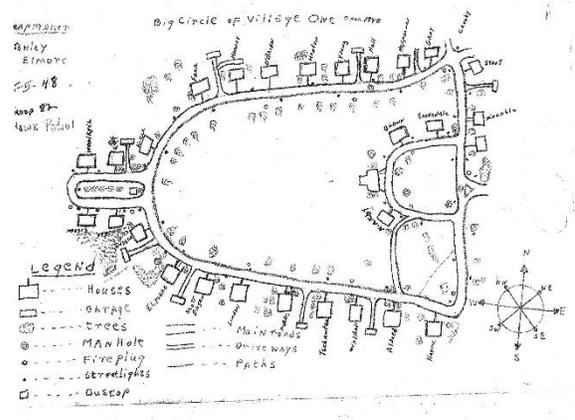
U.S. Nitrate Village One (Govt. Photo) "Liberty Bell".



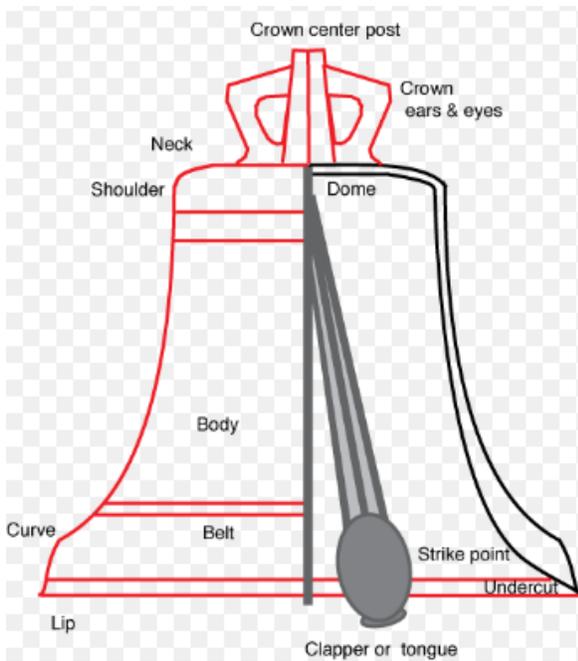
Three hangers, crack, and clapper.



World War One Liberty Bell
Artillery Shoulder Patch.



