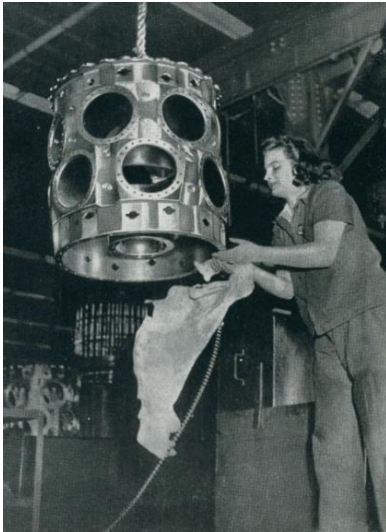


New York and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

World War II helped catapult New York City into its modern status as a global capital. During these years, it surged past London as the world's largest city, with 7.5 million residents by 1940. New York City's significance was tied to its strategic harbor, manufacturing power, and the Brooklyn Navy Yard. New York State as a whole, however, played a pivotal role in defense production and aviation. By war's end, the Empire State led the nation in the total amount of federal war contracts per state, receiving \$21.5 billion.



Woman worker at Otis Elevator Company in Yonkers, New York polishing surfaces. Credit: Yonkers Public Library

Mobilization: Military and Industry

In the days before war broke out, the Port of New York was the busiest in the world, handling 40% of the nation's imports and exports.¹ New York Harbor featured 650 miles of developed shoreline, 1,800 docks, piers, and wharves, and 39 shipyards. 2.6 million men departed the port, stopping first at either Camp Shanks or Camp Kilmer for equipment.² The Brooklyn Army Supply Base loaded 38 million tons of supplies onto ships, moving Sherman tanks and other equipment onto cargo ships with massive cranes. The port grew into a network of ten terminals that employed 55,000 men and women across the harbor.³

Five defensive forts protected the mouth of the harbor: Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, Fort Wadsworth on Staten Island, Forts Totten and Tilden in Queens, and Fort Hancock in New Jersey. The most important feature of the harbor, though, was the titanic Brooklyn Navy Yard. The yard built battleships and aircraft carriers and became "the free world's naval repair shop, patching up more than five thousand bombed and torpedoed ships."⁴ By V-J day, the Brooklyn Yard was the largest in the world, with 75,000 expert builders all working in concert. They won six Army-Navy "E" Flags. Many associated shops also developed around the yard. Robins Dry Dock & Repair was where Raymond Davidson drove 3,228 rivets in one seven-hour shift, a world record.⁵

Numerous training centers called New York City home during the war. The *Prairie State*, a ship moored alongside Columbia University, was repurposed as a V-7 training center that graduated 23,550 men, representing 6% of all naval officers that served in the U.S. Navy. The Bronx campus of Hunter College trained 81,000 WAVES, 3,200 women Marines and 1,800 Coast Guard SPARs. There was also a Coast Guard Training Center at Manhattan Beach, which included the first cohort of Black Coast Guardsmen.⁶

¹ John Strausbaugh, *Victory City: A History of New York and New Yorkers During World War II* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2018), 3.

² Richard Goldstein, *Helluva Town: The Story of New York City During World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 55-56.

³ "[Brooklyn Army Supply Base... Photographs and Written Historical and Descriptive Data](#)," National Park Service, Historic American Engineering Review, 11. Marilyn N. Harper, [World War II and the American Home Front: A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study](#), National Park Service (2007), 148.

⁴ Lorraine B. Diehl, *Over Here!: New York City During World War II* (New York: Smithsonian Books, 2010), 171.

⁵ Goldstein, *Helluva Town*, 66, 71.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 114, 118.

The city's culture-making industries also supported the war effort. Astoria Studios in Queens produced short films and propagandistic newsreels to boost morale during the war. Bought in 1942 by the Army, the Studios was turned over to the Signal Corps and produced important training films such as Frank Capra's *Why We Fight*. An output of 300 films a year made Astoria one of the largest producers of film anywhere in the world.⁷ The studio also trained GIs who used still and motion cameras in various theaters of war. On Broadway, the production of Irving Berlin's *This is the Army* raised nearly \$10 million and was seen by 2.5 million soldiers and civilians.⁸ Meanwhile, comic book publishers sold titles with Captain America, Wonder Woman, and other heroic Americans battling Nazis and other foes.⁹

