

New Jersey and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

During World War II, New Jersey became one of the most important sites of industrial defense production, receiving over \$12 billion in wartime contracts.¹ Its plants produced aircraft engines, propellers, ordnance equipment, tools, machinery, chemicals, and drugs, as well as electrical, rubber, plastic, and textile goods.² Through the sacrifices and labor of many New Jersey residents, including immigrants from the American South and Caribbean, the Garden State became a pillar of the war effort.



"Greetings from Paterson N.J." Credit: Library of Congress

Mobilization: Military and Industry

New Jersey was home to many military installations when the war started, yet none could adequately meet the military's need to activate troops quickly. In response, the military acquired land from 47 owners in Piscataway Township to build Camp Kilmer. 11,400 union workers built the camp in under nine months, erecting more than 1,100 buildings, 310 acres of rail line, and 28 miles of road. Camp Kilmer prepared troops to ship out for the war front from the New York Port of Embarkation. The camp held a daily troop capacity of up to 50,000 at the height of the

war. In total, almost three million soldiers and civilians passed through the camp during the war. Activities for GIs were held weekly, including WPA and USO variety shows. Military historians believe that Camp Kilmer was the first U.S. Army establishment to use camouflage as a defense strategy. "Dazzle-painting" or bright, contrasting colors were used on the shingled roofs of all camp structures, making it look from the air like clusters of small houses, rather than large warehouses or barracks.³

As a coastal state, New Jersey had to contend with German U-boats attacks on military- and civilian-owned Allied ships off the East Coast. On January 25, 1942, a German sub torpedoed the tanker *Varanger* twenty-eight nautical miles east of Wildwood. Residents reported that "the explosion shook windows in Sea Isle City and could be heard in Atlantic City." Sometimes coastal residents could see the flames of sinking tankers. Partially responsible for the success of the German U-boat attacks was the military's initial hesitancy in enforcing blackouts in coastal resort towns. The experiences of these attacks left an indelible mark on New Jersey residents, instilling in them a stronger patriotic resolve to assist in the war effort.⁴ Coastal Atlantic City, for example, made various deals with the US military to transform the city's beaches and Jazz Age hotels into an epicenter of training and troop rehabilitation.⁵

¹ Patricia Chappine, "Continuity in New Jersey Women's Activism from Suffrage Through World War II," (PhD diss., Drew University, 2017), 164.

² Barbara M. Tucker, "Agricultural Workers in World War II: The Reserve Army of Children, Black Americans, and Jamaicans," *Agricultural History* 68, no. 1 (1994): 55.

³ Kimberly A. Tryba, "Palimpsest: The Cultural Landscape of Camp Kilmer on Livingston Campus, Rutgers University—New Brunswick," (MA thesis, Rutgers University, 2018), 40-42, 47-48, 58-60, 68-69, 72-75.

⁴ Marc Mappen, "When New Jersey Was a Nazi Target," in *There's More to New Jersey than the Sopranos* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 168-71.

⁵ Chappine, "Continuity in New Jersey Women's Activism," 147-148.

Camden, located in South Jersey, stood as an industrial giant, employing 36,000 workers in its shipyards, which built some of the nation's largest warships. Over the course of the war, Camden's New York Shipbuilding Corporation was one of five American firms to receive a combined total of \$100 million in Navy funds.⁶ Camden was also home to the Campbell Soup Company Plant No. 2, which produced a significant portion of the C rations used to feed the armed forces. Sales doubled over the course of the war from 65 million dollars per year to over 138 million, in part through government contracts but also through increased homefront sales. Tin shortages due to defense production led many food companies to a crisis in homefront sales. However, through the maneuvering of company executive William Beverly Murphy, who served on the War Production Board in Washington, Campbell was able to avoid the tin shortage when Congress passed legislation that allowed for *condensed* food products to continue receiving their required allocations of tin plates.⁷

In North Jersey, Paterson had 300 defense industries, with the two most significant being silk and aircraft manufacturing. A group of Paterson firms called the Allied Textile Printers (ATP) pivoted from silk production to nylon due to wartime rationing and the disruption of Asian supply chains. Meanwhile, Paterson's Curtiss-Wright Corporation built 142,840 aircraft engines, 146,468 electric propellers, and 29,269 aircraft by the end of the war. To meet these manufacturing milestones, the corporation employed over 50,000 workers and built over 2.3 million square feet of new manufacturing space.⁸

