

## African American Women in World War II

by Maureen Honey, for the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History



*Luedell Mitchell and Lavada Cherry at work in the El Segundo Plant of the Douglas Aircraft Company during World War II. (National Archives)*

African American women made meaningful gains in the labor force and US armed forces as a result of the wartime labor shortage during the Second World War, but these advances were sharply circumscribed by racial segregation, which was legal in all parts of the country, and virulent racism in the dominant culture. President Franklin Roosevelt's signing of Executive Order 8802 in 1941 banned race discrimination in defense industries and civil service jobs. It was rarely enforced, however, and mostly ignored by employers until they were forced to hire nonwhites by exhaustion of the white labor supply. Even then, war industries often filled their most menial and dangerous positions with black employees, frequently on night shifts and in janitorial slots. African American women suffered both racial and gender discrimination, so they had to fight very hard even to enter skilled spots on the production line in aircraft, shipyard work, and other well-paying war industries.

Entrenched racist attitudes on the part of white employers and coworkers in the nation's war-production centers hindered black women's ability to gain employment in these unionized blue-collar jobs. When black people did get hired, they often were forced to use separate restrooms and to perform the lowest paid, most difficult work. Sometimes their employment triggered hate strikes, which erupted periodically over the war, when white workers walked off the job over promotion or hiring of African Americans into previously restricted departments and occupation categories. In 1943, for example, a Baltimore Western Electric plant was forced to build separate toilet facilities for white and black workers when white women demanded them. Barred from most service occupations like telephone operator, clerical worker (other than federal offices in Washington, DC), or waitress at white restaurants, black women mainly found war jobs in dangerous industries such as munitions plants.

The difficulty for black women entering skilled production areas, retail and other service work, or transportation jobs during the 1940s is mirrored in their continuing dominance of the private market for maids. Although during the war, the proportion of African American women who were working in domestic service fell dramatically, from 60 to 44 percent, domestic employment remained their primary occupation category throughout the war. Even in the military, which they did enter as a support for black male soldiers in the segregated armed forces, black women had trouble escaping low-skilled assignments, and they were not allowed to take combat roles. Six African American WACs, for example, were court-martialed at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, when they refused to take custodial assignments. In her memoir of being the first African American to join the Women's Army Corps, Charity Adams Earley mentions the common army practice of dividing into "white" and "colored" the jobs WACs were given, with the latter being menial and unskilled.



Major Charity E. Adams and Captain Abbie N. Campbell inspect WACs in England, February 1945. (National Archives)

With the exception of some individual welders and riveters who managed to cross the color line in aircraft and shipyard industries, especially in California and at the height of the labor shortage, African American women found themselves at the bottom of the economic list when it came to well-paying jobs. Black men *and* women never accounted for more than 6 percent of all employees in aircraft industries, for example, whereas white women constituted nearly 40 percent of all aircraft workers.

Maya Angelou's experience in San Francisco as a teenager eager to get one of the many lucrative blue-collar jobs opening up after Pearl Harbor is instructive when we look at the routine racism black women faced in their quest for wartime jobs. In her well-known memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Angelou recounts with pride being hired as the city's first black streetcar conductor, but she faced daunting hurdles. When she raced to the employment office after reading an advertisement in the newspaper, for instance, she was met by a clerk who discouraged her with evasions and negative responses; later, Angelou wondered if she was being singled out for bad shifts. Due to her stubborn persistence, Angelou was hired, but the prejudice she encountered cast a pall over the cityscape she had come to adore, and one can imagine how much fortitude was required to leap beyond the routine racism that greeted such pioneers.



*President Barack Obama awards the 2010 Presidential Medal of Freedom to Dr. Maya Angelou, 2011. (Official White House photograph by Lawrence Jackson).*

Despite these obstacles in the labor force, there were some significant breakthroughs in the economy for African American women in World War II. The federal government, to cite the best example, made sure to hire black women as clerical workers in Washington DC, a huge step forward, and new, improved images of them appeared on Hollywood screens. Lena Horne, Dorothy Dandridge, Hazel Scott, and other glamorous singers played prominent roles in musicals or production numbers in movies.



*Poster for "Stormy Weather," starring Lena Horne, 1943. (Wikipedia).*

These images were new to the dominant popular culture, and while many of the scenes were cut for southern audiences, they paved the way for postwar widening of the narrow, demeaning stereotypes in place before the war. The eroticism that trivialized much of white women's representation in popular culture was for black stars an important move toward romantic desirability for a group that had been stereotyped as mummies and jezebels.

The performing arts in general saw progress for black women, foreshadowed by Marian Anderson when she achieved fame at an iconic moment in front of the Lincoln Memorial when she sang a patriotic song at the invitation of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in 1939 after being barred from singing at Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution. In her wake followed Broadway stars like Etta Moten and Anne Wiggins Brown, who performed in George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and the blockbuster hit *Carmen Jones*. All-black Broadway shows such as *Shuffle Along* and *Blackbirds of 1928* had been hits during the 1920s, but the 1940s witnessed a second blossoming of all-black shows years after their heyday during the Harlem Renaissance. The musicals *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky* were released as popular films in 1943, while dancers like Katherine Dunham came to the fore showcasing African and Caribbean culture.



*Mary McLeod Bethune (left) and Eleanor Roosevelt, 1943. (National Archives).*

Most of all, World War II provided an empowering political base for African American women that heralded the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s. The battle against racism undertaken during the war, known as the Double Victory Campaign (Victory over Fascism Abroad, Victory over Racism at Home), was fueled by organizers such as Ella Baker, Mary Church Terrell, Mary McLeod Bethune, and many others, including Rosa Parks, who was already refusing to move to the back of the bus. Ending racial segregation of the armed forces—a barrier that came down in 1948—was the primary goal of the Double Victory Campaign, which was also opposed to segregation in housing, transportation, and employment practices, as well as at lunch counters, theaters, bathrooms, drinking fountains, swimming pools, and the multitude of venues in American life that discriminated against black people.



*Clara Camille Carroll at work in Washington DC, 1943. (National Archives)*

Signaling the enormity of these challenges, in 1943 alone, there were 242 violent attacks on African Americans in forty-seven cities as southern migrants to crowded cities clashed in public spaces over racial tensions simmering through American institutions. Despite the disappointing lack of progress for African American women in the wartime labor force, the war was a political watershed for them, and women played leading roles in articulating the community's opposition to segregation and Jim Crow. If they were often defeated as individuals during World War II, as a collective force, African American women found an empowered voice in those years, one that anticipates the fruit of their embittering but powerful wartime efforts to break silence, challenge limits, and change forever the terms of their own lives.

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