

Housing and the WWII Home Front

Housing is one of the essential stories of the American World War II home front. While [secret cities](#), [Rosie the Riveters](#), [ration lines](#), and [victory gardens](#) may dominate popular images of the World War II home front, the issue of housing impacted every American in some shape or form. Home front housing stories are particularly powerful because they bridge the political and personal, connecting federal power and policy with personal triumphs and tragedies.

Worker Housing

One of the defining challenges on the home front was housing a growing mobile workforce. Close to one fourth of the population – more than thirty million Americans—moved during the war. The major migratory streams moved from rural areas to metropolitan areas and their suburbs. The manufacturing centers, military bases, and scientific facilities in the Sunbelt states of the West Coast, Gulf Coast, and South Atlantic saw the greatest population gains. The U.S. government, often contracting with private companies, rushed to adapt existing housing and build new housing for the massive influx of workers who flocked to defense sites such as the [Kaiser shipyards in Richmond, California](#). The government helped produce around two million dwelling units, a stunning example of how housing shaped the home front's built environment.¹



Figure 1: View of Atchison Village, a model community composed of well-constructed homes for white shipyard workers in Richmond, California. (Credit: Library of Congress)

Home ownership rose significantly during World War II due to several factors, including decent paying defense jobs and affordable worker housing. In some cases, worker housing took the form of model communities that prioritized functional homes, spacious yards, and a centralized commercial core. This government subsidized worker housing represented a major improvement in many workers' standard of living. For some families, it was even their ticket to the [American Dream](#). Many Americans looked back fondly on the home front years, remembering how communities came together, sharing their homes, victory gardens, and mutual aid to workers in need.²

Most wartime housing projects, however, were cheaply constructed and designed to be temporary. They sometimes posed health risks to worker residents when built near polluted or contaminated environments. At other times, wartime defense sites created the contamination that made workers and [local communities](#) ill.³



Figure 2: Aerial photo of the city of Vanport located right outside of Portland, Oregon. Built in 1942 to temporarily house Kaiser shipyard workers, Vanport was the then largest public housing project in the nation. It was racially diverse but also racially segregated. Built on a floodplain with cheap materials, it flooded in 1948, leaving 18,000 people homeless and forever altered race relations in Portland. (Credit: Oregon Historical Society)

Racial Segregation

Racial segregation was one of the most significant legacies of [home front worker housing](#). Local government housing authorities often reserved planned model housing communities for permanent white workers and their families. Non-white workers and families were

instead housed in shoddier, overcrowded projects or left to find housing in segregated enclaves that cities refused to provide basic services for. Many local white communities feared depressed property values and unwanted neighbors. These fears about housing migrant workers resulted in the widespread use of racial covenants and redlining, and at times, violent race riots.⁴

Home Loss

The loss of homes and homelands was another defining aspect of the American World War II home front. The forced relocation and incarceration of communities—such as [Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans](#) on the U.S. West Coast, the [Unangan \(Aleut\) people](#) of the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands off the coast of mainland Alaska, and the [Indigenous populations in the Mariana Islands](#) in the Pacific—resulted in painful stories of lost homes. In many cases, these populations did not just lose physical dwellings, but their livelihoods, personal valuables, and entire communities.



Figure 3: Workers building the first house at Tule Lake Segregation Center, the largest Japanese American Incarceration Camp based in Newell, California. (Credit: Department of the Interior)

Similarly, the systematic dispossession of Native homelands during World War II has been one of the most overlooked and tragic stories of the WWII home front. The U.S. government took possession of Native reservation lands to expand or build new airfields, [bombing ranges](#), and army and navy bases. Sometimes Native reservation lands were used, despite protests from tribal members, to house incarcerated Japanese Americans. In one devastating case, the government flooded hundreds of thousands of acres of reservation lands to build white workers and soldiers postwar housing.⁵

Strategies of Resistance

Communities who faced housing discrimination on the WWII home front fought back. Local NAACP chapters formed all over the country during World War II in response to widespread discrimination Black workers experienced on the home front, including segregation in housing. Latinos protested home front housing discrimination, among other

issues, through the creation of independent cultural spaces and mutual aid. Sometimes communities came together, across racial and ethnic lines, to save the homes of incarcerated Japanese Americans. Native peoples fought back on two main fronts, forming urban organizations to promote Native identity and solidarity while also protesting the loss of their ancestral homelands and Native sovereignty.⁶

In each instance, groups who bore the brunt of World War II home front housing discrimination—in its many varied forms—showed a remarkable resilience. This resilience, coupled with strategies of resistance practiced during WWII, became essential to fighting the divisions and segregation in housing that defined postwar America.

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¹ John W. Jeffries, “Part One: Mobilization and Its Impact,” in [World War II and the American Home Front: A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study](#) (October 2007), 41-42. William M. Tuttle, Jr., “Part Two: The American Family on the Home Front,” in [World War II and the American Home Front](#), 56.

² On rising home ownership rates during WWII, see Daniel K. Fetter, “The Home Front: Rent Control and the Rapid Increase in Wartime Increase in Home Ownership,” *The Journal of Economic History* 76, no. 4 (December 2016): 1001-1043.

³ For more on the intertwining histories of race and the environment tied to housing, see Alistair W. Fortson, “Victory Abroad, Disaster at Home,” *California History* 94, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 20–36; Matthew L. Basso, [World War II and the American Home Front, Volume 2: A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study](#) (December 2024) 21-23.

⁴ Jeffries, “Mobilization and Its Impact,” 43-44; Harvard Sitkoff, “Part Four: African Americans and Other Minorities on the Home Front,” in [World War II and the American Home Front](#), 115-117.

⁵ Basso, [World War II and the American Home Front, Vol. 2](#), 63-66. See also Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso, 2019).

⁶ Basso, [World War II and the American Home Front, Vol. 2](#), 58, 77, 87, 98.