

1997

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### Publication Info

Published in *The Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association*, 1997, pages 61-70.

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Giving a Sense of Achievement: Changing Gender and Racial Roles  
in Wartime Charleston: 1942-1945

Fritz Hamer

Reflecting on her youth in wartime Charleston, a young woman with the unusual name of Clifford R. Passailaigue, thought the "Holy City" was overturned like a basket. The four-year conflict attracted thousands of immigrants from both inside and outside the Palmetto State to that community. A native of Spartanburg, Passailaigue believed these newcomers brought new ideas, new foods, and new customs that gave vitality to the old port city. As Mrs. Passailaigue's sister put it, before the war Charleston behaved as if it were the forty-ninth state.<sup>1</sup>

Among the changes that Passailaigue did not mention were new roles for women and job opportunities for blacks, at least temporarily. Thousands of women and blacks were needed and recruited by the Navy Yard and other war industries in the Charleston metropolitan area.<sup>2</sup>

The extensive changes that World War II brought to Charleston and the nation have led some scholars to argue that the conflict created modern feminism; but, if so, why did it take more than twenty years for women's rights to become a national issue? Marvin Harris states convincingly that women's status regressed after 1945 as the traditional role of homemaker and mother became the ideal once more in the 1950s and early 60s.<sup>3</sup>

Charleston, an important Navy ship-building center during the war, typifies national trends that emerged in the war and post-war era. Despite its significance, the World War II history of this southern city has escaped the attention of most World War II scholars. This paper will be a preliminary study of the changing work roles of women and African Americans during the Second World War, the reaction of old Charleston to these changes, and the postwar reversion to old gender and race roles amid a continued economic upturn.<sup>4</sup>

Charlestonians, with few exceptions, were struggling economically in the interwar period. As in most of the South, this struggle began long before the National Depression. The economic downturn following World War I never was reversed, even though South Carolina's congressional delegation used its influence to stop the Navy from closing the base four years after the Armistice. Despite this success, the Navy facility provided only a few hundred jobs for sporadic repair work during the remainder of the 1920s and into the Great Depression.<sup>5</sup>

As the community struggled through the interwar years, the place of women within its economy remained little changed from the nineteenth century. The traditional duties of homemaker and mother were assumed by all classes of white women, whether rural or urban. Within black households things were different. Due to inadequate wages and skills, products of discrimination, many black women had to enter the job market to supplement the family income, often to serve as maids

for whites, sometimes to take low-paying jobs in small factories in the city.<sup>6</sup>

Although World War I gave new opportunities to women of both races, the conflict was too short for many to take advantage of the opportunities presented. However, some found jobs in the Navy Yard clothing factory, others joined the military, and a few found work in government. After 1918 these jobs vanished. By 1930 school teaching, working telephone exchanges, waitressing, and clerking retail sales provided the few jobs available to white women outside the home. For blacks there were even fewer opportunities, mainly in teaching and domestic service to whites. Teaching positions were often reserved for young, unmarried women or widows.<sup>7</sup>

Although these jobs gave a few women employment, they provided slight opportunities for advancement. But for the most part, Charleston's female population did not expect to carve out careers. Even when the economy of the county and city began to improve in the late thirties with the steady expansion of the Navy Yard and ancillary trades, few women appeared nor could expect to find jobs while so many males were unemployed. Despite relief work and the revival of the Navy Yard in the late thirties, a 1940 US Department of Commerce study of the metropolitan area placed unemployment at 13.3%.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the need for labor accelerated as the clouds of war became ever more menacing in 1941. By the summer of that year the Yard actively began to seek new employees. One retired Navy Yard employee recalled being asked to recruit workers in rural areas. Taking three weeks off at a time, he and a colleague drove as far as Myrtle Beach, stopping at selected farms and other rural work places. They told people about opportunities awaiting them at the Navy Yard. The thirty cents an hour that a common laborer got certainly tempted many farm hands to move. But the success of this venture is difficult to determine because at the end of that year the recruiting scheme ceased.<sup>9</sup>

