There is a piece of World War I-era U.S. Navy history still standing in Seattle at the University of Washington campus.

Commander, Navy Region Northwest Rear Adm. Scott Gray visited the ASUW Shell House in early May 2019 for a tour and learned from staff about the Navy origins of the historic structure.

Built by the Navy and completed in 1918, the current ASUW Shell House, or Canoe House, was initially constructed to house seaplanes at a temporary aviation training station for pilots during WWI.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975, it’s one of two wooden WWI-era Navy hangars still standing in the country and the only one to have housed seaplanes during the war.

The Navy has maintained a presence in Washington State waters since the mid 1800’s and established its first permanent shore facility in the area – what is now Puget Sound Naval Shipyard – in 1891. During WWI, the Navy worked to build up infrastructure that would support U.S. military efforts during the war. This included a Naval Training Camp in Seattle and associated facilities like the historic ASUW Shell House.

In the 1921 report of War Activities of Bureau of Yards and Docks, Navy Department Bureau of Yards and Docks Chief Rear Adm. C. W. Parks documented the actions taken by the Navy to increase and improve infrastructure across the country to support the war efforts.

In this report, Navy civil engineer corps officer Capt. L. E. Gregory in charge of public works at the Puget Sound Navy Yard gave his personal account of the building of the Naval Training Camp in Seattle.

“Early in June of 1917 it was decided that a training camp should be built on a portion of the grounds of the State University at Seattle for the purpose of training recruits for the Navy,” wrote Gregory. “The authorities in charge of this university, under the direction of Dr. Henry Suzzallo, were most enthusiastic in their desire to place at the disposal of the Government the facilities of the university, in order that they might be made of greatest use during the continuation of the war.”

Gregory’s account goes on to state that the location of this training camp was ideal for the Navy because of its proximity to waterways that had a direct connection to the sea.

The Prologue of what appears to be an old U.S. Naval Training Camp Seattle yearbook states that “on June 28, 1917, the contract was let for the building of a Naval Training Camp on the University of Washington Campus, at a site selected by the Commandant of the Thirteenth Naval District. On July 3, 1917, material was assembled, and on the 5th following, actual building operations were commenced.”

Although the historic airplane hangar was not completed in time to be regularly used in WWI training activities, the training camp in Seattle was home to one of nine schools that trained U.S. Navy pilots, aviation crew and mechanics during WWI.

“A very high class of men were obtained in this section, and advantage was taken of the university facilities for classroom work,” wrote Gregory in his personal account. “This even extended to instruction in aviation, and an aviation school was one of the adjuncts of the camp toward its latter days.”
According to the National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form submitted to the National Park Service for consideration of the ASUW Shell House, the WWI-era structure is significant “because the airplane hangar was a response to new technology, its efficient form was essentially without historical precedent. No other examples of the hangar type dating from the period of the First World War are known in Washington.”

Following the end of the war, this aviation training school closed and the airplane hangar remained mostly empty until it was officially turned over to the University of Washington around 1922. After that, the university completed some upgrades and used the hangar as its headquarters for campus rowing crew racing activities. In 1949, the space was converted into the University’s Canoe House to be used for storage and boat rentals.

Though weathered, the historic ASUW Shell House still stands today. It is maintained by the University of Washington under agreement with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, on whose property, the ASUW Shell House is partially located.

For more information about the history of the ASUW Shell House, visit University of Washington’s website at https://www.washington.edu/ima/waterfront/asuw-shell-house/history/.
Copies of the ASUW Shell House (or Canoe House) photos submitted to the U.S. Department of Interior, National Park Service as part of the National Register of Historic Places nomination.
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