

Massachusetts and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

After declining during the Great Depression, Massachusetts's industries boomed with productivity during World War II. The Bay State became an industrial and military powerhouse, producing warships at coastal navy yards and ammunition and rifles at Remington Arms and the Springfield Armory. Women entered defense production work in unprecedented numbers, but they faced discrimination in the home front workplace, as did Black and Jewish Americans.

Mobilization: Military and Industry

The Charlestown Navy Yard, also known as the Boston Navy Shipyard, may best exemplify Massachusetts' home front response. In use since 1800, the yard reached its zenith of activity in the war, employing some 50,000 people, launching more than 300 ships, and repairing or overhauling nearly 4,000 vessels between 1939 and 1945.¹ The facility famously launched the *USS Mason*, an escort vessel manned predominantly by African American sailors that paved the way for a desegregated Navy. For its competence and efficiency, the yard earned a Navy "E" award for every year of the war.²



"Stocking Shop Operations, May 17, 1943." Courtesy of the Springfield Armory National Historic Site.

As the local textile industry waned during the early twentieth century, Lowell fell on hard times. High unemployment trends, however, reversed with wartime contracts and the need for cotton in a variety of wartime goods. Lowell saw an increase from 5,500 to 7,000 mill workers in the war's early years. The city's shoe industry grew as well, tripling its labor force (from 600 to 1,800 workers) by 1941, as companies began making soldiers' boots.³ Many Lowell workers, however, joined General Electric and United States Rubber or commuted thirty miles to work at the Charlestown Navy Yard. Most, however, flocked to the biggest game in town: Remington Arms. With 5,000 workers (90 percent from Lowell) on payroll at its peak, Remington churned out .50-caliber armor-piercing bullets.⁴

Springfield was similarly poised for a wartime boost, as the Springfield Armory had been preparing to produce the M1 Garand rifle for seven years before the U.S. entered the war. The .30-06 caliber rifle became standard issue in the U.S. Armed Forces, and the Springfield Armory rose to meet the demand, producing 3.1 million rifles—1,300 per shift—during the war. This was accomplished thanks to a 250% budget increase and mass hirings: between 1941 and 1945 more than 13,000 men and women worked the factory floor. The Armory's staff enjoyed a monthly newsletter, tended an on-site victory garden, and recreated through the company's athletic club.⁵

¹ David Hannigan, "[The Boston Navy Yard during World War II](#)," National Park Service.

² Stephen P. Carlson, *Charlestown Navy Yard: Historic Resource Study*, Vol. 3, Boston National Historical Park, National Park Service (Boston, MA, 2010), 1113.

³ Mark S. Miller, *The Irony of Victory: World War II and Lowell, Massachusetts* (Urbana, 1988), 12, 17.

⁴ Marc S. Miller, "Working Women and World War II," *The New England Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (Mar., 1980): 43-50.

⁵ Allison Crosbie and Rumika Chaudhry, *Cultural Landscape Report for Armory Square: Springfield Armory National Historic Site, Springfield, Massachusetts* (Boston: NPS/Olmstead Center for Landscape Preservation, 2010), 83-84.

With so much coastal activity in Massachusetts, the state's shoreline batteries, like Fort Rodman, were built up during the war. At Mashpee, on Cape Cod, Camp Edwards saw a substantial build-out, enough to accommodate 30,000 guardsmen. In addition to focusing on enemy submarine monitoring, Camp Edwards constructed a mock German village for training exercises. The camp also helped expand Falmouth's Otis Army Airfield, adding to the state's air defenses, which included Fort Devens AAF, Hanscom AFB in Bedford, Westover Air Reserve Base in Chicopee, and the Logan Airport in Boston.⁶

Massachusetts also housed POWs at Camp McKay (Dorchester), Fort Andrews (Boston), and Camp Myles Standish (Taunton). The last of these functioned as a staging area for the Boston Port of Embarkation, one of the nation's ten embarkation ports and the third ranked in terms of men and materiel processed. By September 1943, half a million servicemen had passed through the camp, including British, Australian, and Canadian troops.⁷

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

The most dynamic change for workers during the war years was the inclusion of women in many defense industries. At Charlestown Navy Yard, at least 19% of employees were women (7,700 on the rolls) by 1944, along with seven percent who were Black (2,300 of 32,000 workers). The Lowell mills had a workforce of more than 50 percent women. Similarly, the Atlantic Parachute Company brought on 1,000 women as power stitchers. The percentage of women workers at Springfield Armory peaked at 43%. Remington, however, out did other factories with a staff that was 70% women. While many on the home front celebrated the patriotism of these women workers, "there were persistent rumors that Remington's Lowell production was defective," which was tied to the unjustified perception that women were less capable than men in wartime manufacturing."⁸ Similarly, women were only admitted to Harvard Medical School in 1944 to meet wartime demands for M.D.s after intense debate. One gynecology professor lamented that "the primary function of woman is to bear and raise children, and that the first social duty of woman is to develop and perpetuate the home."⁹

