

Louisiana and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

Due to its expansive waterways, Louisiana played a significant role during World War II. The Pelican State served as a major port of embarkation for soldiers, cargo, and supplies. More than one third of all Americans who served in the war travelled through Louisiana for training or deployment, and the state hosted over 40 POW camps. Louisiana was also known for its defense manufacturing, particularly the 20,000 boats produced by Higgins Industries that enhanced Allied troops' ability to move ashore.¹

Mobilization: Military and Industry

Louisiana's unique heritage propelled it to prominence. In 1926, Andrew Jackson Higgins designed his revolutionary flat boat, the Eureka, after studying the low, flatbed swamp boats used by Cajun trappers in Louisiana's bayous.² With a recessed propeller and spoon-shaped prow, Higgins's boats could roam shallow waters and make easy beach landings. In 1940, the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps ordered more than 2,000 Higgins boats. Officially named the Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel (LCVP), they became one of the most significant vessels in the Allies' eventual victory. A total of 23,358 LCVPs were delivered to both oceanic theatres between 1942 and 1945. Higgins met these goals through the assembly line, and by hiring Black workers at unprecedented levels for the segregationist South at his 12,000-acre shipyard.³



"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.

Wartime success was also enjoyed by other New Orleans businesses. After the merger of Consolidated Aircraft and the Vultee Aircraft Corporation, the newly minted Convair company, though based in San Diego, selected New Orleans for its PBY Catalina seaplane patrol bomber production. This became the most widely produced military seaplane in history. New Orleans also hosted many smaller material providers. Artillery shell casings came out of Rheem Manufacturing in Jefferson Parish, lifeboats cruised out of Neptune Boat and Davit Company, and tugboats chugged from Avondale Marine Ways. Other area businesses included trouser-maker Edwin H. Blum Company; rope-maker Federal Fiber Mills; Snider Poster Process Company, which made airplane decals and instrument panels; the National Blow and Pipe Manufacturing Company; and Crescent City Bed Company. The last of these made Liberty Ship construction berths, much in need as the local Delta Shipbuilding Company

¹ [New Orleans, Louisiana](#), National Park Service.

² Jason P. Theriot, "Cajun Country During World War II," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 51, no. 2 (Spring 2010), 157-158, 159, 162.

³ Peter Neushul, "Andrew Jackson Higgins and the Mass Production of World War II Landing Craft," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 39, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 145-148, 161.

expanded greatly during the war. At peak production, Delta's workforce of 7,000 could construct a ten-thousand-ton cargo vessel every sixty-seven days.⁴

Shreveport, in the northwestern corner of the state, advanced the war effort in numerous ways. Nurses and pilots trained at the local Centenary College. The Barksdale Air Force Base served as a major hub for bomber training and hosted an Army Air Force Chemical Warfare Training Center staffed largely by Black second lieutenants. Shreveport's largest impact came through explosives manufacturing. In addition to its versatile J. B. Beaird Company—a producer of fuel tanks, anchors, and shell casings—Shreveport hosted the Louisiana Ordnance Plant, which delivered more than 100 million munitions. Meanwhile, the Lee Manufacturing company made pants and jackets under contracts totaling \$82,000.⁵

Shreveport also became the northern boundary for the Louisiana Maneuvers, a series of war games where the likes of General Eisenhower and General Patton honed their tactics. From September 15-28, 1941, nineteen divisions took part in the Louisiana Maneuvers, with each of the two participating "armies" topping 100,000 troops, making them the largest mock training battles ever conducted in the U.S. at the time. While tanks bogged in the tough terrain, aircraft excelled at new mock missions. Up to a thousand planes practiced dog fights, dive bombs, and strafing techniques, while ground troops trained with anti-aircraft strategies, and as many as 14,000 paratroopers learned air support lessons.⁶

As a Gulf State, Louisiana experienced offshore warfare that affected the state's shipping and industry. The Bayou Sale Oil and Gas Field, near Franklin, piped out some three million barrels of oil by 1944, but progress in the oil business was hard-won. Based in the state's southern wetlands, Texaco saw five of its oil tankers sunk by U-Boats, which claimed the lives of ninety-seven crew. Several of the flaming disasters unfolded before helpless Texaco employees on the shore.⁷