Just north of the city, almost 75 companies in Yonkers contributed to the war effort. Many of these companies converted from manufacturing their regular products to war production, revealing the diversity and breadth of the state's manufacturing base. Much further north, General Electric in Schenectady held a monopoly on the production of radio equipment and radar systems and was awarded nearly 20% of all war contracts in the state. To the west, the Buffalo and Niagara regions stood at the center of the state's aircraft production. The Curtiss-Wright Corporation had a staggering 85,000 employees by 1945 and produced 15,000 P-40 fighters.¹⁰ In the Finger Lakes region, the War Department established the Seneca Army Depot in 1941 as part of a larger effort to relocate critical facilities and supplies away from the Atlantic Coast. Local residents were given three days' notice to leave their farms, despite roots that stretched back generations. Ten thousand workers labored to get the facility up and running, which included 500 'igloos,' domes covered with earth to store munitions.¹¹

In Jefferson County, on farmland a stone's throw from the Canadian Border, Fort Drum became a major facility. The small post, Pine Camp, was overhauled with the purchase of 75,000 acres, displacing 525 families and five villages. Construction contractors moved in, and with 10 months and \$20 million, they built 240 barracks, 84 mess halls, 86 storehouses, 58 warehouses, 27 officers' quarters, 22 headquarters buildings, and 99 recreational buildings as well as guardhouses and a hospital. Three full divisions trained at Fort Drum, which also housed prisoners of war.¹²

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

For ethnic and racial minorities, the war offered many new work opportunities. New state antidiscrimination policies reduced, although did not eliminate, workplace barriers. Much of the state's Haudenosaunee population left reservations for manufacturing centers, turning Rochester into a center of Iroquois culture and increasing Native visibility in American culture.¹³ Women, however, experienced the greatest changes overall, as they moved into lines of work normally dominated by men. Women worked on assembly lines in war plants, flew planes for the civil air patrol, delivered mail, drove trucks

⁷ Harper, *World War II and the American Home Front*, 76, 147. "[New York SP Paramount Studios Complex, National Register of History Places Inventory--Nomination Form](#)," National Park Service (1978), 9.

⁸ Goldstein, *Helluva Town*, 151.

⁹ Strausbaugh, *Victory City*, 267.

¹⁰ "[Yonkers, New York](#)," National Park Service. Tod Ottman, "[World War 2, 1939-1945](#)," New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center.

¹¹ Caroline Zogg and Walter Gable, *The Seneca Army Depot: Fighting Wars from the New York Home Front* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2012) 9, 49.

¹² "[History](#)," U.S. Army Fort Drum.

¹³ Laurence M. Hauptman, *The Iroquois Struggle for Survival: World War II to Red Power* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 1-4.

and taxis, helped run the subways, tended bar, operated elevators, and served as lifeguards at the city's beaches during the summer.¹⁴ Women at home served as plane spotters, while teenage girls corresponded with soldiers overseas. In June 1942, the city held an all-female parade, featuring 10,000 marchers in immaculate uniforms. By early 1944, the War Production Board reported, "134,000 women were employed in New York City's 341 major war plants, nearly 28 percent of the workforce."¹⁵

The Brooklyn Navy Yard hired women, but at only half the pay that inexperienced men got. It wasn't until Mother's Day, 1944, that women were allowed to work aboard the ships. At Murray Manufacturing, 1,800 worker roles were 90% female. By 1945, 40% of the state's aviation industries employees were women. Aiding women's work was the statewide program for the Committee on Child Care, which provided childcare services for mothers employed in defense industries starting in 1941. Over 251 centers spread across 42 communities took care of more than 7,000 children daily.¹⁶

Like many other states, New York experienced an agricultural crisis as farm workers were drafted into the military. To save the 1943 harvest, the Federal War Food Administration brought in 3,000 Jamaican laborers to Western New York. These laborers were soon joined by thousands of German and Italian POWs, who also provided vital labor in the fields as well as food processing centers. Some POWs worked at military installations, such as the 260 Italian POWs put to work loading and unloading trucks and railroad cars at the Seneca Army Depot beginning in 1944.

