

South Carolina and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

World War II helped lift South Carolina out of the Great Depression. The largely rural and agricultural state saw workers flock to urban centers to take advantage of growing defense industries. Although it was slow to obtain federal funding, the Palmetto State contributed to the home front by providing countless ships and soldiers for the Allied Forces. The war also helped energize the civil rights movement by highlighting ongoing racism that affected Black workers and soldiers.



Figure 1: "A U.S. Army Air Corps mechanic works on a BT-13 Valiant at Shaw Field, S.C., circa 1942." Courtesy Photo: Shaw Air Force Base

Mobilization: Military and Industry

Defense production industries tied to federal funding were generally not common in the Southeast in the early days of the war. As a result, South Carolina thrived with a small-but-growing industrial manufacturing sector. The state formed an Industrial Development Committee, which took credit for bringing "two fertilizer plants, a seafood canning plant, an asbestos plant, an iron alloy factory, and a shipbuilding facility to Charleston, a textile equipment factory to Greenville, a woolen mill to Union, and a shirt factory to Clinton" by 1941.¹ Although the committee had intended to spread the benefit of these industries across the state, a majority of the facilities were in Charleston, the state's largest urban area.

The Charleston Navy Yard, which expanded greatly during the war, stood at the center of the city's wartime efforts. Initially, the Yard built destroyers for the Navy but in 1943 shifted to making landing ship tanks and landing ship mediums, whose main purpose was to transport troops, tanks, trucks, and other supplies to the warfront. By the end of the war, the shipyard had made 157 landing crafts, 19 destroyers, and 15 seaplane derricks in addition to repairing numerous warships damaged in battle. The Yard received the Army-Navy E Award for Excellence. The Yard also provided construction, repair, and logistic support to operating forces, with thousands of soldiers, sailors, and airmen passing through its facilities on their way to war. In recognition of its importance, the Yard was designated as headquarters for the Sixth Naval District, which included South Carolina, Georgia and most of North Carolina. The city was also home to the smaller Charleston Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company (CSBDDC), which built fleet tugs, minesweepers, and other small vessels.²

In contrast to Charleston's shipyards, Columbia's WWII home front war effort came in the form of military installations. Fort Jackson, initially established as Camp Jackson in 1917, was perhaps the most significant. Construction completed in 1941 to expand the Fort cost \$22 million. The base enlarged its footprint to cover more than 53,000 acres and added 3,000 buildings. These expansions employed at least 8,000 civilian workers and made the Fort the third largest urban area in the state, behind Charleston and Columbia. Over the course of the war, 43,000 soldiers and eight army divisions were trained at Fort Jackson, presaging its role as the main training facility for the U.S. Army today.³

¹ Richard Phillip Stone, "Making a Modern State: The Politics of Economic Development in South Carolina, 1938-1962" (Ph.D. diss., University of South Carolina, 2003), 117.

² Peter Fritz Hamer, "A Southern City Enters the Twentieth Century: Charleston, Its Navy Yard, and World War II, 1940-1948," (Ph.D. diss., University of South Carolina, 1998), 44-48. Stone, "Making a Modern State," 123.

³ Andrew Myers, *Black, White, and Olive Drab: Racial Integration at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 7, 28.

Located in Camden, thirty-five miles northeast of Columbia, the Southern Aviation School trained cadet pilots. The school opened in March 1941, and over the course of three years, trained over 6,000 pilots, including almost 300 British pilots.⁴ Shaw Field, located in Sumter just east of Columbia, first trained air corps cadets in basic training and later switched to advanced training. By the end of the war, over 8,600 U.S. and Allied pilots had graduated from Shaw Field. Over a dozen Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) were also stationed at Shaw Field.⁵

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

At the outset of World War II, South Carolina was a predominantly rural state, with 75% of its residents residing outside urban areas and over 50% of the state's workforce engaged in agriculture. Thanks to an increased demand for cotton and produce, agricultural workers saw their wages nearly double during the war.⁶ POW labor, largely from Fort Jackson's 2,000 German prisoners, helped harvest peanuts and cotton and proved crucial for filling labor shortages caused by rural residents leaving for higher paying jobs in urban centers.⁷ According to one estimate, at least 55,000 people moved to the Charleston area in the wartime period, with the population rising 85% between 1940 and 1943. Employment at the Charleston Navy Yard steadily increased from 10,000 in 1941 to 28,000 by 1943, helping to make the per capita income in Charleston almost three times the rest of the state's. This migration also exacerbated housing shortages, as new construction lagged well behind demand.⁸