However, the Navy Yard still needed workers. In the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor the labor demands of all branches of the Armed Forces accelerated even further. In order to produce the destroyers, mine sweepers, and, later, landing craft needed by a wartime Navy, the Charleston Navy Yard required more labor than it could have anticipated the previous year. The same was true throughout the nation. Reluctantly, employers began turning to an untapped resource: women. As Susan Hartmann and others have noted in national studies, most employers ignored women until the middle of 1942. Not until all other labor sources were exploited were women actively recruited by managers of war industries. In February 1942, amidst the early war crisis that gripped the country, the Navy Department in Washington advised the Commandant of the Charleston Navy Yard, Rear Admiral W.G. Allen, that every human being was needed and urged him to go after any man not classified as 1-A and to consider the large numbers of unemployed women. To obtain an adequate supply of workers and to increase production, Allen was instructed to find all the equipment he could and to train new employees "on the job."<sup>10</sup>

Women began to enter the Navy Yard work force by the spring of 1942. At first they were to assist male workers in various shops around the Yard. Employment ranged from electrical and pipe fitting departments to lab technicians and logistical support. Later some women

were trained in skilled jobs as increasing numbers of veteran male workers entered the armed services.

In spite of wartime needs, reports persisted through 1945 that women recruits were difficult to find. One labor market study in 1943 noted with some exasperation that although there were plenty of training facilities to teach shipbuilding skills, "the inability to attract recruits is general" for Charleston. The recruits who did come forward usually were recent arrivals to the city who came with family or on their own looking for work. Women who lived in Charleston before the war rarely joined the new legions of working women. As late as March 1944, out of a total population of close to 200,000 people, 48,455 women over the age of fourteen were not working. Of this number 31,060 were women engaged in housework. Interviews conducted with working women indicate they were attracted to Charleston from other regions within South Carolina and from other states.<sup>11</sup>

One of these outsiders was Eva Hutton. After graduating from Winthrop College, Hutton began teaching in Edgefield during the 1941-42 academic year. Returning to her native Denmark, SC, in the summer, she learned from her father of the many new positions available at the Charleston Navy Yard. When she discovered that an old friend was working there for \$70 per week while "I only earned \$90 per month teaching school" Hutton applied for a job at the Yard and soon was hired as an assistant in the metallurgical laboratory.<sup>12</sup>

While uncertain of her initial motivation, Edna Brown, a native of Anderson, SC, took a job at the Navy Yard in 1943 after completing a course at the "Boys School" in that upstate community with several other women students. Although she did not remain long as a machinist's helper, she found another position in the Yard office keeping track of workers and their hours. Throughout the war she often worked seven days per week to earn more money.<sup>13</sup>

The Charleston newspapers have accounts of new residents who took or planned to take jobs in war industries. After arriving in Charleston with her husband in 1941 (he was a shipfitter at the Yard), Josephine Green took a machinist course at the local vocational school. Following graduation in 1942, she began "turning bolts and other metal things" with enthusiasm in the Navy Yard. Another wife, whose husband worked around the clock as an electrician, told the *Charleston News and Courier* just before Christmas 1942 that she planned to start working at the Yard once she passed an aptitude test.<sup>14</sup>

All of these accounts suggest that entering the work force was based on more than patriotic duty. Studies of national war recruitment of women by scholars such as Susan Hartmann and Maureen Honey show that patriotic appeals were used by government and private industry. However, most "Rosie the Riveters" had more practical reasons for entering the job market. Eva Hutton and Edna Brown were motivated, at least in part, by financial gain. Along with better wages there also was the chance to work in an exciting new environment. Helen Allen, native Charlestonian, was thrilled to work at the Navy Yard as a junior inspector throughout the war. The responsibility and the sense of independence this gave her were "thrills" she remembers to this day.<sup>15</sup>

When women entered the job force at the Navy Yard, their male counterparts did not always welcome them with open arms. Josephine Green's shipfitter husband even remarked, "If women do butt into men's

jobs they should not expect busy men workers to bow and scrape to them nor pick up things they drop." A 1944 study claimed that women were capable of doing all but 56 of 1900 wartime occupations (essentially heavy industry jobs); and, according to at least two male workers, many women took over the light-duty jobs at the Navy Yard. This caused resentment by those displaced because it meant they had to take on more arduous assignments. John Moore, a machinist at the Yard, remembers more than fifty years later that women in his shop were assigned to making small bolts. Male workers reassigned to making large ones that took a "lot more strength" often resented the loss of their easier assignment.<sup>16</sup>

