

Connecticut and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

Small but mighty, Connecticut boasted not just an eager female workforce but a resilient population of Italian, Jewish, and Polish immigrants that reshaped the state's demographics to resemble New York and New Jersey.¹ By 1939, changes in industrial spaces were also well underway in Greater Hartford, one of three regions in the state that possessed an immense pull for wartime contracts. World War II helped build Connecticut's industrial infrastructure and had a lasting impact on the state's economy.

Mobilization: Military and Industry

Connecticut industries started mobilizing before the US entered World War II. In 1939, France ordered \$25 million in aircraft engines from Pratt & Whitney Aircraft Company in East Hartford, a designated American World War II Heritage City. These early contracts laid the groundwork for Connecticut's industrial power. By 1943, 96 percent of all U.S. Army and Navy transport planes used Pratt & Whitney engines. That same year Chance Vought produced more than 1,700 Corsairs, the best aircraft carrier-based fighter plane in the world. In the same period, Hamilton-Standard delivered 75 percent of the Army and Navy's combat and training propellers. The factory produced as many as 4,000 propellers per month.²



Figure 1: Engine assembly room. Pratt and Whitney propeller plant in East Hartford, Connecticut in September 1941. Photographer: John Collier. Credit: Library of Congress.

Other industries also contributed to the war effort. Waterbury boasted the “Big Three” brass plants—Scovill Manufacturing, American Brass, and the Chase Brass & Copper Company—which collectively led the world in brass production. At its peak, Scovill was Waterbury's largest employer, ending the war with 12,000 employees on the books.³ Like Waterbury Clock, Scovill produced fuses that supplied Allied powers before the U.S. formally entered the war.

The military also built bases near Connecticut's industrial centers. The Bradley Army Airfield, just north of Hartford, stretched across 1,700 acres of former tobacco plantation lands.⁴ The deadly 56th Fighter Group of the 8th Air Force trained at Bradley, as did the 57th Fighter Group prior to its dispatch to north Africa and Italy. A four-acre enclosure was also erected to house German POWs. Toward the end of the war, the airfield transitioned into a redeployment site for troops from Europe and the Pacific, with nearly 60,000 passing through on transport planes. Even private institutions like Yale University rented

¹ John W. Jeffries, *Testing the Roosevelt Coalition: Connecticut Society and Politics, 1940-1946* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979), viii-ix.

² Ronald Fernandez, *Excess Profits: The Rise of United Technologies* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1983), 144-45, 156, 163.

³ “Birth of the Brass Valley,” ConnecticutHistory.org, January 25, 2020, <https://connecticuthistory.org/birth-of-the-brass-valley/>. “Notes,” Scovill Brass Works, 59 Mill Street, Waterbury, New Haven County, CT archival image, U.S. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/ct0598/>.

⁴ “Historical Note,” Bradley Field World War II Activities (Collection PG048), Connecticut State Library, <https://cslarchives.ctstatelibrary.org/repositories/2/resources/25>.

buildings to the Army and Navy for service-member housing. The Air Force set up an aviation school at the Ivy League school, which was struggling with enrollment as young men entered the military.

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

Many Connecticut women joined the workforce during World War II. Around Hartford, the towns of Bristol, New Britain, Meriden, and Plainville each hosted their own ball bearing plant. Collectively, the plants supplied two-thirds of the bearings for the nation's entire aircraft industry, a feat accomplished in large part by female workers. In 1943, the plants averaged a 42 percent female workforce.⁵

Although many workers in Waterbury found solidarity in working in brass and munitions, their workplaces were notably fragmented. In 1942, a pronounced rift emerged between pro- and anti-communist factions of the Waterbury International Union of Mine, Mill & Smelter Workers, leading to interventions by the local Catholic bishop and CIO leadership.⁶ Waterbury also saw a large African American migration through the war, which constituted ten percent of the city's population by the 1950s. For a time, Black migration to the city included temporary workers from Jamaica, 171 of whom ended up at Chase Brass & Copper. Waterbury's factories also employed many single women, who needed housing and sought assistance through the Waterbury War Housing Center.⁷

At Groton's Electric Boat, a submarine-making subsidiary of the Consolidated Aircraft Company, work was divided along stark class and ethnic lines: "new immigrants" from Ireland, Italy, and northern Europe worked down in the yard while those on "the Hill" came from older white American families. Union affiliation kept laborers in silos, too, as welders, painters, and grinders were contractually obliged to stick with their own occupational pool.⁸

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

Despite the massive demand for workers generated by the influx of wartime contracts into Greater Hartford, the city was slow to hire African Americans. As renowned sociologist Charles Johnson assessed in 1943, "In Hartford, it is reported that there is much more tension surrounding the employment situation than in other parts of the state," as the city followed a longstanding policy of "using Negroes only in unskilled jobs, if at all."⁹ In response, at least four Black-owned newspapers emerged in Hartford. They advocated for the hiring of Blacks as firefighters and bus drivers, pushed for a law to end racial bias in the National Guard, and shed light on unfair housing policies and highly priced goods in Black neighborhoods. Across the state, on the western border with New York, Danbury jailed conscientious objectors whose activism while incarcerated caused the historically early desegregation of a federal prison.¹⁰

⁵ William T. Breen, "Women and Work: The Limits of War Manpower Commission Policy in World War II," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 20, no. 2 (December 2001), 69-70.

