

Delaware and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

Delaware, “The First State,” punched above its weight in the battle of home front production. Delaware has long been considered a strategically important place, protecting the southern shores of the Delaware Bay. Most of the industry in Delaware was concentrated in the north around Wilmington, which was considered the “Chemical Capital of the World,” thanks to the companies and industries based there. During the war shipbuilding eclipsed chemicals to become the state’s largest industry, while agriculture flourished in the south and interior.

Mobilization: Military and Industry

As war approached, the Delaware Bay was seen as a weak point in coastal defenses, a potential entry point into the so-called ‘vital triangle,’ a core of industrial and military activity stretching between Norfolk, Pittsburgh, and New York City. By 1940 construction was buzzing up and down Delaware’s coastline. Costing \$24 million, Fort Miles was one of the most expensive installations in the coastal defense network, having been designed to address the strongest forces of the German Navy. Located on Cape Henlopen, it had a dozen large batteries, “including four major caliber weapons that could reach targets from 17 to 25 miles off the coast.”¹

In the north, the local shipbuilding industry churned out small and medium sized craft. Before the war even began, Vinyard Shipbuilding Company received a \$261,000 contract to build two sub-chasers and twelve small vessels for the Navy at their facility outside of Milford. Wilmington’s Dravo Corporation shipyard was one of the largest employers in the state with almost 11,000 workers. Dravo alone launched 187 ships, specializing in Landing Ship Tanks (LSTs) and Landing Ship Mediums (LSMs). Pusey and Jones Corporation, also of Wilmington, received contracts from the War Department to build two hopper dredges, ten cargo vessels, and one shipway.² With contracts totaling more than \$21 million, the American Car and Foundry Company produced 46 Navy landing craft, 412 Higgins landing craft, ten minesweepers, two salvage vessels, four net layers, three wooden barges, 131 chemical warfare barges, and 226 aluminum pontoon boats by war’s end.³

Northern Delaware was also a center for steel production, with the Worth Steel Company (in Claymont, on the Delaware River), Deemer Steel Casting Company (New Castle), American Manganese Steel Division (New Castle), Eastern Malleable Iron Company (Wilmington), and Edge Moor Iron Company (near Wilmington). Plants near Wilmington that had produced leather before the war retooled into the production of vulcanized fiber, with the region eventually producing over 70% of the worldwide supply of



A British minesweeper built by American Car and Foundry Company in Wilmington, Delaware, circa 1943. (Courtesy of the Hagley Museum and Library)

¹ Gary Wray and Lee Jennings, *Fort Miles* (Charleston SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 65.

² William H. Connor, Leon De Valinger, and the Delaware Public Archives Commission, *Delaware’s Role in World War II, 1940-1946*, vol. 1 (Dover, 1955), 19-20.

³ *Delaware’s Role in World War II, 1940-1946*, vol. 2, 183.

this essential product.⁴ Wilmington remained a chemical world leader thanks to work by the DuPont Company, the Hercules Powder Company, Atlas Powder Company, and the Delaware Works of the General Chemical Company.

At the start of the war, the state's three county airports also became three military aviation centers: New Castle County Airport became New Castle Army Air Base (AAB), Kent County Airport became Dover AAB, and Sussex County Airport became Georgetown Naval Aviation Field.⁵ Perhaps the most memorable activity at New Castle was the Crescent Caravan, an airlift that was established in February 1944 that ferried supplies, material, and people from Delaware to India.⁶ Dover AAB became a center for coastal patrols. A new 47,000 square foot hangar, costing a million dollars and completed in 1944, allowed the facility to also host pilots training to fly the P-47 Thunderbolt. After the war, it was revealed that there was a highly secretive group at Dover working on developing airborne rocket technology that proved instrumental in the close of the war and drove aerospace innovation in the years to follow.⁷

While heavy industry dominated the north and coast, agriculture, especially the broiler chicken industry, was king in the south and interior. The war drove chicken prices to new highs, and new technologies, including pesticides, synthetic fertilizer, mechanization, irrigation, and genetically improved varieties, allowed yields to explode.⁸ Delaware farms' cash income went from \$41 million in 1941 to more than \$95 million in 1945. Most crops were high-value crops such as apples, peaches, grapes, strawberries, and sweet potatoes, but the state also produced wheat, corn, hay, and soybeans.⁹

