

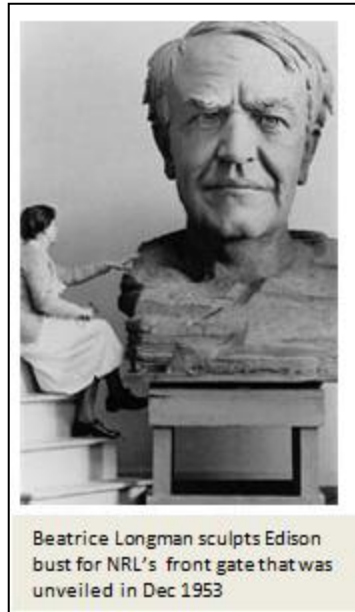
Thomas Edison – The Epic Citizen of Civic Duty

by Michele Guttenberger

The loss of civic studies has been slowly fading away on a national level. In 2006 the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) issued a Report Card on Civics which found only 25% of America's Schoolchildren had proficient scores in the knowledge of civics and government. However, in the early Twentieth Century many important scientific leaders felt compelled as good American citizens to impart their knowledge in fostering a strong alliance between military entities and the scientific community solely for the purpose of strengthening the defensive welfare of their country. As citizens they felt that this was their civic duty to their country.

Thomas Edison was one of these scientific leaders who in 1915 felt alarmed by the great European war (World War I) that had been escalating. His declaration to this threat was that the Nation should look to science to insure its defenses. He stated "The Government should maintain a great research laboratory.... In this could be developed...all the technique of military and naval progression without any vast expense." Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels took favor to Edison's published public commentary and recruited him to serve as the head of a new body of civilian experts called the Naval Consulting Board. This board would advise the Navy on science and technology. The Board's grand plan with an allocation of \$1.5 million was the creation of a modern research facility for the Navy Congress.

By late December of 1915, Thomas Edison was at the Brooklyn Navy Yard with his plans for a physical laboratory to undertake naval experiments. This facility would be constructed on 100 acres of purchased land on New York's tide-waters. The location was close to the Brooklyn Navy Yard so that experiments of architecture and machinery could be done both on land and water. This naval physical laboratory meant a savings of millions of dollars in war craft production. There would now be a process and facility to research, plan, test and control these massive production projects. Before the creation of this physical laboratory nearly every ship launched was an experiment of trial and error. There was no facility to test the practicability of an idea before it was launched. In 1915, the Brooklyn Navy Yard was at its peak production with a recent completion of the battleship New York, and near completion of the battle ship Arizona. Also under construction was the oil-burning destroyer the Wadsworth and the E-2 and K-4 submarines. Edison immediately equipped the E-2 with his new batteries which eliminated the danger of



chlorine gas poisoning that occurred when salt water leaked into lead batteries. Edison saw importance in the 2,500 horse-powered engine developed at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. In 1915 this was the largest diesel engine in the world and it was being shipped off to San Francisco to be installed in the new USS Maumee (AO-2) a fuel ship which was the first surface ship in the U.S. Navy to be powered by diesel engines.

Thomas Edison's founding vision of a physical laboratory for naval experiments became the foundation of today's NRL -Naval Research Laboratory. All this was done not by some great government or military leader, but by a loyal citizen who had the technological knowhow that he wanted to apply to military projects. In the early twentieth century Civic duty was an honorable personal mission by many enterprising leaders. The spirit of Civic duty still exists in many of us but we need to be reacquainted with it again. Schools have been and should be the place to promote future civic minded concepts. The greatest welfare to our country has been served by its epic citizens too especially when there exists a devoted partnership of government and citizens working together on a common bond -our country's welfare. Thomas Edison was at the forefront of this special relationship.

See the inventions of this great citizen visit The **Thomas Edison Museum. Open Wednesday through Sunday. Hours are 9:00am - 5:00pm Fee is \$7.00 - 211 Main Street West Orange, NJ 07052 Visit website for more details <http://www.nps.gov/edis/index.htm>**