

Washington and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

Few states were shaped by the home front experience to the degree that the war years catalyzed Washington. The once-sleepy Northwestern outpost underwent dramatic economic, social, and demographic changes. Hanford Engineering Works, one of three major sites for the Manhattan Project, produced the plutonium that filled the bomb credited with ending the war. The maritime and aviation industries around Puget Sound produced the planes and ships that brought American soldiers to distant theaters of war. This economic expansion, however, occurred alongside social turbulence and racial animosity.

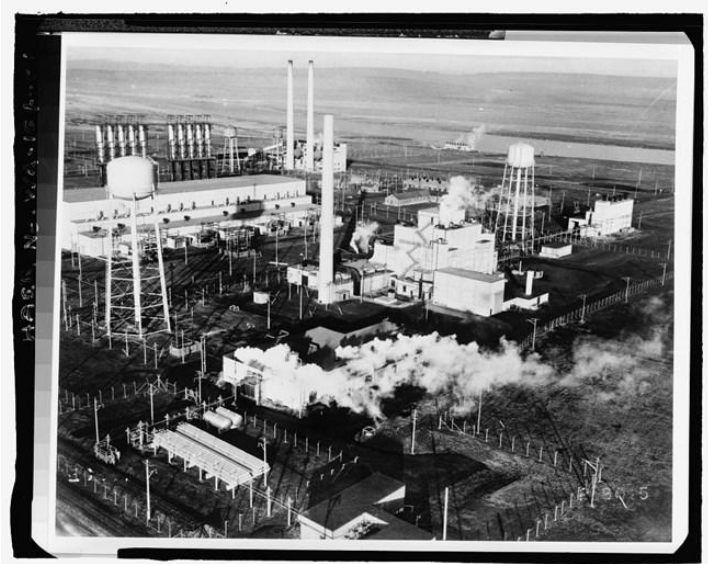
Mobilization: Military and Industry

War production transformed Seattle from a regionally significant city, with an economy based around timber, ship repair, and fishing, into a national center for industrial production and high-tech innovation. During four years of war, federal production contracts totaled some \$5.6 billion, which put it in the top three cities of per capita federal dollars.¹

A key driver of the state's transition was the Hanford Engineering Works. This sprawling facility sat along a 14-mile stretch of the Columbia River, upstream from the 'Tri-Cities' of Pasco, Richland, and Kennewick—now a designated American World War II Heritage City. Operational from 1944 to 1969, the Engineering Works produced more than half of the nation's supply of plutonium. This plutonium was inside

the bombs used in the Trinity Test and that dropped on the people of Nagasaki on August 9th, 1945.² The Hanford site was selected because of its remote location and proximity to large amounts of electricity. Workers moved 25 million cubic yards of earth to build 386 miles of roadways, pour 780,000 cubic yards of concrete, and build housing for almost 30,000 people.³ What came to be called 'Reactor B' became the first full-scale nuclear reactor to operate anywhere, built by the Army Corps of Engineers and DuPont Corporation in just 11 months beginning in late 1943.⁴ The project was managed by a unique coalition of atomic scientists, military officers, and industrial corporations.

The Aircraft industry also played a major role in Washington's transition. In 1939, 800,000 square feet of industrial space was devoted to building airplanes. This number ballooned to 4.1 million square feet by 1944.⁵ Boeing Company, which already employed 4,000 workers in 1939, quickly became the



"Aerial view of the 100-B Area in January 1945, looking toward the northwest. This is one of the first photographs released to the public in 1945, and is perhaps the most often used photograph of 100-B," Richland, WA. Credit: Library of Congress

¹ Taylor, "Swing the Door Wide...", 2.

² [Hanford, WA - Manhattan Project National Historical Park \(US](#)

³ S.L. Sanger, *Working on the Bomb: An Oral History of WWII Hanford*, (Portland: Portland State University Press, 1995), 3.

⁴ [World War II and the American Home Front](#), 144.

⁵ Warren, XVI

region's largest employer, with 30,000 workers by the time the United States officially entered the war in December.⁶

Washington's traditional industries were also supercharged by World War II. The lumber industry produced billions of board feet in addition to crafting replacement parts for rationed or scarce metals. The state's entire crop of canned salmon was purchased by the Army and Navy. And in 1942, President Roosevelt allocated \$1 million to pay for transporting 8,000 Midwestern farmers to Eastern Washington to help harvest a multi-million-dollar apple crop.