⁶ Steve Rosswurm, "The Contextualization of a Moment in CIO History: The Mine-Mill Battle in the Connecticut Brass Valley during World War II," *Rethinking U. S. Labor History: Essays on the Working-Class Experience, 1756-2009*, edited by Donna T. Haverty-Stacke, and Daniel J. Walkowitz, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2010), 168, 171.

⁷ Raechel Guest, "The Brass City," <https://www.ctexplored.org/the-brass-city-manufactures-for-victory/>.

⁸ Patrick Tyler, *Running Critical: The Silent War, Rickover, and General Dynamics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 91.

⁹ Charles Johnson, *To Stem this Tide: A Survey of Racial Tension Areas in the United States* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1943), 20.

¹⁰ Scott H. Bennett, *Radical Pacifism: The War Resisters League and Gandhian Nonviolence in America, 1915-1963* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003) 117-118.

Life on the Home Front

The wartime bustle in home front Hartford helped the state as a whole shed its national reputation for sleepy, snow-clad villages—perpetuated by films like *Holiday Inn* (1942) and *Christmas in Connecticut* (1945)—and emerge as an industrial powerhouse.¹¹ For example, more than 3,000 Manchester residents flooded into the Howell Cheney Technical School during the war, to gain all manner of vocational skills, especially those related to textile manufacturing. Between 1943 and 1945 Manchester residents also donated 3,120 pints of blood to meet the plasma demand.¹²

More than 12,000 men and 500 women from Waterbury served in the armed forces during the war. Residents bought \$270 million worth of war bonds. They also collected 68,500 pounds of rubber; 5,097,421 pounds of scrap metal; 8,255,640 pounds of paper; and 150 tons of waste fat.¹³ Earlier in the war, New Haven hosted the first Connecticut Conference on Women in Defense, where 1,000 women attendees rallied in the spirit of volunteerism and learned techniques for salvaging in times of scarcity.¹⁴ 55 percent of the staff at Bradley donated as much as 13 percent of their paychecks to support bonds toward the Army purchase of a \$75,000 fighter plane. The personnel raised more than \$89,000.

After the War

The war's end spelled the beginning of a decline in Connecticut's manufacturing base. Within a week of V-J Day, 10,200 employees were let go from Waterbury factories as military contracts ended. Many, however, were rehired when the factories retooled for civilian production while defense manufacturing revived during the Cold War.¹⁵ Connecticut's population continued to diversify but the war's legacy of segregation and discrimination continued to shape the experiences of workers and residents.

Key Places

- **Pratt and Whitney Aircraft Company:** Located in East Hartford, Connecticut's designated American World War II Heritage City, Pratt & Whitney's engines could be found in 96% of all U.S. Army and Navy transport planes by 1943.
- **Groton's Electric Boat:** A subsidiary of the Consolidated Aircraft Company, Electric Boat produced 74 submarines between for the war, including the USS *Flasher*, which earned three Presidential Unit Citations and is on view today at the National Submarine Memorial in Groton.¹⁶
- **Scovill Brass Works:** One of Connecticut's "Big Three" brass plants, which collectively led the world in brass production and employed thousands of workers.

By Travis Hancock, supervised by Dr. Matt Basso. Adapted by Dr. Nicole Martin, consulting historian with the National Park Service in partnership with the National Council on Public History.

¹¹ Mark Allen Baker, *Images of America: Connecticut in World War II* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2017), 8.

¹² Archie Kilpatrick, *World War II History of Manchester, Connecticut* (New York: The Hobson Book Press, 1946), 54, 79-80.

¹³ Ken Burns, "The Four Towns: Waterbury, Connecticut," *The WAR*, PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-war/waterbury/>.

¹⁴ Ben Gammell, "Women and Defense: World War II on the Connecticut Home Front," *ConnecticutHistory.org*, December 2, 2020, <https://connecticuthistory.org/women-and-defense-world-war-ii-on-the-connecticut-home-front/>. 1

¹⁵ Burns, "The Four Towns."

¹⁶ James Streeter, *Groton: Historical Bits and Pieces* (Bloomington: iUniverse Books, 2009), 139.