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

As a state known for its historical associations with American patriots, maritime prowess, and abolitionism, controversial events during the war reveal the complex reality of the home front. In 1943, some Irish Catholics, bent toward a markedly antisemitic brand of isolationism promoted by Christian Front radio priest Charles Coughlin, carried out a spate of "small pogroms" against Boston's Jewish population. In spite of daily assaults and acts of vandalism and the outright denunciation by Boston's Catholic officials, the local police not only ignored the attacks, but even appeared to encourage them.¹⁰

Black Americans also faced discrimination on the Massachusetts home front in housing, work, and the military. In 1945, fifty-four Black WACs (Women's Army Corps) stationed at Fort Devens went on strike

⁶ William Gaines, "Coast Artillery Organizational History, 1917-1950 Part I, Coast Artillery Regiments 1-196," *The Coast Defense Journal* 23, Iss. 2 (May 2009), 15. "[Camp Edward History](#)," Massachusetts National Guard.

⁷ Flavio Giovanni Conti and Alan R. Perry, "Italian Prisoners of War in the Boston Area during World War II," *Italian American Review* 9, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 179. William F. Hanna, "Friends and Enemies: Co-Belligerents and Prisoners of War at Camp Myles Standish, Taunton, Massachusetts during World War II," *Bridgewater Review* 33, Iss. 2 (Nov 2014): 8.

⁸ Miller, "Working Women and World War II," 43-50, 53.

⁹ Ilona Phyllis Swarz, "A Historical Investigation of the Impact of World War II on Harvard Medical School--1938-1948" (PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 1983), 115-116.

¹⁰ Stephen H. Norwood, "Marauding Youth and the Christian Front: Antisemitic Violence in Boston and New York During World War II," *American Jewish History* 91, no. 2, (June 2003): 233-234.

because they had been relegated to positions as hospital orderlies rather than medical technicians as promised. Four women refused to back down and were court-martialed. When press coverage of the proceedings went national, charges were dropped, though the women had to resume menial duties. In effect, these Black women were performing the same tasks as the German and Italian POWs housed at Fort Devens, while white women WACs filled skilled nursing positions.¹¹

Life on the Home Front

During the war, Massachusetts faced severe rationing, but residents responded with victory gardens, including one on the Boston Common. In Northampton, the Hampshire Bookshop became a direct counterpoint to the Nazi practice of book burning. In addition to fervently disseminating pro-democratic literature, bookshop manager Marion Dodd held a war bond drive in 1944 that raised \$438,600.¹² Smith College students joined the Women's Land Army and participated in crop care and harvesting, while Mount Holyoke College gained notoriety as a gathering place for famous artists and intellectuals—from Marc Chagall to Hannah Arendt.¹³ Tragedy also struck the state's homefront on November 28, 1942, when a deadly fire engulfed Boston's Cocoanut Grove nightclub. Packed that evening with outbound servicemen and civilians, nearly 500 people were killed. Laxity around building codes and safety regulations contributed, and as a result, enforcement of such rules increased nationwide.¹⁴

After the War

Massachusetts was able to successfully transfer the defense manufacturing boom of the war years, which had temporarily reignited aging manufacturing sectors of the economy, into financial services and high-tech industry. Wartime research at Harvard University and MIT helped drive growth in fields such as telecommunications, electronics, and biomedical technologies. Returning veterans took advantage of educational and housing benefits, which resulted in explosive suburban growth and an educated middle-class of workers. Black veterans faced inequalities when trying to access these benefits, however, and racial tensions in urban centers increased in the postwar period.

Places of World War II History

- **Springfield Armory:** Located in Massachusetts's designated WWII Heritage City, the armory is now a [National Historic Site](#). During the war, 7,500 workers (of which 45% were women) made 160 rifles per hour in three shifts. By war's end 3.1 million M-1 rifles had been manufactured.
- **Charlestown Navy Yard:** Today part of [Boston National Historical Park](#), the Charlestown Navy Yard employed some 50,000 workers who launched 300 ships and repaired nearly 4,000.
- **Lowell:** Now a [National Historical Park](#), Lowell's once vibrant, but now dying, textile mills revived during WWII, while the Remington Arms plant became the largest employer in the city.

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¹¹ Sandra M Bolzenius. *Glory in Their Spirit: How Four Black Women Took On the Army During World War II*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 3.

¹² Barbara Brannon, "The Bookshop as 'An Arsenal of Democracy': Marion Dodd and the Hampshire Bookshop during World War II," *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 92, no. 1 (March 1998): 17-24.

¹³ Christopher Benfey and Karen Remmler, *Artists, Intellectuals, and World War II: The Pontigny Encounters at Mount Holyoke College, 1942-1944* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 3-4.

¹⁴ Stephanie Schorow, *The Cocoanut Grove Fire* (Carlisle, MA: Commonwealth Editions, 2005), vii, 35.