

New Orleans, Louisiana, WWII Heritage City

A series of lessons from the [World War II Heritage Cities Lesson Collection](#)



Figure 1: "Higgins shipyards, New Orleans, Louisiana. Hellcat of Higgins, an experimental PT (patrol-torpedo) type boat." June 1943. Photo by John Vachon, Office of War Information. Credit: Library of Congress.

Introduction

The three lessons, and culminating fourth lesson, support students in developing their understanding of the significance of [New Orleans, Louisiana](#) as a World War II Heritage City. The first lesson examines examples of wartime industries and manufacturing in the city, such as shipbuilding, and connects to women and youth in the workforce. The second lesson teaches about Black and Caribbean American service members who trained and worked at army and naval bases in and near New Orleans. They included Virgin Islands soldiers, who are featured in the lesson. The third lesson describes ways in which women served in the Coast Guard as SPARs in the city. All lessons highlight specific contributions

but connect to larger themes and understandings of the U.S. home front during wartime. A mix of primary and secondary sources is used, along with photos and media.

Lessons (with World War II home front topics):

The first three lessons listed can be taught individually or collectively, in any order. The final lesson guides students in summarizing the contributions of New Orleans, Louisiana, and leads to comparison with other World War II home front cities as a culminating activity.

1. [Wartime Industries, Manufacturing, and Training in New Orleans, Louisiana, World War II Heritage City \(p. 5\)](#)

- Wartime industry
- Shipbuilding
- Women in the workforce
- National Youth Administration (NYA)
- Nursing
- Civilian workforce
- Higgins Boats

2. [Black and Caribbean Americans in the Armed Forces in New Orleans, Louisiana, World War II Heritage City \(p. 18\)](#)

- African Americans in service
- Double V campaign
- Armed forces
- Virgin Islands soldiers
- Army
- Navy

3. [The SPARs in New Orleans, Louisiana, World War II Heritage City \(p. 37\)](#)

- Women in the service
- SPARs

- WAVES
- Social change
- Women in the workforce

4. [New Orleans, Louisiana: Comparing and Connecting WWII Home Front Cities \(p. 50\)](#)

Positioning these Lessons in the Curriculum:

The lessons have been aligned to national standards and topics, as well as to the Louisiana Student Standards for Social Studies (as of 2022). Standards are listed below, and objectives for each lesson, materials, and resources are listed within each lesson.

Time period: World War II

Topics: World War II, women's history, workforce migration, science and technology

United States History Standards for Grades 5-12

This lesson relates to the following [National Standards for History](#) from the UCLA National Center for History in the Schools:

Era 8: The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945)

Standard 3: The causes and course of World War II, the character of the war at home and abroad, and its reshaping of the U.S. role in world affairs

Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

This lesson relates to the following [Curriculum Standards themes for Social Studies](#) from the National Council for the Social Studies:

- Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change
- Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- Theme 8: Science, Technology, and Society
- Theme 9: Global Connections

Relevant Common Core Standards

These lessons relate to the following [Common Core English and Language Arts Standards for History and Social Studies](#) for middle and high school students:

Key Ideas and Details

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH. 6-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH. 6-12.2

Craft and Structure

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH. 6-12.4

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-12.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-12.9

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH. 6-12.10

Louisiana Student Standards for Social Studies

The lessons align to standards within the following grades and subjects, defined by the Louisiana Social Studies Standards (as of 2022).

Grade 3 – The American Story: People, Places, and Papers

Primary resource excerpts and photos can be used with adaptations and support to align with History standards in this grade.

Grade 9 – The United States and Louisiana: Industrial Age Through Modern Era

Standards 8.1-8.12 and 8.14.(Describe the causes, course, and consequences of World War II.)

High School United States History

Standards US.1-6, US. 11, and US.15 (Explain the causes, course, and consequences of World War II.)

Connections to High School Civics and High School Civics can also be made.

The lesson series was written by Sarah Nestor Lane, an educator and consultant funded by a National Council on Public History's cooperative agreement with the National Park Service.

Lesson 1: Wartime Industries, Manufacturing, and Training in New Orleans, Louisiana, World War II Heritage City

About this Lesson

This lesson is part of a series about the home front in [New Orleans, Louisiana, World War II Heritage City](#). The lesson includes readings and photos that help learners understand examples of wartime industries, manufacturing, and training in the area. The readings connect to women in the workforce engaging in industries like shipbuilding, and training opportunities for youth in areas such as nursing.

Objectives:

1. Explain the impact of wartime industries on workforce, training, and development in New Orleans.
2. Describe how local manufacturers on the home front contributed to the U.S. and the Allied forces overseas.
3. Compare local historical perspectives on service to synthesize and connect to larger wartime perspectives and themes.

Materials for Students:

1. Photos: Figures 2-8 (*can be displayed digitally*)
2. Readings 1, 2, 3 (and optional extension)
3. *Recommended:* Map of Louisiana, with New Orleans marked



Getting Started: Essential Question

How did home front trainees and workers in New Orleans meet the growing demand for wartime products and services?

Photos



Figure 2: "Higgins shipyards, New Orleans, Louisiana. Cargo vessel under construction." June 1943. Photo by John Vachon, Office of War Information. Credit: Library of Congress.



Figure 3: "Higgins shipyards, New Orleans, Louisiana. Ramp boats on railroad cars." June 1943. Photo by John Vachon, Office of War Information. Credit: Library of Congress.



Figure 4: "Numbering steel plates ready for installation. Higgins shipyards, New Orleans, Louisiana." June 1943. Photo by John Vachon, Office of War Information. Credit: Library of Congress.



Figure 5: "New Orleans, Louisiana. Loading ammunition onto a truck at the Associated Transport Company terminal." March 1943. Photo by John Vachon, Office of War Information. Credit: Library of Congress.



Figure 6: "Lifesavers - The lifeboats these New Orleans women build may save one of their fathers, husbands, or brothers in the armed forces. Left to right they are, front row, Joseph Poche, Superintendent; Mrs. Juanita Windham, Miss Ann Markezich, Mrs. Gladys Collier, Mrs. Marguerite Ferrara and Mrs. Vivian Emch." This photo accompanied Reading 1 in *The New Orleans Item* on Feb. 15, 1943.



By the numbers: Another example of New Orleans industry - Delta Shipbuilding Company

- On March 14, 1941, the Delta Shipbuilding Company accepted a contract to build 25 Liberty ships, with shipyard construction starting in April 1941. The first keel was laid on October 1, 1941.
- Within a year, the maritime commission expanded the Delta contract from 25 to 76 ships. (*New Orleans States*, Oct. 2, 1942)
- By October 1942, 97% of the 14,700 workers at the Delta Shipbuilding Company subscribed to \$7.5 million a year in war bond sales – or, about 12 percent of their earnings. This was the largest contribution by a company at the time. (*New Orleans States*, Oct. 14, 1942)
- Delta also converted Liberty ships to tankers. In June 1943, the company announced construction of its first group of 52 tankers, with each having the capacity to carry up to 10,500 tons of petroleum overseas. (*New Orleans States*, June 2, 1943)

- Nearing the end of the war, Delta had constructed 132 Liberty ships, placing sixth nationwide among shipyards for the total number of Liberty ships built. (*The Times-Picayune*, July 1, 1945)



Quotation to consider: Delta Shipbuilding Company

“Back in April, 1941, the Delta Shipbuilding Company received a contract to build 25 Liberty freighters. The announcement elicited considerable civic applause and pride. This was acclaimed a whale of a war contract. It amounted to between \$40,000,000 and \$50,000,000. Never had such a large piece of good fortune, of its kind, fallen upon New Orleans. In the other World war we built a few ships. Less than a dozen, we believe. And then a blackout of the shipbuilding business for more than two decades! This new venture would stamp New Orleans as a real center of maritime activity, not just another port through which shipping dashed in two directions, with merely a pause at our miles of wharves. So ran our hopes and ambitions. . .

Delta’s management and workers have proven worthy of their reward, and they have received it. Work at high wages has endured for a much longer time than was at first anticipated. And New Orleans has demonstrated that shipbuilding brains, genius and skill are not confined to those centers where big politics and big business can exert commanding influence at Washington. This community knows a few shipbuilding tricks, too.”

- “Doing a Big Job,” *New Orleans States*, January 6, 1943



Read to Connect

Teacher Note: The following readings share examples of wartime manufacturing in New Orleans. They do not cover all examples of industry in the city. New Orleans became a major manufacturing and military hub during the war because of its location along the Mississippi River and its access to the Gulf of Mexico. The city was an important center for shipping, transportation, and shipbuilding. The military also had training bases and movement of troops throughout the area. Lesson 3 shares about one unique group of service members serving in New Orleans - the SPARS, women in the United States Coast Guard Reserve. These factors led to new jobs and population growth in the region. Lesson 4 also continues to connect to wartime industries and growth in New Orleans.

Readings 1 and 2 in this lesson use historical language and labels not used today to describe race that are reflective of racism and segregation in the South at the time. Discuss

this with students in advance. It is recommended this lesson be used alongside [Lesson 2](#) in the series to better understand some of the many contributions of African American civilians and service members in New Orleans.

Reading 1: Newspaper Article

Weaker Sex? Eternal Feminine Talks Home, Babies on Tough War Jobs

New Orleans Item, February 15, 1943

A hammer clangs against an empty tank twice at Neptune Boat and Davit Works, and the crash of steel and staccato thunder of rivets become an undertone. Drowning them are voices like a 50-table bridge game, outshouting a fair-sized artillery barrage. It's lunch hour for Neptune's women boat builders.

In workman's overalls, brightened with colorful sweaters and blouses, their hair pinned up under gay peasant handkerchiefs, the women troop from their machines. Dodging workmen carrying room-length steel tubes, scrambling over banks of sheet metal, they mill for the door and down the rutted road toward plates piled man-size with food.

One laugh sounds shrilly above the rest. That's little Juanita Windham, red curls bobbing beneath her kerchief. Juanita's husband is a Marine, somewhere in South Africa. She laughs loudest when the women sit at lunch, talking about their children, and what the war is doing to their homes.

I'll Do the Work

'My husband's learning what it means to wash dishes and make beds in the Army,' one woman said gleefully. Then Juanita laughs again. 'My little man isn't going to touch a dish when he gets home,' she giggles. 'If he gets home – I wouldn't even let him pick up a towel.'

'Huh, you have four little pelicans at home, eating the icebox clean and you'll be longing for some help,' Marguerite Ferrara, 1903 St. Maurice Street, says sensibly. Marguerite, whose husband, "Mike" is foreman at Neptune, does dishwashing, housecleaning, dinner making, laundry for four school children, her husband and herself each night. 'I don't even get a chance to go to a show any more; just fall in bed,' she rambles cheerfully.

'I don't guess I'll have any young'uns to worry about,' Juanita says softly.

Wanted to Help

'Oh, I'm not complaining,' Marguerite adds quickly. 'I went to work on my own hook, because I wanted to get in and do something. I never worked before the war. It makes you feel good to be working on something you know is going to help.'

'Yeh, I got four brothers in the service and a husband out in San Francisco, in the Sea Bees,' says robust Pauline Shipley, 1901 St. Maurice. Pauline is the only woman riveter at Neptune, and proud as punch of the distinction.

'Funny thing,' she chuckles. 'For fourteen years I was a chocolate dipper; up in Kansas City, and then down here, after my husband joined up. And now I'm riveting. Some difference, huh?

'I'd a lot rather be doing this though. Boy, every rivet I drive, I say, 'that's one for a [Japanese].' Nobody's going to sink in one of my boats!'

She's a Grandma

'I guess we all feel that way,' chimes in youthful Vivian Emch, 2710 Edge Street. A proud grandmother, with three children, 18, 17 and 15, and a two-and-a-half-month-old granddaughter, Vivian looks a young thirty. 'My husband hasn't gone over yet, but he's at San Diego, training for the Marines. You can't help thinking when you're building a lifeboat, 'It better be good; maybe he'll have to use it.'

'My father's in the Marines – he wanted to join up first thing, but we made him stay home till they decided to draft men up to 45 – he's 44,' slim Yvonne Monson, 22, of 1641 Savage Street, adds. 'My brother-in-law is in, too, on a subchaser in the Coast Guard, but my husband's in war work, just like me. He even does almost the same thing; he's a boiler maker's assistant. We come home at night and really talk shop!

