

THE STORY OF VIRGINIA: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

A Long-term Exhibition at the Virginia Historical Society

http://www.vahistorical.org/sva2003/americans_again.htm

Becoming Americans Again

World War I, World War II, and the Cold War accelerated the integration of Virginia back into the national mainstream. They transformed the state from a rural to a primarily urban one, from a poor to a relatively affluent one, and from a state with few non-natives to one with many.

World War I and the Outbreak of World War II

A Virginia-born president, Woodrow Wilson, led the nation to war against the German, Austrian, and Ottoman empires in 1917 and 1918. Virginians welcomed the jobs created by the war, but they also mourned the loss of 1,200 of their citizens who gave their lives in the nation's service. Although American participation in the war was too short a time to alter Virginia's economic, social, or political systems permanently, it did hasten industrialization, urbanization, and the exodus of African Americans to the North. The treaties that ended World War I eventually gave rise to the birth of Nazism and the emergence of Adolf Hitler in Germany in 1933. Hitler aimed not only to establish a thorough totalitarian state, but he also had territorial ambitions on other states. But Americans took little interest in these matters. Only the sudden collapse of France in 1940 galvanized American opinion. The result was an American defense buildup that had enormous consequences in Virginia.

Preparing for Global Conflict

The state experienced unprecedented growth in military-related industries and in camps that sprung up almost overnight to train the large number of soldiers who were preparing for America's entry into the conflict. The buildup continued through 1940 and 1941. Then, on December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Within days Germany and Italy declared war on the United States.

The defense buildup and the ensuing war effort ended the Great Depression and raised Virginia to unprecedented levels of prosperity and employment. One factor was shipbuilding at the superb Hampton Roads ports. Newport News Shipbuilding went from 13,000 workers in 1939 to 70,000 in 1943. The numerous posts and bases throughout Virginia that provided thousands of civilian jobs constituted another factor. Businesses throughout the commonwealth produced goods needed for the military machine. Among southern states, Virginia ranked second behind Texas in the value of war contracts.

Although only 10 percent of women workers were in war industry jobs in 1944, the war opened up new fields to women. African Americans, too, benefitted, especially after the federal government proclaimed equal pay regardless of race for all war workers doing the same job. The

lure of war work accelerated the transformation of black Virginians from a rural to an urban people even as other blacks left Virginia entirely.

Total War Changes Virginia

World War II was a “total war” in which sacrifices were required on the home front. The motto was “Use it up, wear it out, make do, or do without.” And because only a small fraction of the war could be paid for by income taxes, the government financed the war by loans from the American people in the form of war bonds. Many Virginians attended parades, shows, and appearances by celebrities to support the war effort. After America joined the war, Virginians asked “What can I do?” Many found the answer in volunteerism, with some assuming such paramilitary functions as air raid wardens or airplane spotters.

Many of the war’s most famous commanders—George C. Marshall, Alexander Archer Vandegrift, Douglas MacArthur, and George S. Patton—were native Virginians or had strong ties to the commonwealth.

Although World War II was not waged on Virginia soil, it reached into every community and touched every Virginian. Foremost were the 7,000 Virginians killed and their families. More than 300,000 Virginians served in uniform during the war, largely because they felt justifiable pride in defeating this unprecedented danger.

War Transforms Virginia, Again

To wage and win a global war required the efforts of these and other commanders, more than 300,000 Virginians in uniforms, millions of Virginia war workers and civilians, and their counterparts in other American states and in allied nations across the globe. Apart from its larger consequences, the effort made Virginia more urban, prosperous, and cosmopolitan. The federal government became Virginia’s largest employer. Mechanization of agriculture spurred by the wartime labor shortage permanently freed huge numbers of workers for the postwar boom in the retail and service sectors of the economy. Vast tracts of prefabricated single-dwelling houses, built for war workers, were prototypes for postwar suburbs. Moreover, the broadened experiences of blacks and women gave impetus to the civil rights and women’s movements.