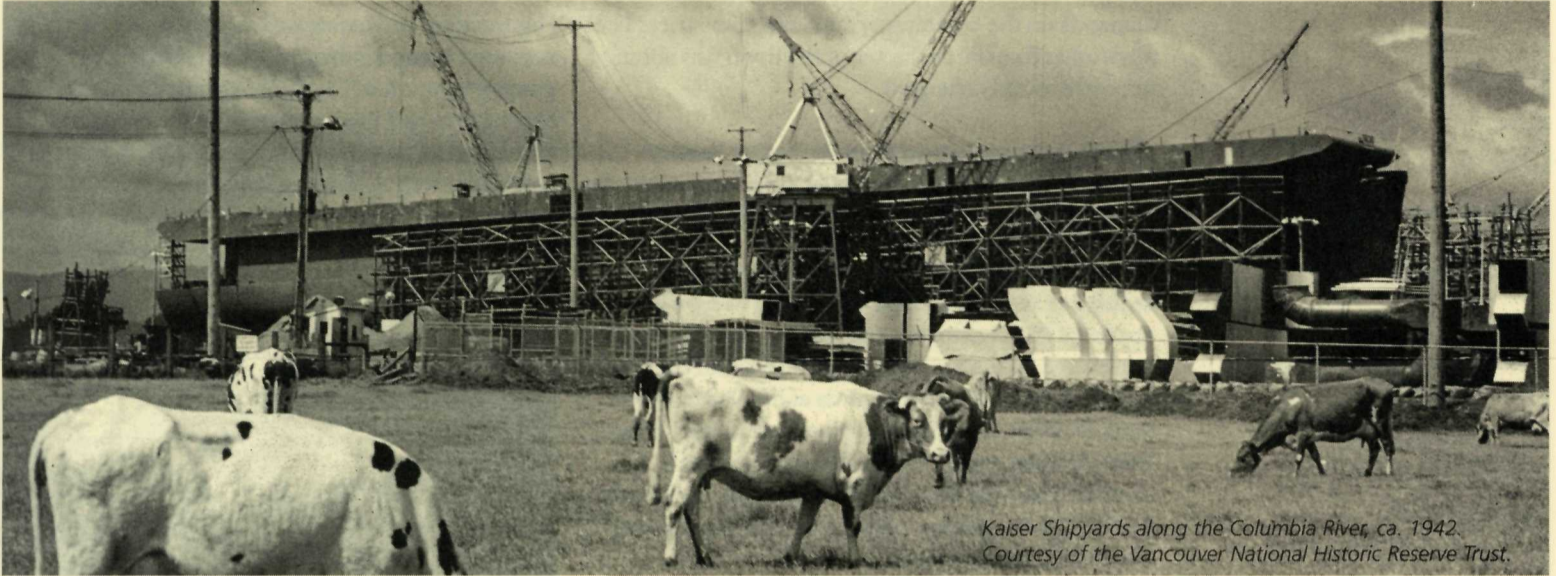




Vancouver During World War II



*Kaiser Shipyards along the Columbia River, ca. 1942.
Courtesy of the Vancouver National Historic Reserve Trust.*

Vancouver Transforms

The effect of World War II on Vancouver was unparalleled. Since its establishment in 1825, Vancouver had grown slowly as the home of retiring fur trappers, Oregon Trail emigrants, and other settlers. Though the population and industrial base continued to increase, Vancouver was outpaced by other cities. However, it was in the ideal location to meet military and homefront needs during the war. Its position in the center of north-south transportation routes, as well as its deep-water port, made it a valued asset. World War II changed the community's course, thrusting it into a new era as a large and bustling center.

Preparation for War

Even before its role was officially recognized, Vancouver prepared for war. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) headquartered at Vancouver – with its military administration, jargon, and discipline – provided a pool of more than three million men trained in skills valuable for soldiering. Most of those active in the CCC around 1940 worked on projects related to national defense.

Vancouver's public works projects and industries helped to modernize the city and support its foreshadowed role in war services. By the end of the 1930s, Vancouver had a public utility district distributing power from the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), the water supply had increased to almost 10 million gallons, new road construction made transportation easier and more rapid, and over 4,000 telephones had been installed.

Military spending tied to events in Europe strengthened the economy and increased employment. Lumber, dairy, and agriculture provided significant income to the county.

As the probability of war increased, Vancouver's location on the river, coupled with BPA's power source, made it the perfect location for aluminum production. The Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA) established a smelter in Vancouver, the first west of the Mississippi. Not only did the plant provide economic stimulus to the entire region, but when the United States entered the war less than a year later, the need for aluminum soared. Eventually the Vancouver plant produced enough aluminum for 3,000 planes a month.

