

Take Cover:

Nuclear Preparations in Montgomery County

Emily Stewart

A nuclear weapon is an explosive device the destructive potential of which derives from the energy that is released by the splitting or combining of atomic nuclei. The use of nuclear weapons became a threat to the world with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end World War II. The United States federal government worked to aid nuclear preparations throughout the nation. Throughout approximately forty years of American history, tensions between the United States and Russia led to civil defense programs that prepared for a nuclear attack. The government set federal restrictions in order to establish guidelines for states to follow when preparing for a nuclear crisis.

In Virginia, county officials had to work with state officials to effectively mobilize nuclear defense. One such county, Montgomery County, is a rural county located in the southwest region of Virginia. During the time period from 1959 to 1963, Montgomery County was actively preparing for the possible threat of a nuclear crisis. County officers communicated with state and federal officers in an effort to make sure their municipal preparations followed the national standards. The national standards were defined, enforced, and advertised through federal funding for fallout shelter programs, national advertisements pertaining to a nuclear war, military initiatives and educational pamphlets. National initiatives trickled down to municipal preparations in Montgomery County but did not seem to have a significant effect. Montgomery County preparations can specifically be seen through the actions of local elected officials. Officers



FALLOUT SHELTER

sought federal financial assistance in order to aid local preparations. Throughout the county, local officials worked with the overall safety and benefit of the public in mind. In many instances, if not for local officials in the county, civil defense during this time period might have proven ineffective. Additionally, public support of these programs allowed officials to work more efficiently toward their goals. Nuclear crisis preparations in Montgomery County were shaped by a combination of federal initiatives and funding, local cooperation, and positive public support towards civil defense.

Many historians have researched aspects of the America's Cold War era civil defense, including Montgomery County civil defense. Study has been conducted in areas analyzing family contributions, rural town preparations, and public policies, as well as the different planning stages throughout the Cold War period. In her work *Mightier than Missiles: The Rhetoric of Civil Defense for Rural American Families*, Jenny Barker-Devine argues that during the Cold War Era, it was rural American families that provided the framework for civil defense during a nuclear crisis.¹ Without the American family structure, civil defense programs would not have been implemented effectively, especially in remote areas such as Montgomery County. Another scholar, Guy Oakes, provides more empirical weight behind the average American family's importance in nuclear civil defense. These works by Barker-Devine and Oakes contextualize the significance of rural contributions to civil defense preparations throughout the United States.

In his book *The Imaginary War*, Oakes also analyzes the relationship of national security and civil defense to civil ethics, specifically emphasizing the role of American families.² Oakes pushes a little further than Barker-Devine in that he studied not just the role American families played in nuclear war preparations, but the relationship families had with officers in the implementation of these programs. Sources from families in Montgomery County are difficult to come across, but contemporary newspapers record public opinion regarding civil defense measures among average individuals residing in Montgomery County.

Andrew Grossman, another scholar, speaks to the modern effect of Cold War institutions. In his essay *The Early Cold War and Ameri-*

¹ Jenny Barker-Devine, "Mightier than Missiles: The Rhetoric of Civil Defense for Rural American Families, 1950-1970," *Agricultural History* 80, No. 4 (Autumn 2006): 417.

² Guy Oakes, *The Imaginary War: Civil Defense and American Cold War Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 9.

can Political Development- Reflections on Recent Research, Grossman analyzes three different books written to reflect on American Cold War public policy.³ He argues that the three books all demonstrate that the “institutional arrangements during the Cold War are still with us. (sic)”⁴ Throughout Montgomery County, it is evident that Cold War institutions are still present. For example, the Radford Ordnance Plant still operates, although used for different purposes now, and even some homes throughout the County still have bomb shelter bunkers.

Lastly, David Monteyne reflects on the architectural implications of civil defense mechanisms, specifically by looking at the design of fallout shelters in America.⁵ Monteyne agrees with Grossman that Cold War institutions still linger throughout modern America in that, after the Cold War period was over, the nation did not just destroy their Cold War foundational buildings. These four historians have all researched somewhat different topics of the civil defense programs in America during the Cold War, which together help us to better understand the mobilization and support of Montgomery County civil defense programs.