'But, it's a lot worse, having young children, than having them already in school,' she tells Marguerite. 'My little girl's only three. I have a colored maid to take care of her; we've had her two years, and so she's all right, but I still worry about the baby sometimes.'

'Otherwise, it's a grand job. The men are awfully nice to us.'

The Men – They're Swell

'That's right. They never let me lift anything heavy; they're swell,' echoed Odele Moore, 5813 Royal street. 'It's a good job, all right.'

'Say Pauline, will you teach me how to do that?' comes a voice from the background.

Pauline, the riveter, stops in the midst of an intricate crochet loop, needle poised. 'Sure,' she answers heartily. 'You can make a lot of things during lunch hour – I made the loveliest dresser scarf the other day, and without a pattern.'

She is the center of a little crowd of women, as she teaches the basic crochet stitches.

Makes Own Clothes

‘I make all my own clothes,’ says one, ‘but I never have been able to do good embroidery or crochet.’ Back at the boat works, steam shoots from the whistle. Crocheting disappears into a capacious bag, conversation shifts like a flipped light switch. ‘It’s 1:30 – get a move on girls.’

Sturdy overalled legs sprint back to drills, torches and riveting machines. Neptune’s women workers are headed back to their man’s world, till 4:30 p.m.

Questions for Reading 1, By the Numbers, Quotation to Consider, and Photos

1. What type of work were the women at Neptune Boat and Davit Works doing during the war?
2. What were some of the motivations of the women to work at Neptune?
3. Consider the descriptions of the women and the time spent describing their home life and crocheting. How does the author both challenge and reinforce traditional gender expectations in the article?
4. What does the mention of a “colored maid” suggest about childcare challenges, race, and work in the South at the time?
5. How does the phrase “headed back to their man’s world” reflect attitudes about gender and women in the workforce at the time?
6. What perspectives or experiences may be missing in this article?

By the Numbers and Quotation to Consider

7. Using information from across the statistics and the quotation, how did the growth of the Delta Shipbuilding Company during the war impact New Orleans and its role in wartime industry and shipbuilding?
8. What does the high level of war bond participation by Delta Shipbuilding workers (in By the Numbers) suggest about workers’ attitudes toward the war effort? Why would a newspaper highlight these contributions?

Photos

9. What type of activities are taking place? Why was New Orleans a well-suited location for shipbuilding?
10. How do the photos build on, or connect to, your learning about wartime industries in New Orleans so far?

Photo: Three NYA Workers



Figure 7: Ruth Arceneaux (19), Michelina LaCerva (22), and Rosemary Jones (20), all from New Orleans who were the first National Youth Administration (NYA) women from the local machine shop to get jobs in factory work, going on to the Rheems shell case plant to make shell cases. 500 NYA young men had been placed before these three women. (New Orleans States-Item, March 28, 1942)

Reading 2: Newspaper Article

Teacher Note: Work by the NYA occurred in other home front cities during the war and can be used for comparison to New Orleans. For example, Reading 3 in the Lewistown, Montana Heritage City lesson “[\(H\)our History Lesson: Home Front Experiences and Contributions by Youth in Lewistown, Montana, World War II Heritage City](#),” shares another example of an NYA project.

Background: The National Youth Administration (NYA) was a New Deal agency sponsored by Franklin D. Roosevelt. It provided work and education for youths aged 16 to 25. It started in 1935 and was discontinued in 1943.

The photo above shows the first three NYA local young women in New Orleans placed in defense factory work. Prior to this, 500 NYA young men had already been placed in local industrial jobs. The NYA provided opportunities not only in industry and manufacturing training but also in fields such as nursing. African American youth also participated in Louisiana's NYA program, as described in the text, but these opportunities were segregated and often differed in type and quality from those available to white youth.

In New Orleans, the NYA also worked with the Civilian Conservation Corps and the city to build recreation centers and dormitories for the military. Before these projects, some soldiers were sleeping in school basements and auditoriums. NYA workers also helped construct gymnasiums, meeting houses, and provided office equipment. In one example, a group of African American NYA boys in DeSoto Parish built a combination schoolhouse and auditorium that could serve 600 children (New Orleans Item, March 27, 1941).

NYA Trains State Girls for Nursing

Louisiana Project First in Nation; Popularity Told

New Orleans Item, March 28, 1941

By James A. Wobbe

If there's a war, you can't have too many nurses; and acting on this axiom, the National Youth Administration has been busy for some months giving girls pre-nursing education.

The Louisiana NYA project is the first established in (the) United States.

The principal nursing school is in Shreveport where the girls get adequate training in the state's Charity hospital.

'I think we're prouder of this than any of the other girls' projects,' said D. G. Robinson, NYA director for the northern district of the state. 'Nine out of 10 of our girls who receive pre-nursing experience are accepted by the Shreveport Charity hospital nursing school, and so far 25 have been graduated as registered nurses.'

Alexandria also has a pre-nursing project, the only one in the Alexandria area. Some 30 girls are employed as ward aids in local hospitals, and after a year's training are sent to Shreveport as candidates for admission to the nursing school.

Very Popular

New Orleans likewise offers aid to hospitals.

About 55 NYA youths in New Orleans act as ward aids, laboratory workers and orderlies in the city's white hospitals, and some 80 Negro enrollees work in Flint-Goodridge hospital.

Hospital work is one of the most popular branches among girl enrollees, though there are many others who prefer sewing and home economics.

New Orleans' home economics division is a vital aid to the free school lunch program. More than 300 girls of the NYA, working in cooperation with the Orleans school board and the Parent Teachers Association, cook and serve lunches in the schools daily.

‘There is a constant turnover in the home economics division,’ said John C. Bendler, director for Orleans parish. ‘We have many requests for waitresses, and are always able to supply the demand.’

Questions for Reading 2 and Its Background

1. What was the NYA? (Use the reading background to support.)
2. How did segregation shape the experiences of African American NYA youth?
3. How did the NYA support meeting community needs?
4. Why do you think nursing and home economics programs were emphasized for young women at the time?
5. How did NYA programs support wartime education to meet labor demands?

Photo



Figure 8: A cartoon depiction of a person wearing a Louisiana labeled bib sits at “Louisiana’s Industrial Table” and says “Oh Boy! Wott’a Dish!” looking at a platter labeled Higgins Payroll \$65 million. Other items at the table are Strawberries- \$4 million, Ric- \$43 million, Sugar - \$26 million, and Salt - \$3 million. This was published in the “Higgins Worker” section of *The New Orleans Item* on June 15, 1944.

Reading 3: Newspaper Article

Background: During World War II, Higgins Industries in New Orleans became famous for designing and building the [Higgins boat \(LCVP\)](#), the landing craft that carried troops ashore during amphibious invasions such as D-Day in Normandy. The company employed more than 20,000 workers and produced over 20,000 boats during the war, making it one of the city's largest wartime industries. There is an optional research activity in Lesson 4 on Higgins Boats as an opportunity for students to learn more about the critical role the boats played in amphibious landings. The article below was published in the weekly newsletter the "Higgins Worker" for Higgins employees within The New Orleans Item.

Higgins Payroll Sweeter Than Sugar Crop

Cane Passed by Higgins Workers As State's Income Producer

From the "Higgins Worker," within *The New Orleans States-Item*, June 15, 1944

Louisiana is the greatest sugar producing state in the country. Its sugar crop pours 26 million dollars annually into the pockets of the people of Louisiana.

But the wages we earn at Higgins plants run nearly three times that much. Actually the annual value of our pay roll is close to 65 million dollars.

Where does it go? Well, nearly 15% of it goes into War Bonds. We have the largest pay roll deduction, per average worker, of any war plant in this area and one of the largest in the entire nation.

We tell you this first, because we believe, out here at Higgins, that our war bond purchases come FIRST.

And the rest of that pay roll of over a million dollars per week we draw? Well, just go downtown any time and you'll find our wives spending it with the 'butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker.'

Twenty thousand Higgins employees are adding over \$180,000 a day to the wealth of the city of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana – every day in the week and fifty-two weeks a year.

The money that finally filters its way into every shop, store and business enterprise in New Orleans is nearly as great as the combined rice, sugar, strawberry and salt revenue of the whole state of Louisiana. Without a doubt the purchasing power of the Higgins workers is the greatest single asset to the future prosperity of the city that it possesses.

At the end of 1943, over 90% of the thousands of assault vessels of the American fleet were either Higgins designed or actually constructed in Higgins plants. The auditors of the nation, in examining the fixed price basis on which Higgins boats are produced, recognized as the lowest in the boat building industry, have discovered that Higgins workers have saved the taxpayers of the nation hundreds of millions of dollars.

Thus we are saving for our country three ways – helping to furnish, in tremendous quantities, the material for forcing an early victory; reducing the cost of war, in our particular type of production, to the lowest possible minimum; and building, with our earnings, the community where we live so that it will be one of the strongest and richest in the country when victory returns it to peacetime pursuits and

Questions for Reading 3 and Photo

1. What was the estimated annual value of the Higgins payroll? How did this compare to revenue from other industries in the state?
2. What did Higgins produce, and why was it critical to the Allied forces?
3. How did Higgins workers contribute to the war effort beyond building boats?
4. If you were a Higgins worker reading this article in 1944, what messages do you think the company wanted you to take away?
5. *Photo*: What does the cartoon suggest about the growing importance of wartime industries compared to traditional agricultural industries in the state? How might this change have affected people's lives after the war?

Lesson Closing

Answer the essential question: How did home front trainees and workers in New Orleans meet the growing demand for wartime products and services?

Lesson 2: Black and Caribbean Americans in the Armed Forces in New Orleans, Louisiana, World War II Heritage City

About this Lesson

This lesson is a part of a series about the home front in [New Orleans, Louisiana, World War II Heritage City](#). The lesson contains readings and photos to support students in learning about training experiences and contributions of Black and Caribbean American service members who were in New Orleans during the war. The city served as a strategic hub for training, staging, logistics and repair at Army, Navy, and Coast Guard installations. Despite facing unjust discrimination, these service members contributed to the mission of the [Double V campaign](#) as they served their country and supported the fight for equality.

Objectives:

1. Describe the home front experiences and contributions of Black and Caribbean Americans who served and trained in New Orleans.
2. Examine how discrimination and segregation during the war affected the roles and opportunities available to Black and Caribbean American service members.
3. Compare local historical perspectives on service to synthesize and connect to larger wartime perspectives and themes.

Materials for Students:

1. Photos: Figures 9-14 (*can be displayed digitally*)
2. Readings 1, 2, 3 (and optional extension)
3. *Recommended: Map of Louisiana, with New Orleans marked*



Getting Started: Essential Question

How did the service of Black and Caribbean American service members in New Orleans support the war effort and help advance the fight for equality?

Photos



Figure 9: Sailors in New Orleans, Louisiana. Photographed by John Vachon in March 1943 for the Office of War Information. Credit: Library of Congress.



Figure 10: Members of the Algiers Naval Station Band, 1942, Courtesy of the New Orleans Jazz Club Collection of the Louisiana State Museum, [object no. 1978.118(B).00089]



Figure 11: Algiers Naval Station Band, 1942, Courtesy of the New Orleans Jazz Club Collection of the Louisiana State Museum, [object no. 1978.118(B).00090]

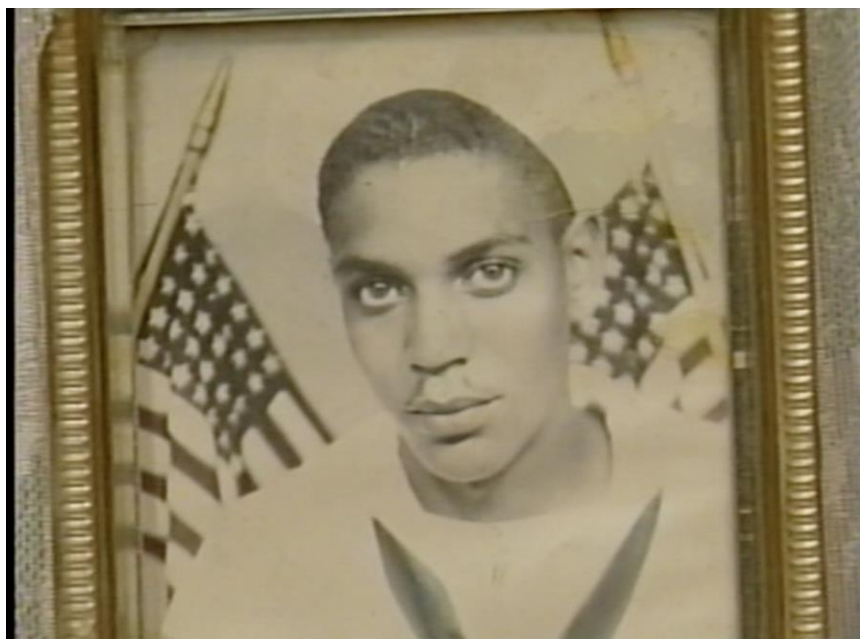


Figure 12: Portrait of John Kessler Martin, quoted in *Quotations to consider*. Image from the video recording of his interview on August 2, 2002, for the Veterans History Project, Library of Congress.