1948 Village One Boy Scout map.

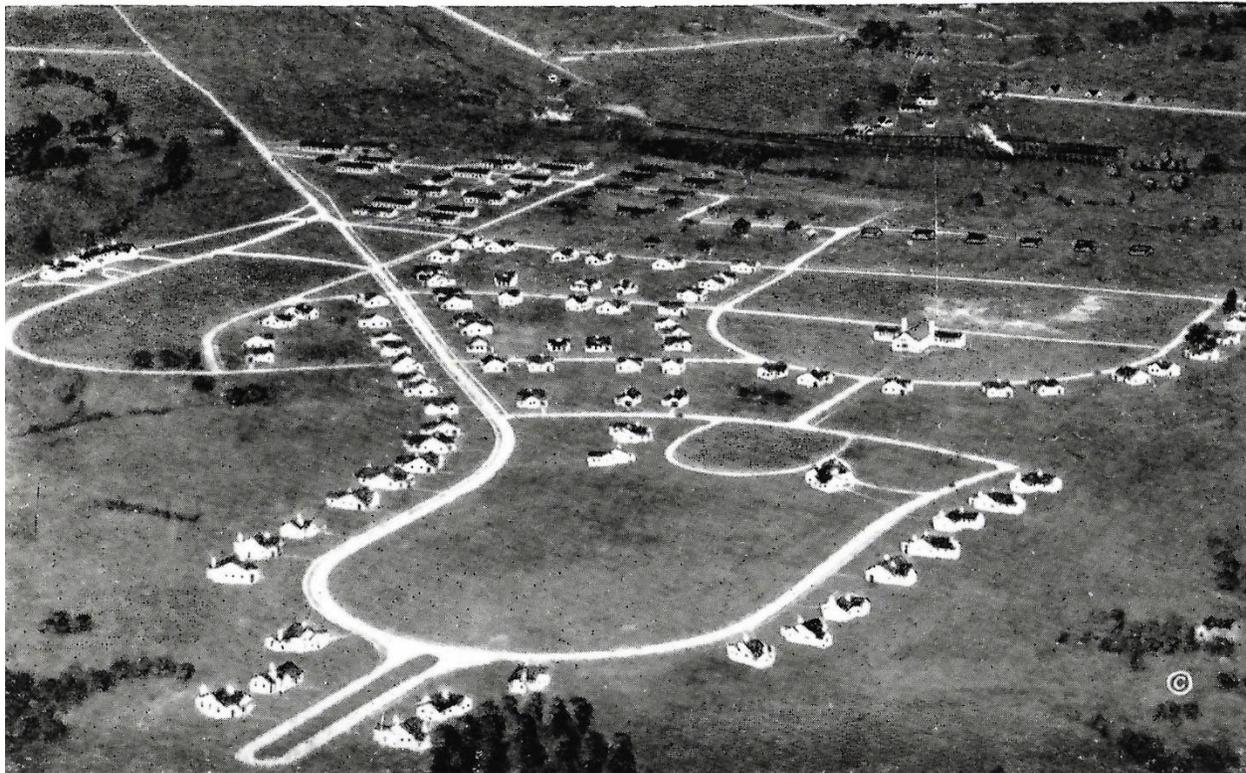


Bell Anatomy.



First World War Army shoulder patch.

LIBERTY BELL SHAPED RESIDENTIAL SECTION FOR GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, MUSCLE SHOALS, ALA.



Postcard from 1920, with copyright, labeled "Liberty Bell residential section"

"It was known as the Liberty Bell Village," Chief E.J. Martin, who served as a U.S. Army Ordnance Department guard at U.S. Nitrate Plant One during the Great War. Chief Martin was a resident of Village One and witness to its construction in 1918. Audio recorded interview published in Sheffield History and Recollections, Bluewater Publications ©2011

The Great War is estimated to be responsible for 18 million deaths and 23 million wounded worldwide. It is ranked as one of the deadliest conflicts in human history. U.S. involvement, including nitrate munitions production, turned the tables on the war, and brought a relatively quick end to the bloody stalemate. The Nitrate Village No. One "Liberty Bell," was constructed as a display of patriotism, by our military, during a trying time in our nation's history. It should stand today as a memorial to those who served our country to bring a timely end to the five years of sacrifice abroad.

Liberty Bell-shaped subdivision has kept clapper, lost the crack

By James H. Kennedy
News Staff Writer

SHEFFIELD — No one knows exactly who came up with the unusual layout for "The Village," a quaint 71-year-old subdivision in west Sheffield.

It could have been a Yankee. A New York City contractor built the stucco houses with the roofs during World War I.

Whoever it was, local historians such as Harold Damsgard consider it one of the more patriotic gestures of all time. It was laid out, and remains today, in

the precise shape of the Liberty Bell — clapper, handle and all.

The only thing missing is the famous "crack," which originally was a quarter-mile driveway cutting through the clapper area. Some residents didn't like it running through their yards and blocked it off years later.

Nestled in a crook of Spring Creek that flows into nearby Tennessee River, the project is on the National Historical Register because of its shape.

Perhaps even more significant, though, is its historic connection with the founding of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

TVA — formed by proclamation of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933 — is considered perhaps the greatest happening in the area.

The Village was built in the waning months of World War I for Army officers and workers at a new plant to produce ammonium nitrate. The chemical was used to make explosives and munitions for the war.

Wilson Dam also was part of the project. TVA was formed to operate the dam, Alabama's largest hydroelectric facility.

During the war, America's main supply of nitrate from Chile was being threatened by German submarines. So, Congress passed the National Defense Act authorizing — among other things — building plants to produce nitrate.

President Woodrow Wilson authorized two plants in the Muscle Shoals area: Nitrate Plant Number One and Nitrate Plant Number Two.