After World War II, national tensions between the United States and the former Soviet Union drastically escalated into mutual distrust. One critical event that contributed to escalating tensions between the United States and Russia was President Harry S. Truman’s containment policy of 1947.⁶ This policy sought to isolate the Soviet Union from making any global advancement, including nuclear missile testing. Although the American containment policy sought to prevent nuclearization of the Soviet Union, it ultimately failed to keep atomic testing out of the nation. The first successful testing of an atomic bomb in the Soviet Union was in 1949, the same year of Truman’s containment legislation.⁷ Due to the Soviet possession of nuclear weapons, both nations ramped up internal civil defense programs. Tensions between the United States and Russia reached their

³ Andrew D. Grossman, “The Early Cold War and American Political Development: Reflections on Recent Research,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 15, No. 3 (Spring 2002): 472-473.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 481.

⁵ David Monteyne, *Designing for Civil Defense in the Cold War: Fallout Shelter* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xxi.

⁶ Brett Spencer, “From Atomic Shelters to Arms Control: Libraries, Civil Defense, and American Militarism during the Cold War,” *Information and Culture* 49, No. 3 (Fall 2014): 351-385.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 352.

⁸ Edward Geist, “Armageddon Insurance: Civil Defense in the United States and Soviet Union, 1945-1991”, (video of lecture, Virginia Tech: National Capital Region, September 22, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=my6TOct5PHo>.

heights during the years surrounding 1962, when the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred. President John F. Kennedy advocated strongly for the development of a program for civil defense during this time period.⁸ He helped portray civil defense programs to the American people as a necessary step of insurance against the Soviet Union.⁹ The Office of Civil Defense (OCD) was established under the Department of Defense during the Kennedy administration.¹⁰ The overall goal of the OCD was to implement and utilize a system of shelters in order to save as many lives as possible in the event of a nuclear war.¹¹ In order for the United States to effectively implement a national civil defense program, the federal government relied on municipal programs like that of Montgomery County. Through national programs, a federal budget, and the notion of “necessary insurance,” Montgomery County officials worked toward providing secure, thought out civil defense measures, and officials diligently considered possible places of storage, means of financial support, as well as public information initiatives beneficial to its citizens.

Montgomery County did not seem to have its own unique civil defense preparation plans. The county government worked only to fulfill the federal guidelines pertaining to local civil defense. For the most part, Montgomery County officials only did the necessary steps in order to set up a safety plan in the case of a nuclear crisis and did not go beyond the federal emergency action requirements. The Montgomery County government worked with the Virginia Army Corps of Engineers in hopes of securing the proper civil defense measures such as shelter, storage, and emergency supplies. Once the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors received the proper approval from the Army Corps of Engineers, local officials were able to work with other county departments in preparation for a nuclear crisis. Specifically, the Board of Supervisors worked with the county police department, the Radford Ordnance Plant, and local members of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). By working with various branches of state and local departments of government, Montgomery County officials were able to ensure effective defense measures were established.

The United States Office of Civil Defense provided financial assistance to Montgomery County in order for the county to find proper public sheltering in the event of a nuclear crisis. From 1960 to 1961,

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Monteyne, *Designing for Civil Defense in the Cold War*, 47.

¹¹ Geist, *Armageddon Insurance*.

¹² Monteyne, *Designing for Civil Defense in the Cold War*, 47.