Moore gave women only grudging credit for their contributions to the war effort, but another male Yard worker, a former pipe fitter, was very positive about female labor. In a recent interview, Robert Sneed estimated that he trained 300 women in the pipe fitter shop, seventy-five per cent of whom he thought were as good as male workers. Sneed thought that women, with something to prove, were generally more dedicated than males. To gain respect from their male counterparts, women had to be more serious and extra careful. Since males had always worked at the Yard, they had a tendency to be less conscientious about their duties, drank more on and off the job, and sometimes loafed. To illustrate this, Sneed recalled a Friday afternoon in 1943 when he found a group of male workers gambling in a remote part a ship under construction.<sup>17</sup>

Data from at least one women's training program at the Yard support Sneed's observations. In his report to the assistant secretary of the Navy in April 1944, Captain R. Baker was ecstatic about the progress made by 105 female electrical trainees. Not only were they making much better progress than anticipated, but they were already able to replace most male electricians in the construction of two vessels. Although experienced males laid out the work and did the more complicated jobs, women did the rest. Baker added that these women enjoyed duties which they once "dreaded." Now they requested these assignments because it gave them greater opportunities for advancement. Without elaborating, the naval officer further observed that attendance and interest by female employees was greatly improved over the past.<sup>18</sup>

The Navy Yard was a major employer for men and women in Charleston but it was not the only one. At the Charleston Ordnance Depot more than 17% of its 2,317 work force were women, while more than 88% of the employees at the local cigar factory were women. Service industries such as transportation and utilities had at least 15 to 20% of their work force made up of women.<sup>19</sup>

Not all women found their jobs personally rewarding or lucrative. In the spring of 1942 one desperate waitress wrote to Governor Jeffries that she only made \$5.25 a week plus tips working two meals a day seven days per week. In addition, she was required to pay thirty cents for each uniform she wore while on the duty. Tips were not enough to provide for her needs. She observed that her employer made good money, but none of it seemed to go to his employees. Her request for legislation that would increase waitress wages to \$12.50 per week with a day off received little consideration from the governor. His suggestion, in a brief reply, was to contact the SC Commissioner of Labor.<sup>20</sup>

This desperate waitress noted in her letter that inadequate wages forced "many girls to go wrong." She did not clarify what this meant, but the long-standing battle that the Navy and city had with the "oldest profession" probably is what she had in mind. Efforts to curb prostitution had been the focus of local and state authorities before Pearl Harbor. In the spring of 1942, after tremendous lobbying by federal authorities inside and outside the military, a strict law was finally enacted by the State House. Even though state and federal bureaucrats believed such restrictions would reduce the high degree of VD among soldiers and sailors, prostitution was never eradicated.<sup>21</sup>

After this anti-prostitution law was on the books for nearly a year, one scholar found that police within the "Holy City" had rounded up hundreds employed in the "oldest profession." Between November 1942 and August 1943 the Charleston Police Department arrested and detained 626 suspected prostitutes. According to the contemporary reports, more than half were infected with VD.<sup>22</sup>

Although prostitution would remain a problem throughout the war, most Charleston women were engaged in other pursuits. Whether it was for better wages, the independence employment gave, or simply patriotism, women contributed significantly to the war effort. The same motivations inspired many in the black community to seek gainful employment. Despite Jim Crow laws and other restrictions, African Americans experienced similar improvement in their economic conditions. However, discriminatory laws hardly changed. That would come much later.