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

Higgins's workforce topped 20,000 employees, 80 percent of whom were women, and 40 percent of whom were African American—and all received equal pay. It was the largest integrated workforce in the South. While this egalitarian policy rankled neighboring businesses, none could threaten Higgins, as the company was making \$144 million per year by 1944.⁸ More than 6,000 workers staffed the Convair factory in 1944, with many coming from the company's own training programs, which included a notable 16-18-year-old "boy labor" contingent. 40 percent of workers were women, who reportedly received the same pay as men—a ripple effect from the Higgins plant. Even though hourly wages at the plant were generally lower than the national average of ninety-five cents for factory workers, skilled and semi-skilled Black workers at Convair made double the legal minimum wage of thirty cents.⁹

⁴ Craig Bauer, "'But what a plane!' New Orleans and the Manufacturing of the Iconic PBY Catalina Patrol Bomber in World War II," *The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 61, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 165. 170-72. Theriot, "Cajun Country in World War II," 157-158, 159, 162.

⁵ Katelyn Woodel, *A Red River City During War: Shreveport, Louisiana's Experiences During World War II* (M.A. thesis, University of New Orleans, 2020), 2-20.

⁶ G. Patrick Murray, "The Louisiana Maneuvers: Practice for War," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 13, no. 2 (Spring, 1972), 117-128.

⁷ Theriot, "Cajun Country in World War II," 152, 157-158, 159, 162.

⁸ John A. Heitmann, "The Man Who Won the War: Andrew Jackson Higgins," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 34, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 39-44.

⁹ Bauer, "PBY Catalina Patrol Bomber," 185.

Louisiana also relied on a steady flow of enemy POWs to fill labor shortages. With roughly 280,000 citizens joining the armed services, Louisiana's 150,000 farms, which covered nearly one-third of the state—or close to one million acres—needed the POW labor.¹⁰ Louisiana Cane Growers successfully lobbied to end a federal law prohibiting the placement of POWs within 150 miles of the coast. Farmers of rice, cotton, and sugarcane ultimately employed some 20,000 prisoners, paying them up to \$1.50 per day.¹¹ Regional military bases, including Fort Polk, Camp Livingston, Camp Claiborne, Camp Ruston, and the New Orleans Port of Embarkation, all supported work-release programs. Prisoners were dispatched to sub-camps throughout the state.¹² Some planters worried that seeing white POWs doing work historically associated with Black workers would break down socially constructed barriers, even as they supported a war effort against race-obsessed Nazism.¹³

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

While Higgins set a new standard in race-neutral hiring, race issues still permeated the Deep South state throughout the war. In Shreveport, Mayor Sam Caldwell defied the Federal Works Administration's order that 12 percent of workers be African American and instead required all public health construction work be done by white workers.¹⁴

In the predominantly Black area of Alexandria, a white military policeman arrested an off-duty Black soldier for alleged disorderly conduct, sparking what would be known as the Lee Street Riot in 1942.¹⁵ Official reports listed three wounded African Americans, while witnesses claimed as many as 20 people were killed. The event led to the belated creation of a Louisiana state guard.¹⁶ Yet little changed in the way of social attitudes. When the U.S. Supreme Court banished Louisiana's white-only primary in April 1944, a dozen local Black leaders who had lobbied for the decision were kicked out of the town of New Iberia. White mobs and police beat four of the leaders, causing one death.¹⁷ The "New Iberia Incident" was a concentrated flashpoint among other forms of racism. A 1942 study found that Louisiana spent on average \$66 for each white child in public schools, and just \$15.50 on each African American child. New Orleans led the charge toward change, as its Black teachers pushed for equal pay. They set up *McKelpin vs. Orleans Parish School Board*, which ultimately eliminated race-based salaries in the city.¹⁸

At Southern University in Baton Rouge, longtime president Felton Grandison Clark advocated for Black students as a wartime asset. Dr. Clark convinced the U.S. Department of War to designate Southern as a regional defense training center. Achieving this unprecedented victory for a Deep South Historically

¹⁰ The National WWII Museum, "The Pelican State Goes to War: Louisiana in World War II, presented by The Alta and John Franks Foundation" (2017), 1-5. Ronald N. Brady, *The Use of German Prisoners of War in Louisiana's Agricultural Labor Force, 1942-1946* (MA thesis, University of New Orleans, 2016), 2-4.

