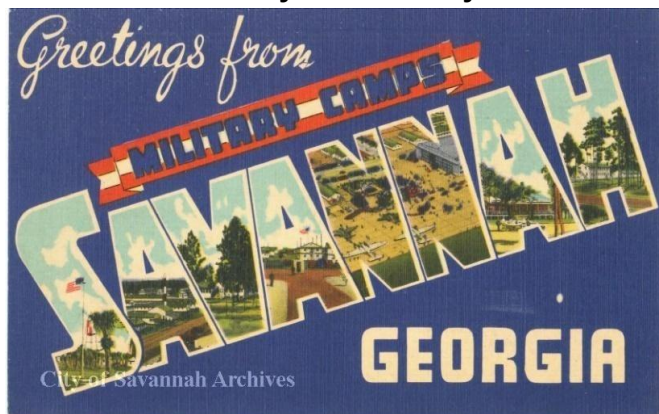


Georgia and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

World War II initiated a series of industrial and social changes that swept through the Peach State. Georgians came to know wartime air and watercrafts inside and out, as they built 668 B-29 Superfortresses and launched 173 Liberty Ships from the state's two Marine Corps shipyards at Savannah and Brunswick. These manufacturing sites included unprecedented numbers of women and Black laborers, who experienced discrimination on a homefront steeped in Jim Crow conditions.

Mobilization: Military and Industry



The postcard, postmarked May 5, 1943, depicts scenes from Savannah's military presence within the letters. (Photo courtesy of the City of Savannah Municipal Archives).

POW "base camps" housing approximately 1,000 men each. By the war's end, the state also hosted thirty-seven smaller "branch camps," containing up to 750 prisoners each."³

While 320,000 of Georgia's men left for battle, thousands of servicemen from other states came to Georgia for training at numerous military installations. In Columbus, Fort Benning became the largest infantry training center in the country and included the "Nickle Boys," the first all-Black paratrooper battalion.¹ In Augusta, the Medical College of Georgia was selected to help produce much-needed M.D.s for the armed forces and welcomed the Navy's V-12 Program for officer education, along with an Army Specialized Training Program.² Georgia also hosted thousands

of German and Italian prisoners of war with five

Georgia's coastal cities of Savannah and Brunswick were home to two major warship plants. Tasked with producing Liberty Ships for the U.S. Marine Corps, the Savannah facility, built in 1941, employed 50,000 workers from 1941-45 and produced eighty-eight fighting ships. Among the country's five six-slip shipyards, Brunswick's was the most productive, producing eighty-five standard EC2-S-C1 Liberty ships from the time it opened in 1942 to the war's end.⁴ The task of monitoring domestic ship and U-Boat traffic along the coastline fell to the Coast Guard stations, like that at St. Simons Island. When a U-Boat torpedoed two U.S. merchant ships near the station on April 8, 1942, killing 22, the Coast Guard mobilized a rescue mission. While the *SS Oklahoma* sank, the *Esso Baton Rouge* was brought to Brunswick and given temporary repairs.⁵

In 1942, Marietta was selected as the site for Bell Aircraft to produce B-29 planes for the U.S. Armed Forces. At its peak, the \$45,000,000 war plant sustained upwards of twenty-five thousand employees. Because so many jobs required specialized skills, the Washington Aircraft School was established in

¹ ["The 555th Parachute Infantry Company 'Triple Nickles',"](#) National Museum of the United States Army.

² Phinzy Spalding, *The History of the Medical College of Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 183.

³ Kathryn Coker and Jason Wetzel, *Georgia POW Camps in World War II* (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2019), 18, 20.

⁴ Ashley Veasey, "Liberty Shipyards: The Role of Savannah and Brunswick in the Allied Victory, 1941- 1945," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 92, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 160-161, 177.

⁵ ["History-Coast Guard Station,"](#) *Coastal Georgia Historical Society*.

nearby Atlanta, offering students 150 hours of aircraft sheet metal work, 35 hours of assembly guidance, ten hours of inspection training, and other relevant experience.⁶

The military industrial complex required more than ships and planes. It also needed protein, which Georgia's Upcountry supplied. In historian Monica Gisolfi's summation, "Before the war, poultry products in Hall County, the center of Georgia's poultry industry, were valued at roughly \$120,000, some 14 percent of all farm products sold from the county that year. Ten years later, poultry products in Hall County were valued at nearly \$6 million, representing 86 percent of all the county's farm produce."⁷

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

The sudden growth in industry, coupled with the demographic effects of the draft, led to many employers hiring outside the usual labor pools. Many African Americans, women, children, and elderly Georgians entered the poultry labor force, leaving behind the once-dominant cotton industry.⁸ The Bell Bomber Plant hired 2,500 Black workers, with 800 employed in skilled jobs at drill presses, saws and riveters, and heat-treating and metal-shaping machinery.⁹ Some industries used POW labor from Camp Gordon, including local peanut farms, hospitals, saw mills, and the Augusta Arsenal.¹⁰

Perhaps Georgia's women workers made the most gains during WWII. Some 3,500 women worked on Liberty Ships at Savannah, while another thousand worked the shipyard at Brunswick. Although many filled secretarial roles, some trained as welders, burners, tool room keepers, ship fitters, and mold loftsman.¹¹ Thirty-seven percent of the workforce at Bell Aircraft was women.¹² Georgia was also famous for sending women into wartime aircraft. "Georgia's First Lady of Flight," Hazel Jane Raines of Waynesboro, led the first cohort of women pilots overseas and carried out numerous supply missions on the homefront with the Women Airforce Service Pilots.¹³

