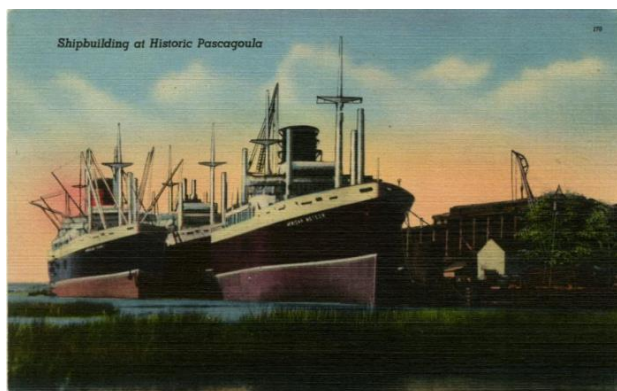


Mississippi and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

After enthusiastic campaigning from politicians and business leaders, Mississippi became the home to numerous military installations and defense-related industries. Farmers, meanwhile, relied on prisoners of war to cultivate their prized crop, cotton, in the face of labor shortages. WWII also fundamentally altered race relations in the Magnolia State. Black men, both locals and soldiers arriving from across the U.S., encountered Jim Crow conditions and agitated for change.



Shipbuilding at Historic Pascagoula (1950). Credit: Mississippi Department of Archives and History

Mobilization: Military and Industry

The pre-war population of Mississippi was more than 80% rural, among the most rural in the country. In the 1940s, however, most rural counties logged double-digit population declines, while urban centers and towns that gained war industries grew dramatically. The population of the sleepy town of Pascagoula, for example, exploded by 850% during the war. The Ingalls Shipbuilding Corporation, located in Pascagoula, was the leading industrial employer in Mississippi during WWII. Historian John R. Skates describes how efficient shipbuilding techniques helped

the Ingalls Shipyard become one of the foremost wartime shipbuilders: "The Ingalls yard pioneered in replacing the slower, costlier riveting construction with welding. The C-3's produced at Pascagoula soon became the workhorse of the United States merchant fleet, and of the 120 produced during the war, 70 were launched at Ingalls." The factory expanded rapidly during the war to meet the demand. In 1940, Ingalls employed 3,000 men and by the peak of their wartime production, the company employed 12,000 men and women.¹

Mississippi also had two ordnance plants. The Gulf Ordnance Plant in Prairie cost \$25 million to build and "included over three hundred buildings spread over 6,200 acres." The plant in Flora, named Brecon Bag Loading Plant but called simply the Mississippi Ordnance Plant, cost \$15 million to build and was designed to make smokeless powder bags. By the war's end it had produced 959,281 howitzer bags. The plant more than doubled the population of the town of Flora, which had 500 residents in 1942, bringing untold social disruption to the small hamlet.²

The two most prominent military installations in Mississippi during the war were Keesler Army Airfield in Biloxi and Camp Shelby in Hattiesburg. At its peak, Keesler had a military population of 69,000, making it one of the largest airbases in the world, and included a technical training school specializing in maintenance of B-24 Liberator heavy bombers. In 1943, more than 7,000 Tuskegee Airmen did basic training at Keesler. Overall, Keesler trained 141,000 mechanics and 336,000 basic training students.³ Camp Shelby spanned over 300,000 acres. The camp was one of the major training locations for the U.S. military, owing in part to its temperate climate. Camp Shelby's most famous trainees were the

¹ John Ray Skates, Jr., "World War II and Its Effects," Richard Aubrey McLemore, ed., *A History of Mississippi 2* (Jackson: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973), 123.

² Kevin Dougherty, *Weapons of Mississippi* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2010), 145, 151-52.

³ Skates, "World War II and Its Effects," 121-22. "[History of Keesler Air Force Base](#)," Keesler Air Force Base.

members of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, an all-Japanese American Army unit, arguably the most decorated unit in U.S. military history. Camp Shelby was also the home to a large hospital and a prisoner of war camp, housing 5,300 German prisoners from the infamous German Afrika Korps.⁴

Before the war, agriculture was Mississippi's most important economic sector. Although thousands of farmers and sharecroppers enlisted in the military, the War Manpower Commission identified many of Mississippi's farming regions as having a surplus of labor that could be used for the war effort. Plantation owners resisted this classification, fearing potential labor shortages and alterations to the race relations that underlaid sharecropping. Their concerns were valid, as some historians see WWII as the "death knell" of sharecropping. Mississippi's farm population shrunk by 25% overall during the war, and the number of tenant farmers decreased from 192,819 to 159,255.⁵ Mississippi farms were also generally not mechanized before the war and failed to increase mechanization during the war. This was due to the scarcity of equipment but also the relative poverty of the state compared to other regions.

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

Women workers experienced the largest changes on the home front, as they entered areas of employment normally reserved for men. Women played an important role at the Ingalls Shipyards, becoming expert welders to make up for the declining male workforce. In 1943, the American Women's Welding Championship was held at Ingalls, with an Ingalls employee, Vera Anderson, taking home the top prize.⁶ At Keesler, women led training at the airfield when male instructors were in short supply.