By the numbers: Supporting statistics for the readings

- The population of New Orleans was approximately 30% Black Americans in 1940, or approximately 150,000 of the nearly 500,000 residents.
- Between 200,000 to 300,000 service members trained or staged at Camp Plauche during the war. Over 3,000 Italian and German prisoners of war were held at Camp Plauche, and an additional 1,400 were held at regional side camps. Black service members sometimes assisted in guarding and transporting the prisoners.
- The US Naval Repair Base (Algiers) processed personnel from more than 800 ships. The base repaired and serviced ships from overseas and provided training, including firefighting training to more than 24,000 personnel. Black sailors were mostly limited to logistical operations at the base.
- The population of the Virgin Islands in the 1940 US Census was 24,889. About 700 Virgin Islanders served during the war, or around 3%. Prior to the 1944 draft of Virgin Islanders, they were able to volunteer to enlist.



Quotations to consider: US Naval Repair Base (Algiers)

“A group of us got transferred to – well on the board it had ‘LA.’ We didn’t know what it was. When I found out I was going to New Orleans, Louisiana, Oh my God, I thought I would - I didn’t know if I wanted to live or die because I had heard about those people down there and I was afraid because living in a place like Clarksburg [W.V.], we never had anything like this, no disturbing stuff like that, no racial riots, or...you know, the neighbors got along so good. We were in an integrated town, see . . . So, when I got to Algiers, Louisiana, woah - well I didn’t come out.

I didn’t come off the base for about six or eight months. I told them . . .

They kept telling me, saying it's not that bad out there. I said, well, I’m not coming out to see how bad it is. Reading these two papers that we used to get here in Clarksburg called *The Pittsburgh Courier* and *The [Baltimore] Afro-American* every week when you’d pick up that paper, you would see where someone had been lynched, drug around the city block, the city square, and I just couldn’t understand how people could do people like that. So, I figured that the best thing for me to do, regardless of how long my Navy career was going to last- I’m not going out there and give nobody a shot at me.

Eventually after six or eight months they talked me into going on liberty...”

- John Kessler Martin, excerpts from his [interview](#) on August 2, 2002, for the Veterans History Project, Library of Congress

“ . . . When we first got there [Algiers], Blacks had only been in certain fields. Specifically, cooks and officer stewards. That was before the beginning of World War II . . . The United States Navy used Blacks and Filipinos in those fields. . . .

Well, we started KP [kitchen patrol], but there were regulations that you weren't supposed to take assignments out of your trained area - your area of training. . . They didn't stay us on KP very long before they decided to – before they could decide- you know, they didn't know what to do with us. [laughs] We had training out of the “traditional” fields. And so, we would have muster every morning and go to the boiler house. [Where we] slept. . . all day. We were a well-rested unit. . . .

A temporary duty was one Saturday – that's the only thing I can remember – that one Saturday we were called out to guard [Italian] prisoners that came to New Orleans, and they took them up by train to a cafe. We came down and acted as guards, outside - outside the cafe . . . because of the segregation laws. So, the United States government recognized the segregation laws of the South, even in the military.”

- Sanford Bernard Tollette, excerpts from his [interview](#) on April 5, 2016, for the Veterans History Project, Library of Congress



Read to Connect

Reading 1: Newspaper Article

Camp Plauche Program Proves Leaders Are Made – Not Born

The Pittsburgh Courier, December 16, 1944

Camp Plauche, La. - Reversing the old adage, the Leadership Training course at the Army Forces Training Center here is proving daily that leaders are made – not born. Each week the course turns out a new batch of leaders; up to fifty per cent of them are colored soldiers. In this war there isn't time to wait for leaders to be born, but hundreds of them have been turned out by the leadership course headed by Capt. Richard B. Swenson. The men are drawn from the ranks and receive specialized training which fits them for important non-commissioned officer posts in companies both in this country and in other theatres of operation.

Time Element Essential

The time element is important. Take the matter of voice for example. Obviously, the Army can't wait for golden-voiced leaders of men to be born, so the leadership school goes to work and teaches the potential non-com the fundamentals of voice control – to use the diaphragm and not the voice alone; to make the voice carry without straining the vocal cords and to replace the bashful plea with the authoritative command.

Men for the school are chosen on the basis of their having exhibited undeveloped qualities of leadership. Many are colored soldiers who have just completed basic training. Some are non-commissioned men who are taking the course as a finishing school or refresher, and some are soldiers preparing for officer candidate school.

Plauche 'Junior OCS'

The Plauche school has been called a 'Junior OCS' because of the rigidity of its standards and because it has been modelled after the officers' school. It is rugged. A GI sent to the school gets on his toes when he arrives and stays on the alert all the time he is there. The men have their own barracks and mess hall and the first thing they learn is co-operation. They soon learn that individual success at the school depends on criticizing and helping each other.

The men learn by practice. Small classes meet together with one of the group designated the lecturer, or teacher.

Leadership Stressed

The graduate of the school is intensively trained to lead men, how to talk to them, how to instruct them, to lead them in classroom, drill field, or in battle. He learned by taking charge and training the rest of his class and added to his perspective when he stood in ranks and was trained by another student.

Lt. Daymond J. Aiken, in charge of methods of instruction, declared, 'The success of the school is entirely due to making men teach themselves. All are somewhat abashed when they first face the class, but it is amazing how the system develops leaders in a comparatively short time.'

Questions for Reading 1, Quotations to Consider, Photos

1. What was the purpose of the Leadership Training course at Camp Plauche?
2. Why do you think the Army invested in training soldiers who showed potential for leadership during the war?
3. What were some of the skills that were developed in the course?

4. Consider that the article was published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*. What audience was the author trying to reach, and with what message? How might the portrayal of the training course in this article differ from coverage in other newspapers during the war?
5. How does this article (and its provided background) reflect both opportunities and limitations for Black service members during the war?

Quotations to Consider

6. How did Martin feel when he learned he was being sent to Louisiana, and why? Use details from his quotation to support your answer.
7. What emotions do you think Sanford Tollette experienced when he and his fellow sailors were not allowed to work in the jobs they had trained for?
8. How do these quotations connect to the premise of the Double V Campaign? What contradictions do you see between the United States fighting for freedom abroad and maintaining segregation at home and within the military?

Photos

9. Where are the band photos from? How might this band have improved morale of service members?
10. What stands out to you in the photos? What other types of photos would you like to see related to the material you have learned and discussed so far?

Photos: Ralph V. Simmonds

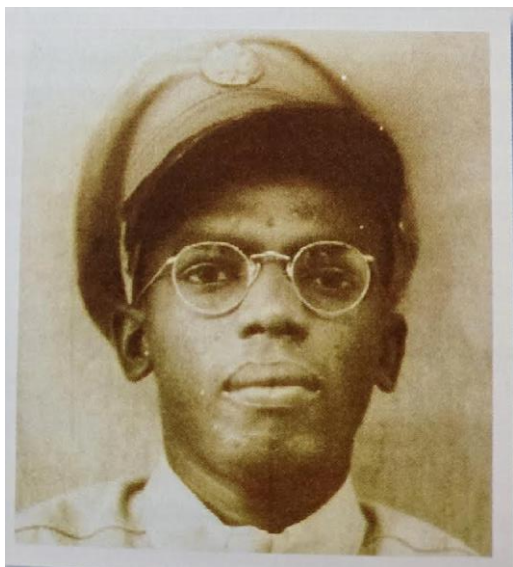


Figure 13: Ralph V. Simmonds (Photo courtesy of Loán Lake and the Simmonds family.)

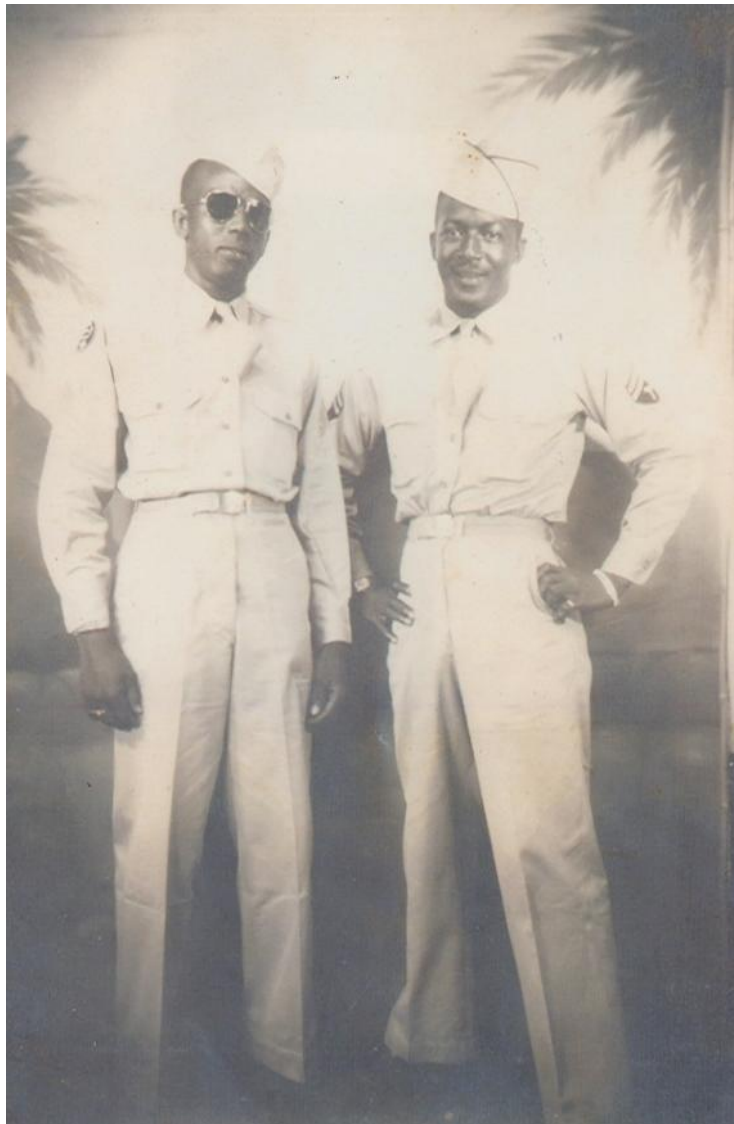


Figure 14: Left, Ralph V. Simmonds, and right, his brother, Aubrey Simmonds. (Photo courtesy of Loán Lake and the Simmonds family.)

Reading 2: Oral History

Background: Ralph V. Simmonds trained at Camp Plauche (first described in the background of Reading 1). Camp Plauche was also a location where Virgin Island port companies were stationed, as Simmonds described in his interview below.

At the end of the interview, Simmonds discusses resistance that occurred at Camp Plauche. This incident was written about in detail in the local St. Croix newspaper. See the lesson extension for an additional reading addressing the incident and its coverage in the

Virgin Islands. Interview subheadings have been added and light editing done for readability.

For supporting students in analyzing oral histories, you can use the [“Talking with the Past #2: Oral History”](#) video from the National Park Service to learn about analyzing oral histories as primary sources.

Oral History Excerpts: Ralph V. Simmonds

Ralph V. Simmonds was interviewed for the Veterans History Project with the Library of Congress in 2004 by interviewer Michael Taft. The full interview can be accessed [here](#).

Ralph V. Simmonds (RVS): I was in the Army. Part of a port company, a service unit. There were two companies from the Virgin Islands. The 872nd and the 873rd port companies. . . .

Michael Taft (MT): Interesting. Why port?

RVS: Because that was our assignment- to unload the ships and to... in general, service them.

MT: And what was the highest rank you were?

RVS: In my case? I was a staff sergeant. Supply sergeant. . . .

MT: Were you drafted, or did you enlist?