there was a major increase in national funding for civil defense programs.¹² The increase in federal funding for civil defense proved to be beneficial for all of Montgomery County's civil defense programs, but even more specifically its efforts to find adequate public shelter space. Correspondence between Ira Claxton, Director of Civil Defense for the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors, and J. D. Snow, district engineer in the Norfolk branch of the Army Corps of Engineers, displays detailed plans for the county's nuclear crisis preparation.¹³ According to the guidelines provided by the OCD, the Army Corps of Engineers had to complete a shelter survey in order for Montgomery County to receive any federal assistance.¹⁴ This survey ultimately revealed acceptable public shelters and was designed to explore recommendations for the improvement of shelters.¹⁵ Along with conducting the shelter survey, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers provided a Fact Sheet on the Department of Defense Community Fallout Shelter Survey Program for Virginia in order to specify a clearer explanation on the procedures accompanying the shelter survey program.¹⁶ This source clearly states that the main purpose of a fallout shelter is to "prevent deaths and to reduce biological damage."¹⁷ Therefore, it became vital for Montgomery County to find adequate shelter in order to provide protection to its citizens. Correspondence between Montgomery County and the Norfolk Army Corps of Engineers during the year 1961, displays the significance behind securing shelter space for civil defense preparations. After the shelter survey was completed, yielding positive results, Montgomery County was able to move forward in securing federal funding for the next steps in their nuclear emergency action plans.

After securing federal funding, Montgomery County successfully put into place other necessary nuclear crisis emergency action plans. One specific plan, referenced in a Montgomery County Board of Supervisor's letter, asserts the importance of emergency aid for food and medical supplies the federal government was responsible

¹³ J. D. Snow, Letter to Mr. Ira D. Claxton, 22 December 1961, box 2, folder 5 Orrin Rankin Magill Papers, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

¹⁴ Monteyne, *Designing for Civil Defense in the Cold War*, 48.

¹⁵ J. D. Snow, Letter to Mr. Ira D. Claxton, 22 December 1961.

¹⁶ U.S Army Engineer District, Norfolk, Fact Sheet on Department of Defense Community Fallout Shelter Survey Program for Virginia: Norfolk, VA, 1961, Orrin Rankin Magill Papers, box 2, folder 5, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

¹⁷ Fact Sheet on Department of Defense Community Fallout Shelter Survey Program for Virginia: Norfolk, VA, 1961.

¹⁸ Ira D. Claxton, Letter to the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors, 20 February 1962, box 2, folder 5, Orrin Rankin Magill Papers, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

¹⁹ Claxton, Letter to the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors, 20 February 1962.

for providing.¹⁸ From this letter, we learn the federal government provided aid for items such as emergency food and medical supplies to counties and cities only after the local government was able to secure some type of warehouse space to ensure the safe storage of the emergency supplies.¹⁹ These letters display evidence of the County responding to federally set standards for municipal preparations. In order for Montgomery County to obtain federal funding for nuclear preparations, the local government needed to secure a space for the emergency supplies to be stored safely.

Local officials in Montgomery County worked diligently in order to find adequate storage for emergency supplies in compliance with the Army Corps of Engineers Shelter Survey guidelines. Ira D. Claxton, the director of the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors during the year 1962, secured storage space at the Radford Ordnance Plant.²⁰ In his letters, Claxton does not explain the exact measures taken in order to secure the shelter space. Rather, he just simply states that he has secured the space to use in the event of a nuclear crisis. Specifically, Claxton was granted access to the east wing of the Radford Ordnance Plant for the storage of emergency supplies and equipment.²¹ In order obtain this storage space from the Radford Ordnance Plant, Claxton worked with various departments and branches of the Montgomery County government. Specifically, in his letters, Claxton references working with the Montgomery County sheriff, Mr. Arington.²² According to a letter Mr. Claxton sent to the Board of Supervisors, Mr. Arington was put in charge of receiving and storing the supplies in the Radford Ordnance Plant once they arrived in Montgomery County.²³ Although the detailed responsibilities of Mr. Arington's duties were never discussed in the Board of Supervisors letters, he served a crucial role in the local civil defense preparations. The letters of correspondence, which reference the funding, show the serious approach Montgomery County was taking in order to adequately prepare for a nuclear crisis. With the help of the federal legislation that provided local funding, Montgomery County properly obtained supplies and shelter in order to protect its citizens against a nuclear attack.

²⁰ Ira D. Claxton, Letter to Mr. Douglass A. Moore Jr., 8 February 1962, box 2, folder 5, Orrin Rankin Magill Papers, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

²¹ Claxton, Letter to Mr. Douglass A. Moore Jr., 8 February 1962.

