



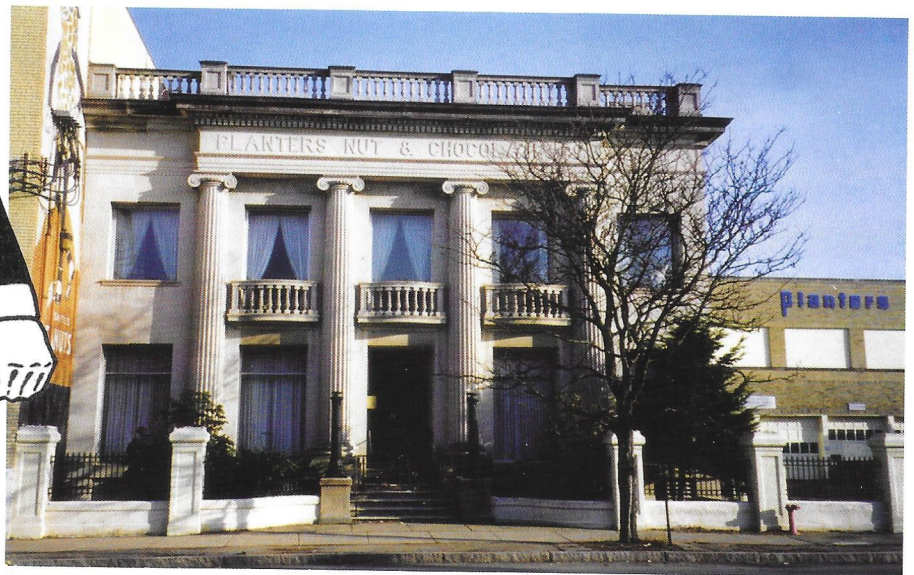
# Mr. Peanut's Hometown

## Wilkes-Barre and the Founding of Planters Peanuts

William C. Kashatus



Mr. Peanut (above) and his original home, the Planters Nut and Chocolate Company building, in the Luzerne County seat of Wilkes-Barre.



PHMC BUREAU FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

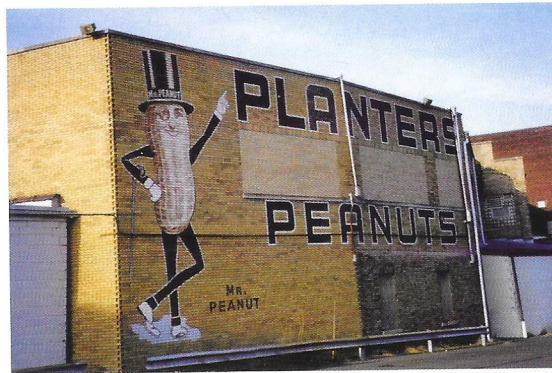
**F**ew may realize it, but for nearly a half-century, the Luzerne County seat of Wilkes-Barre, in northeastern Pennsylvania, was the peanut capital of the world. Founded in 1906, the Planters Peanut Company operated its national headquarters at 632 South Main Street in an impressive two-story Federal-style building. A handsome balustrade encircled the roof of the elegant concrete edifice and was embellished with twenty cast iron “Mr. Peanut” statues, each standing three feet tall, top-hatted, and grinning.

Adjoining the north side of the office building was a four-story brick warehouse featuring a large mural of the monocled celebrity. A brick building on the south side warehoused Mr. Peanut merchandise which was redeemable by coupon. Mail orders were processed here for everything from dolls to toy trucks and penny whistles.

On most summer days, an eight-foot tall Mr. Peanut mascot, wearing a black top hat, monocle, and white spats, strolled along Wilkes-Barre's shopping district, handing out free roasted peanuts to children. His intention was to lure their parents to the Planters retail store just off Public Square, at 10 East Market Street, where they could purchase peanuts as well as trinkets. The store also featured peanut grinders, Mr. Peanut figures sitting astride and pedaling large machines that ground the nuts. Children were fascinated by the activity and would stand to watch the process as long as their parents allowed.



PHMC BUREAU FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION



PHMC BUREAU FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

The company emblazoned nearly everything—including its buildings—with the likeness of Mr. Peanut.

