

Alabama and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

Alabama underwent major changes during World War II. Before the war, Alabama's economy was mostly agricultural. Wartime mobilization brought jobs and money to the state. Alabamians moved to urban areas and military bases for these jobs, changing the state's demographics. Rapid industrialization had many benefits but not everyone had equal access to the new opportunities.

Mobilization: Military and Industry



1 1943 view of Barin Field in Foley, AL. Credit: U.S. Navy, National Naval Aviation Museum, Emil Buehler Naval Aviation library

After the U.S. declared war in 1941, the military built and expanded facilities across Alabama. The mild weather and cheap, open land made the state a good place to train new recruits. Old sites like Fort McClellan in Anniston, Craig Field near Selma, and Napier Field near Dothan were all updated. Maxwell Field, the old Wright Flying School, trained over 100,000 American cadets, plus other Allied pilots. New facilities like Camp Rucker in Dale County and Camp Sibert in Gadsden were also opened. The Barin Airfield trained pilots in Foley, which is now a designated American World War II Heritage City. Camp Sibert was a Chemical Warfare Training Center where trainees learned to test and

decontaminate new chemicals. The African American Tuskegee Institute also built the Tuskegee Army Air Field. Alabama bases also held over 16,000 prisoners of war, many captured in North Africa in 1942. Rapid military expansion had a large impact on local economies, environments, and populations.

Wartime mobilization also rapidly industrialized many Alabama cities. Alabama ranked seventeenth in Defense spending, including \$600 million in government contracts. The largest increase was in existing steel industries, which led to weapon production. Four major companies in Birmingham had contracts to switch to military production. The Hardie-Tynes Manufacturing Company made almost all the precision motors for submarines and warships in the United States. Smaller cities also focused on weapons. Huntsville, for example, built the Redstone Arsenal. The plant produced 45 million pieces of weapons and ammunition over the course of the war. Infrastructure improvements from New Deal Programs like the Tennessee Valley Project made much of the industrialization possible.

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

The increase in military production brought new job opportunities for workers across Alabama. The most significant impact was the migration to the cities. 10% of rural whites and more than 25% of rural Black Alabamians moved to cities for new opportunities. Some moved out of state but many stayed in Alabama. Alabama's urban population increased by 57% during the war years. Small- and mid-sized

towns like Aliceville and Prichard City also doubled.¹ There were 46% more industrial jobs across the state.² Higher wages—sometimes three or four times what people made before the war—made jobs at these sites appealing. Women especially could find higher paying jobs. A woman who made \$800 a year teaching could now make up to \$3,600 as a welder in the Mobile Shipyards.

A major difficulty was housing the new workers coming to the cities. Some local governments built special temporary housing. They often still couldn't meet the demand. Most of the new housing built was segregated.

Urban migration also left a shortage of agricultural workers as cotton prices rose. Prisoners of war at military facilities across the state filled some of these gaps. In 1944, the work of 4,000 prisoners saved the state's \$38 million peanut crop. After the war, urbanization continued to affect Alabama's economy, including the shift to large-scale and mechanized agriculture.

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

In some ways, World War II entrenched existing color lines in Alabama.³ Many African Americans moved from being tenant farmers to working in wartime industries. They faced resistance from working-class whites and industrial owners. President Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802 banned discrimination in defense industries. Under NAACP pressure, the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company in Mobile promoted twelve Black welders. In response, a mob of 4,000 white shipyard employees and community members assaulted African American workers. The military was called in. The company put more segregation policies in place, seemingly to protect the Black community.⁴ Racial anxiety appeared in newspaper headlines, union pressure, and elsewhere throughout the state.

Yet Black Alabamians worked hard to support the war effort. In Birmingham, African American leaders organized a campaign to raise \$300,000 for a bomber. They named it the *Julius Ellsberry* in honor of Alabama's first Black serviceman killed in the war.⁵

The Tuskegee Army Airfield was among the most well-known Black contributions to World War II. The educational institute was the first and only all-African American pilot training center. The first five African American pilots earned their wings at Tuskegee in March 1942. About a thousand pilots would do so during the war. The 332nd Fighter Group flew successful combat missions in Europe and North Africa. The base was also where Black men and women worked in technical and support fields for the military. Soldiers and civilian personnel still faced discrimination and clashed with local white authorities. Overall, Tuskegee was a site of Black excellence.

Life on the Home Front

World War II caused upheaval in many facets of people's lives. Along the Gulf Coast, the US Navy ordered a "dim out," turning off all lights along piers, and beachfronts at night. They also limited fishing and recreational boating. German submarines justified the policy, sinking 50 vessels in the Gulf of Mexico between May 1942 and December 1943.⁶ This is the closest Alabama got to fighting.

The people of Alabama overwhelmingly supported the war effort, even as they had to sacrifice. Like other states, there was rationing, victory gardens and scrap drives. In Ozark, school superintendent Emma Flowers organized a "junior army" to collect metal and celebrated their efforts with a "scrap metal parade." USO Clubs, places to host soldiers for rest and recreation, opened throughout the state. There were two in Montgomery, one run by the YMCA and another by the National Catholic Community Service, for white soldiers. In 1942, the YWCA opened an USO for white women serving the armed

forces. These organizations showed Alabamians' support for soldiers and the persistent racial segregation throughout the war.

After the War

The end of the war had an uneven impact on the industries in Alabama. Some sites continued to develop. The Redstone Arsenal would become the Marshall Space Flight Center in 1958. Agriculture advances led to the first cotton crop planted, cultivated, and picked by machine in 1946 in Montgomery.

Today, several sites commemorate Alabama's contribution to World War II. This includes two warships in Mobile harbor, as well as forts like Fort Morgan and Fort McClellan.

Places of World War II History

- **Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, Tuskegee:** The training site of the Army Air Corps' first African American pilots and support staff. This site is part of the African American Civil Rights Network and coordinated by the National Park Service.
- **Fort Morgan State Historic Site, Mobile Bay:** Built in 1834, the Army constructed an airfield next to the fort and upgraded the fort in 1942 for World War II. World War II was the last time Fort Morgan was an active military base. It is now designated as a National Historic Landmark.
- **Foley:** Foley is a designated American World War II Heritage City. It was home to the Barin Field, which trained naval pilots and logged more flight hours than any other Naval training center. There was also a prisoner of war camp. Visitors can see the marker in Foley's Heritage Park.

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¹ U.S. Census Bureau, "1950 Census Analysis", <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1950/pc-02/pc-2-11.pdf>

² Allen Cronenberg, "World War II and Alabama", *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, <http://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1348>

³ Glenn Feldman, "Southern Disillusionment with the Democratic Party: Cultural Conformity and 'the Great Melding' of Racial and Economic Conservatism during World War II," *Journal of American Studies* Vol 43 No 2 (2009), 199.

⁴ Bruce Nelson, "Organized Labor and the Struggle for Black Equality in Mobile during World War II," *The Journal of American History* Vol 80 No 3 (1993), 952, 979. Ken Burns, "The Four Towns: Mobile"

⁵ Allen Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict: Alabama and World War II*, (The University of Alabama Press, 2003), 30-31.

⁶ Cronenberg, "World War II and Alabama."