RVS: We were drafted. Came from a very interesting experience. Virgin Islanders were not eligible for the draft, but some of our people thought we needed to do something to be a part of the United States' effort. And so, they petitioned the Congress, and it was granted. And in 1944, the first group of volunteers, I think it was in June of that year, went into training. Later on, what I'd like to say the bulk of the draftees - approximately 700 men - went into training ... on September 5, 1944 and September 7, 1944.

MT: So, when did you go in?

RVS: On September 5.

MT: September 5?

RVS: Yeah.

MT: And you were in till when? Till the end of the....

RVS: The war was over before April of 1946, I don't remember the exact date, you understand . . . my discharge would show that. But, that's when we were mustered out – once the war was over.

Incidentally, we were named A.U.S, Army of the United States, rather than the United States Army at that time. It was that effort. That war effort. . . Well, we left the Virgin Islands. We trained in Puerto Rico. We trained in Louisiana. In New Orleans, to be exact. And we had a brief stay in Portland, Oregon. And then we went overseas. We got as far as Hawaii.

MT: And that's where you were?

RVS: Yes that's as far as we got. But, we were, actually to be a part of the invasion because the troops were equipped to go to – I think it was China. As a sort of jump off point for that invasion. And then somebody flew over with a bomb, dropped it, and that was – thanks be to God. That's why I'm here today. . . .

[The Home Front in the Virgin Islands](#)

MT: What did people think generally in the Virgin Islands. Did they support the US or not?

RVS: Definitely. Support the U.S. We are 100% American citizens. 100%. There were a few, a little people... you always have that margin. . . No, we suffered. No butter, no gasoline. Very little of everything, because everything we have is imported. You see, everything we get - Everything at that time was imported. So, we suffered like everybody else for the war.

MT: So, what were you doing when the war broke out?

RVS: I was working for the – Virgin Islands government. I was a clerk in the hospital. So, when I went into the Army, I went in from that position, which was - when I was mustered out, was a position I was able to return to briefly, and then I moved on from there to some other things, yeah.

MT: . . . Did you think about enlisting earlier?

RVS: No, I didn't because, you know, there were people who volunteered to go earlier, but before that time, I didn't think enlistment was anything on our minds, you know? We were just hoping that things would come out right. And, following the draft, then we knew we would have to be part of that effort, and it came... I think it was a good thing for us. It was a very good thing. . . .

[New Orleans \(Following Initial Training in Puerto Rico\)](#)

RVS: Then we went off to New Orleans for advanced training. We went to a place called Camp Plaquemine . . .

MT: And what did you do there? You were in advanced training. What did that amount to? Or, what kind of training was that?

RVS: It was training on the building – not building really, but – the servicing the ships as they come in. See, in Puerto Rico we didn't do that. We were just training. But then in New Orleans, we were a unit. And the training was along the lines of unloading the ships, servicing them and all that sort of thing.

MT: You had your combat training in Puerto Rico?

RVS: Yeah, that's correct.

MT: So, were you kind of anxious to get off to the front line? Or... no?

RVS: Oh no. [laughs] It didn't sound great. No, I mean the war with Japan was really raging you know, at the time. No, I don't think we were anxious. But we knew we were going there, and we had to make our minds up. For many of us it didn't seem like there would be a road back, but fortunately there was.

MT: Did you know you were going to the Pacific, or did you..

RVS: Yes, we more or less knew we were going there because these were the later days in the war I think. The war in Europe was almost over.

Discrimination Faced During Travel to Oregon

MT: So how many months altogether in training before you went over to Hawaii?

RVS: We left. . . I was down in February. I left as part of an advance team, a lieutenant and myself. It was in July or August I think. I don't have that on my fingertips... We were to go and prepare for the troops coming up to Oregon and then overseas. He [the lieutenant] of course, came from Chicago and wanted to see his family, so he said, 'Ralph, you go ahead.'

I got on the train. And he went to Chicago to see his family. And I had a very interesting experience which I must tell you about. Traveling alone, I met another man who also was advance from his team. So, we traveled together. He was white, but we knew where we were going, and we became instant friends. So, by the time we started boarding the train though I sat in one section and he in another. Well, the thing about it is that back in those days, the United States Army was not the way it is today, because of color, you know.

So, I had a little disagreement with one of the people riding the train. One of the - I thought he was the - I guess he was a guard or something. He carried a weapon. So, I told him - I said, "I have here a Pullman reservation." Pullman meant I was supposed to get a Coach where I could sleep and everything.

But he disagreed, and he told me to shut up and sit down. And I didn't come from a place where I shut up so easy. So, I talked back to him. So, he pulled his Derringer [gun]. He had a Derringer. So, a woman behind him, said, "Soldier, sit down, this man will shoot you."

So, then I said, there was no point in arguing. They came and arrested me. They used to have a military car, riding with the trains in case there was anything that – you know – where military people that were not cooperating with . . . So, they put me in that. It was right behind the locomotive so the next morning when I came out, I was under soot. [laughs, shakes head]

That was one of the most interesting experiences of my life, because , you know, I felt that there was no justification and give me a chance to talk, right? You know, back in the islands we talk- we talk to people. I don't care what shade you are. We didn't know what discrimination was. And so, somebody told me when you get to Oregon, file charges. "Sir, we're not going to be there long enough to do anything anyway." So, I never did anything over it. . . .

Mutiny at Camp Plauche and Closing Reflection

MT: How often do you think about the war? How often does it come up in conversation these days?

RVS: Not very often, no, because no, the veterans don't see WW2 veterans as veterans, they don't see us as former soldiers. They don't see us as people on whose shoulders they're walking. We have changed things for them. We have made the entrance of Black people into the military something to be respected. While we were in Louisiana, we changed a lot of things because of radicalism.

One of our group was arrested and imprisoned for two weeks, and we didn't know where he was and I wrote home to my mother [speaks with deep emotion]. It was my brother. We didn't know where he was. But aside from that, we... as a result of the war we were able to produce a lot of very what should I say. . . important people, in my estimation, out of the groups that went out. The Virgin Islands elected two governors later on. And a number of other people in very important positions. And the Virgin Islands itself has been a better place because we served.

MT: Do you think you would have been a different person if you had never gone to the war?

RVS: I would have, yeah.

MT: How do you think it changed you and others?

RVS: It taught us a sense of responsibility, respect, authority. A number of things that young people need today. And I wish that more people- more of our young people could have gotten into the service, you know. I don't want to see the draft come back, but I wish they could get in, because you grow up. You have to grow up, you know. You take orders. Nobody wants to take orders today, ok, so. But I would not have been the same. I know that.

MT: It also sounds like what you were saying about Louisiana, you have more of a sense of identity within your group, perhaps? Because you were in that kind of hostile area?

RVS: Yeah, Yeah, we were called different names, yeah. We used to parade the streets in the camp area – training area – and so when the troops were marching - some people would go on, "There go the Kingsmen." They didn't know where we were from. We were all this shade [holds up and rubs hand] and they could think of nothing else.

But, we had had good training. We would sing, parade, you know, that sort of thing. So, we got a certain amount of respect from them. But. . . Even within the city area, because they used to have police – MPs I guess- raided the buses – to make sure we didn't get in too much trouble. You asked about an experience, and it just came back to me. Let me tell you.

When we got to Louisiana, we were placed in barracks. We had weapons and the weapons were placed on what is known as a weapon rack. And they were locked. No, well, they were not locked that day. They were locked later on. But because some of the things that we thought were injustices being done. The two groups rose up against it and as a result, what they did- they moved us out of the barracks, put us in the street, called the MPS, locked all the rifles, and we couldn't get at them.

They discharged the first sergeant and sent him back to Puerto Rico. And they said to move us out. The thing is that I think they were afraid that something was going to happen, but you know. I mean, we weren't going to shoot anybody, but we certainly didn't like what was happening. I mean, this was midnight, right? They moved us all out of the barracks.

MT: So what started this? Do you remember what started this?

RVS: Yeah, it was because they had planned to remove the first sergeant.

MT: I see... so you were protecting him? Or you were...

RVS: The units were, yeah. So everybody, in defiance of that move – said this man had served – this man had been in the service for seven years. We picked him up in Puerto Rico and made him part of our unit. And for some reason or other they decided to remove him and everybody - He was a good man, yeah.

MT: Was that unusual to kind of speak back that way or to -

RVS: No, you couldn't speak to them, not demonstrate. . . It got home to the local papers. And I think some organizations in the United States protested, so things changed. So that's why I say today's veterans – or -Today's soldiers are walking on the shoulders of change. . . .

I would like to share one other thing if I may. And that is, I had made some notes, which I – I'm here today because – this young lady here, my granddaughter, works for Delegate [Donna] Christensen and when the World War II Monument Society got into being, she asked me if I would like to be a part of it, and she sent me an application, so I became a member. I became a member because in my feeling, that somebody needed to represent the Virgin Islands in case nobody else but me had done so, and so that's why I'm here. . . .

Questions for Reading 2 and By the Numbers

1. Where did Ralph Simmonds complete training during the war? What was the job of the port companies?
2. According to Simmonds, why did people in the Virgin Islands support participation in the U.S. war effort? How does he describe life on the home front there during the war?
3. How did Simmonds describe race relations in the Virgin Islands compared to what he experienced in the continental US?
4. Why do you think Simmonds viewed the conflict over the first sergeant at Camp Plauche as an important moment of resistance? *[See the extension- additional reading - for a newspaper article covering the incident.]*
5. In part of the interview not quoted above, Simmonds shares the following about returning to St. Thomas: "We felt we were young, full of vigor, we had seen the world, and we were going to change the island."
6. How does this quotation and details he shared in his oral history connect to the impact of the service of Virgin Islanders when they returned home?

By the Numbers

7. How do these statistics connect to the readings and sources so far?

Reading 3: Memoir Excerpt

"Memoirs of Cecil A. Wenner"

Cecil A. Wenner was interviewed for the Veterans History Project with the Library of Congress and submitted his memoir. The full interview and memoir can be accessed [here](#).

“I was the third child of the union between Joseph Emanuel Wenner and Virginia McClean, born on February 5th, 1922 on St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. I had five siblings. My father passed away at age 5 and I was raised by my mother. My mother worked as a domestic and laundress to support our family. During the Great Depression, jobs were scarce, incomes were low, and upward mobility was constrained.

I attended the Abraham Lincoln Elementary School and Charlotte Amalie High School on St. Thomas until age 16. At that time, I left to help support my family. Between 1938 and 1940, I work[ed] at the Grand Hotel, the premier hotel on St. Thomas at the time, as a waiter and storeroom stock clerk. In 1941, I started working at Arundell Corporation constructing a submarine base and a naval air station on the island.

The U.S. Virgin Islands was purchased from Denmark in 1917 for strategic reasons. It was astride major shipping lanes to and from the Panama Canal and was blessed with a deep and well sheltered harbor. With the outbreak of WWII, the U.S. Navy expanded its presence in the territory and started to build base facilities. Construction jobs become readily available and I responded to one such vacancy notice.

At Arundell, I worked as an oiler for a diesel steam shovel. My mentor was William Kirkland, a southerner. He showed how to maintain, service, and operate the steam shovel. During that time I learned to drive trucks. During this time I gained confidence and through daily contact with military officials and mainland American contractors, decided to enlist in the Army after the construction contract ended.

The principal motivation for enlisting was to take advantage of new opportunities. I decided to enlist on June 13th, 1944 in response to the first call for Virgin Island volunteers. I took a series of medical examinations and aptitude tests during that day at an induction center manned by the 65th Infantry Division, comprised of Puerto Rican troops, located at the West Indies dock in Charlotte Amalie, the main city on St. Thomas. After I was sworn in I was not allowed to leave the induction camp facility to notify my mother and siblings. The officer told me that my mother would be informed by him at a later date. The next day, I shipped out for Fort Buchanan in Puerto Rico, forty miles to the west.

The first morning at Fort Buchanan I had a feeling of awakening. I heard a newspaper vendor hawking papers in both Spanish and English and felt that this was a beginning. It was the first time, I had ever left St. Thomas and I felt that the military was for me. At Fort Buchanan I completed basic training and earned a sharpshooter medal.

My mother was eventually informed that I had joined the service. She was surprised that I had joined but did not say much. At Christmas time 1944, I had a 10-day pass and I visited my family. They were very proud of me and liked my military uniform. During my time at

Buchanan, I would send home letters and photographs. I earned \$80 a month and sent \$60 of my pay to my mother. She was very happy for the financial support, since three of my siblings were still in school.