Blacks were employed in various Charleston industries during the war. In a 1943 federal report, thirteen manufacturing establishments were operating. In the Navy Yard 6,366 African Americans were employed, representing 25.9 % of the total labor force there. Six months before, black employment at the Yard was just under 19%. Other industries with a significant number of black workers included the Charleston Ordnance Depot with 679 (29.3% of the total work force), American Tobacco Co. with 1321 (59.3%), and the West Virginia Pulp and Paper Co. with slightly over half of a total work force of 871. But while the statistical information combined with oral interviews and data in government documents suggest that blacks had some opportunities in manufacturing, they were still restricted by custom and law.<sup>23</sup>

With discrimination and prejudice as rampant as ever during the war black workers (male and female) made only moderate gains. A June 1942 report stated that 18% of the Navy Yard work force was black. Of these more than 3% were classified as skilled, 32% semi-skilled, and the rest unskilled. A white, John Moore, recalled that machine shop hired its first black tradesman, a New Jersey native, in 1942. Even though he became the "best machinist I ever knew," many of the veterans resented his presence and tried to "run him off." Moore is unclear on exactly what this entailed but he recalled that many refused to help him when he needed new tools and other types of assistance in his new surroundings.<sup>24</sup>

Another white informant whose father worked in the Yard during the war years stated that many African Americans were employed as riggers, boiler makers, and general laborers. He claimed they were best as riggers, a traditional job for blacks at other industrial sites, particularly textile mills. Whether at the Navy Yard or a mill blacks were often employed to move heavy equipment into position. At the Navy Yard

this was important because heavy pieces such as generators, boilers, and related machinery had to be moved from the main deck of a ship into its proper space below. This was back-breaking work and certainly difficult but; at best, it was semi-skilled in nature.<sup>25</sup>

Discrimination and prejudice were not the only factors which kept African Americans from skilled jobs. Most blacks lacked the education and training for skilled positions. I.A. Newby has observed that prior to the war there were few blacks in South Carolina with the training to work in highly skilled trades. In 1938 thirteen per cent of the state's electrical industry work force were minorities. However, by the fall of 1943, according to one scholar, the Charleston Navy Yard was one of four shipyards in the Southeast that had a segregated way (a platform on which ships are built) where blacks had "greater economic opportunity and suffered less discrimination." According to this study, these "segregated ways" provided training for blacks while hiring African Americans in most skills and upgrading others as they became more proficient. To date none of the retired workers interviewed has ever mentioned this unusual working arrangement.<sup>26</sup>

Much more work remains to be done in Navy records and those of the Committee on Fair Employment Practices (CFEP) to get a better understanding of racial discrimination, although one case of discrimination was found in Navy records which has been surveyed so far. After scoring an impressive 90.1% on the civil service exam for an office clerk position in 1944, Carletta Wright of Summerville, an African American, still was not hired. After rejection Wright wrote a letter of protest to the Employee Relations Section of the Yard arguing that she was spurned only because of her race. The outcome of this protest is unknown, but her letter came to the attention of the Navy Yard Commandant. However, even if sent on to the FEPC it is doubtful if any action was taken. Only 227 of 1,108 complaints submitted to the Commission in the South were successfully resolved.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond the confines of the Navy Yard shops other examples of discrimination were evident. Even before the United States entered the war, Charleston lacked housing, recreation facilities, and transportation for a growing number of war workers and military personnel. After Pearl Harbor the problem increased. Although whites certainly did not escape these difficulties, blacks suffered more acutely. One federal report issued in 1944 revealed that in 1940 23.7% of the city's residents were living in crowded conditions. When broken down by race, there were, on average, 1.5 persons per room, but the percentage of non-white overcrowding stood at 36.8%, while that for whites was 9.6%. This had hardly changed four years later.<sup>28</sup>

Statistics bear out increased employment of African Americans in various war industries spawned by the conflict overseas, but problems remained. In spite of increased opportunities in the job market, labor researchers reported that African Americans had the greatest turnover and absenteeism among all groups. The explanation given was that the least skilled workers, predominated black, lacked the "...economic necessity to work continuously in order to maintain customary standards of living." Perhaps a more accurate reason is found in a 1944 report by the US Commerce Department. Black working mothers played a prominent role in Charleston's minority work force. Child care and home duties were always a problem for women of both races but were

particularly acute for African American women. With the pressure of home duties coupled with an industrial job, it is quite likely that many black women gave up their salary in order to fulfill household and family responsibilities.<sup>29</sup>

