“THEY ARE HIRING THE WHITE WOMEN BUT THEY WON’T HIRE THE COLORED WOMEN”: BLACK WOMEN CONFRONT RACISM AND SEXISM IN THE RICHMOND SHIPYARDS DURING WORLD WAR II

by

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ABSTRACT

“They Are Hiring the White Women but They Won’t Hire the Colored Women”:
Black Women Confront Racism and Sexism in the Richmond Shipyards
During World War II

by

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During World War II, black women migrated largely out of the South to take advantage of the growing defense industries in California. Black women flocked to the shipbuilding industry in Richmond for the great economic opportunities industrial jobs offered. What they found when they arrived and attempted to secure jobs in the shipyards hardly lived up to their dreams and expectations. Black women found themselves faced with dual discrimination due to their race and gender.

The shortage of available manpower opened up the traditionally white male shipbuilding industry to women and minorities but it did not guarantee them equal treatment or employment opportunities. Women faced hostile treatment from their male coworkers, especially in the form of sexual harassment, while black workers experienced racist comments and behavior. Black women experienced both gender and racial
harassment. Yet, they chose not to fight against the interpersonal discrimination they experienced in the workplace.

Black women fought against the dual discrimination that hindered their employment opportunities. The shipyards and the union worked together to limit the employment opportunities of black women. They practiced many methods of discrimination that denied black women jobs. The union used residency requirements and a quota system to limit black women’s access to shipyard jobs. This discrimination extended beyond hiring practices. The shipyards and union worked together to keep black women out of skilled occupations regardless of their training and prior experience. They also denied black women access to supervisory positions. These discriminatory policies and practices severely limited the employment opportunities of black women but they continuously fought for greater access to jobs and sought government support for their efforts.

As black women confronted this double burden due to their race and gender, they fought most strongly against discrimination that affected their employment opportunities. They migrated to the Bay Area to take advantage of industrial jobs in the shipbuilding industry and they did everything in their power to acquire these jobs despite the many forms of discrimination that attempted to thwart their plans.

(81 pages)
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

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Paige Tuft

Historians disagree about the lasting progress wartime defense work helped women and blacks achieve. Both gender and race historians explored the meaning of progress in terms of economic opportunities and social change. Ultimately, the progress debate centers on whether the war afforded women and minorities greater opportunities or whether remaining barriers limited these opportunities. This thesis complicates the progress narrative by looking at black women, a group largely overlooked by both gender and race historians. This thesis defines progress specifically as the ability to secure skilled jobs in the shipyards.

This thesis also takes an in-depth look at the reasons black women did not achieve the economic opportunities they sought. It breaks down the mechanisms of racial and gender discrimination employed by the Richmond Shipyards and Boilermakers’ Union that denied these women access to most industrial jobs. It also looks at the how black women confronted this dual discrimination. This thesis is by no means a comprehensive look at the discrimination experienced by black women but it does take a detailed look at how the shipbuilding industry limited the economic opportunities of black women in the Bay Area during World War II.
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I am incredibly grateful and indebted to all the people who believed in me and supported me throughout this project. I am especially thankful for those who listened to me talk on and on about my research. It was through and because of their listening that many of my ideas took shape and became what they are in this body of work.

I am especially grateful for the time and effort my committee put into me and my project. It is because of Dr. Colleen O’Neill, Dr. Victoria Grieve, and Dr. Christy Glass that my interest in the female defense workers of World War II became the project that it did, particularly for the labor angle that it took on. This project is better because of their suggestions and I am a better historian and writer because of them.

Paige Tuft
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

On October 13, 1943, Lodis H. Clark wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt implored him to address the racial discrimination problem in the shipyards. A few days earlier, she went to both employment offices looking for work and was told that they did not have any openings for women in the shipyards. A few days later, Clark “hapen [sic] to be in one of the yards taking a welding test and I talked to several white ladies that had been hired out on the day that I was there.” Clark went on to elaborate on what a struggle it was for black women who were not being hired whereas white women were.1 Bernice McFadden echoed this experience in her letter to President Roosevelt: “They are hiring the white women but they won’t hire the colored women.”2 The experience of black women defense workers during the war does not fit the “Rosie the Riveter” image. They were not as readily accepted into industrial jobs as white women were, nor were they able to secure some of the higher skilled and wage jobs white women filled. As Shirley Chisolm said, “It’s more difficult to be a woman and more so to be black and a woman.”3

Black women workers faced a double burden due to their gender and their race as they attempted to secure skilled defense work in the shipbuilding industry in the East Bay. For most black women, wartime defense work did not offer freedom or empowerment so frequently associated with the “Rosie the Riveter” image. Black

1 Lodis H. Clark to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, October 13, 1944, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-311Boilermarkers, Local 513 Richmond, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
2 Bernice McFadden to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, October 12, 1944, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-311Boilermarkers, Local 513 Richmond, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
women migrated to the Bay Area in search of the greater freedom and better economic opportunities the shipbuilding industry appeared to hold for them. When they got there, they found out how unrealistic their dreams and expectations had been. The shipyards and unions worked together to employ various methods to keep black women from securing jobs in the yards. They also sought to confine them to the lowest skilled and paid positions. This double burden of race and gender discrimination severely limited the economic and overall advancement that black women workers could achieve. Black women experienced discrimination in all aspects of their defense work, yet they fought most strongly against the racism and sexism that kept them out of the shipyards and out of the higher skilled jobs.