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

Across industries and military installations, Jim Crow conditions shaped Georgians' homefront experiences. Unlike white farmers, Black farmers entering the poultry industry found minimal assistance from the government. This systematic discrimination, coupled with the fact that 95 percent were tenant farmers or sharecroppers, meant Black farmers did not benefit from the growth of this sector of the economy.¹⁴ While many Black workers at Marietta's Bell Bomber Plant performed skilled tasks, they did so while segregated from white workers. While Black workers at Brunswick successfully unionized and gained some skilled positions, they faced stiff opposition in the Savannah shipyards.¹⁵

⁶ Madrid Boyd Turner, *A Study of One Hundred Skilled Negro Workers at Bell Aircraft Corporation and the Problems Encountered in Adapting to a Peacetime Economy*, Master's thesis, Atlanta University (1946), 1-2, 30-31.

⁷ Monica Gisolfi, *The Takeover: Chicken Farming and the Roots of American Agribusiness* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 23-24.

⁸ Gisolfi, *The Takeover*, 25-27.

⁹ Turner, *A Study of One Hundred Skilled Negro Workers*, 1-4.

¹⁰ Kathryn Coker, "World War II Prisoners of War In Georgia: German Memories of Camp Gordon, 1943- 1945," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 849-850.

¹¹ Veasey, "Liberty Ships," 175-6.

¹² Thomas A. Scott, "[Bell Bomber](#)," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*.

¹³ Paul Stephen Hudson, "Hazel Jane Raines (1916–1956) Georgia's First Woman Pilot and Her 'Band of Sisters' during World War II," in *Georgia Women: Their Lives and Times*, Vol. 2, ed. Ann Short Chirhart and Kathleen Ann Clark (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 260.

¹⁴ Gisolfi, *The Takeover*, 32-33.

¹⁵ Scott, "Bell Bomber." Edward A. Hatfield, "[World War II in Georgia](#)," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*.

The military also remained segregated, and in 1941, Fort Benning was the site of two extreme acts of racial violence against Black soldiers: the lynching of Felix Hall and the murder of Albert King by a white military policeman.¹⁶ Black Georgians responded to systemic discrimination and racial violence by organizing a legal challenge to voter suppression. Led by Thomas Brewer and Primus King, they successfully overturned in *King v. Chapman et al.* (M.D. Ga. 1945) the Democratic Party's ruling that only white men could vote in the Democratic primary.¹⁷

Life on the Home Front

Despite racial strife on the home front, Georgians came together to support the war effort in myriad ways. At the University of Georgia, cadets created their own Victory Gardens on a 28-acre section of campus.¹⁸ In the shipyards, Georgia patriots invested over \$11 million of their paychecks in bonds to help support the war. Similarly, seven bond drives helped to fund Georgia's other major wartime export: the construction of five B-29 bombers.¹⁹ Savannah was ranked as one of the top 30 cities nationwide in scrap collection. A newspaper article from late 1942 noted, "Savannah and Chatham County threw a teeth-rattling challenge at Atlanta yesterday with the announcement that its scrap drive had netted 18,000,000 – yes, eighteen million—pounds of old metal, rubber and rags in the scrap drive."²⁰

After the War

Like most states, WWII profoundly impacted Georgia, through industrial growth, movement from rural to urban areas, and expanding roles for women. The rapid growth of the poultry industry left its mark, as "broiler" chickens are Georgia's most valuable agricultural export today.²¹ Medical studies have shown the toll of homefront sacrifices, as the state's shipyard workers experienced higher levels of lung cancer than their peers.²² As a whole, the Jim Crow South had little appreciation for the skills gained by Black Americans during the war. Despite the success of *King v. Chapman et al.*, racist attitudes and violence continued in the late 1940s and into the 50s, forcing the newly skilled Black workforce to return to menial jobs, migrate, or protest, galvanizing the Civil Rights Movement in the process.

Places of World War II History

- **Savannah and Chatham County:** Georgia's designated World War II Heritage City was known for the Savannah Shipyard, Hunter Army Airfield, the Savannah Quartermaster Depot, and enthusiastic civilian volunteerism.
- **Bell Bomber:** At its peak, Marietta's Bell Aircraft plant employed 28,000 Georgians to build B-29 bombers. Notably, their workforce was highly unionized, diverse, and segregated.

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

¹⁶ Alexa Mills, "[Army to Memorialize Black Soldier Lynched on Georgia Base 80 Years Ago: Pvt. Felix Hall's Killers Were Never Brought to Justice](#)," *Bunk History* via *Washington Post* (April 1, 2021). Charles C. Bolton, "[The US South: A deadly front during World War II](#)," *OUPBlog* (April 18, 2024).

¹⁷ Stephen Tuck, "[Civil Rights Movement](#)," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*.

¹⁸ F.N. Boney and Gary L. Doster, "A University Goes to War: The Navy at the University of Georgia during World War II," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (Spring 1992):125.

¹⁹ Veasey, "Liberty Ships," 169, 175-6.

²⁰ *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 17, 1942, p. 4.

²¹ "[About Georgia Agriculture](#)," Georgia Farm Bureau website.

²² Blot, William J., et al., "Lung Cancer after Employment in Shipyards during World War II," *The New England Journal of Medicine* 299, no. 12 (September 21, 1978).