



1944

Women in the Auto Industry

The United States' decision to enter World War II in 1941, created a labor shortage as hundreds of thousands of men were sent off to war. Jobs were again open to women for the first time since World War I. At this time African American women were able to enter the auto industry. As a result, women became a key component in the "Arsenal of Democracy." Women were now employed to do jobs that were once reserved for men, creating the iconic image of "Rosie the Riveter", the new image of the American woman during wartime.



¹ Women welders at the Landers, Frary, and Clark plant

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² African American workers

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Credits:

Amott, Teresa and Mattaei, Julie. *Race, Gender, and Work: A Multi-cultural Economic History of Women in the United States*. Boston: South End Press, 1996. Print.

Lewis-Colman, David M. *Race Against Liberalism: Black Workers and the UAW in Detroit*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008. Print.

Milkman, Ruth. "Redefining "Women's Work": The Sexual Division of Labor in the Auto Industry During WWII." *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Women and Work (Summer, 1979), pp, 337-372. <http://www.jstor.org>.

Keywords/Topics:

Work/Jobs

Questions:

1. Why did African American women work in the factories during World War II?
2. How did African American women secure jobs in the automotive plants?
3. How did working in the automotive plants challenge the traditional role of women in the 1940s?
4. How did African American women create opportunities for future women?

Links to Internet Websites:

<http://www.waai.com/>

<http://www.nps.gov/pwro/collection/website/home.htm>

<http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/>

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By 1940, only 246 African American women worked in all of Detroit's automobile plants. This accounted for only 1 percent of all African American workers in the industry. Between 1942 and 1944 African American women went to Ford Motor Company, in the thousands, demanding jobs.

By 1944, the percentage of the female labor force in clerical, sales, and service jobs declined to 30 percent, while the number employed in manufacturing increased to 34 percent. Of the many women employed in the war effort as of March 1944, 49 percent had never worked outside the home.

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In 1944, the UAW formed the Women's Bureau, which dedicated itself to helping African American women find jobs in the plants. The U.S. employment service also came to their aid by informing employers of over a thousand African American women in Detroit who had completed vocational training courses. They argued not using this labor force was nothing short of foolish. With the help of these groups and perseverance, African American women were hired at automobile plants.

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The African American women above are creating parts for the war effort. Nevertheless, few African American women in the automobile industry were trained mechanics or technicians. Jobs available to these women were the most menial, such as janitors, matrons and sometimes as government inspectors, but they were jobs that would help them gain experience needed for future endeavors.

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Unfortunately when the war ended many of these women were let go in order to provide jobs for the men returning from war. This happened to all women including white counterparts, but African American women were the first to be fired. African American women used the experience they gained from working in the factories for the war as leverage in other career opportunities. By 1960, the number of African American women working in factories doubled. Jobs in sales and clerk positions also grew by leaps and bounds over the next two years. Because of their experience in the auto industry, African American women were able to open up possibilities for jobs in the future.