In Puerto Rico, I would get two day weekend passes from Friday afternoon to Sunday night. I would normally travel to various places on the island by bus to sightsee. At night I would stay at the YMCA in San Juan. The charge was \$2.50 per night and it included a breakfast. I enjoyed myself immensely in Puerto Rico and started to learn Spanish.

I was stationed in Puerto Rico for approximately six months and then was transferred to Camp Pluseau [sic], twenty miles outside of New Orleans, Louisiana. In Louisiana, I received additional training in the operation of cranes, clamshell diggers, steam shovels, and forklifts. In New Orleans, I had my first encounter with racial segregation. On weekend passes, I had to ride in the rear of buses behind a sign marked for Coloreds Only. This was a shock for me coming from the Caribbean where societies are multiracial and tolerant. In the camp, there were two PXs, one for whites and one for blacks. Movies were also segregated on the base. Nonetheless, the segregation in the military was not as grating as the segregation outside. Our company of Virgin Islanders consisted of blacks, mulattos, and white French descendants. Our company was a rainbow of colors and the rigid segregation was unsettling. Many times the white French Virgin Islanders would sit in the rear of the bus with black Virgin Islanders. On the base, our company was very close and we stuck together. We found support in each other. The same happened with multiracial Puerto Rican companies.

In February of 1945, I was transferred to Oahu, Hawaii. We traveled by train from New Orleans to Seattle, Washington, and then by Liberty ship from Vancouver, British Colombia to Honolulu. . . .

On August 6, 1945, the day the first atomic bomb was dropped I remembered that we had gathered around in the tent of a company mate listening to a radio. I was both saddened and relieved to hear the news. The high civilian casualty rate saddened me deeply but I knew that the war was at an end and that I would not go to the front. We recently had received survival training and new heavier clothes more appropriate for a colder climate. We all expected to join in the invasion of Japan.

After the war ended in the September [of] 1945, the pace at the docks slowed considerably. We celebrated the end of the war on base but did not receive passes to go to town. Because of a large Japanese descent population in Hawaii, the military was concerned about potential disturbances. During my free time I pursued self-improvement vocational

courses and learned how to type. I enjoyed and relished the opportunities the military afforded me to advance my education. . . .”

Questions for Reading 3

1. What was Wenner’s motivation for enlisting in the Army? How did his background support this decision?
2. What type of training did Wenner complete in New Orleans?
3. How did Wenner's experiences in the Virgin Islands shape his reactions to segregation in New Orleans?
4. Why did Wenner feel both saddened and relieved to hear of the atomic bombing of Japan?

Questions for both Reading 2 and 3

5. Before these readings, had you ever read or heard about the wartime experiences of a service member from a U.S. territory? If so, what did you know?
6. How does Simmonds' interview and Wenner's memoir help you connect to experiences and perspectives that are both different and similar from those of soldiers from the mainland US?
7. How do their experiences connect to the ideas of the Double V Campaign?
8. What strengths and limitations should historians consider when using oral histories and memoirs as historical evidence?

Lesson Closing

Answer the essential question: How did the service of Black and Caribbean American service members in New Orleans support the war effort and help advance the fight for equality?

Extension

Additional Reading: Mutiny at Camp Plauche

Ralph V. Simmonds discusses an incident at Camp Plauche in his oral history (Reading 2) that was covered in the St. Croix newspaper. The following is the article he refers to as local coverage. It is made available by the [Digital Library of the Caribbean](#).

Mutiny Following Demotion of V.I. Officer Averted At Camp Plauche (Louisiana)

Riot Squad Called Out; Articles of War Read

The St. Croix Avis

Saturday, June 23, 1945

According to information received here from Camp Plauche, Louisiana, yesterday, Virgin Islands soldiers last week reached a stage of near mutiny following the unexpected demotion of First

Sergeant Sigurd Petersen and Sergeants Horation Millin & Jospeh Francis. High tension and unrest were reduced only after the intervention of the Post Commandeer who conferred with non-commissioned officers and promised restoration of all the men's stripes. He also severely chastised the officer in command of the company.

According to the report by the Daily News Sgt. Sigurd Peterson of 872 Port Company, was informed that he would be returned to Puerto Rico. No reason for this action was given. It came as a blow to the company as Peterson had been serving in the capacity of 1st Sgt. Ever since the company had been activated in Puerto Rico in 1944.

In Peterson's place was named Oliver Scatliffe, the ex-policeman. While the company held no prejudice against Scatliffe, its members found the situation rather puzzling. Nevertheless, the routine of the company proceeded as usual.

Sgt. Peterson was demanded by the Company officer, Lt. Imbeie to write a letter requesting that he be reduced in rank without prejudice, and that if this were not done he would be reduced to a private and transferred to the 873rd Port. Co. Also to be reduced were Sgt. Horation Millin, and Joseph Francis of St. Croix.

Tension then mounted, and non-commission officers torn [sic] off their stripes and returned them to the Company Officer. After several incidents, things reached the stage where the Commanding officer of the post was summoned. He arrived and handled the situation in a most admirable manner. He dismissed the pressing officers and gathered all the non-commissed [sic] officers and held an informal meeting with them. He pried to the roots of the dissatisfaction. When the meeting was over he thoroughly reamed the C.O. for having such unrest going on in his command. He stated that he thought Petersen was a fine man, after interviewing him.

He promised restoration of all chevrons and that while he could not promise to keep Petersen over the head of his C.O. he would see to it he was returned to Puerto Rico with his 1st. Sargeant stripes.

Questions

1. What event caused unrest among the Virgin Island soldiers at Camp Plauche?
2. How did the soldiers express their dissatisfaction with the decisions?
3. If you had been a member of the 872nd Port Company, how might you have responded to the situation? Explain your reasoning.
4. How does this reading compare and connect to Simmond's oral history (Reading 2) and themes from Wenner's memoir (Reading 3)?

Additional Resources

[History of US Naval Repair Base, New Orleans, Louisiana from United States Naval Administration in World War II](#) (ibiblio.org)

[LA: Algiers Naval Air Station Band](#) by Alex Albright

[Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America – New Orleans, Louisiana \(1940\)](#) from the University of Richmond *[Note: This map resource can be used in conjunction with “[Redlining and Racial Covenants](#),” NCPH.org]*

[Proudly We Served: Virgin Island Veterans of World War II](#) (Documentary hosted at PWSVI.org)

Lesson 3: The SPARs in New Orleans, Louisiana, World War II Heritage City

About this Lesson

This lesson is a part of a series about the home front in [New Orleans, Louisiana, World War II Heritage City](#). The lesson contains readings and photos for students to learn about the role and impact of the women in the SPARs, who supported filling crucial roles on the home front in the Coast Guard. The readings include newspaper articles and an oral history of a SPAR who served in New Orleans.

Objectives:

1. Explain the role of the SPARs in supporting the Coast Guard and their connections to New Orleans.
2. Describe accomplishments of women in the SPARs and some of the challenges faced.
3. Compare local historical perspectives on service to synthesize and connect to larger wartime perspectives and themes.

Materials for Students:

1. Photos: Figures 15-19 (*can be displayed digitally*)
2. Readings 1, 2, 3
3. *Recommended: Map of Louisiana, with New Orleans marked*



Getting Started: Essential Question

How did the SPARs support the training and operations of the Coast Guard in New Orleans?

Photos



Figure 15: SPARs with a recruitment booth set up inside the D.H. Holmes Company, Ltd. Store, with six SPARs in attendance at the booth. Pictured in *The New Orleans Item* on May 4, 1943.



Figure 16: The Coast Guard insignia and motto behind the desk of Coast Guard and SPARs recruiting officer, Lieutenant F. H. Ahrens, who shows it to reporter Ann Meredith. Meredith was the author of Reading 1 in this lesson. Pictured in *The New Orleans Item* on January 6, 1943.



Figure 17: SPARs completing target practice with pistols at the Coast Guard barracks at Lake Pontchartrain. Chief Gunner's Mate Kenneth Kurtzman of the Coast Guard, and Seamen Second Class Elfrieda Spree, Natalie H. Jones, Joyce Fanning and Viola Dybdal. *The Times-Picayune*, May 23, 1943.

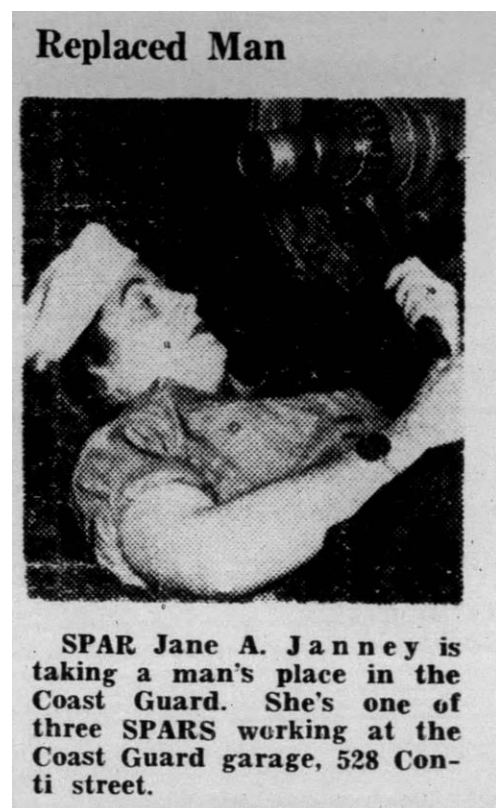


Figure 18: "Replaced a Man: SPAR Jane A. Janney is taking a man's place in the Coast Guard. She's one of three SPARS working at the Coast Guard garage, 528 Conti street." *The Old French Quarter News*, March 23, 1945.



By the numbers:

- On December 2, 1942, a newspaper announcement shared the beginning of enrollment in the SPARs in New Orleans. The national membership quota goal at the time was an enlistment of 4000 women in the SPARs. (*New Orleans States*, Dec. 2, 1942).
- Just under a year since the start of enrollment in the SPARs (November 1943), the SPARs had grown to a size of nearly 6000 nationally.
- The Eighth Naval District in New Orleans had grown to include 124 SPARs in active duty: 61 yeomen, 30 seamen, 29 carpenters, 2 coxswains and 2 radio operators. (*The Times-Picayune*, November 23, 1943)
- By November 1944, New Orleans had nearly 200 SPARs on duty. By the end of the war, over 10,000 women had served in the SPARs. (*New Orleans States*, November 23, 1944)



Quotation to consider:

“Brother and sister faced each other today in the United States Coast Guard recruiting office here with a single purpose – to give their best in that branch of Uncle Sam’s fighting forces.

Milton L. Fletchinger is a yeoman, second class. His sister, Miss Eleanor May Fletchinger, appeared as a volunteer candidate in the SPARs, new women’s organization of the Coast Guard. Her candidacy was sponsored by her brother.

By his action in helping his sister to become a SPAR, recruiting officers said, Yeoman Fletchinger took the chance that she some day may replace him in his office job, thus releasing him for duty eventually on the high seas. Conscious of the fact, Yeoman Fletchinger said: ‘I’m ready to go, any old time.’”

- “Brother Sponsors Sister Seeking Job in ‘SPARs,’” *New Orleans States*, December 7, 1942



Read to Connect

Background: The Coast Guard had a shortage of personnel when the United States entered the war. This led to the first women’s division of the Coast Guard, signed into law on November 23, 1942. The women who served were called SPARs. SPAR is an acronym for

the Coast Guard motto, “Semper Paratus – Always Ready.” Between 1942 and 1946, more than 10,000 women volunteered to be a SPAR. Use the article, “[United States Coast Guard Women's Reserve \(SPARs\)](#)” from the National Park Service to learn more.

Reading 1: Newspaper Article

A SPAR? She's a Top Flight Femme, Physically and Mentally, Scribe Finds

By Ann Meredith, in *The New Orleans Item*, January 6, 1943

Do you know what a SPAR is? Well, to me it was something on a boat.

Today, I am a living reliquary of facts, statistics, accomplishments and assorted addends relative to W(9) and W(10), the women's divisions of the United States Coast Guard. (Which, I discovered, is what a SPAR is.)

I learned it all by being thrown through the entire process, from recruiting office to finished product, by which a SPAR is born.

In An 'L' Shaped Room

The recruiting office is on the first floor of the Pere Marquette building: an 'L' shaped room, crammed with dozens of typewriters. Around the corner of the 'L' sits Lieut. F. H. Ahrens, Coast Guard and SPARs recruiting officer.

