

Virginia and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

During World War II, Virginia specialized in defense industries and training that served the Atlantic theater. Old Dominion was home to especially critical naval production facilities and military bases, while Virginia's higher education institutions trained soldiers and civilians for the war effort. From war production and military training to volunteer efforts, each region of Virginia played a significant role on the World War II home front.

Mobilization: Military and Industry

The Chesapeake Bay area was at the center of Virginia's defense industry.

During the mobilization period, war production expanded dramatically. By 1946, the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company had produced over 400 vessels during six years of continuous work. Forty-nine of these ships were built specifically for the US Navy, which included eight 27,000-ton Essex-class aircraft carriers.¹ The Norfolk Navy Yard launched forty-two new Navy vessels and repaired over 7,000 ships between 1939 and 1945.²

The Langley Airbase in Hampton helped create high-speed aircraft during the war. To do this, they built

two high-speed wind tunnels for training and design purposes. These tactics helped to defend the Virginia coast against German U-Boat threats.³ Several military bases also guarded this major war production zone. Fort Monroe and Fort Wool acted as an interior defense to the shipbuilding yards in Hampton Roads. Fort Henry and Fort Charles, on the mouth of the bay, provided security for the Potomac River shipping access and the route to Washington, D.C.⁴



Some of the "Bedford Boys," from the 116th Infantry Regiment, during training in England in 1943. Courtesy of the National D-Day Memorial.

Northern Virginia saw a major increase in military activity and wartime production efforts as well. The Naval Torpedo Station in Alexandria was known for creating 9,920 Mark 14 Submarine Torpedoes during the war.⁵ The largest military installation in the region, however, was the Pentagon, built on top of an Arlington County swamp. Colonel Leslie R. Groves led the project, with the massive building

¹ Newport News, *Newport News during the Second World War, Authorized by City Council* (Newport News, VA, 1948), 31-32.

² Phyllis Hall, "Crisis at Hampton Roads: The Problems of Wartime Congestion, 1942-1944," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 101, no. 3 (July 1993): 406.

³ Joseph P. Freitas, *Virginia in the War Years, 1938-1945: Military Bases, the U-Boat War and Daily Life* (McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, Jefferson, North Carolina, 2014,) 57-58.

⁴ Terrance McGovern, *The Chesapeake Bay at War! The Coastal Defenses of Chesapeake Bay During World War II* (McLean, Virginia: Three Sisters Press, 2010), 6.

⁵ Freitas, *Virginia in the War Years, 1938-1945*, 12.

becoming a symbol for the scale of American war effort at home and abroad.⁶ Fort Belvoir also had a significant impact on the area. In 1939, the facility obtained 3,000 acres above Route 1 (south of Washington, D.C.) in order to build the Engineer Replacement Training Center (ERTC). By the end of the war, Fort Belvoir and the ERTC had trained over 147,000 engineer troops. At Fort Hunt, just south of Alexandria, over three thousand high value German captives were interrogated while escape tools for captured U.S. servicemen were secretly developed.⁷ NASA's Langley Research Center in Northern Virginia served as "aviation's premier theoretical research facility" during the war. Nearly every model of fighter plane that served in the war was tested and improved at the Langley Center.⁸

Northern Virginia also contributed to agricultural production that helped feed both the U.S. military and home front civilians. Fairfax and Loudoun counties were known for dairy, wheat, and corn crops. New farming technology boomed in the region during the war years, benefiting the industrialized farmer. Railroad and highway transportation were improved in the area to move agricultural commodities and other wartime materials through the area.⁹ In Richmond, tobacco continued to reign as the largest industry during the war. In 1941, the city produced 71,638,976,000 cigarettes, which represented one third of the nation's total.¹⁰

In Central Virginia, Charlottesville's University of Virginia played a critical role in the state's home front response. In 1942, students had the opportunity to join a volunteer unit at the beginning of the war to learn basic training to enter combat.¹¹ The university continued to expand, supporting the V-12 College Training Program where students could earn their degree and become officers. After completing the program, the students moved on to a four-month basic training course at the Quantico base. The state's capital, Richmond, housed the Naval Diesel School and Welder's School among other Navy sites. The Navy V-12 program established a unit at the University of Richmond, including a unit of the V-12 medical program housed at the Virginia School of Medicine and the School of Dentistry.¹²