By 1950, Planters had grown to a \$60 million per year operation with dozens of retail stores, four principal manufacturing plants, and some 5,000 employees spread throughout North America. The remarkable success of the enterprise was due to the vision of its founder, Amedeo Obici (pronounced *Ah-may-day-oh Oh-bee-chee*).

He was born on July 15, 1877, to Pietro Ludovico and Luigia Carolina Sartori Obici in the small town of Oderzo, near Venice, in northern Italy. His father died when Obici was seven years old. At the age of ten, he immigrated to the United States to live with his uncle, his mother's brother Vittorio Sartori, in Scranton, Lackawanna County, ten miles north of Wilkes-Barre. Sartori, his wife, and



COURTESY PLANTERS

Italian immigrant Amadeo Obici, founder of Planters Peanuts.

Once a mecca for Planters Peanuts collectors, the company's distribution center in Wilkes-Barre has been demolished.

*Planters*  
**PENNANT BRAND PEANUTS**

10 oz. NET

*Planters*  
**PENNANT BRAND SALTED PEANUTS**  
ALWAYS FRESH IN THIS VACUUM JAR  
THE HOME PACKAGE  
Planters Nut & Chocolate Co.  
WILKES-BARRE, PA.

**Delicious Nuts  
That Need No  
Cracking**

The crisp, delicious freshness of Pennant Peanuts is retained indefinitely in these airless jars and in the blue tin boxes. Both are handy home packages that give you a tempting delicacy to serve your guests at a moment's notice and without the least trouble.

10 oz. jar, 50c 6 oz. jar, 35c 16 oz. tin, 75c

**PLANTERS**  
Nut & Chocolate Company  
Wilkes-Barre, Pa. Suffolk, Va.

**To Dealers:** If you are unable to obtain Planters Pennant Peanuts, write to us at once giving name and address of your jobber, and we will advise you how to obtain them promptly.

COURTESY PLANTERS

Obici recognized the importance of advertising and aggressively purchased space in national magazines beginning in 1916.

their two children had immigrated to Scranton several years earlier. Uneducated, the youngster learned to speak English while working at a cigar factory for one dollar a week.

In 1892, Obici, at the age of fifteen, moved to Wilkes-Barre, where he worked for friends at a fruit and nut stand for free board and a small salary. Much like the more than 10,000 Italians who arrived in northeastern Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley during the early decades of the twentieth century, he hoped to escape the grueling life of an anthracite miner by becoming self-employed. Working several odd jobs, Obici saved enough money to open his own nut and fruit stand on East Main Street. He also began to research the peanut, which is a legume, or a plant with pods that split open when the seeds are ripe. The ripened seed is the peanut. Believing

he could increase his profits if his customers didn't have to crack open the shell and peel off the skin of the peanut, Obici purchased a \$4.50 peanut roaster and invented his own method of blanching whole roasted peanuts. Within a few years, he adopted the title of "Peanut Specialist," and began peddling his product from a horse and wagon to other storekeepers.

His early success inspired other entrepreneurial endeavors. In his early twenties, Obici mortgaged his fruit stand for \$39,000 and opened a combination soda fountain and oyster bar. Above the restaurant, he installed a roaster to continue expanding his peanut business. Obici quickly recognized that the peanut market had a bright future and began envisioning an even greater market than the local economy afforded.

At the age of 29, in 1906, he entered into a partnership with Mario Peruzzi (1875-1955), an Italian immigrant who headed the confections department at the C. P. Wentz Company, a jobber of confections and cigars in Scranton. Obici served as president and general manager. Peruzzi, who later became Obici's brother-in-law by marrying his sister Elizabeth, served as secretary-treasurer and director. They rented two floors of a downtown factory for \$25 per month and began with six employees (five women and one man), two large roasters, and crude machinery. Two years later, the partners incorporated their business as Planters Nut and Chocolate Company, and expanded their line of merchandise to include chocolate-nut bars, chocolate-covered peanuts, and various chocolate confections. Their primary goal, however, was to sell branded, whole salted nuts in penny and nickel bags on a large scale. It was an extremely ambitious venture.

