

## Tennessee and the World War II Home Front

### Introduction

Between 1942 and 1945, Tennessee sent 315,501 citizens to war, a fitting contribution for the Volunteer State.<sup>1</sup> However, the state is best known for the Clinton Engineer Works, eventually named for the town that sprung up around it, Oak Ridge. One of three major sites for the Manhattan Project, Oak Ridge produced the uranium-235 that powered Little Boy's destruction of Hiroshima.<sup>2</sup> While Oak Ridge made the stuff of atomic bombs, the state as a whole exploded in many directions.

### Mobilization: Military and Industry

The armed services gained more than just volunteers. In Tennessee, the military saw an ideal space for training, including everything from barrage balloon practice to the epic land-and-sky combat program called the Tennessee Maneuvers. From 1941-45, these games saw the arrival of nearly a million troops, including the 101st Airborne Division, which rehearsed its eventual dive into Normandy. Tennessee's terrain mirrored Western Europe's, and provided the U.S. Second Army with areas to practice laying landmines, fording rivers, and building bridges. Planes swarmed the skies, too, practicing such maneuvers as dropping flour-sack "bombs" on the town of Gainesboro.<sup>3</sup>



*Control desk in the master control room at K-25 at Oak Ridge, 1945. Credit: Courtesy US Department of Energy and Oak Ridge Public Library.*

Smaller cities and towns around West Tennessee bustled with the business of war. Millington hosted the nation's largest inland naval operation.<sup>4</sup> Developed in 1942, the Naval Reserve Aviation Base trained Navy cadets in aerial combat.<sup>5</sup> Sixty miles north lay Dyersburg Army Air Base, the only inland training site for B-17 Super Fortress bombers east of the Mississippi.<sup>6</sup> The training was real; over a twenty-seven month period more than one hundred crewmembers were killed and twenty-three B-17s destroyed. To the east, the Milan Ordnance Center complex covered 28,500 acres and, at its height, employed roughly 11,000 workers who produced various types of ammunition and fuses.<sup>7</sup>

In East Tennessee, Knoxville served as headquarters to the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which doubled power production during WWII to meet industrial demands of the state.<sup>8</sup> Knoxville also became a key source of labor for the construction and operation of Oak Ridge, less than 25 miles away. Now a designated World War II Heritage City, Oak Ridge was the largest construction project ever supervised

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Toplovich, "The Tennessean's War: Life on the Home Front," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 19.

<sup>2</sup> Lindsey A. Freeman, *Longing for the Bomb: Oak Ridge and Atomic Nostalgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Susan L. Gordon, "Home Front Tennessee: The World War II Experience," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 8.

<sup>4</sup> Toplovich, "The Tennessean's War," 21.

<sup>5</sup> Rita Hiltenbrand Hall, *Images of America: Millington* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2012), 8

<sup>6</sup> "The Veterans' Museum," *DYAAB.US*, <https://www.dyaab.us/>.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon, "Home Front Tennessee," 12, 13, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Brake Howard, "Tennessee in War and Peace: The Impact of World War II on State Economic Trends," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 58.

by the Army Corps of Engineers. At its completion, the site covered approximately 92 square miles, powered primarily by hydroelectric power from TVA's Norris Dam.<sup>9</sup> While Oak Ridge emerged through assembly-line building techniques, five pre-existing communities were erased from the map.<sup>10</sup>

### **Mobilization: Changes for Workers**

As the Tennessee workforce became depleted when white, male "volunteers" left for service, Black workers filled some of the labor shortage. Nashville's Black community saw modest gains in this time. Earnings among largely Black low-income housing residents rose 52 percent, while whites in the city saw an 80 percent pay increase. Across Nashville, the hiring of women increased 49 percent, although women typically earned lower pay than male workers. Women also faced increased public scrutiny as cases of syphilis and gonorrhea doubled between 1940 and 1942, largely affecting servicemen. Nashville became the first city in the nation to invoke the May Act, which illegalized acts of vice near military bases—leading anti-vice squads to primarily target and arrest women accused of prostitution.<sup>11</sup>

Oak Ridge hosted a broad range of workers, from scientists with PhDs to rural laborers without high school diplomas. By the war's end, twelve thousand workers staffed the K-25 plant and twenty-two thousand ran the Y-12 plant—both plants being devoted to uranium enrichment.<sup>12</sup> Oak Ridge in total employed some 500,000 people through the war years.<sup>13</sup> The mass hirings were all the more impressive for the fact that they were often done in secret; job listings often used vague language even as they sought to lure skilled laborers from cities as far away as Philadelphia and New York.<sup>14</sup>