²² Claxton, Letter to the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors, 20 February 1962.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Radford Ordnance Plant, Montgomery County Emergency Operational Plan: (Radford, VA), 1963, box 2, folder 5, Orrin Rankin Magill Papers, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

After securing the Radford Ordnance Plant for shelter, it became vital for Montgomery County to draft an Operational Defense Plan. Prepared by Ira Claxton, the Montgomery County Operational Defense Plan was distributed to nineteen different civil defense service chiefs.²⁴ Outlined throughout the plan are topics such as the mission of, responsibilities and duties of, and legal authority for Emergency Plans in the event of a nuclear emergency.²⁵ Instructions on how to react during a national nuclear threat, the differing missions of the various sectors of civil defense preparations, as well as the proper protocols and procedures are all laid out in this lengthy document. The degree to which this plan was distributed, as well as the bulk of information provided throughout the plan, attests to the seriousness with which local officials took civil defense in Montgomery County during this time period.

Along with providing military assistance to civil authorities' emergency operational plan, Montgomery County also drafted a USDA Defense Board Emergency Operating Plan. This coincided with the overall emergency operation plan for Montgomery County.²⁶ Specifically, the USDA Emergency Operation Plan provided instructions for local farmers in order to "preserve life, food resources, and help more food resources get to emergency and distressed areas."²⁷ Laid out throughout the USDA emergency plan are procedures such as management of livestock, water, crop, timber, along with the technical aspects of inventory, transportation, manpower, and communications that were all thought to be essential for survival during a nuclear crisis.²⁸

The people of Montgomery County responded to the mobilization efforts and civil defense programs by recognizing the hard work of local government officials. One newspaper article, "From Shirts to Missiles: That's Industry in City Area," attests to the significance of the Radford Ordnance Plant. This article addresses the success of

²⁶ Montgomery USDA County Defense Board Emergency Operating Plan: Christiansburg, VA, 1965, Orrin Rankin Magill Papers, box 2, folder 5, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ "From Shirts to Missiles. That's industry in City Area: Many varied plants mark industries here," The News Journal: All-American Souvenir Edition (Radford, VA), Virginia Newspapers Collection, box 10, folder 2, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ben Beagle, "Radford Ordnance Plant Still Big One," The Roanoke Times, 13 January 1963, Virginia Newspapers Collection, box 12, folder 2, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

the Radford Ordnance Plant with regards to the production of Space Age Missiles.²⁹ Published in 1963, this article points out the Radford Ordnance Plant was also producing other military weaponry.³⁰ Another article, published in 1962, speaks of the importance of the missiles the Ordnance Plant was producing. The article, titled "Ordnance Plant Still Big One," by Ben Beagle, speaks of missiles used for tactical artillery.³¹ The Radford Ordnance Plant most likely ramped up military weaponry and missiles in order to combat the threat of a nuclear missile crisis, and the people of Montgomery County were proud of its contributions. Another newspaper article, "Over-emphasizing Need for Industry is Risky," by Nancy St. Clair, speaks to the public opinion on how to save and store for nuclear crisis preparations.³² Frederick G. Cowherd, interviewed for this article, stated that farms should be encouraged to produce surpluses: "we have to keep ourselves strong in and ready for an attack of any kind."³³ Cowherd's interview displays the public was aware of the danger, as well as ready to prepare for any nuclear emergency event. Montgomery County officials worked attentively to materially prepare for the event of nuclear war and the county's citizens recognized the efforts, as well as the significance of their preparations.

By 1963, Montgomery County was well prepared in the case of a nuclear emergency. Without assistance from the federal government, Montgomery county would not have been able to mobilize individuals or civil defense programs. Through government action and community support, the county successfully organized for nuclear war. By following federal guidelines, Montgomery County secured adequate storage for emergency supplies, as well as a safe place for the population to safely evacuate. The Radford Ordnance Plant became vital to the civil defense preparations in Montgomery County, allowing local officials to store emergency supplies in the east wing of the plant. Emergency Action Plans, like the USDA Defense Plan, set nuclear reaction standards for Montgomery County. The public also played a crucial role in civil defense preparations. Without public support, Montgomery County's nuclear war reparations probably would not have launched successfully. Although the functionality of the nuclear preparations will remain unknown, since a nuclear crisis never occurred, Montgomery County aligned with the rest of the United States in their arrangements. Throughout America, civil defense still seems to play a crucial role in foreign policy. The era of civil defense, originating back to the beginning of the Cold War, still impacts America today.