World War II caused increased military spending and assisted in bringing the United States out of the Great Depression. Increased spending caused the expansion of factories, industrial plants, and shipyards to fill the war demand. As war industries grew in the West, the San Francisco Bay Area became the center of the shipbuilding industry for the entire nation. Taking advantage of war demand and lucrative contracts, Henry J. Kaiser turned his attention away from constructing dams and toward constructing ships. Kaiser got involved with the shipbuilding industry in the fall of 1940 when a British mission came to the United States to contract out for ships. With Todd Shipyards’ technical assistance, Kaiser broke ground for his first Richmond shipyard in December 1940. Lacking shipbuilding experience turned out to be beneficial for Kaiser as he applied techniques used during his tenure in construction. Kaiser adapted prefabrication

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5 During the 1930s, the Kaiser Corporation was part of the Six Companies that built the Hoover Dam.
techniques and the assembly line to his new endeavor making it possible to mass produce ships. This allowed workers to put together different parts of the ship all at the same time and then bring them together to assemble the final product. This new construction process minimized construction delays that often left workers waiting to perform their assignments. The prefabrication method also broke down traditional shipbuilding crafts and increased worker specialization. It also served to deskill the shipbuilding trades on the large scale and encouraged the industry to take advantage of unskilled workers. This change in shipbuilding production methods opened up opportunities for unskilled women and minorities, who were then able to fill these positions with minimal training.

The rapid increase in the shipbuilding industry in the Bay Area had a huge impact on the small community of Richmond. Prior to this growth, Richmond possessed a population of 23,600 in 1940. For its residents, Richmond felt like a small, close knit community where people knew their neighbors and interacted well with each other. The Kaiser Corporation opened its first shipyard in Richmond in 1941 and would eventually operate four interconnected shipyards that employed more than 100,000 workers by 1944. To supply a growing need for workers, Kaiser recruited from outside the Bay Area, particularly from the Midwest and the South. The population of Richmond grew rapidly. Richmond native Clifford Metz remembered how “it was horrendous, really, because they came in...six trainloads a day at first. Of course, the minute they got there,

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if that’s what they came for, was to work.”  

At the peak of the war, Richmond boasted a population of 125,000.  

The very makeup of Richmond changed with the population boom. By the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942, the little town of Richmond felt the effects of this increasing population. The town was not prepared for the strain on its infrastructure and resources that resulted from the rapid increase in residents. Native resident Stanley Robert Nystrom also recalled, “we weren’t geared for that kind of people.”  

Many of the new residents hailed from the South which included a significant number of African Americans. Before the war, Richmond’s population included fifteen black families who were spread out in the community and treated just like the rest of the population. Nystrom recalled, “They were people like any other people. You didn’t put any importance on the fact that they were black, or unimportance on the fact that they were black.”  

However, that sentiment changed as the shipyard recruits included a large number of Southern blacks. According to Nystrom, the shipyards changed the community members’ attitudes toward race:

With the advent of the shipyard there was the whole different concept of how blacks and whites got along. When people came from the South, both black and

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white, they brought their feelings with them. I think this made it rough on the blacks who were here already. That’s my own opinion. I feel sorry for the ones that were here already and had established a much better life than apparently was going on in the South. Then all of a sudden they had to defend themselves against these attitudes brought in from the South.15

Southern whites transferred their attitude of racial superiority onto their new community, while Southern blacks were determined to rectify the racial injustices they experienced at home. Metz recalled that people had their own way of living and they finally got around to understanding each other. Southerners especially “came out here and they all had to change. They had a heck of a time trying to change, as well as we did, I guess, to them.”16

The changing population dynamics in Richmond also played out in the shipyards. The significantly reduced labor pool opened up the shipbuilding industry to black men and to white and black women when it had traditionally been an industry reserved for white men. The shortage of workers opened up shipbuilding jobs to women and blacks but it did not guarantee them fair and equal treatment in hiring or in the workplace. Historians disagree about the broader impact of this shift in job opportunities and whether new opportunities translated into lasting progress for women and blacks.