Other disparities continued to exist late into the war. Yet there is no evidence that the black community sought redress through open protest. Unlike other Southern port cities such as Mobile, Alabama, Charleston remained essentially calm. In May 1943 a major riot inflamed the Mobile Ship Yards when managers promoted blacks into skilled welding positions. Incensed that blacks could have equal status with skilled white workers, the latter attacked black employees after the promotions were publicized. The three-day riot left twenty workers wounded on both sides, and it stopped work at the Gulf Yards for several days.<sup>30</sup>

A partial explanation for the Mobile revolt may lie in the city's more rapid population increase. The Alabama port's population rise between 1940 to 1944 was higher than Charleston's, 68% compared to 58%. Furthermore, Charleston's black population rose just 9% during the war; in Mobile the increase was 24%, nearly three times as great. However, neither city saw significant numbers come from outside their respective states, which suggests that outside agitation to change Jim Crow laws probably was minimal in both ports.<sup>31</sup>

Another explanation for the more passive attitude of Charleston blacks is the difference between the two principal employers. The Charleston Yard was a Navy-operated facility. It would seem that naval authorities had close reigns on the situation and were able to prevent potential problems from getting out of hand. And in the wake of the Mobile riots, the Charleston Navy Yard authorities established, as noted, "separate ways" providing greater opportunity and lessening discrimination.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company, the principal employer in Mobile (which had more than 30,000 workers at its peak), was a private concern that built merchant ships almost exclusively. Control in this ship yard seems to have been looser, and there was no significant uniformed force at hand to quell a disturbance. The only military installation was the Mobile Air Service Command at Brookley Field which was essentially an airplane engine repair and maintenance center. By the time of the riot more than 40% of its work force were women. At this point one can only speculate that the employers in Mobile were not able to keep problems under wraps.<sup>33</sup>

Yet while racial strife seems to have been minimal in Charleston, that does not mean whites did not fear the change war brought to that tradition bound community. We have already seen that many workers at the Yard resented blacks who were placed on a equal level in the machine shop. There were occasions during the war when Charleston newspapers reported rumors that racial clashes might occur. In 1942, fearing trouble would erupt on Labor Day weekend, the traditional black parade was cancelled. The next year there were two occasions when riot rumors were published, but nothing happened. The always conservative, white-supremacist *Charleston News and Courier* occasionally castigated efforts by national black leaders who tried to make the war more than a struggle against fascism. A January 1943 editorial, entitled "Disciplining the South," slammed Walter White for suggesting that, if racial attitudes



in the United States did not change, the nation could not win the war. In reply the *News and Courier* quipped, "Was there ever such nonsense? Guns and tanks and planes loaded with bombs will win this war, not 'readjustment of attitudes.'"<sup>34</sup>

Although the racist attitude of native, white Charlestonians remained strong regardless of the national emergency, there was a different kind of prejudice displayed towards the new "Rosie the Riveters" in the local labor force. According to various labor reports, few white women native to the city deigned to enter the labor force in spite of War Manpower Commission efforts to enlist them. Those women interviewed who were married early in the war remained homemakers for the duration. The women who did work were usually unmarried, at least when they joined the labor force. Even single women faced gender discrimination. Eva Hutton, a native of the lower part of South Carolina, recalled how shocked her mother was to discover her returning from a shift at the Navy Yard wearing overalls and appearing dirty from the grease and grime of the job. The elder woman told her daughter to quit the Yard and take a more suitable job for a lady. Eva, however, demurred, saying she was doing this for her country and would remain for the duration.<sup>35</sup> The attitude of the Charleston old guard toward working women is not known for certain, but indirect evidence suggests a definite ambivalence regarding opportunities and problems the war economy brought to the "Holy City." Reflecting on further expansion of the Navy Yard in January 1943, the *News and Courier* was reluctant to see another 14,000 workers enter the already over taxed infrastructure. But, patriotism was their ruling sentiment: if "old Charleston is one of the casualties of the war, [there] is no time now for mourning over it." One of these casualties, in their minds, appeared to be the partial loss of white male predominance in the work place.<sup>36</sup>