New industries also popped up, seemingly overnight. For example, there was no aluminum produced in Washington before the war. But thanks to the cheap, abundant power supplied by the Grand Coulee Dam, the state had an instant aluminum industry that accounted for about a third of national output. Power from the dam not only refined metals used in the state's aircraft production, but also purified plutonium at Hanford, powered the welding machines of Puget Sound shipyards, and electrified the homes of war industry workers. Harry Truman later remarked that without the Grand Coulee Dam, "it would have been impossible to win this war."⁷

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

Washington's wartime workforce grew in leaps and bounds. The population of Seattle and Tacoma grew by 18% between 1940 and 1944, while Kitsap County grew by 118%.⁸ Finding housing in these booming centers of innovation became challenging. This was in part due to the conservative sentiment of local leaders, who feared permanent housing would become low-income housing after the war.⁹ This racialized logic permeated the thinking of Puget Sound area leaders, which exacerbated tensions as more and more African Americans arrived in the area for war production jobs.¹⁰

The proximity of the Tri-Cities to the Manhattan Project's Hanford site completely changed life there. The combined population of the three cities grew from 6,000 in 1940 to more than 40,000 a few years later.¹¹ Workers at the facility were sworn to absolute secrecy, with recruiters disallowing candidates from the area. Local farmers grew angry with the use of eminent domain to take their fields without any explanation. Hanford also lay within the ancestral homelands of the Nez Perce, Umatilla, Wanapum, and Yakama Tribes, who found themselves permanently excluded from the land.

Chicano/as and Mexican Nationals contributed mightily to the Washington home front. Mexican Nationals were given visas through the new *bracero* program, while Chicano/as were recruited, mostly from the Southwest.¹² Washington's agricultural producers found themselves in a double bind: demand was up thanks to war mobilization, but workers were largely lured away by better-paying industrial

⁶ Taylor, "Swing the Door Wide...", 2.

⁷ Warren, XVII.

⁸ Brain Gerard Casserly, *Securing the Sound: The Evolution of Civilian-Military Relations in the Puget Sound area, 1891-1984*, University of Washington Dissertation, ProQuest Dissertations, 236.

⁹ Howard A Droker, "Seattle Race Relations During the Second World War," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, Vol 67 No 4 (Oct 1976), 165.

¹⁰ Casserly, 236.

¹¹ Warren, 53.

¹² Erasmo Gamboa, "Mexican Migration into Washington State: A History, 1940-1950," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* Vol 72 No 3 (July 1981), 2.

manufacturing jobs. The hop, asparagus, and sugar beet industries saw the *bracero* program as an answer to their labor shortage prayers.¹³

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

Seattle had a deep history of racial conflict and violence toward its sizeable population of Asian Americans. Responses to Pearl Harbor and the war were heavily influenced by this racial context. A letter from the Washington State Planning Council to the Secretary of the Navy, written before the war, asked for naval support in seizing all fishing boats owned by “American-born Japanese.” After the Japanese incarceration process had begun, testimony from a Congressional committee spoke to the mindset of those involved. When asked about locating Japanese Americans inland within Washington, Governor Arthur Langlie replied, “Well, there isn’t any question but what the sentiment favors *not* locating them in the inland areas...”¹⁴

Seattle also struggled to accept the African American population that migrated for work. The Committee for Defense of Negro Labor’s Right to Work at Boeing Airplane Company, a coalition of black churches, clubs, and political groups, fought against discriminatory hiring and promotion practices. They won admittance onto the Boeing assembly lines, but skilled and managerial work remained overwhelmingly white. African Americans continued to push for fair treatment, and by February 1944 Mayor William Devin had created the Mayor’s Civic Unity Committee, to address the concerns of the black community with regard to housing availability, workplace opportunity, and racism.¹⁵