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

To fill labor shortages, New Jersey women acquired factory jobs in unprecedented numbers during the war. Some women held jobs at Turner Tubes in Highland Park or Richardson Battery in New Brunswick. As noted by historian Patricia Chappine, "The Eastern Aircraft Division of General Motors formed a significant wartime production facility with plants in Trenton, Linden, and Bloomfield, New Jersey. Women were involved in the manufacture of Wildcat fighters at the Linden facility, Avenger Bombers in Trenton, and various electrical items and decals at Bloomfield."⁹ POW labor also helped fill labor shortages in industrial manufacturing. POWs imprisoned at Fort Dix, a major U.S. Army Training facility southwest of Trenton, worked at P.J. Ritter, a cannery, and L. Rokeach and Sons, a kosher food-packing plant. Most significantly, however, POW labor was used on local farms.

New Jersey had a thriving agricultural economy and was a leading producer of eggs, poultry, milk, fruits, and vegetables during the war, despite ranking forty-fifth among the states in land area. In addition to POW labor, farmers employed children, Jamaicans, southern white women, and African Americans. In 1942, over 10,000 boys and girls worked on farms as "Victory Farm Volunteers." Farmers used "the day haul system," which transported children back and forth daily between school and various local farms that needed extra hands. Outside school hours, state law permitted children 12 and over to work in agriculture, but farmers frequently violated this age limit. In the summer of 1942, inspectors found that almost every farmer in the Burlington area knowingly employed underage or undocumented children.¹⁰

⁶ Thomas Heinrich, "Fighting Ships That Require Knowledge and Experience: Industrial Mobilization in American Naval Shipbuilding, 1940-1945," *The Business History Review* 88, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 278-289.

⁷ Daniel Sidorick, *Condensed Capitalism: Campbell Soup and the Pursuit of Cheap Production in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 68-71.

⁸ "[American World War II Heritage City](#)," Paterson Great Falls National Historical Park, National Park Service.

⁹ Chappine, "Continuity in New Jersey Women's Activism," 149, 153-154.

¹⁰ Tucker, "Agricultural Workers in World War II," 55-60, 64-66.

In 1943, New Jersey farmers still faced a shortage of 11,000 hands. The government recruited southern white single women and families to work in canneries. Large, integrated farming and food processing enterprises, such as Seabrook Farms and Deerfield Packing Corporation in the Burlington area, recruited mostly southern Black workers. In April 1943, the Department of Agriculture made a deal with the Jamaican government for the immediate importation of up to 10,000 farm hands. Immigrants worked on farms in Bridgeton, Burlington, and Swedesboro. These workers, all single men, lived in a CCC camp leased from the federal government.¹¹

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

The war began less than a year after United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) Local 80 won its campaign to be the company's official union in Camden. As the war began, the Local took a no-strike pledge during the duration of the war. However, workers noticed how Campbell was reaping large profits off the backs of patriotic war workers. In 1940 and 1941, they successfully negotiated for two weeks of vacation and a slight increase in pay. Campbell, in turn, worked with the War Manpower Commission to bring in laborers from Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Barbados, which helped the company avoid union rules and labor rights. Jamaicans suffered some of the worst conditions and harshest treatment by bosses. While Puerto Ricans were American citizens, the government did not recognize this as 'rights-bearing' citizenship. They were subjected to long hours and harsh working conditions for less pay than union members. The barracks that Campbell provided were dirty and crowded, with minimal facilities. While many of these workers continued to live in Camden, causing chain migrations over the next decade, only one-quarter completed their contracts.¹²

Before the war, Campbell refused to hire Black women at any of their plants. In 1943, the union threatened to take this issue to the Fair Employment Practices Committee if the company did not begin recruiting and hiring Black women. Campbell complied, but only on the condition that Black and white women worked separately. While the union refused to comply with this segregation, the company only hired Black women for specific jobs that kept them away from other workstations. Some of Local 80's most productive union stewards were African American women, whose dedicated work kept the union going despite the setbacks of the no-strike pledge. Campbell continued to exclude all women from higher-paying jobs at the plants, defining their labor in food preparation as 'unskilled.' However, some white women were able to gain employment in skilled and heavy labor positions.¹³