Vancouver Barracks

Vancouver Barracks' military and economic significance was reflected in increased funding just prior to the war, resulting in the largest building boom on the post since the First World War. The amount of troops stationed at the barracks increased, as did the number of reservists and Citizen's Military Training students.

The 7th Infantry trained with war games at Camp Bonneville before being moved to Fort Lewis as part of a general consolidation. They were replaced with the 18th Engineers, who practiced launching assault boats and building pontoon bridges on the Columbia River.

Pearson Field became a valuable intermediate landing stop, located next to fuel stations in Vancouver and Portland and home to a large pool of reserve pilots.

In 1941, construction of the Barnes Medical Center was well underway. This "modern medical center,"

including the 750-bed Barnes Hospital, was a self-sufficient city where nearly 1,000 members of the medical corps lived and worked.



The Barnes Medical Center, originally meant to be temporary, survived to become a Veteran's Administration Hospital in 1946. This photo shows the complex in 1966. Courtesy of the Clark County Historical Museum, P83.5.4

War Comes

With the bombing of Pearl Harbor, a state of civic emergency was declared in Vancouver due to its strategic location. The Interstate bridge was ringed with searchlights and guns. Vancouver's preparation was put to the test as wartime put new and increased demands on the community and local industries. The physical and social character of the town was about to be irrevocably changed.

"Vancouver has changed from the former 'homey' character typical of so many small American towns

into a blast furnace to temper tools of war."
The Columbian, December 1944.

Many of the transformations that were to engulf Vancouver were due to its ideal placement for shipbuilding and embarkation. Vancouver Barracks activated Camp Hathaway (approximately in the current location of Clark College) to serve as a staging area and processing center for Portland's embarkation port. The camp processed thousands of soldiers as well as housing Italian prisoners-of-war.

Kaiser Shipyards

Kaiser Shipyards, one of the war's most famous industries, was established in May of 1942; by July the first Liberty ship, the USS *George Vancouver*, was completed. The shipyards operated around the clock and set new production records at the Vancouver yard. By war's end it had launched ten Liberty ships, thirty landing crafts (LSTs), fifty escort aircraft carriers (baby flat tops), thirty-one attack transports, twelve C-4 troopships, eight C-4 cargo vessels, and two 14,000 ton drydocks.

Of all the activities in the area, Kaiser was to have perhaps the greatest effect on the community. Not only did the town's population triple with rising employment, but Kaiser's responses to workers' needs contributed to the transformation of Vancouver's housing, social services, and makeup. To support employees, Kaiser established schools, daycares, medical care, and transportation systems, many of which served as models for more permanent versions.



Kaiser workers attend the launching of a ship. Courtesy of the Vancouver National Historic Reserve Trust.

The Community

In 1940, Vancouver's population was close to 19,000. In 1944, the number peaked at 95,000. The Vancouver Housing Authority was formed to deal with the enormous demand for new construction. Eight housing projects reworked the landscape, eventually accommodating over 57,000 people. One of the largest was McLoughlin Heights: this development alone housed 25,000 people, and had 60 miles of streets. This wartime city was larger than Vancouver proper.



The rapid, unprecedented growth was coupled with an increasingly diverse population as different ethnic groups, especially African-Americans, moved to Vancouver for wartime employment. At the same time, several groups of Vancouver residents were experiencing the paranoia of war time. Japanese, German, and Italian resident aliens, as well as Japanese-Americans, were forbidden to live in south or west Clark County or to travel highways within certain zones. Japanese-Americans were sent to internment camps.

Traditional roles were evolving to reflect wartime requirements. Beginning as welders, more than 10,600 women were working at the Vancouver shipyards by 1944. At the end of the war, journeymen-level women were working in almost every craft.

The McLoughlin Heights development under construction on August 25, 1942. Courtesy of the Clark County Historical Museum, P84.7.6

The War Ends

With the end of the war, the large industries reduced numbers of employees, temporary housing was dismantled, and Vancouver Barracks disembarked thousands of troops from the Pacific.

The changes wrought by wartime service would remain features of Vancouver. New industrial technologies revolutionized local businesses, infrastructure and transportation systems had modernized and expanded, and social services improved. The infrastructure that had been created would help to support post-war Vancouver and highlight its regional role in the coming years.

For more information, contact the Vancouver National Historic Reserve Visitor Center at (360) 696-7655.

You may also want to visit one of the related national parks: Rosie the Riveter / WWII Homefront National Historic Park, War in the Pacific National Historical Park, USS Arizona Memorial, Minidoka Internment National Monument, Manzanar National Historic Site, and more.

Go to www.nps.gov for a complete listing.