By the time Charleston and its wartime population celebrated victory over the Axis, it was the future, not the current make-up of the work force, which caused concern. Domestic policy makers at all levels began planning for a postwar world as early as 1943. But a depression, as occurred after World War I, was avoided leaving the Charleston postwar economy robust compared to prewar levels. According to a 1949 report the value of manufactured products rose from \$72.6 million in 1945 to \$94.2 million four years later. Other indicators of postwar prosperity reveal similar growth. At the Navy Yard the pay roll in 1940 was \$7.4 million with 6,000 employees. Three years after the war the pay roll was almost three times as much with a work force of over 7,500. Yet, while the postwar prosperity of Charleston remained much better than two decades before the situation for minorities and women was a different story.<sup>37</sup>

New job opportunities created by the war for women quickly dried up. As veterans returned they sought their old jobs, which the government had promised they could get. As John Moore put it, after years of Navy service in the Pacific, "no one was going to stop me returning." Although some displaced workers were men, most were women. Virtually all the industrial jobs from electrician to ship fitter were given to males or eliminated as the Yard was downsized to a peacetime basis. Even many female office workers lost their jobs as the Navy Yard reduced its overall work force to peacetime levels.<sup>38</sup>

According to local interviews and national studies, many women expected but still resented job displacement. Susan Hartmann and Maureen Honey argue that wartime service was just that; once the emergency was over, regardless of women's true wishes, they did their patriotic duty by returning to domestic duties. Eva Hutton left the Yard in 1945 after marrying a co-worker she met in the lab. Despite efforts to remain at the Navy Yard, Edna Brown was laid off from her office job and worked at a child's nursery before going to business school to improve her job skills and returning to Anderson. Helen Allen left the Yard when her husband-to-be, "requested I resign to be married and become a housewife."<sup>39</sup>

An early postwar study carried out by the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor contains statistics of women for ten war production areas. Although Charleston is not included in the study, Mobile is. More than two-and-half times as many Mobile women wanted to remain on the job in 1945-46 compared to the female work force prior to Pearl Harbor. Of women who began work during the war, more than 80% wanted to remain employed after the guns were silenced. Of further interest is the fact that more than 80% replied that necessity was the overriding reason. Even though women may have discovered, as one Mobile female airplane mechanic quipped years later, "[men] didn't want women to do men's work [because] it's easier than women's work," within a year after the war's end most industrial jobs were returned to males. By 1946 the Mobile shipyard's female work force had dropped to 3% from its high of nearly 12% more than a year before. At the Mobile aircraft repair center a female employment rate of 48% in May 1945 fell to 31% the following year.<sup>40</sup>

With few exceptions the same retrenchment in jobs was experienced by blacks. Although progress was made equalizing black-white teacher salaries by the latter stages of the war, Jim Crow laws were as strong as ever. And, with time, in the wake of the Clarendon County school desegregation lawsuit, blacks would get better educational opportunities. But, in the late 1940s, Charleston blacks returned largely to their pre-war status as far as job advancement and opportunities are concerned. White Navy Yard workers such as John Moore and Robert Sneed, who worked into the 1970s, remember that racial integration of the Yard really did not begin until the early 1960s.<sup>41</sup>

In conclusion, while the war brought important changes to metropolitan Charleston, its social impact was short-lived. Economically the region was changed in important ways. New businesses continued to enter the metropolitan area after 1945 and the population began to increase after some loss in the war's immediate aftermath. By 1950 the metropolitan population stood at 164,856, a substantial increase of 36% over a decade before (when it was at 121,105). Yet the social changes during the war were repressed for at least a decade and half after 1945 as women and blacks, for the most part, returned to their pre-war status in the job market and social structure.<sup>42</sup>

Although Mrs. Passailaigue came from the Upstate, she mirrored what seemed to have been the prevailing attitude of many native Charlestonians. After working briefly in the city during 1941, she married a native and stopped work as soon as she became pregnant. Like her mother and older sister, as she put it, no one in those days worked once the first-born was on its way. While she thought the new foods,

ideas, and opportunities the war brought to her adopted city were improvements, her social beliefs regarding women's roles did not change.<sup>43</sup>