

IT HAPPENED HERE NEW JERSEY

Women at Work: Rosie the Riveter and World War II

Target Age: Middle /High School
Time Period: 20th Century
Featured County: Monmouth
NJ 350th Theme: Liberty

Common Core States Standards for English Language Arts:

R.CCR.1- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.



Courtesy Newark Public Library.

R.CCR.3- Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards:

Social Studies: 6.1.12.D.11.b, 6.1.12.D.11.c, 6.1.12.D.13.f

FOCUS QUESTION:

How did women contribute to New Jersey's military effort during World War II?

BACKGROUND:

Several companies already had contracts with the government to produce equipment for the Allies before the United States even entered World War II. When the U.S. declared war, production increased dramatically and in a short amount of time. Auto factories were converted to build airplanes, shipyards were expanded, and new factories were constructed. All of these facilities needed workers since so many men volunteered or were drafted for military service.

Working was not new to women, of course. Women have always worked, even outside the home, especially minority women and women of lower economic status. However, the cultural norms of the 1940s ideally placed white middle-class women in the home and men in the workforce. The start of World War II tested these ideas. The government launched a promotional campaign that emphasized both the importance of the war effort and women's potential contributions to it. This was to encourage women of all classes and races to consider not only wage-paying jobs, but also positions associated with manual labor,

One of these tactics centered on the fictional character of "Rosie the Riveter" as the quintessential female worker: loyal, efficient, patriotic, and pretty. A song entitled "Rosie the Riveter" became very

popular in 1942. Norman Rockwell's image on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* on May 29, 1943 was the first widely publicized pictorial representation of the new "Rosie the Riveter," which led to many other "Rosie" images.

ACTIVITY:

Begin by providing an overview of World War II, the role of propaganda to mobilize public support, and women's role in supporting the war effort. An excellent short history is available at the New Jersey Digital Highway (http://www.njdigitalhighway.org/enj/lessons/ww_ii_and_nj/?part=women_in_ww_ii), and more information is listed in the resources section at the end of this classroom activity.

Ask the class to read three interviews by New Jersey women who lived during World War II: Jean C. Comeforo, Mary Robinson, and Alice Jennings Archibald. Each interview is 2 to 3 pages. These can either be distributed in class and read in small groups or, assigned the night before. Ask students to compare and contrast the different experiences of each woman:

- What was life like during the war?
- What kinds of work did these women do, and how did they describe their contributions?

FOLLOW-UP:

Follow-up #1: Propaganda about women's involvement in the war was not limited to factory jobs. There were a variety of ways women were encouraged to support the effort by what they purchased, how they acted, how they invested their money, and even what they grew in their gardens. Ask students to visit "We Need Women," an online exhibition at the New Jersey Digital Highway at Rutgers University and review the four images posted on the website.

- How did pictures of women change in order to attract them to the workforce? Was there more than one "image" of what a woman's contribution could be?
- What ideas or emotions do these four posters emphasize? What kinds of women might they appeal to?

Follow-up #2: Women workers were only one group targeted by governmental promotional posters during World War II. Have students explore the National Archives online collection of WWII propaganda (available at: <http://www.digitalvaults.org/tags/p/posters.html>) to determine what other groups of people or ideas posters addressed. Have students (working either alone or in small groups) select a favorite poster and share with the class:

- WHAT is the poster about?
- WHO is the poster meant to appeal to?
- HOW is the message conveyed in both words and images?

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Places You Can Visit

New Jersey World War II Memorial: http://www.nj.gov/military/veterans/wwii_memorial/

Battleship New Jersey: www.battleshipnewjersey.org

Additional Classroom Activities

“World War II,” The New Jersey Digital Highway, Rutgers University: http://njdh.scc-net.rutgers.edu/enj/themes/world_war_ii/

For More Information:

“Rosie the Riveter: Women Working during World War II,” National Park Service: <http://www.nps.gov/pwro/collection/website/home.htm>

“World War II Posters,” National Archives Digital Vault: <http://www.digitalvaults.org/tags/p/posters.html>

“Rosie the Riveter,” The History Channel: <http://www.history.com/topics/rosie-the-riveter>

“Rosie the Riveter: Morris County Women during World War II,” County College of Morris: <http://archive.ccm.edu/Rosie/index.htm>

Penny Coleman, *Women Working on the Home Front in World War II* (young adult) (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995).

Kurt G. Piehler, "World War II," in Maxine N. Lurie and Marc Mappen, editors, *The Encyclopedia of New Jersey* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

Emily Yellin, *Our Mother's War: American Women at Home at the at the Front during World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

CREDIT INFORMATION:

Pg. 1: Working on the Destroyer, Newark Public Library.

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