Seabrook Farms, one of the nation's largest producers of frozen vegetables, operated a large camp, Orchard Center Village, for its migrant southern Black workers and families. A survey found the camp's prefabricated homes to be cramped, with multiple families assigned to one house. The houses did not include cookstoves, a waterline, refrigeration, or toilet facilities. The camp also did not provide medical care or garbage collection, and the nearest store was three miles away.¹⁴ Seabrook Farms also relied on the labor of Japanese American incarceration camps. About 2,500 Japanese Americans lived in barracks at Seabrook Village in Upper Deerfield. They worked seven days per week for twelve hours per day, earning 55 cents per hour. In 1944, the government allowed incarcerated to be released who signed a loyalty oath and some continued to live in Upper Deerfield and work at Seabrook Farms.¹⁵

¹¹ Tucker, "Agricultural Workers in World War II," 66-68.

¹² Daniel Sidorick, *Condensed Capitalism: Campbell Soup and the Pursuit of Cheap Production in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 68-69, 75-79, 87-94.

¹³ Sidorick, *Condensed Capitalism*, 97-100.

¹⁴ Tucker, "Agricultural Workers in World War II," 66-68.

¹⁵ Ronald Smothers, "A New Chapter for a Village, Once Barracks," *New York Times*, October 4, 2006.

Life on the Home Front

Many New Jersey residents placed great emphasis on civil defense preparedness and volunteerism. Paterson established sixteen Auxiliary Fire Companies with over 300 additional firemen. New Jersey women often balanced labor and volunteerism with local USOs and charities. Douglass College offered voluntary “war courses” to foster skills deemed useful toward the war effort. Red Cross volunteers would entertain wounded soldiers and roll bandages. The Women’s Voluntary Services (AWVS) also served as an important base for home front activism and as an emergency aid group. They gifted musical instruments, books, and games to injured soldiers recovering at Thomas England General Hospital. They also held fashion shows displaying repurposed clothing and set up education centers to teach women how to sew and work with patterns.¹⁶ New Jersey’s large Jewish population felt particularly motivated to assist the war effort and some focused their efforts on welcoming and integrating the Jewish refugees coming from Europe. The Jewish Vocational Service (JVS), which began in Newark in 1939, strove to serve the needs of Holocaust survivors as they dealt with psychological trauma and adapted to life in a new country.¹⁷

After the War

After the war, Camp Kilmer housed 30,000 Hungarian refugees. “Operation Mercy,” led by Vice President Nixon in 1956, was one of the most significant European humanitarian airlift operations. Many of these refugees settled in New Brunswick’s Fifth Ward Neighborhood. The camp operated through the Korean Conflict and was eventually absorbed into the Rutgers University campus.¹⁸ In the decades after the war, New Jersey’s manufacturing economy shifted to the service industry and many returning GIs helped fuel massive suburbanization. While the war created economic opportunities for many African Americans, postwar housing policies kept Black residents from suburban home ownership and wealth, helping to fuel civil rights struggles. In recent years, decades-long cleanup efforts of Superfund sites linked to environmental contamination from WWII have been successful.¹⁹

Places of World War II History

- **Paterson:** New Jersey’s designated World War II Heritage City is known for having over 300 defense industries, with critical contributions from aircraft manufacturers, and civil defense preparedness. Learn more today at [Paterson Great Falls National Historical Park](#) and the [Paterson Museum](#).
- **New York Shipbuilding Corporation:** Located in Camden, the shipyard was one of the three largest suppliers of battleships, cruisers, and aircraft carriers with over 30,000 workers. Today, you can learn more through the [New York Ship Preservation Project](#).

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¹⁶ Chappine, “Continuity in New Jersey Women’s Activism,” 139-141, 146-147.

¹⁷ Edward Shapiro, “The Jewish Vocational Service of Newark, New Jersey, 1950-1980,” *The American Jewish Archives Journal* LVI, no. 1 & 2 (2004): 37–45.

¹⁸ Tryba, “Palimpsest: The Cultural Landscape of Camp Kilmer,” 82-85.

¹⁹ “[Two New Jerseys: One State of Inequity](#),” New Jersey Institute for Social Justice. Mike Deak, “[Feds Celebrate Completion of WWII Atomic Bomb Plant Cleanup in Middlesex](#),” My Central Jersey, October 12, 2023.