The western part of Virginia was very active in producing defense materials. In the Bedford region, the Rubatex factory produced insulation for military planes and submarines as well as hoses for gas masks. The Hampton Looms Woolen Mill produced wool uniforms for the military. Belding Hemingway Textile Mill made rayon thread for parachutes, the Southern Flavoring Company transitioned to making parachute parts, and the Bedford Pulp and Paper Company focused on making paper and cardboard for shipping and ammunition.¹³ Bedford is also known for having the largest known D-Day loss per capita of any town in the United States. Twenty young Bedford men, known as the "Bedford Boys," lost their lives on a single day, June 6, 1944, on Omaha Beach.¹⁴

⁶ Charles W. Johnson, "V for Virginia: The Commonwealth Goes to War," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 100, no. 3 (July 1992): 372-373.

⁷ "[History: U.S. Army Fort Belvoir](#)," U.S. Army. "[POWs and Intel at Fort Hunt in World War II](#)," National Park Service.

⁸ [World War II and the American Home Front NPS Theme Study](#) (p. 135)

⁹ Brad Mehaffy, *New Runways, Terminal Facilities and Related Facilities at Washington Dulles International Airport* (United States Department of Transportation, Federal Aviation Administration, United States Army Corps of Engineers,) 3-11.

¹⁰ Francis Earle Lutz, *History of Richmond in World War II* (Dietz Press, Richmond, 1951,) 35.

¹¹ Jennings L. Wagoner and Robert L. Baxter, "Higher Education Goes to War: The University of Virginia's Response to World War II," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 100, no. 3 (July 1992): 402.

¹² Freitas, *Virginia in the War Years, 1938-1945*, 15, 33.

¹³ "[Bedford Boys Homefront Tour](#)," National D-Day Memorial.

¹⁴ "[Bedford County, Virginia](#)," National Park Service.

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

The five years between 1940 and 1945 saw steady statewide population growth of 4.3%, but the Hampton Roads area grew by 38.8%.¹⁵ The growth was largely a product of new people streaming in towards war production opportunities.¹⁶ At its peak, for example, Newport News Shipbuilding had 35,000 workers. Over 13,000 laborers worked to finish the Pentagon. With the influx of government workers, the Fairlington Neighborhood was created to alleviate overcrowding and house the Pentagon workers during the war.¹⁷

Women played a critical role in the war effort. Some women enrolled in the Engineering Science Management War Training program at Old Dominion University in Norfolk. The program taught women aircraft repair to help with the labor shortage in that field.¹⁸ In the shipbuilding industry, “Winnie the Welders” stepped in to provide crucial labor. Virginia women also played a major role in the military, with WAACS (Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps) stationed at the Nansemond Ordnance Depot located in Suffolk, Virginia. The women’s success led to Congress passing a bill in July of 1943 that changed their name to the WAC and granted them military privileges such as rank and pay. Women in the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services) program were stationed on the Virginia coast to help protect the Chesapeake Bay.¹⁹

Labor shortages on the Virginia home front were also filled by prisoners of war. The state constructed several large POW Camps, including Camp Patrick Henry, Camp Hill, Camp Ashby, Fort Eustis, and several smaller branch camps. Most POWs worked in camp maintenance such as food service, laundry, and sanitation. Prisoners near the coast worked unloading cargo ships at the port of Newport News. Camp Ashby, located at Virginia Beach, was the largest POW camp in the state, housing 2,230 prisoners throughout the course of the war. Ashby’s prisoners could choose to work in agriculture or non-military civil production, for which they would be paid. Some began to farm, while others worked in manufacturing at places like the Weaver Fertilization Company. During the camp’s existence, 477 German prisoners died with 56 of those being shot while attempting to escape the camp.²⁰