Lieutenant Ahrens greets the eager applicant, gives her a preliminary four-page questionnaire, and questions her for any obvious disqualifications.

For instance, an officer candidate must have a college degree, or two years of college with two years of business experience. She must be over 60 inches tall, weigh more than 95 pounds, and have 12/20 vision correctible to 20/20.

An enlisted woman needs a business or high school education, or its equivalent. She must pass the same physical test, though vision can be 6/20, correctible to 20/20 in one eye.

What's in the Name

If the applicant is still in the running, Lieutenant Ahrens explains the meaning of the name SPAR, wishes her good luck, and sends her over to the [WAVES](#) recruiting office for further examination.

The name SPAR comes from the Coast Guard motto, Semper Paratus - 'Always Ready.' - S-P-A-R, Simple?

At the WAVES recruiting office Lieut. Katherine Luna, senior WAVES officer, explains the close relationship between the two organizations. The SPARs, it seems, is a sort of sister

organization to the WAVES. Its members wear uniforms identical to those of the WAVES, but with Coast Guard insignia, and its rules and regulations are almost the same as those of the women's division of the Navy.

'Because it is new the SPARs has the advantage of still offering applicants the jobs they want, and probably in the places they want,' I was told.

Then the Examination

Next began the examinations. First an interview with one of the WAVES officers to see if I would make a good SPAR, and if so, in what position. Then a complete physical checkup.

After doing a very thorough check the nurse turned me over to my WAVES interviewer again, and I sat down in a little room equipped with table, chairs and an awesome stack of pencils. They placed before me a sealed aptitude and intelligence test.

That was just to give me the idea I couldn't take it, since I was not a bona fide SPAR applicant, but from its bulk and business-like appearance it must be quite a test.

The medical and mental examination papers are sent to Washington, Lieutenant Luna explained, and, if they're okayed, the applicant is in – either as an officer or enlisted woman, depending on what she applied for and what her qualifications are. 'Theoretically, you are now a SPAR,' my Coast Guard guide, Lieutenant Ahrens, told me.

Next is Training

'Now you head for a college training camp for 30 days as an apprentice seaman (salary \$50 a month, plus clothes, room, board and traveling expenses). Then, if you're an officer candidate, you take a three months' specialized officer's training course, after which you graduate as an ensign. If you fail it you may be discharged or else given enlisted status. Ensign's pay is \$150 a month, plus allowances, making it about \$216.

'An enlisted woman, as a third class petty officer, receives \$78 a month base pay when she starts active duty. It may increase to \$126, plus which, food, lodging and clothes are supplied or paid for.'

'What do they have to do to earn that?' I asked, slightly awed.

Room for All Types

'There's room for almost every type of worker in the SPARs,' was the answer. 'You could take the place of one of these men, typing or filing, or checking lists. That's the yeoman's job – just what most women have been doing in civilian life, probably for lower pay.'

Medical Aides Needed

‘Then if you have any medical training at all, or, are willing to take a course, you can be a pharmacist’s assistant.’ He took me into an office all in surgical white, where blood tests were being made, slides examined under microscopes, prescriptions compounded. ‘You could do these things – and the male assistant could be helping save men on the fighting front.’

‘But,’ said I, ‘I thought the Coast Guard just stayed around home waters. These men wouldn’t be doing much actual fighting even if they were on duty, would they?’

‘For your information,’ the lieutenant answered proudly, ‘Coast Guardsmen and Coast Guard set units have taken part in almost every theatre of operation side by side with the Army and Navy. The Alaskan skirmishes were on the Coast Guards’ regular ‘beat’ --- there were Coast Guardsmen decorated for valor on Guadalcanal – and Coast Guard transports and landing units figured prominently and effectively in the North African invasion.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘Anyway,’ he added, ‘there are 38 positions open to SPARs, including jobs as radio and airplane mechanics, bakers, telephone operators, librarians, photographers – just about anything a woman could have worked at in civilian life, and a few more.

‘There is even,’ he conceded, ‘room for a girl reporter.’

Questions for Reading 1, By the Numbers, Quotation to Consider, and Photos

1. Why do you think the author wrote a piece about the steps of enlistment from this perspective?
2. Identify different physical and mental requirements for SPARs mentioned in the reading. Why do you think the author wrote in such detail?
3. The author encourages women to join the SPARs by emphasizing that many military jobs are jobs women already held in civilian life. How does the article challenge and reinforce traditional gender roles?
4. How might this article have influenced women considering military service?

By the Numbers

5. What do registration numbers suggest about the growth of the SPARs during the war?

Quotation to Consider

6. How did Fletchinger support his sister’s decision to join the SPARs?

7. Why do you think the newspaper chose to highlight the story of a brother helping his sister join the SPARs? What does this example show about how some men viewed women joining military service and taking over jobs that could free men for combat duty?

Photos

8. What surprises and interests you about the photos? Would you have been interested in being in the SPARs?

Reading 2: Newspaper Article

Pull Their Weight

The New Orleans States, Nov. 23, 1944

Today 10,000 women of the United States Coast Guard SPARs will mark their second birthday by being on the job.

Today in New Orleans nearly 200 SPARs on duty here will look back with pride and fond memories at the two years that have passed since they donned their navy blue. As they recall their enlistment and their 'boot days' at Hunter college and Palm Beach, they will marvel at the transformation that has caused 200 young women from every walk of life and every state in the Union to weld themselves into a uniform, smart and efficient organization.

As the memories roll onward, they will view with pride of achievement the 76 different jobs now filled by SPARs – jobs once thought only for men – jobs needed and vital to the smooth functioning of the service that SPARs are doing in Coast Guard stations from Maine to Washington and Louisiana to Minnesota.

If perhaps a little of the glamour has worn off – none of the importance has. In every invasion and aboard ships of every fleet there are Coast Guard men adding to the might of the blow – because a SPAR is doing a job ashore.

It is important to the SPARs that they are not merely doing a 'war created' job, but one that is a standing operational function.

New Orleans has been proud to have these fine young women here as part of our military establishment. We are proud that many of our own daughters are in their ranks and we honor them today as befits the fine work they are doing.

In saluting them we do so in the words of their companions in arms when we say, 'The SPARs are pulling their weight in the boat.'

Questions for Reading 2

1. Why were the jobs performed by SPARs critical to the war effort?
2. What were some of the benefits of being a SPAR?
3. Consider the article. Why do you think the author wrote "perhaps a little of the glamour has worn off"?
4. Why do you think the article focuses on pride and service rather than challenges women may have faced?
5. What is the author's purpose in writing this article? Support your opinion with details from the text.

Photo



Figure 19: Kathleen Thomson Stoye as a SPAR cadet in New London, Connecticut in March 1943. Stoye shared that it was a publicity picture taken upon a ship called the Denmark. The ship was used as a training ship in the Coast Guard. Prior to meeting her husband, he, too, had been onboard the ship for training. (Credit: Library of Congress, Veterans History Project)

Reading 3: Oral History Excerpts

Background: Kathleen Thomson Stoye was interviewed on May 31, 2003, for the Veterans History Project with the Library of Congress by interviewer Chris Simon. The full interview

can be accessed [here](#). Subheading additions and light editing has been done for readability. Stoye's biography was also featured by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [here](#).

For supporting students in analyzing oral histories, you can use the [“Talking with the Past #2: Oral History”](#) video from the National Park Service to learn about analyzing oral histories as primary sources.

Oral History Excerpts: Kathleen Thomson Stoye

Kathleen Thomson Stoye (KTS): . . . I ended up as a full Lieutenant. After I got my commission, I was at Hunter College for a while and then I took our troop train of SPARs down to our training station at Palm Beach, Florida. Real tough duty. (Laughs) Where the Coast Guard had taken over the Biltmore Hotel and made it into a SPAR training station. Of course, they took out all the beautiful things and put in bunk beds and such, so it wasn't really glamorous except that it was a really beautiful place to be. I was there for two years and then when they were closing the station they gave me a choice - they gave everyone a choice, first, second third places - of where you'd like to go next. Of course, I expected to get my first, second or third choice, so I put down Alaska, Hawaii and Seattle, and they sent me to New Orleans. I felt like I was sent from the flatlands to the swamps. And I was there for a year as a morale officer.

Chris Simon (CS): A morale officer, what's that?

KTS: Actually, I was the assistant for a while until Lieutenant Boyle resigned. They have to do with all the recreation activities of the Coast Guards SPARs and servicemen in the area and furnish the equipment. The Chaplain is sort of attached to our branch of activities, and we put on parties once in a while to entertain the people. It was fun. . . .

Becoming a SPAR

CS: So when the war started, you would have already been out of high school?

KTS: Oh, way out, yeah. I was out of college. I had graduated from college in 1937, the University of California in Berkeley. . . .

At the time of the war I was working for Union Oil Company in San Francisco, in their offices, and looking out from our office windows we could see the battleships and we could see the airplanes and we had the fever to be involved with what was going on, and most of us there--most of us unattached girls--we were involved with USOs and junior officer clubs and canteens, and all that sort of thing.

So we were around the military people a lot, and I had a lot of friends that had gone into the service. Some of the ladies that were WAVEs had been good friends of mine. I kind of had the bug that I'd sure like to join them too, but I didn't quite figure out how I was going to manage it. By February of '43, I had decided that I wanted to go into service, and I went to go into the WAVEs and the personnel officer that interviewed me said, "Wouldn't you like to be a SPAR instead of a WAVE? Because we would like you to go into officers training and we need them right now. We're organizing SPAR officers and the first class to go to the academy, and I could get you in right away, but you'll have to wait about three months to get into the WAVEs, and I'm not sure where you'd go."

I think he really wanted to get this SPAR business built up, so I decided he was right, and I'd just as soon be there if that was where they wanted me to go. . . . I always had a fondness for the water and thought being in the service of any kind, I'd want to be in Navy or Coast Guard, either one, and we were used to seeing the military ships around. It was sort of like it was expected of me.

I wasn't sure how my parents were going to take it when I told them what I'd decided to do, and well, I was old enough to make up my mind. I was 27 by that time, and they were so proud of me for wanting to do it. My father said if he had had a son, he would have expected him to go for this, and he was real proud that I wanted to go. They didn't send me off with tears and sadness. They sent me off with joy and faith. . .

In the Coast Guard

CS: What did the guys that were in the Coast Guard think about you?

KTS: Some of them didn't like it at all, but most of them enjoyed it. They just liked the idea. I remember one boatswain, though they tried to teach the men and the women that our uniforms were what they had to respect, and the rank was what they had to respect, and so forth, and so they'd all learn to salute and say, "Aye, aye, sir" to uniforms, and this one boatswain didn't like to call us sir, naturally. We didn't like it either, at first, until we got used to it. Everybody called us sir and this guy would always say, "aye, aye, sir, ma'am." [laughs] He's the same one that when I was trying to get my troops to whistle a tune while we were marched down the street, he got up real close to me and said, "Only damn fools and boatswains can whistle in this man's Navy." So I calmed down and didn't whistle, at least not around him, anyway. But we had some fun.

CS: Did you serve with the men? Was it mixed, or?

KTS: Oh sometimes, yeah, like in the Morale Office. Under the Morale would be the shop where they made signs for things that did all the artwork and that kind of thing, and we had some neat guys that were good at that. One man had worked for cartoonists like Bugs

Bunny and things like that, so he was a real good one to have around. He did some beautiful stuff. . . .

CS: . . . So after Palm Beach you were assigned to New Orleans?

Kathleen Thomson Stoye: Yeah. I figured they'd sent me from the flatlands to the swamps and New Orleans was so dirty at that time, it was overrun with service people and, I don't know, it was old and I thought, this town is kind of yucky after being in Florida where it's all so clean and breezy and everything. I was tired of it because it was flatlands. I even cried when I heard John Charles Thomas singing "Hills of Home." I thought, gee, if all they need downtown in New Orleans is a big fire and a big flood to clean it out and they could just start over because they had garbage cans out on the streets and people would knock them over and nobody would clean it up. And it was just in a state of disrepair as far as I was concerned. But then I got an apartment with a couple of other SPARs and we were out in the Audubon area in St. Charles, which is pretty beautiful, old homes and stuff. Then I began to see the light that it was a beautiful place. I was there for almost a year. And then the war was over.

The End of the War

CS: Do you remember when you heard the war was over?

KTS: I remember walking down Canal Street, with all the excitement. It was just one big busy happy time.