Spanish peanuts at the time were available for as little as ten cents a pound. Ordinary Virginia peanuts sold in bulk for twenty cents. Planters' two-ounce nickel bag of large Virginia peanuts, on the other hand, sold at the equivalent of forty cents a pound.

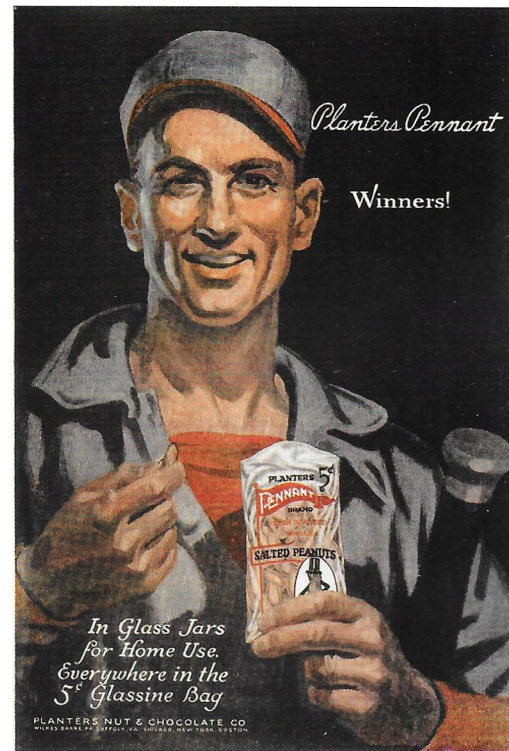
But Obici alleviated prospective dealers' concerns by explaining that "prices and first profits were not nearly as important as repeat business" and proved his operation based on quality

and brand name were important for continued success.

Using the same organizational skills as entrepreneurs such as steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, Obici combined the various phases of production, marketing, and sales into his own enterprise. The first step towards self-sufficiency was purchasing his own place of business at 632 South Main Street. To reduce expenses, he hired family members to work for him and was actively involved in every aspect of the business. Obici also found ways to improve his product and streamline his business operations. In 1910, for example, Planters adopted the grease-proof glassine bag, which solved one of the company's major

packaging problems and kept peanuts fresher longer. Planters later switched to cellophane envelopes and eventually added vapor-tight jars and tin boxes to its product line. In 1913, Obici invested \$25,000 to build a shelling and cleaning mill to process raw peanuts in Suffolk, Virginia, so he no longer had to rely on suppliers. Shortly after, he introduced Planters "Nickel Lunch," a two-ounce package of whole blanched nuts selling for 5 cents, and the demand for Planters Peanuts became even greater.

Capitalizing on new ways to package his products, Obici used glass jars and glassine bags, which he promoted as keeping his products fresh (below).



*Planters Pennant*

Winners!

*In Glass Jars  
for Home Use.  
Everywhere in the  
5¢ Glassine Bag*

PLANTERS NUT & CHOCOLATE CO.  
715 N. MARKET STREET, PHILADELPHIA, PA. 19106

COURTESY PLANTERS

Planters Peanuts carefully targeted audiences with its advertising campaigns, including sports spectators, (above) to whom it promoted its Planters Pennant Brand.



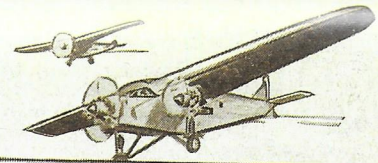
**Whole, Golden  
Peanuts - Salted**

*In Glass Jars for Home Use  
Everywhere in the  
5¢ Glassine Bag*

COURTESY PLANTERS

Planters emphasized the nutritional value of peanuts in a series of early twentieth-century advertisements, touting them as "'fuel' to help you win."

## Some Foods like some fuels give more **ENERGY** per ounce



It takes special fuel to make airplane motors roar and zoom to new records—special fuel with *quick energy, more energy per ounce.*

Your body burns *food* just as a motor burns fuel. There are foods that contain *much more* energy than others. Near the top of the list stand Planters Peanuts. They contain more calories (energy producing elements) than meat, milk, potatoes, or bread! So nourishing that they're called "The Nickel Lunch."