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

African Americans remained frustrated at the persistence of discrimination, segregation, and racism that they faced on the home front. 18,000 African Americans held a rally at Madison Square Garden in June 1942 to demand equal opportunities in the military. Tensions boiled over during the Harlem Riot of 1943. When a white police officer shot Robert Bandy, an African American soldier, rumors flew that he had been killed (he was wounded but survived). The two-day outbreak of violence that followed left six dead, hundreds injured, 600 under arrest, and vandalism and property damage against white-owned businesses in Harlem. Mayor La Guardia brought in several thousand police officers and volunteers to regain control of the streets, with city workers cleaning up and repairing buildings, and distributing food and goods.

For New York's large, diverse, and flourishing Jewish population, the streets of New York City became a place where rising antisemitic rhetoric was translated into violent action. The German American Bund, the Silver Shirts, and the Christian Front all had a strong presence in New York. A 1940 investigation revealed that 407 members of the NYC Police Department were members of the Christian Front.¹⁷ After a long period of suppressing rumors of the Holocaust, President Roosevelt agreed to establish one refugee camp for Jews fleeing Europe. Established at Fort Ontario in Oswego in 1944, the camp housed almost one thousand European refugees, most of whom were Jewish. The shelter remained open until President Truman ordered the refugees to receive permanent visas to stay in 1946.¹⁸

¹⁴ Diehl, *Over Here!*, 169-170.

¹⁵ Goldstein, *Helluva Town*, 71.

¹⁶ Goldstein, *Helluva Town*, 69. Ottman, "World War 2, 1939-1945."

¹⁷ Clarence Taylor, *To Be a Good American: The New York City Teachers Union and Race during the Second World War* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 15.

¹⁸ Ella Wagner, "[Fort Ontario](#)," National Park Service.

Life on the Home Front

Early in the war, getting New Yorkers to fall in line with blackout orders proved difficult in the city that never sleeps. The fact that over three million military personnel passed through New York City did not help.¹⁹ Times Square became a recreational haven for servicemen and civilians alike. The nightclubs and bars of Copacabana and the Latin Quarter stood at the center of nightlife, and the city's bars and posh hotels hosted a vibrant, albeit segregated, gay scene. New Yorkers channeled their patriotic zeal through the "New York at War Parade" on June 13th, 1942. Half a million marchers headed up Fifth Ave past 2.5 million spectators. The Stage Door Canteen became a home front favorite, facilitating entertainment for troops seven nights a week and sold \$7 million in war bonds.²⁰

As the war raged on, ration books were distributed to New York City residents and posters went up at every butcher's shop and grocery store explaining rationing regulations. Mayor La Guardia called for a 'Meatless Tuesday,' and restaurants responded with innovations, such as the "nut" burger. Victory gardens sprung up in public parks and playgrounds in response to rationing. A Rockefeller garden was worked by 600 children in subdivided plots, who pulled out 36,000 radishes, 9,500 beets, 7,200 carrots, and 10,000 onions. Strict goals for producing scrap material sometimes came at the cost of the city's history, as even cannonballs dating from the Civil War went into the scrap pile.²¹

After the War

While the completion of the United Nations headquarters in New York City in 1950 best captures how the war catapulted the state into a position of world leadership, there have been many lasting legacies. The environmental impact of the war is still felt today, especially in upstate New York in the form of munitions and nuclear contaminants. Women were hit the hardest by massive postwar layoffs in industrial plants. Their employment numbers did not reach wartime levels again until the 1970s. While racial discrimination continued in many forms, New York became the first state to pass fair employment practice laws that inspired the 1964 Civil Rights Act.²² The war also significantly impacted New York City's Jewish population. Many Jewish residents moved to the suburbs with the help of the GI Bill, while the city simultaneously became a sanctuary for thousands of Holocaust survivors.

Places of World War II History

- **Yonkers:** Just north of New York City, the state's designated World War II Heritage City showcased an impressive breadth and diversity of manufacturing power. Almost 75 companies, both big and small, worked to support the war effort.
- **Brooklyn Navy Yard:** This massive shipyard employed over 70,000 workers, sent troops and supplies to fronts across the globe, repaired more than 5,000 ships, and built aircraft carriers and iconic battleships, including the USS *Missouri*.

By Scott Morris, 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.

¹⁹ Aaron Hiltner, *Taking Leave, Taking Liberties: American Troops on the World War II Home Front* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 3.

²⁰ Diehl, *Over Here!*, 184. Allan Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 114-16. Goldstein, *Helluva Town*, 140.

²¹ Diehl, *Over Here!*, 152, 156. 165.

²² Ottman, "World War 2, 1939-1945."