CS: Was it like you see in the picture, where everybody was grabbing one another and kissing?

KTS: Oh yeah. I don't think there was a lot of, there wasn't quite as much as Times Square as they showed it to be, but it was wonderful.

CS: Did you think at that time that you would be leaving the SPARs, was that the intention?

KTS: Oh yes. We knew it was going to be over. And after the war was declared over, and the men were coming back for their jobs, and we were being released to go home. That was when they started asking us when we'd like to go, and I said as soon as you need to get rid of me.

CS: So there was no intention of the SPARs continuing?

KTS: Oh no. There were a few of them kept. I always figured it was sort of a clean-up crew that they kept in Washington, and probably some of the larger stations to do the final things. One of my friends, Marjorie McGay, was in Washington D.C. was in for quite a while after the rest of us were released.

CS: Were you sad?

KTS: I don't think so. I had just met my future husband about that time, so I was anxious to get home and get married. But before I met him, I was just joyous that everything was over and we didn't have to worry about Japan anymore. . . .

CS: Do you think that being in the SPARs shaped your life into a different direction than it would have been, aside from meeting your husband?

KTS: I don't think it really shaped my life any differently. It just made me more knowledgeable about what the military services do when they're not fighting a war. The very strong feeling I've always had is that they are the peacekeepers, not the warmongers that so many people think they are. Everything they do is to keep from going to war, to keep them from having problems. . . .

Questions for Reading 3

1. Why did Stoye decide to join the SPARs?
2. Where did Stoye serve as a SPAR and what were her roles?
3. How did Stoye's parents react when she told them she was joining the service?
4. What does the story about the boatswain show about some of the men's attitudes at the time toward women in the military?
5. How did Stoye's opinion of New Orleans change during the time she was stationed there?
6. How does Stoye's experience illustrate both opportunities and challenges for women serving in the military during the war?
7. Stoye stated that the military's role is to be "peacekeepers, not warmongers." How might her wartime experiences have influenced this perspective? Do you think others who served might have viewed the military differently? Explain.
8. How are oral histories helpful for understanding perspectives from the home front? What are some of their limitations?

Lesson Closing

Answer the essential question: How did the SPARs support the training and operations of the Coast Guard in New Orleans?

Continue your learning: Compare the experiences of SPARs with those of women serving or volunteering in other military branches during the war. What similarities and differences can you find?

Lesson 4: Comparing and Connecting WWII Home Front Cities

About this Lesson

This lesson is part of a series teaching about the World War II home front, with [New Orleans, Louisiana](#) designated as a [World War II Heritage City](#). The lesson contains photos, readings and a culminating project. The first reading shares the impact of wartime manufacturing and how it changed the workforce and industries in the city. The second reading connects the region to the designation of a Heritage City. An optional research activity supports further learning about the Higgins Boats that were built in New Orleans. The culminating project contributes to learners' understandings of New Orleans as a WWII Heritage City, with the opportunity to combine lesson themes from the three other lessons in the [lesson collection](#). This is to summarize the city's contributions and encourage connections to the overall home front efforts.

Objectives:

In a culminating product:

- a. Identify World War II home front defense industries and describe the historical impact to the Allied efforts.
- b. Explain the critical role of military bases in the area for home front training and defense.
- c. Describe the contributions of, and challenges faced by, Black and Caribbean service members and SPARs stationed in the region.
- d. *Optional:* Describe similarities and differences between New Orleans and other World War II home front city(s).

Materials for Students:

1. Photos: Figures 20-24 (*can be displayed digitally*)
2. Readings 1, 2
3. Maps, project materials (as needed)
4. Student graphic organizers (See Figure 25 at end of lesson, for reference)

- Create Comparison Matrices for your students to use. To compare two cities, create a one-page sheet with three columns and four rows. Label the left column Theme/Topic and the other columns City 1 and City 2. For a Comparison Matrix for three cities simply add an additional column.
- Create two Single-Point Rubrics to assist students' self-assessment. One is for assessing proficiency in meeting teacher-selected standards. One is for assessing proficiency in meeting objectives.
- For the rubric on standards, create a one-page sheet with three columns and four rows of content. Label the first column "Areas for Improvement," the second column, "Proficient (Meeting Standard)," and the third column, "Areas of Exceeding Standard." Leave the first and third columns blank. In each row of the second column identify a Standard and indicate a space for noting the evidence for meeting the standard. Include a space at the bottom of the page for assigning points for each column.
- For the rubric on objectives, create a one-page sheet with three columns and four rows of content. Label the first column "Areas for Improving toward Objective," the second column, "Proficient (Meeting Objective)," and the third column, "Areas of Exceeding Objective." Leave the first and third columns blank. In the four rows of the second column identify these four objectives:
 - a. Identify World War II home front defense industries and describe the historical impact to the Allied efforts.
 - b. Explain the critical role of military bases in the area for home front training and defense.
 - c. Describe the contributions of, and challenges faced by, Black and Caribbean service members and SPARs stationed in the region.
 - d. *Optional:* Describe similarities and differences between New Orleans and other World War II home front city(s).

Include a space at the bottom of the page for assigning points for each column. See the last photo of this lesson for reference.

Getting Started: Essential Question

Why was New Orleans chosen as a World War II Heritage City, and what are its similarities to and differences from other home front cities?

Photos



Figure 20: The photo shows a banner hanging on a building on Canal Street in New Orleans. The banner reads “Do your part – buy war bonds” and shows Uncle Sam holding up a war bond. March 1943. (Credit: Library of Congress)



Figure 21: “Salvage. Scrap metal. The magnet loader of a large Southern junkyard operates continuously to keep our steel mills supplied with the scrap metal needed to make the tools of war. Location: in a large New Orleans yard.” June 1942. Photo by Hollem Howard, Office of War Information. (Credit: Library of Congress)



Figure 22: New Orleans, Louisiana. Ramp boats on railroad cars. June 1943. Photo by John Vachon, Office of War Information. (Credit: Library of Congress)

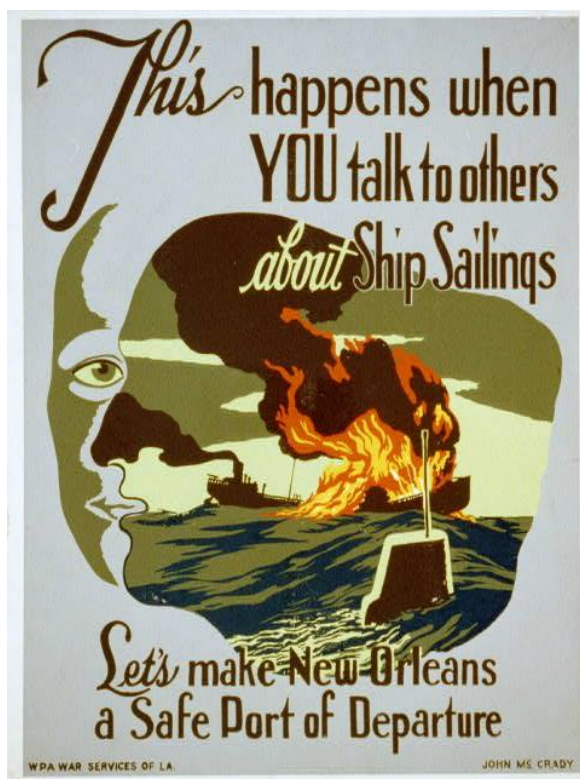


Figure 23: "This happens when you talk to others about ship sailings Let's make New Orleans a safe port of departure // John McCrady." WPA War Services, [between 1941 and 1943]. Credit: Library of Congress.

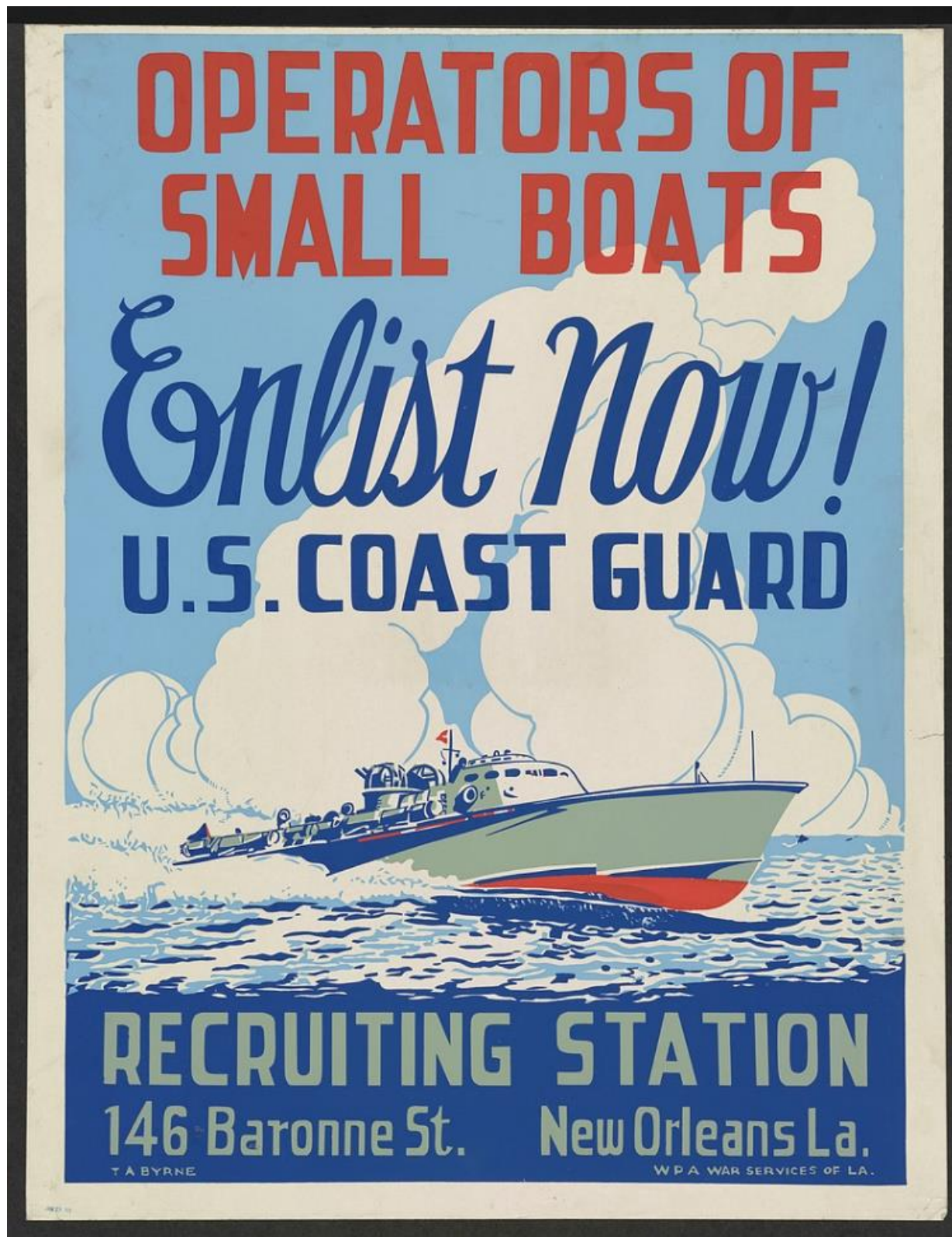


Figure 24: "Poster encouraging boat owners to enlist in the U.S. Coast Guard at the Recruiting Station, 146 Baronne St., New Orleans, La., showing a small Coast Guard boat." Byrne, Thomas A., artist. WPA War Services of La., [between 1941 and 1943]



Quotation to consider:

[Teacher Note: There have been reports that Ambrose may have exaggerated his contact with Eisenhower. You may wish to explore this topic further with students, with articles such as “[A Historian’s Responsibility](#)” from the Nixon Foundation. While Eisenhower’s quotation is not verifiable, it offers a reflection point for the importance of New Orleans to the war effort.]

“The first time I met General Eisenhower was in the spring of 1964, at his home in Gettysburg, Pa. He had asked me to become an editor of his papers. When we completed a discussion of what would be involved, he said he had noticed I was teaching at LSU in New Orleans. ‘Did you know [Andy Higgins](#)?’ he asked.

‘No, sir,’ I replied. ‘He died before I came to town.’

‘That’s too bad,’ Eisenhower said. ‘He is the man who won the war for us.’