Here's a "fuel" to help you win. Always delicious, crisp, and wholesome when they bear Planters name. Look for "MR. PEANUT" on the glassine bags. 5c everywhere.

PLANTERS NUT & CHOCOLATE CO.  
Suffolk, Virginia  
Wilkes-Barre, Pa. San Francisco  
Toronto, Canada

Send 10 empty Planters bags or wrappers from Jumbo Block . . . Get Mr. Peanut's Paint Book FREE.



# PLANTERS SALTED PEANUTS

COURTESY PLANTERS

Always searching for new and novel marketing techniques to enhance the popularity of his product, Obici held a contest to find a logo for the company in 1916. Anthony Gentile, a 13-year-old Virginia schoolboy, submitted the winning drawing of an animated peanut and won \$5. Modified over the years by Joseph R. Fischer, a Wilkes-Barre commercial artist, the

ever-dapper Mr. Peanut eventually added a top hat, white spats, ebony cane, and monocle to his distinctive ensemble. The new logo proved to be a stroke of marketing genius. Mr. Peanut appeared on every package and container produced by Planters. Obici flooded the market with Mr. Peanut marketing gimmicks in the form of toys and books targeted to the young consumers. He believed that if he could attract customers

to his product as children, he could guarantee an adult market for years to come. Planters also launched an aggressive advertising campaign on a national scale in 1916 with a series of two-page spreads in the *Saturday Evening Post*, followed by page-length advertisements in the *Ladies Home Journal*, *Life*, *McCall's*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Better Homes & Gardens*.

Obici enjoyed a banner year in 1916. Not only was his business growing by leaps and bounds, but he also married Louise Musante (1863–1938), who had operated a small peanut stand in Wilkes-Barre. The couple began to think of Suffolk, Virginia, as home and listed their legal residence as Bay Point Dairy Farm, a 260-acre estate on the Nansemond River, about ten miles from Suffolk, the center of vast peanut farms. Obici became a generous benefactor to his adopted community, endowing a hospital in memory of his beloved wife after her death in 1938.



COURTESY DAN MORPHY AUCTIONS

1920s metal Planters Peanut toy truck made by Canadian Lincoln Toy Company.



LUZERNE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Louise Musante Obici (1863–1938) married the “Peanut Specialist” in 1916.

Planters’ confection and manufacturing processes expanded after the establishment of the Suffolk plant. In 1921, a second factory was built at San Francisco, California, to capitalize on a growing market on the West Coast. Four years later, a third manufacturing plant was established at Toronto, Canada, and a national advertising campaign was launched to familiarize Canadians with the product. The company’s national headquarters, with its executive offices, remained in Wilkes-Barre.

Planters set up a redemption center at 632 South Main Street in Wilkes-Barre to accommodate the thousands of mail orders for Mr. Peanut merchandise. Beginning in 1927, Planters’ customers collected coupons in the form of letters contained inside peanut packages and candy bar wrappers. When they had collected the letters to spell “A OBICI,” they could send away for a coloring book designed by Fischer. The most popular of these was a coloring book of the nation’s presidents, issued in 1936, when 4,000 orders a week were filled at the Wilkes-Barre redemption center.

During the 1910s and 1920s, the growth of the business continued booming with sales approaching \$10 million by 1929. As a result, two subsidiary companies were introduced that year: the National Peanut Corporation, which sold and promoted Planters, and Planters Edible Oil Company, which sold oil extracted from inedible peanuts.

Planters became so successful that it opened additional plants across North America in the 1930s and 1940s. Mr. Peanut could be seen strolling Atlantic City’s iconic boardwalk where Planters established a retail store. “That was a beautiful store,” recalled Herb Stern, vice chairman of New Jersey’s Atlantic City Historical Museum. “You could smell the roasted peanuts on the boardwalk a block away. Outside, there was a man dressed up in the peanut costume. He’d give out little samples. They were supposed to be for the adults, but kids always snuck by. If you were lucky, you could sneak by two or three times.” Other retail stores were established at San Francisco, Toronto, London, and on Times Square in New York City.