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

With young men drafted off to war or drawn into the industrial economy, labor shortages were a constant headache for Delaware farmers. The Delaware Victory Farm Volunteers tried to make up the gap. During the 1943 harvest, 1,300 boys and girls, most under 16, earned \$21,000 by harvesting over three million pounds of food.¹⁰ Three thousand POWs were also used by farmers to process poultry, manufacture packaging, pick crops, or work in orchards. They were loaned out from branch camps at Georgetown, Leipsic, Lewes, Harrington, Fort Saulsbury, Bethany Beach, and Bridgeville.¹¹

Women, immigrants, and African Americans also filled labor shortages despite traditionally facing barriers. In the shipyards, women filled a variety of roles, including becoming welders. Newcastle AAB served as the headquarters for the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS), who later became the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs). The WAFS ferried a wide range of military aircraft, towed targets for gunners, and generally broke ground for women in aviation. About 150 members of the Women's Army Corps (WAC) also served at the base, where they "were responsible for getting each plane down safely as well as regulating takeoffs and direction of flights. . . the WACs also handled radio and telephone apparatus, including transmitting Morse code."¹²

⁴ *Delaware's Role in World War II, 1940-1946*, vol. 2, 172.

⁵ *Delaware's Role in World War II, 1940-1946*, vol. 1, 54.

⁶ Janet Churchill and Kennard R. Wiggins Jr, *Delaware Aviation* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2014), 32.

⁷ *Delaware's role in World War II, 1940-1946*, vol. 1, 64.

⁸ Ed Kee, *Delaware Farming* (Charleston SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2007), 10.

⁹ *Delaware's Role in World War II, 1940-1946*, vol. 2, 160. Kee, *Delaware Farming*, 51.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹¹ *Delaware's Role in World War II, 1940-1946*, vol. 1, 71.

¹² *Ibid.*, 59.

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

African American women and men faced discrimination in job opportunities and training in Delaware's major war industries. Advocacy groups such as the local branches of the National Urban League and the N.A.A.C.P. fought for equal opportunities. Workplace discrimination extended into wartime housing shortages. African Americans faced barriers to buying or renting homes in certain neighborhoods and were often pushed into poor-quality housing. The Wilmington Housing Authority responded by building segregated public housing developments for African American workers, including Southbridge and Millside, in the south of the city.¹³

Life on the Home Front

The people of Delaware enthusiastically supported the home front war effort. The Delaware Salvage Committee put out calls for rubber, tin, scrap metal, waste paper, and household fats, and by September 1942, 209 collection depots had been set up across the state. The 16.5 pounds per person collected by October put Delaware fourth among 48 states in per capita collection. A rubber collection drive that summer netted 1.6 million pounds of the essential material. An extra key collection drive at a Wilmington junior high school collected 7,000 keys, with one enterprising student bringing in over a thousand. The City of Wilmington contributed 3,500 tons of old trolley rails, removed from 21 miles of streets. The first USO Center in the state was in Wilmington, opened in September 1941. It received over 601,000 visits from service men and women, served 201 Sunday morning breakfasts, and held 491 dances. A USO Club also opened in Dover in early 1943, which became the largest in the state, with over half a million visits in three years of operations.¹⁴

After the War

The war solidified Delaware as a manufacturing powerhouse and laid the foundations for industrial and chemical expansion in the decades after the war. The state continued to reckon with water pollution from these industries for decades. Fort Miles became a top-secret listening post to track Soviet submarines during the Cold War.¹⁵ While the actual city of Wilmington lost 2% of its population during the 1940s, the larger metropolitan area swelled by over 20%, signaling massive suburban growth that continued into the 1950s and 60s and was marked by racial segregation. In agriculture, the southern third of Delaware continued its strong association with poultry into the postwar era. Today there are over 3,000 poultry operations, with 75 million birds growing at any one time.¹⁶

Places of World War II History

- **Wilmington:** Delaware's designated World War II Heritage City was known for its standout shipbuilding industry, including the Dravo Corporation. Also noteworthy was the Newcastle AAB, headquarters of the WAFS, and residents' civic volunteerism.
- **Fort Miles:** Completed in 1941, the expansive Fort Miles became Delaware's Harbor Control Post. It is now a state park and includes a museum.

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¹³ Center for Historic Architecture and Design, [Suburbs & Race: Post-WWII Neighborhoods of New Castle Avenue](#) (Delaware Department of Transportation, June 29, 2023).

¹⁴ *Delaware's Role in World War II, 1940-1946*, vol. 2, 132, 134, 135.

¹⁵ Fort Miles Historical Association, "Historical Perspective."

¹⁶ Kee, *Delaware Farming*, 77.