¹¹ Theriot, "Cajun Country in World War II," 148-149.

¹² Brady, *German Prisoners of War*, 14-15.

¹³ Matthew J. Schott, "Prisoners like Us: German POWs Encounter Louisiana's African-Americans," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 36, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 286-287.

¹⁴ Woodel, *A Red River City*, 24.

¹⁵ Barry M. Stentiford, "Forgotten Militia: The Louisiana State Guard of World War II," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 45, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 325-328.

¹⁶ "[City Erects Marker Recognizing Lee Street Riot of 1942](#)," City of Alexandria, Office of Mayor Jeffrey W. Hall, February 26, 2021. Stentiford, "Forgotten Militia," 325-331.

¹⁷ Adam Fairclough, "Racial Repression in World War Two: The New Iberia Incident," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 32, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 183.

¹⁸ Jerry Purvis Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II: Politics and Society, 1939-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 186-188.

Black College or University (HBCU), Dr. Clark continued to overhaul the school into a virtual factory for Black industrial leadership. Courses were offered in welding, nursing, electronics and more.¹⁹ The university's Home Economics program turned out socks, sweaters, and other accessories for Black members of the armed services.²⁰

Life on the Home Front

Louisiana residents supported the home front in a variety of ways. Civilians organized blackouts and air raid warnings, which were especially useful for local defense on the Gulf Coast near active U-boat warfare. Louisianans also excelled at collecting scrap metal and war bond drives. A dozen children at a one-room school in Zimmerman collected 55 tons of scrap metal in 1942.²¹ In New Orleans, Black civic groups and organizations purchased over \$5 million in war bonds, while Convair purchased \$500,000 in war bonds. Residents met food rationing by cultivating Victory Gardens and embracing less traditional local meats such as alligator, catfish, and muskrat.²²

After the War

The war accelerated Louisiana's transformation from a largely rural economy to one based around industrialized and port economies. While many of the military training camps were abandoned or reduced in size, factories and oil refineries expanded rapidly in the postwar era. Farm mechanization also drove populations to the state's urban centers. Opportunities that women and African Americans found during the war, in tandem with ongoing discrimination, helped lay the groundwork for future fights for equality. Louisiana often led the way in the Civil Rights Movement, including holding the movement's first bus boycott in Baton Rouge in 1953. In 2003, the U.S. Congress designated New Orleans' new National D-Day Museum as the country's official National WWII Museum, which has welcomed over 8 million visitors over the past twenty years.²³

Places of World War II History

- **Higgins Industries:** Based in New Orleans, the state's designated World War II Heritage City, the company produced the famous "Higgins boats" that allowed Allied troops to successfully storm beaches. Higgins was also known for having a racially integrated workforce of over 25,000 men and women, who built over 20,000 vessels.
- **Camp Claiborne:** Today all that remains of this once thriving and massive military training camp are markers and signs in the Kisatchie National Forest. Divisions like the 101st Airborne and the 761st, a predominately African American tank battalion, trained here, as well as specialized forestry and engineer battalions.

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¹⁹ National WWII Museum, "Pelican State Goes to War," 8.

²⁰ Marcs Cox, "'We Are All Louisianians and by That Sign All Americans': Negro Defense Training, Leadership, and War Activities at Southern University during World War II," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 48, no. 4 (Fall, 2007): 416-428.

²¹ National WWII Museum, "The Pelican State Goes to War," 5-6.

²² Bauer, "PBY Catalina Patrol Bomber," 176-179, 189. [New Orleans, Louisiana](#), National Park Service.

²³ Debbie Elliott, "[The First Civil Rights Bus Boycott](#)," NPR, June 19, 2023. [New Orleans, Louisiana](#), National Park Service.