³² Nancy St. Clair, "Over-emphasizing Need for Industry is Risky," Virginia Tech and Local History Mounted Clippings 1870's- 1960's, box 46, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

³³ Ibid.

Works Cited:

Primary Sources

Beagle, Ben. "Radford Ordinance Plant Still Big One." *The Roanoke Times*, 13 January 1963. Virginia Newspapers Collection, box 12, folder 2, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

Claxton, Ira D. Letter to Mr. Douglass A. Moore Jr., 8 February 1962. box 2, folder 5, Orrin Rankin Magill Papers, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

Claxton, Ira D. Letter to the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors. 20 February 1962. Orrin Rankin Magill Papers, box 2, folder 5, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

Department of the Army Geographic Aid. Things to do Under Nuclear Biological or Chemical Attack: U.S. Government Printing Office. 1966. Harry Downing Temple Jr. Papers, box 4, folder 19, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

"From Shirts to Missiles. That's industry in City Area: Many varied plants mark industries here," *The News Journal: All-American Souvenir Edition*. Radford, VA, Virginia Newspapers Collection, box 10, folder 2, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

Montgomery USDA County Defense Board Emergency Operating Plan: Christiansburg, VA. 1965. Orrin Rankin Magill Papers, box 2, folder 5, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

Radford Ordinance Plant. Montgomery County Emergency Operational Plan: Radford, VA. 1963. Orrin Rankin Magill Papers, box 2, folder, 5, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

Snow, J. D. Letter to Mr. Ira D. Claxton, 22 December 1961. Orrin Rankin Magill Papers, box 2, folder 5, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

St. Clair, Nancy. "Over-emphasizing Need for Industry is Risky," *Virginia Tech and Local History Mounted Clippings, 1870's- 1960's*, box 46, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

U.S Army Engineer District. Norfolk. Fact Sheet on Department of Defense Community Fallout Shelter Survey Program for Virginia:

Norfolk, VA. 1961. Orrin Rankin Magill Papers, box 2, folder 5, Virginia Tech Special Collections.

Secondary Sources

Barker-Devine, Jenny. "Mightier than Missiles: The Rhetoric of Civil Defense for Rural American Families, 1950-1970," *Agricultural History* 80, No. 4 (Autumn 2006): 415-435. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/stable/4617775?pq-origsite=summon&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

Davis, Tracy C. *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defense*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Grossman, Andrew D. "The Early Cold War and American Political Development: Reflections on Recent Research." *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 15, No. 3 (Spring 2002): 471-483. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/stable/20020127>.

Geist, Edward. "Armageddon Insurance: Civil Defense in the United States and Soviet Union, 1945-1991"(video of lecture, Virginia Tech: National Capital Region, September 22, 2016) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=my6TOct5PHo>.

Monteyne, David. *Designing for Civil Defense in the Cold War: Fallout Shelter*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Oakes, Guy. *The Imaginary War: Civil Defense and American Cold War Culture*.(New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Spencer, Brett. "From Atomic Shelters to Arms Control: Libraries, Civil Defense, and American Militarism during the Cold War." *Information and Culture* 49, No. 3 (Fall 2014): 351-385. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/docview/1559887193/fulltextPDF/7C21D023D4AF4197PQ/1?accountid=14826>.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Stewart

Expected Graduation: May, 2018

University: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences

Hometown: Christiansburg, VA

In my free time I enjoy reading, watching good movies, dancing, and spending time with my friends and family. Around campus I am involved in the Student Government Association, Christ's Church at Virginia Tech, the Residential Leadership Community, and currently serve as a Resident Advisor in Johnson Hall.