### **Discrimination and Fights for Equality**

Tennessee's war productivity did not break free from a larger culture of racism. In Memphis, city officials oversaw the destruction of the Japanese Garden at Overton Park. As the park commissioner explained, "We didn't want any of their culture around." In town, the Japanese owners of the Kuni Wada Bakery were sent to the Jerome War Relocation Center in Arkansas, after which their bakery was vandalized.<sup>15</sup> This street-level racism was echoed in the state's halls of power. Tennessee Senator Thomas Stewart bemoaned the local presence of so-called "yellow devils" and declared to Congress, "I say that wherever there is one drop of Japanese blood that there is absolute Japanese treachery."<sup>16</sup>

In the town of Columbia, a Black Navy veteran James Stephenson was charged with attempted murder in 1946 for protecting his mother from mistreatment by a white shop keeper. When Stephenson's bail was posted, white mobs and local police attacked and looted the town's Black neighborhood and arrested more than a hundred African Americans. This led to the involvement of an NAACP lawyer, a

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<sup>9</sup> Drew Swanson, *Beyond the Mountains: Commodifying Appalachian Environments* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 159-161.

<sup>10</sup> Lindsey A. Freeman, *Longing for the Bomb: Oak Ridge and Atomic Nostalgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Robert G. Spinney, "Municipal Government in Nashville, Tennessee, 1938-1951: World War II and the Growth of the Public Sector," *The Journal of Southern History* 61, no. 1 (Feb., 1995): 82-83, 85-86.

<sup>12</sup> Swanson, *Beyond the Mountains*, 166-167.

<sup>13</sup> Russell Olwell, "Help Wanted for Secret City: Recruiting Workers for the Manhattan Project at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, 1942-1946," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (Spring 1999), 55.

<sup>14</sup> Olwell, "Help Wanted," 56-57.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon, "Home Front Tennessee," 4.

<sup>16</sup> Jason Morgan Ward, "'No Jap Crow': Japanese Americans Encounter the World War II South," *The Journal of Southern History* Volume 73, no. 1, (February 2007), 90.

Black veteran named Maurice Weaver, whom whites threatened to lynch.<sup>17</sup> Reflecting broader regional patterns, many white Southerners held a blatant disregard for the Black community's common commitment to fighting the tenets of Hitlerism abroad.

At Oak Ridge, the CIO and AFL supported Black and women workers, advocating on their behalf for equal pay. Ultimately, the unions split control at the site.<sup>18</sup> Union support could not defeat Jim Crow, and Black workers lived in segregated housing and filled menial and unskilled positions in the plants.<sup>19</sup>

### **Life on the Home Front**

Like other Americans, Tennesseans eagerly sold defense stamps and war bonds and collected metal scrap. The Tennessee Maneuvers, however, created a unique home front experience. At the peak of the war games, Nashville hosted 80,000 servicemen per week. The First Presbyterian Church set up a Service Men's Lounge, with 160 cots, hot showers, and a Sunday breakfast provided to troops at no cost.<sup>20</sup> The presence of the armed forces benefitted Nashville's brick-and-mortar businesses, with retail sales jumping almost forty percent during the war.<sup>21</sup> The military also caused real damage: area civilians placed nearly 30,000 claims and requested over \$2 million in compensation; meanwhile, local officials requested another \$2 million to fix roads and streets. In terms of human damages, despite the use of fake ammo, 268 troops died during the Tennessee Maneuvers.<sup>22</sup>

### **After the War**

Unlike many wartime boomtowns, Oak Ridge was not deserted after the war. It remains a leading research center with one of the world's fastest supercomputers. However, former employees have faced serious health risks due to atomic exposure.<sup>23</sup> Despite Black military service and some gains by Black workers during the war, African Americans endured post-war Jim Crow conditions in Tennessee until the Civil Rights Movement made significant changes possible in the 1950s and 60s.

### **Places of World War II History**

- **Manhattan Project at Oak Ridge, National Historical Park:** The administrative headquarters and largest of the three Manhattan Project sites, Oak Ridge specialized in uranium enrichment. It remains a center of scientific research and nuclear production today.
- **Holston Army Ammunition Plant:** Operated by the Tennessee Eastman Corporation, the facility produced RDX, the world's most powerful explosive prior to the atomic bomb. RDX played a vital role in both Allied anti-submarine and aerial bombardment campaigns.

*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.*

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<sup>17</sup> Kara Elizabeth Kempinski, "A Jim Crow Welcome Home: African American World War Veterans In Knoxville, Tennessee" (MA thesis, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2012), 74-75.

<sup>18</sup> Russell Olwell, "'I Am Mrs. America:' The 'Secret City' Women Oak Ridge, Tennessee, During World War II," *Tennessee Women: Their Lives and Times*, ed. Beverly Greene Bond and Sarah Wilerson Freeman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 329-331.

<sup>19</sup> Olwell, "Help Wanted," 60.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon, "Home Front Tennessee," 9.

<sup>21</sup> Spinney, "Municipal Government in Nashville," 82.

<sup>22</sup> Topovich, "The Tennessean's War," 26-27.

<sup>23</sup> Olwell, "'I Am Mrs. America,'" 332-33.