Nitrate Village Number One — which became simply "The Village" — was built about a mile from Plant Number One. The war ended, however, just as the plant was completed, and it never went into production.

Nitrate Plant Number Two later became the basis for TVA research on fertilizers. The research has made an impact worldwide and continues today.

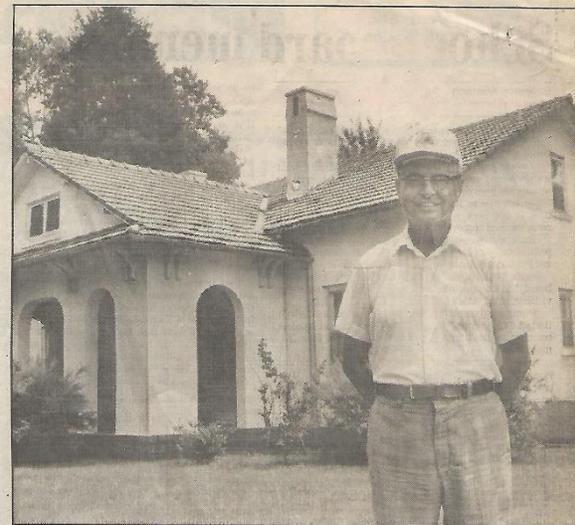
The Village had its own government, school and other facilities. A large three-story barrack built for bachelor officers still stands and presently is being made into modern apartments.

The original school also remains and today is a Sheffield elementary school.

After the military left, the houses, for the most part, remained empty until TVA was formed 15 years later. A few homes were rented to employees of Alabama Power Co., which operated Wilson Dam until TVA took it over.

TVA employees were allowed to rent the houses until they were sold in 1949-50. Renters were given first choice to buy.

"I lived here 20 years before I realized it was shaped like the Liberty Bell," said Stewart Harvey, who moved there in 1934. Now 87, he retired from



NEWS STAFF PHOTO/JAMES KENNEDY

Arthur Kirkby: "It has been a good house, and we've enjoyed it very much."

TVA in 1966, after serving 23 years as director of chemical operations at the TVA nitrate plant.

His grandson, Alec Harvey, who frequently visited his grandparents as a boy, said he was always "amazed at the shape of one of the streets." It was Wilson Dam Circle, which forms the handle at the top of the bell.

Ironically, the largest house in the complex — built for the commander of the military unit — was bought by outsider and native New Yorker Arthur Kirkby. The house was one of three larger homes built in the clapper area

of the bell for top ranking officers.

"I was moving to Muscle Shoals to manage the newly built Hotel Muscle Shoals, and no houses were being built at the time," said Kirkby, who grew up in Birmingham. "I heard that TVA was selling all these houses, and I think this one was the only one left. Nobody seemed to want it because it was two story. It has been a good house, and we've enjoyed it very much."

He said his driveway used to form part of the crack in the bell. All the streets are named for TVA dams along the Tennessee River. For

example, the main streets outlining the bell are Wilson Dam Avenue and Wheeler Dam Avenue.

Guntersville Circle — named for Guntersville Dam — is a horse-shoe-shaped street that lines the clapper area, which is a small open park.

The top of the bell is a nine-acre open park.

All but two of the original 85 homes — all similar in design — still stand. One burned and the other had to be torn down because of insect damage.