My face showed the astonishment I felt at such a statement from such a source, so Eisenhower explained: ‘Without the Higgins’ boats, we could never have landed on an open beach. Had Higgins not designed and then built in such quantities the LCVP (Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel), the whole strategy of the war would have been different, and probably not successful. . . .’

The war years were wonderful years for New Orleans. The city had been as hard hit by the Great Depression as any in the nation, with an unemployment rate that sometimes went over 30 percent, but during the war the city boomed. Higgins, Delta, and other plants provided full employment and then some. Many of the workers were women, many were Black, holding full-time, well-paid jobs for the first time in their lives. Personal savings doubled, then doubled again. A steady job and money in the bank was something most New Orleans under 35 years of age had never before experienced. . . .”

- Stephen Ambrose, author and historian, and co-founder of the National WWII Museum in a lecture, “[New Orleans in the Second World War](#),” January 15, 1992.

Reading 1: Newspaper Article

New Era for New Orleans: City Tuned to Industry

The New Orleans Item, February 15, 1943

If there were no such thing as rationing, if civilian consumer goods were still being produced in restricted quantities, if people drove into gas stations and really said ‘Fill ‘er

up, Joe,' if A, B, and C books were something known only to kindergarteners, New Orleans would still be a vastly changed city as matters stand.

That is because by the end of the year something like 100,000 more people will be living in this city than resided here before we got to talking about 'defense industries' a couple of years back, and particularly because an overwhelming percentage of our population – old-timers and newcomers alike – are no longer leading the sort of occupational lives they led.

Shift to Production

The whole city, which was primarily a mercantile community in those days, is today an important center of production. Because most of this production is centered on direct war work, the number of firms so engaged and the number of persons they employ are military secrets, known to only a few highly placed WPB [War Production Board] executives. The same restrictions govern the additional growth of port commerce, which has been more than impressive.

But in the last analysis it is the change in the individual members of the working community which is bringing into effect a marked change in the city's character. Take the item of welders. Two years ago there were a few welders here, enough to make sugar mill machinery, automobile, and other such repairs. Today welders run into the thousands.

The Delta Shipyards

Delta Shipyards, for instance, was just an idea when the Maritime Commission let a contract to a New Orleans group on April 1, 1941, to build Liberty Cargo vessels. Yet the first keel was laid October 1, 1941, and the 38th completed Liberty ship was launched last week by this same organization.

Skilled welders made that possible. A very few came here from other cities. Most of those welders are our own folks – railroad clerks, auto salesmen, bookkeepers, bank messengers and the like – who learned welding, and who are craftsmen instead of white collar workers today.

Community Feels Difference

This will be even more evident before the end of the present year because at least one and probably two big airplane assembly plants will be in operation by then. One of these expects to employ about 30,000 individuals and expects further that 80 percent – about 24,000 – of these employees will be women. Naturally there are not that many trained women airplane assembly workers in and around New Orleans. The answer? Facilities to train women for this work are even now being organized, and by fall these girls will be doing their share in turning out planes.

Obviously a community with no skilled women production workers to speak of, and one which has thousands of them, will feel the difference in its civic makeup.

Even were it permitted to make public the information, it would be a task of extreme difficulty to determine just how much direct war work New Orleans firms are doing. The shipyards and plane plants, to be sure, are engaged exclusively in the production of use by the armed force of the nation.

Firms Change Product

But in the case of such plants as cotton mills, foundries, or box factories it would be something of a puzzle as to where to draw the line. A box factory might be making containers for civilian use, and containers for military use – and directional wooden fins for bombs like those which guided American missiles unerringly to their targets in Tokyo last April. A clothing firm might be making summer-weight suits for civilians and cotton uniforms for the Navy. A cottonseed mill would be turning out vegetable oil for civilian soap and cooking, as well as raw material for explosives to blast the Axis.

One New Orleans establishment, for example, is assembling fishing rigs for lifeboats – stout linen lines, artificial metal lures, steel wire leaders, and heavy hooks. They go into every lifeboat on a mercantile or naval vessel, every rubber life raft on a plane, and so on. If emergency makes it necessary, the lures can bring aboard to those adrift at the mercy of the elements, mackerel, dolphin, bonito or shark; all of them edible, and all of the type that strike avidly at artificial metal baits. And the assembly of those kits, which may save the lives of merchant seamen, or of aviators shot down by enemy action, is war production at work.

Most Workers Are Orleanians

The absolute amount of war production is not as significant to the future design of the city, however, as the fact that most of the men and women now employed in this work – much more than 90 percent of them – are and have been Orleanians. They are not outsiders coming to a boom town, ready to leave at a moment's notice. And since most of them were previously without the special skills that now earn them their livelihood, it is obvious that the New Orleans that is populated by men and women trained in productive crafts will not be the same as New Orleans of old.

New Orleans has been regarded in the past as a town which devoted more of its energies to entertainment – its own and that of visitors – than any other community in the Western hemisphere; but industrially and productively, as a slumbering giant. The men and women who are now engaged upon what is to most of them, as individuals, the greatest adventure of their lives, producing the weapons and munitions and transport facilities which will carry

defeat to history's most ambitious and ruthless project for world domination, may without realizing it [will] be the medium that startles the sleeping giant into permanently wakeful activity for the future.

Questions for Reading 1, Quotation to Consider, Photos

1. How did World War II change employment opportunities in New Orleans?
2. How did New Orleans's ability to produce a wide range of products demonstrate its importance as a home front city? Which items do you see as some of the most important during wartime and why?
3. Why did the city need training programs for women workers?
4. The author described the work as "the greatest adventure" in many workers' lives. Why might a newspaper in 1943 emphasize the benefits of war production?
5. What does the phrase "slumbering giant" suggest about how the author viewed New Orleans before the war?
6. Using this article and your knowledge of the city today, do you think World War II permanently transformed New Orleans? Why or why not?

Quotation to Consider

7. What does Eisenhower's statement that Andy Higgins "won the war for us" suggest about the importance of Higgins boats? How did the workers who designed, built, and tested those boats have contribute to that success?
8. How does Ambrose describe the positive impacts of wartime industries on the city?

Photos

9. How do the photos connect to what you know, or have learned, about war efforts on the home front? (*From the New Orleans lessons, and/or other lessons related to the home front*)
10. If you were to create an album of photos showing New Orleans during the war, and you had these photos to get started, what types of photos would you add to this collection?



By the numbers: Housing and population

- The population of New Orleans was 494, 537 in 1940. The population (within city limits) by 1950 was 570,445. (US Census)

- There were seven major federal housing projects in the city during the war, constructed between 1939 and 1942: six permanent and one temporary for military personnel. These housing areas were strictly segregated. The Lafitte housing project was built in 1941 and was the second largest housing project in the country for African American families. It had 896 units and housed approximately 3,000 tenants, costing over \$4 million.
- The increase in population during the war impacted local housing. George Danziger, chairman of war housing in New Orleans, was quoted, ‘For example, new contracts signed by Higgins Industries are requiring from 5000 to 7000 skilled workers, who must be sheltered.’ The article shared during 1944 a total of 69,000 borrowers received homestead loans aggregating \$19,112,604.13. (*New Orleans States-Item*, Jan. 2, 1945)

Reading 2: Heritage City Designation

Excerpt from: “[House Report 115-998](#), “To Direct the Secretary of the Interior to Annually Designate at Least One City in The United States as An ‘American World War II Heritage City,’ and for other purposes” (October 30, 2018)

“ . . .PURPOSE OF THE BILL

The purpose of H.R. 6118 is to direct the Secretary of the Interior to annually designate at least one city in the United States as an “American World War II Heritage City”.

BACKGROUND AND NEED FOR LEGISLATION

On December 7, 1941, military forces of the Empire of Japan attacked the U.S. Naval Fleet and ground bases at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. On December 8, 1941, one day after what President Roosevelt referred to as, “a date which will live in infamy,” the United States declared war against the Empire of Japan. Three days later, on December 11, 1941, Japan's ally, Germany, declared war on the United States. Sixteen million Americans, mostly young working-age men, served in the military during World War II, out of an overall United States population of 113 million.

While an unprecedented number of Americans served in World War II, the country drastically increased its war production on the home front, serving not only the needs of the armed forces of the United States but her allies as well--in what President Franklin Roosevelt called “The Arsenal of Democracy.” The combination of millions serving in the military, during a period of necessary and drastic increases in production, led to significant social changes on the American home front.

The World War II period resulted in the largest number of people migrating within the United States in the history of the country. Individuals and families relocated to industrial centers for good paying jobs out of a sense of patriotic duty. Many industrial centers became “boomtowns,” growing at phenomenal rates. One example, the City of Richmond, California, grew from a population of under 24,000 to over 100,000 during the war. . . .”

Questions for Reading 2 and By the Numbers

1. What was the purpose of the bill (H.R. 6118) according to the report?
2. What contributed to New Orleans being a “boomtown?”
3. Using By the numbers, describe examples of growth and development in the area.
(Note: Keep in mind the transient wartime residents in the area, such as service members, would not be reflected in the 1950 US Census numbers for growth.)
4. How might the rapid growth in population and industries during the war have created both opportunities and challenges for New Orleans residents?
5. Why do you think New Orleans was designated as a World War II Heritage City? Connect details from the bill and evidence from the first reading, and/or other readings from the New Orleans lessons.
6. Are there other cities you think of when considering home front contributions during wartime? Which, and why?

Optional Research Activity: Higgins Boats

Have students research how Higgins boats were designed and used during the war using media and written sources. Students may draw and/or label a Higgins boat, watch historical footage of the boats (such as this footage: “[LCVP Higgins Boat 1944 U.S. Navy Landing Craft Training Film 29784](#)”), or research the role they played in a specific battle. D-Day is the most well-known example, but there are several other examples of battles and invasions students can investigate.

As they explore, have them identify features that made the boats effective for amphibious landings and explain why military leaders considered them so important. An example article that could be used is, “[The patented boat that won the war](#),” from the United States Patent and Trademark Office. Students should also connect their findings to the thousands of workers at Higgins Industries in New Orleans who built the boats and supported the war effort. Conclude by having students share how the design, production, and use of Higgins boats built in New Orleans contributed to Allied success during the war.

Culminating Activity/Mastery Product

To demonstrate student understanding, support students in creating a final product that meets the following objectives:

- a. Identify World War II home front defense industries and describe the historical impact to the Allied efforts.
- b. Explain the critical role of military bases in the area for home front training and defense.
- c. Describe the contributions of, and challenges faced by, Black and Caribbean service members and SPARs stationed in the region.
- d. *Optional:* Describe similarities and differences between New Orleans and other World War II home front city(s).

Mastery products should be:

. . . **student-led**; Students work as individuals or in collaborative groups.

. . . **student-directed**: Students are offered a variety of choices for product type.

. . . **student-organized**; Teacher facilitates by providing students with the comparison matrices and/or resource links from throughout the series of lessons.

. . . **student-assessed**; Teacher supports student self-assessment and reflection by providing students single-point rubrics to assess for meeting standards and/or lesson objectives.

Note: Depending on time and scope, the comparison of New Orleans, Louisiana to another WWII Heritage or home front city(s) within the mastery product (objectives) may be omitted. However, comparing cities is recommended, as it connects students to a deeper understanding of the WWII home front.

Examples of mastery product choices include, but are not limited to:

- **Written**: Letter (opinion or informative), essay, poem, narratives, biography, articles, class book or children's book, speech or debate (then presented orally), blog / website, plaque or historical displays, pamphlets or rack cards
- **Graphic Organizers**: timeline, flowcharts, mind or concept content maps, Venn diagrams, comparison matrices, posters
- **Artistic Expression**: song, dance, theater (ex. skits), 3-D models, dioramas, photo journal, stamp and coin designs, visual art, architecture/building or monument, museum design

- **Media design and creation:** podcast, historical markers, social media content, interactive virtual maps or tours, infographics, video, comic strips or graphics, game design, slideshows, digital scrapbook

Please view the [NPS Heritage cities lesson collection](#) for information and resources on other cities.

Single-Point Rubric

Areas for Improvement	Proficient (Meeting Standard)	Areas of Exceeding Standard
	Standard: _____ Evidence of meeting standard: •	
	Standard: _____ Evidence of meeting standard: •	
	Standard: _____ Evidence of meeting standard: •	
	Standard: _____ Evidence of meeting standard: •	
Points		

Figure 25: Single-Point Rubric (Standards; Blank) [Teacher selects priority standards for assessment.] Courtesy of Sarah Nestor Lane

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