Prisoners of war also became an important labor source during the rapid mobilization of war. In addition to Camp Shelby, Camp Clinton hosted some of the highest-ranking German officers among their 3,400 prisoners. Camp McCain housed as many as 7,700 prisoners and Camp Como held 3,800 Italian prisoners. In 1944 these four main POW camps set up fifteen branch camps, smaller facilities in the countryside, where POWs were closer to work opportunities. Five of these camps were in the upland pine forests, where the prisoners worked in forestry operations, and ten camps were in the swampy lowlands, where German POWs labored in the cotton fields.⁷

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

As a state steeped in Jim Crow, Black Americans faced widespread discrimination on the Mississippi home front. White managers at Ingalls Shipyard believed Black men and women, who made up 12% of Ingalls' wartime workforce, were unsuitable for technical jobs and relegated them to menial labor. The Mississippi Ordnance Plant only employed Black men as janitors, yard workers, and maintenance men, while Black women were only employed as maids and cafeteria workers. A 1942 hearing at the Fair Employment Practice Committee resulted in the government demanding the plant change its practices.⁸

Black soldiers also faced discrimination that highlighted the intense situation that Black service members faced while stationed in Mississippi. At Camp Shelby, historian Susan Behel explains, "The soldiers were assigned janitorial and maintenance jobs instead of receiving adequate basic training for battle." Camp Van Dorn in Centreville, Mississippi, was the location of racially motivated attacks on

⁴ John Ray Skates, "[World War II](#)," *The Mississippi Encyclopedia* (2018).

⁵ Nan Woodruff, "Pick or Fight: The Emergency Farm Labor Program in the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas during World War II," *Agricultural History* 64, no. 2 (Spring 1990). Skates, "World War II and Its Effects," 127-28.

⁶ Skates, "World War II and Its Effects," 123.

⁷ Skates, "[World War II](#)."

⁸ Dougherty, *Weapons of Mississippi*, 151-52.

Black soldiers who resisted legal segregation in Mississippi when they arrived at camp. The soldiers of the all-Black 364th regiment entered whites-only spaces and shopped at the whites-only Post Exchange.⁹ This form of protest upset local law enforcement, and on May 30, 1943, the sheriff shot and killed Private William Walker, a Black soldier, when he was confronted about his presence near the camp entrance. After the killing, the men of the 364th staged an uprising. Shortly afterward, the regiment was sent to the Aleutian Islands, performing garrison duty until the war ended.¹⁰

Japanese American soldiers also experienced significant racism while stationed in Mississippi. In 1942, the 100th Regiment, composed of Japanese American soldiers, was selected for a top-secret training mission. The soldiers were sent to Cat Island in the Mississippi Sound and were used as human targets when the Army attempted to train dogs to detect the scent of people with Japanese ancestry. The soldiers, despite protests, were also ordered to abuse the dogs to create negative associations with Japanese men. The tracking experiment failed because human scent depends on diet, not ancestry.¹¹

Life on the Home Front

Across the state, Mississippians from all backgrounds rallied to support the war effort through war fund drives, sewing circles, salvage material programs, victory gardens, and the building of the first recreational center in the country for soldiers in Pascagoula. Mississippians also eagerly volunteered their time in civilian defense efforts, including air raid wardens, road repair units, and decontamination squads. Segregation on the Mississippi home front, however, also extended to leisure activities. While the Black community in Hattiesburg established the East Sixth Street USO, the USO for white soldiers was more conveniently located on the base at Camp Shelby and with greater resources.¹²

After the War

World War II fundamentally altered Mississippi, both through industry and military installations. By 1950, due to the economic dislocations of the home front years, attractive employment opportunities that beckoned from afar, and the disruption of the sharecropping system, the total statewide population shrunk half a percent over the decade. Although the segregation and discrimination experienced during WWII served as a significant impetus for the Black freedom struggle, it took nearly two full decades of continued fighting before Black Mississippians began to chalk up significant victories at home.

Places of World War II History

- Pascagoula: As Mississippi's designated World War II Heritage City, the sleepy fishing and boatbuilding town of 4,000 rapidly became a modern industrial powerhouse of 38,000 led by the Ingalls Shipbuilding Corporation and strong civilian defense and volunteer efforts.
- Camp Shelby: The 300,000-acre training camp included the all-Japanese American 442nd regiment as trainees as well as a large POW camp. Today, it is home to the Mississippi Armed Forces Museum, which tells the story of military activity across the state.

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⁹ Sandra K. Behel, "The Mississippi Home Front during World War II: Tradition and Change," PhD diss., (Ann Arbor: U.M.I., 1989), 67, 99.

¹⁰ Lucius M. Lampton, [Camp Van Dorn](#), The Mississippi Encyclopedia (2017).

¹¹ "[Japanese Americans on Cat Island](#)," Gulf Islands National Seashore, National Park Service.

¹² Daniels, "Military Pastimes," 63, 141.