Women in particular gained new opportunities as workers during the war. They were first hired at Charleston Navy Yard in 1943 and were given a five-week mechanical training course at the Murray Vocational School. There they learned soldering, drilling, die casting, pattern making, grinding, and welding— all skills necessary for successful shipbuilding. At their peak, women comprised 20% of the Yard's workforce, with approximately 6,000 women on the payroll. While the Yard employed a few Black workers before the outset of the war, their numbers only slowly increased throughout the war. The lack of wartime job opportunities for Black workers meant that the city saw far more white people moving in to take advantage of wartime opportunities. As a result, the population of nonwhite residents dropped from 49.2% in 1940 to 38.9% in 1944.⁹

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

Anti-Black racism was a major problem throughout the state. Due to the legacy of racism, Black residents lacked access to educational opportunities and jobs that provided the valuable skills required for more lucrative wartime jobs. South Carolina's Jim Crow customs also made white workers reluctant to work alongside Black workers, and Black men were often only hired in unskilled and semiskilled positions.¹⁰ Black women were hired in even lower numbers, and many Black women continued to work

⁴ Gilbert S. Guinn, "[Southern Aviation School](#)," South Carolina Encyclopedia.

⁵ "[Sumter City and County, South Carolina](#)," National Park Service.

⁶ Peter Fritz Hamer, "[World War II](#)," South Carolina Encyclopedia.

⁷ Myers, *Black, White, and Olive Drab*, 10.

⁸ Amy Thompson McCandless, "Extended Horizons: Lowcountry Women in World War II," in *Citizen-Scholar: Essays in Honor of Walter Edgar*, ed. Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 180. "[Naval Base History](#)," City of North Charleston.

⁹ McCandless, "Extended Horizons," 185, 186. Hamer, "A Southern City Enters the Twentieth Century," 80.

¹⁰ Peter Fritz Hamer. "Julia and Alice Delk: From Rural Life to Welding at the Charleston Navy Yard in World War II" in *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times*, ed. Joan Marie Johnson et al. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 97.

in domestic roles. In general, the war failed to significantly improve the economic conditions of the state's Black women.¹¹

One of the worst incidents of racial intimidation in South Carolina during the war started on April 20, 1941, when a fight between white Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) workers and Black soldiers stationed at Fort Jackson broke out. The conflict began when the soldiers were swimming in a lake and tried to use a diving platform that the CCC workers were using. The white workers saw this attempt as a gross violation of Jim Crow white supremacy and fought with the soldiers. After the initial fight, rumors started spreading that a white man was killed, and between 65 and 75 white members of the Georgia National Guard grabbed rifles and ammunition before heading to the Black soldiers' barracks. Military police broke up the crowd. However, two hours later a group of 400 white men descended upon the Black soldiers' barracks once more and fired into the barracks. Military police arrived again to send the white men back, and they maintained a continual presence to prevent future violence.¹²

Life on the Home Front

South Carolina residents eagerly participated in war bond drives, collected scrap metal, grew victory gardens, and volunteered with the Red Cross, including children in the Junior Red Cross. In 1943, students at Edmunds High School in Sumter City invested enough money in war bonds and stamps to purchase twenty-one jeeps for the U.S. Army. Edmunds ended up fulfilling one third of the state's total goal of jeeps purchased.¹³ South Carolinians were less thrilled by gas rationing, believing they bore the brunt of it since it began on the East Coast. Leisure sites such as United Service Organizations, restaurants, and movie theaters remained segregated throughout the war.

After the War

South Carolina continued to transform from a rural farming state into a more economically diverse state in the postwar era. The GI Bill helped maintain a strong economy with free education and low-interest loans for former, especially white, servicemen. New roads and affordable cars helped boost coastal tourism, and the Cold War revitalized military infrastructure and jobs. Most white South Carolinians expected Jim Crow to stay in place. However, the racial conflicts of the home front years, as well as the tragic 1946 beating and blinding of the Black veteran Isaac Woodward by a South Carolina police chief, proved instrumental to the civil rights struggles that spread across the South in the 1950s and 1960s.

Places of World War II History

- **Sumter City and County:** South Carolina's designated World War II Heritage City is best known for training over 8,000 pilots at Shaw Field, as well as the civilian population's active volunteer participation in the war effort.
- **Charleston Navy Yard:** Now a historic district and [memorial](#), the almost 50,000 workers of the Yard built some 200 vessels of all sorts, and many more were repaired during the war.

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¹¹ McCandless, "Extended Horizons," 195.

¹² Myers, *Black, White, and Olive Drab*, 25.

¹³ "[Sumter City and County, South Carolina](#)," National Park Service.