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

When not facing segregation in the defense workplace, Black Virginians experienced unequal pay and were relegated to menial tasks. Outside of work, Black Virginians faced Jim Crow conditions in housing and other public spaces. The ability for Black women to break into war industries was particularly difficult. White women and employers fervently fought against Black women being on the factory floors. Black women’s unions in Richmond had a difficult time securing manufacturing work for its members due to long standing prejudices that associated Black women with the service sector.²¹ Meanwhile, historically Black Colleges and Universities in Virginia became involved in the war effort to support the ‘Double V Campaign’ of ending racism and discrimination at home and abroad. The Hampton Institute’s president, Malcolm S. Mac Lean, initiated a program to speed graduation rates so that Black students

¹⁵ Forrest Wall, “German Prisoner of War Camps in Virginia during World War Two,” (Ph.D. diss., Carnegie-Mellon University, 1987,) 63.

¹⁶ Hall, “Crisis at Hampton Roads,” 405.

¹⁷ Freitas, *Virginia in the War Years, 1938-1945*, 43.

¹⁸ “[75 Great Moments in ODU History](#),” Old Dominion University.

¹⁹ Freitas, *Virginia in the War Years, 1938-1945*, 114-115.

²⁰ Ibid., 154-159.

²¹ Megan Taylor Shockley, *We, Too, Are Americans: African American Women in Detroit and Richmond, 1940-54* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 65, 67.

could assist the war effort more quickly, including in higher ranking positions in both military and civilian capacities.²²

Life on the Home Front

Virginians actively sought to support the war effort through volunteer war work. Residents volunteered as air raid wardens, while others rolled bandages for the Red Cross. Both young and old Virginians participated in salvage drives, rationing, victory gardens, and victory book campaigns (a national book drive that gathered millions of books for American soldiers). Virginians especially excelled at financially supporting the war. Richmond's Alpha Kappa Alpha, a historically Black Greek Life organization, held the most successful World War II war bond drive in the city, selling \$10,000 worth of war bonds and stamps.²³ In late 1942, *The Bedford Bulletin* reported that Bedford was the first municipality in Virginia to have 100% of its employees investing 10% of their gross pay into war bonds.²⁴

After the War

The military build-up during WWII, best symbolized by the Pentagon, signaled the importance of the federal government to Virginia's postwar economy. The mechanization of agriculture also freed large numbers of returning veterans for the retail and service economy, while prefabricated war worker housing became models for suburban sprawl in the postwar decades. The Black population shifted permanently to urban centers where war manufacturing jobs had been most plentiful, and their experiences during the war helped shape the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. As a state bordering the nation's capital, Virginia also became the site of numerous memorials, monuments, museums, and exhibits about WWII. These include the U.S. Marine Corps War Memorial and the National D-Day Memorial.

Places of World War II History

- **Bedford County:** As Virginia's designated World War II Heritage City, Bedford stands out for its manufacturing prowess and volunteerism. The "Bedford Boys," 20 young men who lost their lives on a single day during the D-Day assault, are commemorated in local memorials and museums, including the National D-Day Memorial.
- **Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company:** During WWII, Newport News built almost two hundred Liberty Ships alongside many other vessels, while also running the North Carolina Shipbuilding Company, one of the best emergency shipbuilders.
- **Fort Hunt:** Now part of [George Washington Memorial Parkway](#), Fort Hunt became a top-secret military installation (known as P.O. Box 1142) during the war that interrogated German captives and ran an escape and evasion program.

By McKenna Crews, supervised by Dr. Matt Basso. Adapted by Dr. Nicole Martin, a consulting historian with the National Park Service in partnership with the National Council on Public History.

²² Shaneka Oliver, "Black Student Protests in World War II, and the Historically Black Colleges and Universities in Virginia," (Thesis, University of Virginia, 2005), 4-5.

²³ Shockley, *We, Too, Are Americans*, 36.

²⁴ "Employees of Bedford 100 percent Bond Buyers," *The Bedford Bulletin*, October 29, 1942.