Discrimination and racism earned the Tri-Cities the nickname “the Birmingham of Washington.” The pre-war African American population in this agricultural community was miniscule, but 15,000 black people moved to the Tri-Cities between 1943 and 1945 to work at the Hanford facility. The workplace was strictly segregated. Early fights over segregated employee buses to and from Pasco drew the attention of the NAACP. Despite some wins, durable progress on racial equity was slow. One scholar explains, “the struggles to establish a permanent civil rights organization in the Tri-Cities reflected both the mobility of the black population and the strength of the local system of segregation.” Later generations of Washington’s African Americans looked to the Hanford workers for inspiration when devising strategy in the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁶

Life on the Home Front

The urban landscape of Seattle bore witness to wartime patriotism. A group of ‘leading citizens’ formed the Victory Square Committee to create a downtown public space for war bond rallies that featured the biggest celebrities of the day: Bing Crosby, Betty Grable, Lana Turner, and Bob Hope. The Square was also used to honor Seattle’s war casualties. The Secretary of the Navy addressed a large crowd from Victory Square in 1942, declaring that “no city has a greater role to play in the war than Seattle.”¹⁷

Fort Lewis, which housed over 50,000 soldiers south of Tacoma, included a groundbreaking Maternity Care Project to address the housing crisis. The care included prenatal care, physician-supervised

¹³ Josue Quezada Estrada, *Texas Mexican Diaspora to Washington State: Recruitment, Migration, and Community, 1940-1960*, Washington State University Thesis, May 2007, 31.

¹⁴ *Journeys to the Past - Historical Documents of Washington, 1854-1944 Documents*, Document 2 and 5

¹⁵ Droker, 163, 171.

¹⁶ Robert Bauman, “Jim Crow in the Tri-Cities, 1943-1950,” *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* Vol 96 No 3 (Summer 2005), 124-25, 130, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40491852>.

¹⁷ Robert Spalding, *Monumental Seattle* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 2018), 99-100.

hospital delivery, and postpartum support. Progressive for the time, the program also provisioned for the care of Black women. Best-practices from the project were broadcast to other facilities experiencing acute health-care needs following war mobilization.¹⁸

After the War

Conflict erupted when Japanese Americans began returning home post-incarceration, with a particularly virulent push from produce dealers arguing against Japanese American reintegration.¹⁹ Beginning in 1982, a four year campaign fought for restitution for the 72 Nisei who were fired from their jobs in Seattle Public Schools.²⁰ The success of this campaign helped inspire passage of the federal Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which prompted a presidential apology and paid reparations to survivors.

World War II forever changed Washington's environment. Timberland suffered under the burden of excessive demand, including the destruction of thousands of acres of accessible young forest growth. Hanford plant operators expelled radioactive byproducts from plutonium production into the local atmosphere and waterways. The people unknowingly exposed to these radioactive toxins identify today as "Downwinders," which include former Hanford workers, Native American communities, and farmers. Collectively, they have experienced cancers, thyroid disease, infertility and sterility. Downwinder activists, alongside investigative journalists, helped expose government secrecy around the contamination starting in the 1980s.²¹

Places of World War II History

- **Manhattan Project at Hanford, National Historical Park:** The park encompasses many historic facilities, including the B-Reactor (the first full-scale nuclear reactor ever constructed) and many sites where workers lived in the Tri-Cities, now a designated American World War II Heritage City.
- **Puget Sound Naval Shipyard:** The principal repair establishment for battle-damaged battleships and aircraft carriers as well as smaller warships of the Pacific Fleet during World War II, including 5 of the 8 battleships bombed at Pearl Harbor.
- **The Boeing Company:** This huge, still active, military industrial complex was producing B-17s (the backbone of the Army Air Forces) at a rate of 362 planes a month by 1944.
- **Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial:** An outdoor memorial honoring the first Japanese Americans to be forcibly removed from their community and incarcerated during WWII. In 2008, the memorial was designated a National Historic Site.

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¹⁸ Nena J. Powell, "The Fort Lewis Maternity Care Project," *Family and Community Health*, Vol 37 No 3 (July 2014), 179, 182, 184.

¹⁹ Droker, 173.

²⁰ Louis Fiset, "Redress for Nisei Public Employees in Washington State after World War II" *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* Vol 88 No 1 (Winter 1996/1997).

²¹ "Downwinders," Manhattan Project National Historical Park, National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/mapr/learn/historyculture/downwinders.htm>.