

Rhode Island and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

Although it is only 37 miles wide and 48 miles long, Rhode Island has over 400 miles of scenic coastline that played a vital role in the state's World War II home front response. New Liberty ships splashed into Narragansett Bay, torpedoes were produced and tested, and industrial and textile factories produced precision machine parts. The Ocean State's social life changed as people moved in search of war work and women found new opportunities outside the home.

Mobilization: Military and Industry

Rhode Island is defined by the Narragansett Bay. During the war years, the west side of the Bay was filled with war industries and military facilities. It was home to Fort Kearney, which was the site of a significant POW camp during WWII. Although prisoner of war camps were common throughout the country, Fort Kearney's POW camp served as a top-secret Nazi reeducation center, known as the Idea Factory (and later, simply The Factory). 85 intellectually elite German POWs, including professors, artists, and writers, were transferred to the camp. The premise of the Factory was that these men, who were generally already critical of Hitler's policies, would help re-educate their fellow German POWs and highlight the benefits of democracy and world peace. Their main project was the publication of the POW newspaper, *Der Ruf* (*The Call*), which was distributed at over 140 camps.¹



Seabees constructing a Quonset Hut as part of their carpentry training at Camp Endicott in Davisville in 1942. Courtesy of the United States Navy Seabee Museum Archive

The Naval Air Station at Quonset Point in Narragansett Bay was the largest Navy air base in New England. The air station was commissioned in July 1941 under the Lend-Lease Act and trained anti-submarine squadrons, which played a vital role in fighting U-boats. The Naval Station also led airborne radar and electronic systems research. The Quonset hut was invented at the Naval Air Station. The hut was a lightweight steel building that was used for barracks, hospitals, kitchens, and more throughout the world.² Quonset Point worked in conjunction with the Davisville Construction Battalion Center, where approximately 100,000 men trained throughout the war at Camp Endicott in Davisville. Navy Seabees, or Construction Battalions, oversaw engineering and construction efforts both at and behind the front lines. In 1942, the Battalion Center, one of two central supply depots, shipped over 26,000 tons of supplies, a number that would jump to 490,000 tons the next year.³

While the east side of Narragansett Bay is best known for the opulent seaside town of Newport, it also hosted the Naval Torpedo Station at Goat Island, the state's largest military installation. The station

¹ Christian McBurney and Brian Wallin, "[The Top Secret World War II Prisoner-of-War Camp at Fort Kearney in Narragansett](#)," The Online Review of Rhode Island History, April 22, 2015.

² "[Quonset Point Naval Air Station Collection](#)," Rhode Island Archival and Manuscript Collections Online, Providence College.

³ "[Chapter V: Procurement and Logistics for Advance Bases](#)," *Building the Navy's Bases in World War II* (Washington: United States Government Printing Offices, 1947).

made around 80% of the nation's torpedoes during the war and served as the central training center for patrol torpedo boat crews.⁴

Providence, the state's capital, played a significant role in home front production. The Walsh-Kaiser Shipyard at Field's Point built 64 large combat vessels during the war and was the largest manufacturing project in the state. Walsh-Kaiser made 9 Liberty ships, 21 frigates, and 32 combat-loaded cargo ships, and 21 submarine-fighting frigates.⁵ A Providence landmark was added in 1943 with the construction of the Armour & Company food processing plant. The Providence facility was just one node in a national network of beef and poultry supplies, and the company's network of refrigerated rail cars enabled it to produce and move large amounts of meat.⁶

Woonsocket, in the northern part of the state, was the heart and soul of Rhode Island's industrial home front effort. The city's most prominent factory was Alice Mill, which produced rubber products. 1,500 employees made some of the inflatable decoy M-4 tanks, known as General George Patton's "Ghost Army." Employees worked in piecemeal fashion so that no worker was fully aware of the product they were constructing. Only much later, when documents were declassified, did the employees understand the significance of their work. Woonsocket's Jacob Finkelstein and Sons was a garment manufacturer that produced military outerwear, including trench coats, bomber jackets, pea coats, and rubberized rainwear. The company was awarded five Army-Navy E Awards.⁷

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

Rhode Island's women gained many new employment opportunities during the war. Providence's Walsh-Kaiser Shipyard, the largest civilian employer with a peak workforce of over 21,000, employed approximately 3,000 women, 60% of whom were in production jobs. The Naval Torpedo Station was the second largest employer in wartime Rhode Island, and in 1945 employed 13,000 civilian workers and 1,100 Navy men and women. Women Accepted for Voluntary Service (WAVES) were also stationed at Quonset Point, where they performed the work of servicemen sent overseas.⁸