1930s–1940s Planters Peanuts electric clock featuring Art Deco trim.



COURTESY DAN MORPHY AUCTIONS



COURTESY OF PLANTERS

Planters took advantage of the expansive peanut farms of Virginia, where the company eventually located a processing plant.



When Obici died in 1947, he headed a \$60 million corporation consisting of seventy retail stores and four manufacturing plants, employing 5,000 people. His sound management and effective organization were continued under the leadership of the three subsequent presidents: Mario Peruzzi (1947–1955), Frank English (1955–1957); and M. L. English (1958–1960). The dedication and loyalty of these individuals ensured that Wilkes-Barre would continue as Planters' national headquarters. Realizing the value of a children's market, they capitalized on the Mr. Peanut product line. By 1951, mail orders for such items as stuffed dolls, tooth brushes, back packs, savings banks, and rings had exploded to between 25,000 and 30,000 a week. Leo McLaughlin, a young Wilkes-Barre resident, was hired at 40 cents an hour to dress up in an eight-foot peanut figure of paper mache, mingle with shoppers on Public Square, and hand out free samples of Planters roasted peanuts. But the good times wouldn't last.



When Standard Brands bought Planters in 1961 for \$20 million, it began to phase out its retail business, concentrating instead on supermarket sales. Wilkes-Barre, no longer the national headquarters for the multi-million-dollar peanut company, became just one of many distribution centers across the nation. Business continued to decline in the 1970s with a heightened awareness of food allergies and fad diets. Peanuts were banished from the diets of many Americans who preferred low-fat foods.

Another corporate merger took place in 1981 when Standard Brands and Nabisco combined to form Nabisco Brands. When Nabisco merged with R. J. Reynolds in 1985, the days of the old Planters headquarters at 632 South Main Street were numbered. RJR Nabisco built a new facility at the nearby Hanover Industrial Estates, where many of the Wilkes-Barre divisions were relocated. In 2000, Altria purchased Nabisco and, three years later, sold the unused South Main Street building to the City of Wilkes-Barre for a token \$100. Since then, the brick warehouse and the redemption center have been demolished and all that remains of the executive office building is its elegant concrete façade.

Today, Planters Peanuts is part of Altria's Kraft Food division, a multi-billion-dollar enterprise based in Chicago. Its promotional products, including a comic strip, Broadway playbill, and automobile, are now prized memorabilia. Mr. Peanut remains the most recognized trademark among all snack foods. And it all can be credited to Amedeo Obici, an Italian immigrant who realized his American Dream in Wilkes-Barre at the turn of the century.

*William C. Kashatus, Paoli, is a regular contributor to Pennsylvania Heritage.*

**They taste so good...always**

PARTIES  
THANKSGIVING  
CHRISTMAS  
HOLIDAYS

Full 8 Oz.

**PLANTERS**  
Socktail  
PEANUTS

They taste so good...  
in the lunches  
you pack

They taste so good...  
as an after-school treat

They taste so good...  
when you're reading  
or watching T.V.

They taste so good...  
to your boys  
in service

Yes, for all your parties, formal or informal...  
for true holiday cheer...the magic touch is  
always PLANTERS PEANUTS and PLANTERS MIXED NUTS.  
Everybody loves them. Crisp...over fresh...  
with that unique PLANTERS flavor...they're an American institution.  
They do taste so good.

For Holiday cookies at their best, bake them with PLANTERS  
super-refined COOKING and SALAD OIL...the superior all-purpose oil,  
for all good cooking, baking and salad making.

These PLANTERS products are also made  
in Canada and sold everywhere in Canada.

Full 4 Oz.

**PLANTERS** is the word for **good** PEANUTS

The company shrewdly marketed peanuts for holidays, as well as for everyday lunches and snacks.



