Part V: 1911–1919

Part V of the *Thomas A. Edison Papers: A Selective Microfilm Edition* begins with the year 1911, when the sixty-four-year-old inventor consolidated his National Phonograph Co. with several other Edison companies to form Thomas A. Edison, Inc. It concludes with the year 1919 when the Treaty of Versailles finally put an end to the long years of war and enabled Edison and other Americans to turn again to peacetime pursuits.

The period documented in Part V was a time of intense activity for Edison, his laboratory, and his companies. Several important new inventions were created and marketed between 1911 and 1919. These included the Blue Amberol record (a significantly improved cylinder record), the Diamond Disc phonograph, an office dictating machine known as the Ediphone, the Home Projecting Kinetoscope, and a safety lamp for miners that won Edison the prestigious Rathenau Medal. At a time before the gasoline engine had won universal acceptance, Edison worked hard to apply his storage battery technology to the propulsion of automobiles and commercial delivery trucks. And more than a decade before the release of The Jazz Singer (directed by a former employee of Edison’s Motion Picture Division), Edison himself had introduced talking pictures to theater goers in the Americas, Europe, and Asia with his Kinetophone.

The onset of the war in Europe pushed Edison’s inventive and business activities in a new direction. He became a major spokesman for preparedness, and his ideas spurred the creation of the Naval Consulting Board, on which he served as president. To overcome the shortages of chemicals previously obtained from Germany, he developed plans for rapidly building new manufacturing plants and became a major chemical supplier not only to American industries but to the European allies and Japan as well. In 1917, a few months before the United States formally entered the war, he began conducting antisubmarine research for the U.S. Navy at a specially equipped new laboratory at the top of Eagle Rock Mountain in West Orange.

In this draft letter, written three weeks after the RMS *Lusitania* was torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat, Edison expressed his views about the incident and his attitude toward the Germans. The inventor’s oldest daughter was married to a German army officer and living in Germany at the outbreak of World War I.
N.J. He would subsequently continue his research aboard ship in locations around Long Island Sound; in an office once occupied by Admiral George Dewey at the Navy Annex in Washington, D.C.; and at the naval base in Key West, Fla. The war also had a profound effect on Edison’s family as his eldest daughter Marion, married to a German army officer, found herself trapped behind enemy lines.

During this period Edison forged a longstanding personal and business relationship with automobile manufacturer Henry Ford, who joined him in a series of highly publicized camping trips that included industrialist Harvey Firestone and naturalist John Burroughs. In 1911 he embarked on a two-month tour of Great Britain and Continental Europe with his wife Mina Miller Edison and their three children, during which the inventor commented extensively on the culture, society, and government of the nations that would soon be convulsed by war. Four years later, he took a cross-country train trip and spent several weeks on the West Coast, visiting the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco and the Panama-California Exposition in San Diego. All of these events are extensively documented in Part V of the Edison Papers.

The approximately 100,000 pages of technical notes, business and family correspondence, company records, and other documents in Part V are arranged in nine series that parallel the record groups in the archives of the Edison National Historic Site in West Orange, N.J.

**Laboratory Notebooks.** This series contains 85 notebooks entirely by Edison, along with another 120 notebooks documenting experiments performed by Edison in conjunction with other members of his laboratory staff. Among the Edison-authored notebooks are 17 volumes that relate primarily to research performed for the Navy during World War I. Also included are notes and drawings pertaining to the development and manufacture of Blue Amberol and Diamond Disc records, improvements in his alkaline storage battery, experiments on an automobile starter battery for Henry Ford, and many other topics.

**Pocket Notebooks.** These 34 pocket-size books were used by Edison to jot down ideas about experiments to be tried and other tasks to be performed. Many of these ideas would subsequently be developed in more systematic fashion in the laboratory notebooks. As the initial manifestation of Edison’s creative genius, the pocket notebooks provide unique insight into the mind of America’s greatest inventor.