In January of 1944, 80 *bracero* workers arrived by train in East Greenwich. While in Rhode Island the Mexican workers lived in dorm-style barracks and maintained and laid tracks for the New Haven Railroad. The *Bracero* program was certainly larger in western states, where they primarily labored within agricultural operations, but Rhode Island's experience highlights another way in which these men contributed to home front production across the country.⁹

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

While Rhode Island's population was overwhelmingly recorded as white, 98.4% in the 1940 federal census, twenty percent were foreign born. The census may not have captured the state's deeply rooted Native communities, which alongside immigrant communities, contributed to the state's labor and

⁴ Anthony Nicolosi, "'Torpedo Range' Island: Gould Island, Narragansett Bay in the Second World War," *Newport History: Journal of the Newport Historical Society* 73: no. 251 (2004), 11.

⁵ McBurney, *World War II Rhode Island*, 113–17.

⁶ [Historic American Building Survey: Armour & Company Building](#), National Park Service, (Philadelphia Support Office), 3.

⁷ Tom Mooney, "[Victory in the Valley](#)," *The Providence Journal*, August 11, 2019. McBurney, *World War II Rhode Island*, 53, 110.

⁸ McBurney, *World War II Rhode Island*, 35, 113–17.

⁹ Lauren Clem, "[These World War II-Era Bracero Workers Had a Hand in Rhode Island's Railroad Industry](#)," *Rhode Island Monthly*, July 19, 2022.

military history and likely experienced discrimination on the home front alongside the state's Black and Asian American populations.¹⁰ Black workers were often shut out of certain jobs, especially higher paying positions. At the Wash-Kaiser Shipyard, African American workers led an ongoing organized fight against the shipyard's union, Local 308 of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Ship Builders, Blacksmiths, Forgers and Helpers. The union, they successfully argued, was not granting full membership to Black workers and was trying to force them into an auxiliary union without the same rights. The handful of Japanese Americans who lived in Rhode Island during the war also became targets of discrimination. One woman recalled that "nasty letters" about the only Japanese American in town, a woman named Mary, began to appear in a local South Kingstown newspaper.¹¹

Life on the Home Front

Rhode Island civilians eagerly volunteered in numerous ways, from civil defense preparedness to community scrap drives. Women trained at the Rhode Island Armory to become volunteer military supply drivers. In North Kingstown, three highway trucks picked up 4,320 pounds of tin can scrap on a single day in 1943. Meanwhile, over 70 children at the North Kingstown Junior High School collected pennies to buy War Savings Stamps, turning in 3,000 pennies in February of 1943. While Narragansett, known for its beachside resorts, was hit especially hard by gasoline rationing, local residents volunteered to patrol the coast alongside stationed troops and followed strict blackouts and curfews.¹²

After the War

While the war temporarily revived Rhode Island's textile and manufacturing economy, it failed to save it permanently as the state's economy shifted to healthcare and education. The rise of affordable automobiles, new roads, and GI Bill housing support for returning veterans all encouraged suburbanization, while urban populations declined. In the decades after the war, many of Rhode Island's military installations were decommissioned. For example, Fort Kearney's The Factory is now the Narragansett Bay Campus of the University of Rhode Island and houses URI's Graduate School of Oceanography. Similarly, the Walsh-Kaiser Company shipyard at Field's Point now includes a Johnson & Wales University facility and a three-turbine wind farm.

Places of World War II History

- **North Kingstown:** Rhode Island's designated World War II Heritage City is known for Naval Air Station (NAS) Quonset Point, the Quonset hut, the Naval Construction Battalion Center at Davisville, and Camp Endicott, where Seabees trained. Today, you can learn more at the [Seabee Museum & Memorial Park](#).
- **Museum of War & Culture:** Learn more about the Alice Mill and Woonsocket's industrial contributions to the World War II home front at this Smithsonian affiliate [museum](#).

By Julia Huddleston, 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.

¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, "1940 Census, Volumes 1 and 2," and "1950 Census, Volumes 1 and 2."

¹¹ Patrick Crowley, "[African American-Led Worker Solidarity in World War II Providence: The Story of Boilermakers Local 308](#)," *Rhode Island History: The Journal of the Rhode Island Historical Society* 79, no. 1 (Fall 2021). Sharon H. Hartman Strom and Linda P. Wood, "[Women and World War II](#)," What Did You Do in the War Grandma?

¹² *The Standard*, February 11 and September 30, 1943. "[1917-1945](#)," Town of Narragansett Rhode Island.