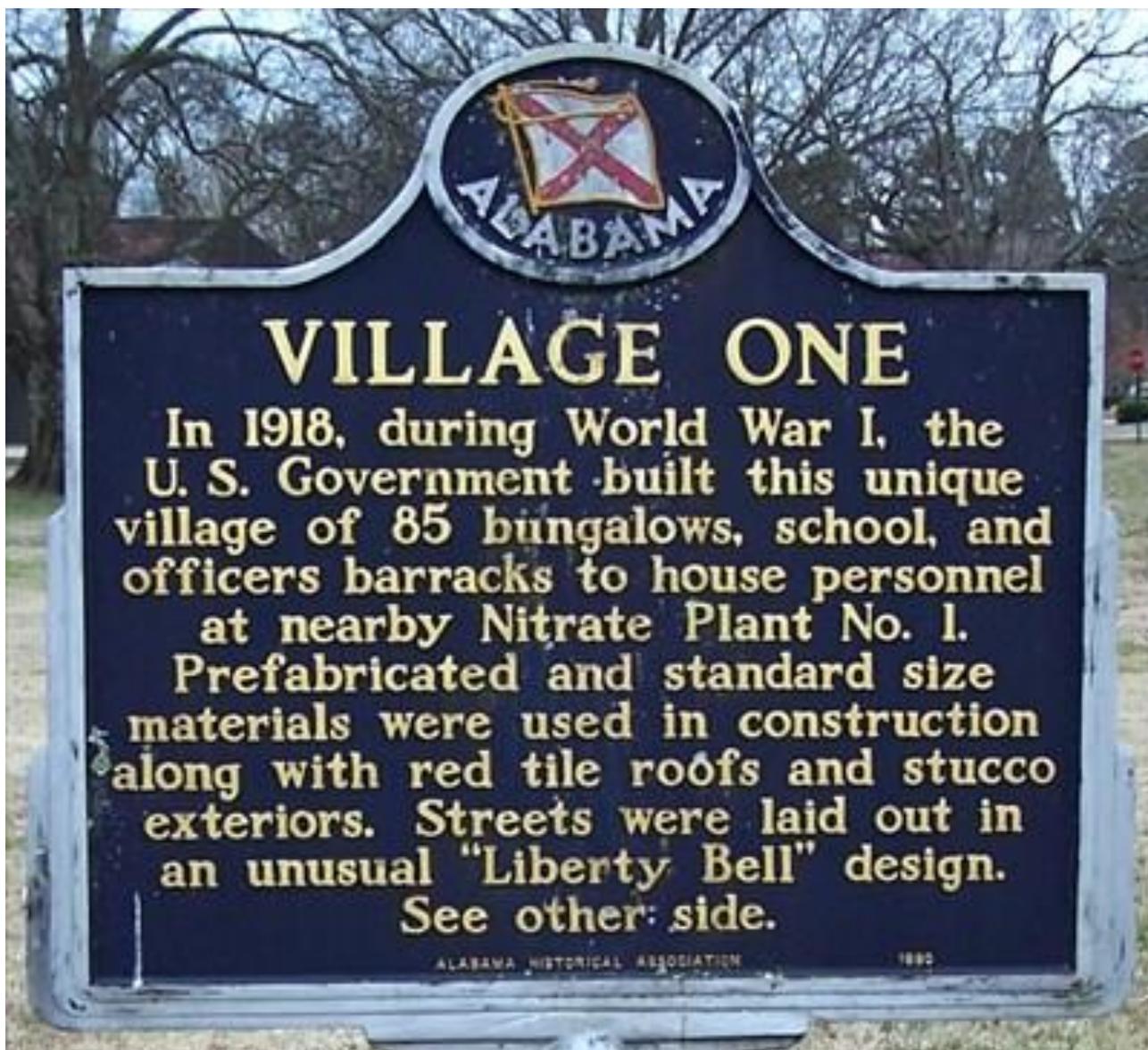


NEWS PHOTO/HAROLD DAMSGARD

Aerial photo shows outline of "The Village."

1988 Birmingham News article when half of the Liberty Bell's crack was removed by developers.

Village One is a unique site and deserves a special place in our nation's history. The constant proliferation of information in the internet age, has made it difficult to maintain a clear and accurate history of the nitrate plant and village. A single article posted online can be repeated and augmented a hundred times over until it has supplanted documented historic facts. Our present situation is that the history of Village One is slowly being rewritten via online posts, and even print publications, that remove the Liberty Bell as a design element of the streetscape. With the centennial of the Great War and of the construction of Nitrate One on the horizon, there will be increasing interest in this history, more attention from media, municipalities, and perhaps authors of articles online and in print. One could only hope they will use information that can be verified with documentation from verifiable sources. There should also be concern regarding incorrect historic markers being added, as well as existing ones altered or removed.



By Greg Harrison

9/25/17