**Patent Application Folios.** The 142 folios constituting this series consist of approximately 25,000 pages of incoming letters (many with notations by Edison), drafts and copies of outgoing letters, interoffice communications, and a variety of other documents. The subjects covered include the complete range of Edison’s businesses and technologies as well as his personal affairs, reminiscences, and opinions about contemporary issues. The correspondents include Edison company officials, laboratory staff, business associates, family friends, and members of the general public. There are also numerous letters to and from important public figures such as President Woodrow Wilson; future presidents Warren G. Harding, Herbert Hoover, and Franklin D. Roosevelt; Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels; U.S. Senators George William Norris, Benjamin R. (“Pitchfork Ben”) Tillman, and John Sharp Williams; industrialists Andrew Carnegie, Harvey Firestone, Henry Ford, and John D. Rockefeller; cartoonist Bud Fisher; science fiction writer Hugo Gernsback; and many other notable individuals including Nicholas In 1916 Edison, a lifelong Republican, supported the re-election of Democratic President Woodrow Wilson. This draft response to a letter from Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels discusses a joint endorsement by Edison and his friends Henry Ford, John Burroughs, and Luther Burbank. By 1916 Edison and Daniels had also become close friends as a result of the inventor’s service as president of the Naval Consulting Board.

**Naval Consulting Board Records.** This series contains approximately 2,500 pages of correspondence, technical notes, and other documents relating to Edison’s role as chairman (later president) of the Naval Consulting Board as well as his personal experimental work for the U.S. government. Included are documents revealing his sometimes contentious relationship with the Navy bureaucracy and the acrimonious debate over the location and purpose of the proposed Naval Research Laboratory. The correspondents include Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, numerous officers of the Army and Navy, and civilian officials in the War and Navy departments.

**Chemical Production Records.** The approximately 400 pages of documents in this series relate primarily to Edison’s six chemical plants at Silver Lake, N.J. Five of these plants were constructed at the beginning of World War I to manufacture phenol and other chemicals in short supply because of the war.

There is also material regarding the benzol plants that were built under Edison’s supervision at the works of the Cambria Steel Co. in Johnstown, Pa. and the Woodward Iron Co. in Woodward, Ala. The latter was a cooperative venture with the Japanese firm Mitsui & Co.

**Legal Series.** This series consists of approximately 3,000 pages of agreements, assignments, licenses, deeds, mortgages, and other legal documents, along with related correspondence and financial records that were collected or created for legal purposes. Included are documents pertaining to a $1.2 million loan from Henry Ford for the expansion of Edison’s storage battery plant.

**Family Records Series.** The approximately 2,000 pages in this series consist primarily of correspondence to and from Edison’s wife Mina Miller Edison. Other correspondents include Thomas Edison, the six children from his two marriages, and various members of the Miller family. The correspondence contains numerous references to Edison’s health, travel, and work; his homes in West Orange, New Jersey, and Fort Myers, Florida; and his roles as parent and spouse. There are also many references to the clubs, societies, and other organizations in which Mina Edison actively participated.

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In this draft response to a letter from Bernard G. Richards of the American Jewish Congress, Edison expresses his views about religious toleration and the rights of minorities. The inventor’s opinions on these matters were considerably more enlightened than those of his friend, Henry Ford.
Scrapbook Series and Unbound Clippings Series. This series consists of almost 4,500 articles clipped from newspapers, popular magazines, and technical journals. One scrapbook is devoted entirely to Edison’s European vacation, while four others document his ill-fated attempt to introduce talking motion pictures in the United States and Asia. One book relates primarily to daughter Madeleine Edison, including her 1914 wedding to inventor John Eyre Sloane. Two volumes pertain to the fire of December 9, 1914, that destroyed or damaged more than half of the buildings in the West Orange laboratory complex. There are also four scrapbooks, along with hundreds of additional loose clippings, covering the two years preceding the entrance of the United States into World War I. In addition to articles specifically about Edison and the Naval Consulting Board, there are more general discussions of submarine warfare, the progress of the war, its impact on the American economy, and the issue of preparedness. Of particular interest are the numerous interviews with the press, in which Edison voiced his opinions about a wide variety of topics, including war and preparedness, Henry Ford’s controversial peace plan, the presidential elections of 1912 and 1916, women’s suffrage, temperance and prohibition, cigarette smoking, health and diet, musical tastes, popular culture, and religion. The clippings provide a detailed and richly textured picture not only of Edison himself but also of the United States during the second decade of the twentieth century.

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