Reading clockwise at 12 o'clock: Dry Roasted Peanuts, Salted Pecans, Redwin Spanish Peanuts, Whole Cashews and Mixed Nuts

## ANYTIME IS PLANTERS TIME



NUTS ARE HIGH IN PROTEIN

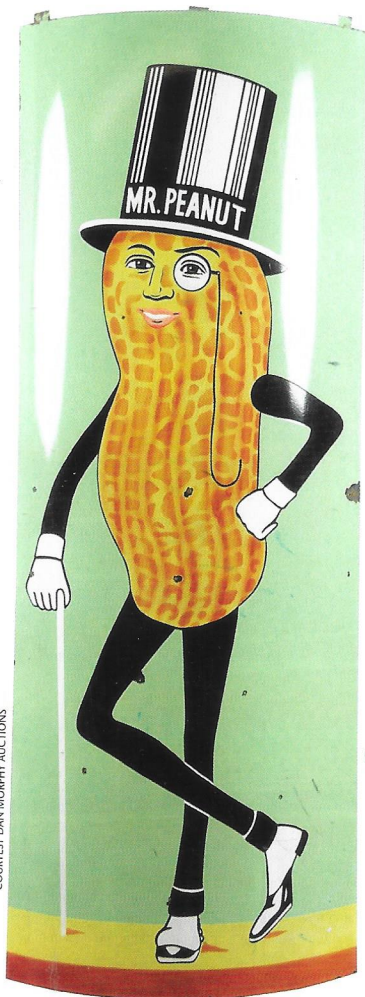
Whether it's snack time, TV time, party time, lunch time or after-school time—anytime is Planters time! Planters never packs paper liners or lower grade nuts. Planters packs only quality. Shop for the whole new line of fine Planters products in new blue cans, jars, bags or wrappers.



**PLANTERS**® —THE NAME FOR QUALITY

COURTESY PLANTERS

1930s–1940s porcelain half-moon-shaped sign featuring Mr. Peanut, displayed at a Planters store in Memphis, Tennessee.



COURTESY BARBARA CREWS

In addition to a varied product line, which included not only peanuts but also cashews, pecans, and mixed nuts, Planters Peanuts retailed candy bars.

## AND IT ALL BEGAN WITH A PEANUT.

**B**ecause of its association with slaves of African descent in the South, the peanut is considered by many Americans to be an import from Africa. Although the peanut—known as goober or goober pea below the Mason-Dixon Line—did cross the Atlantic Ocean with the slaves, it's actually native to South America. Early Spanish explorers discovered South American Indians eating *cacohuate* ("earth chocolate").

The peanut was gradually transplanted to West Africa as a food and fodder crop. Slave traders realized peanuts could provide inexpensive but nutritionally sound food for Africans being transported to North America aboard slave ships. Peanuts were eventually sown in Virginia for livestock, and ultimately became a staple.

The peanut owes its fame to African American scientist, botanist, educator, and inventor George Washington Carver (1864–1943). In the early twentieth century, Carver proved the peanut (sometimes called groundnut and earthnut) could free the South from its dependence on cotton and restore nitrogen to soil which had been depleted by the cultivation of cotton. In the 1890s, when Carver initiated his research, the peanut was not recognized as a crop, but within fifty years, by 1940, it ranked as one of the country's six leading crops and the largest crop, after cotton, in the southern states.

Over the years, Mr. Peanut appeared in many forms, including a cookie jar produced by Benjamin Medwin, circa early 1990s. In 2006, the company surveyed customers, asking if a bowtie, cufflinks, or a pocket watch should be added to Mr. Peanut's attire. The resounding response was "No!"

The son of a slave, Carver successfully demonstrated the ecological and environmental benefits of peanut cultivation and later found new uses for the overabundant foodstuff. He discovered hundreds of derivatives—both edible and inedible—of the peanut, such as cheese, milk, coffee, flour, ink, dye, plastics, soap, wood stains, linoleum, cosmetics, and medicinal oils. He did not, however, develop peanut butter. Claims for inventing peanut butter were made by Marcellus Gilmore Edson of Montreal, Canada, in 1884, J. H. Kellogg of Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1897, and Ambrose Straub, a physician in St. Louis, Missouri, who patented a peanut butter machine in 1903. The Aztec Indians of South America were known to have mashed peanuts into a paste, or butter, several hundred years earlier.