Early historians who advanced the progress argument examined female workers in general during World War II and focused on the plight of white women. Heavily influenced by the women’s movement, early gender historians interpreted women’s wartime occupations in the male-dominated defense industry as progress. William Henry

Chafe argued that the wartime shortage of manpower offered women a better chance to tear down institutionalized inequalities, particularly in the workplace. Even though the gains made by women did not carry on into the postwar years, Chafe argued that more women entered the labor force and expanded the types and skill level of jobs deemed appropriate for women.¹⁷ Chester W. Gregory agreed with Chafe and argued that “the extensive use of women in many levels paved the way for the broader acceptance of women as equals in almost every area of American society.” Early gender historians recognized that women’s roles changed with the war and saw this change as a positive move toward greater social equality for women in spite of the discrimination women continued to face. The next wave of gender historians challenged this narrative of progress and argued that the continued presence of discrimination, as well as the persistence of traditional gender roles, testified against the lasting impact of wartime changes on women’s status. For example, Susan M. Hartman found that the permeation of traditional values kept women from achieving real change. The war failed to supersede the importance of the family in women’s lives. Because of this, those gains that contradicted society’s definition of the family could not last forever.¹⁸ Maureen Honey supported Hartmann’s argument that male-dominated family values inhibited women’s lasting gains in the workforce. Honey argued that the lack of change in the traditional status of women resulted from propaganda and “the top-down impetus for

social change that left the new images vulnerable to swift annihilation."¹⁹ Gender historians disagreed about whether the war brought lasting progress to women. Scholars studying the defense industry argued that the war reinforced discrimination against women in the workforce.

Labor scholars acknowledged the dual influence gender and labor played in the progress narrative of female defense workers. Scholars who focused on working class women argued against progress because employers opened up postwar industrial positions for men by forcing women out of them. Ruth Milkman argued that industries classified jobs as either male or female. The failure of managers to address this sex-typing kept women confined to low paying positions and out of higher skilled occupations.²⁰ Nancy Gabin complicated the progress narrative by focusing on feminist struggles in the workplace. Gabin explored the place of feminism within the labor movement, particularly how the United Auto Workers Union dealt with the priorities of its female membership. She argued that the union alternated between advocating special protection for female laborers and demanding equal treatment for them. According to Gabin, even though the union fought for women’s issues, such as equal pay, ultimately management and male union members worked together to keep women out of the industry’s postwar plans.²¹ These scholars highlighted the different historical factors that moved females into “male” occupations. Gains women made during the war were largely temporary. After the war, the workplace returned to its prewar gender stratification.

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¹⁹ Maureen Honey, Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 17.
Gender historians continued to engage in the discussion of the war’s influence on progress for women in a less obvious way. They explored the influence of society’s views on women’s roles as it pertained to their war effort. In looking at the shipyards in Portland and Vancouver, Amy Kesselman argued that women’s experience did not necessarily fit in with society’s gendered view of the war. Most of the women who filled war jobs came from other occupations, not out of the home. Also, the government and wartime employers offered limited resources to assist female workers with their dual work and home responsibilities, assistance which ended with the war.\(^\text{22}\) Other historians looked at a broader array of women, not just defense workers, and noticed how traditional gender roles permeated women’s lives no matter what position they filled during the war, such as prioritizing women’s care of their own children as well as maintaining feminine standards of appearance even while filling “men’s jobs.”\(^\text{23}\) Tawnya J. Adkins Covert also explored the perpetuation of traditional gender roles in women’s identity during the war. She argued that government, business, and advertising made a conscious effort to shape the identity of women as they sold the war.\(^\text{24}\) Contemporary historians may not have engaged in the progress debate in terms of the jobs that women held after the war, but in essence, they refuted the progress narrative by exploring the continuation of traditional gender values in other aspects of women’s lives.

Historians engaged in a similar debate of whether the war meant progress for African American defense workers as well. This scholarship largely fit into two distinct

\(^{22}\) Amy Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver during World War II and Reconversion* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 24, 20, 68, 89.


categories: those who saw the war years as measuring progress for black workers, and those who recognized the continued presence of racial discrimination as evidence of lack of real progress. Charles Wollenberg emphasized the progress blacks achieved working in the shipbuilding industries in the San Francisco Bay Area. He acknowledged that the war led to incredible social change and great economic accomplishment, especially for African Americans.\footnote{Charles Wollenberg, *Marinship at War: Shipbuilding and Social Change in Wartime Sausalito* (Berkeley: Western Heritage Press, 1990), 6.}

Taking the other side of the story, Roger W. Lotchin strongly disagreed with those who saw World War II as a time of progress for blacks. He pointed out that the war continued to reinforce racial discrimination, which took shape in the decades preceding the war. He argued that limited economic opportunities did not translate into political success for black workers.\footnote{Roger W. Lotchin, “California Cities and the Hurricane of Change: World War II in the San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego Metropolitan Areas,” *Pacific Historical Review* 63, no. 3 (August 1994): 414-416.}

Quintard Taylor asserted that the war limited racial progress for black workers in the West. He argued that black war migrants viewed the West as a place where dreams flourished but they soon realized that they still had to fight racial discrimination.\footnote{Quintard Taylor, “World War II and the Postwar Black West, 1941-50,” in *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West 1528-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 277.}

The war-induced labor shortage guaranteed blacks jobs in the defense industry, but not equal treatment. Taylor argued that even though migrants faced better economic opportunities in the West, they did not escape racial discrimination. Race historians engaged in the progress debate by looking at African Americans in an overarching sense. In much the same way that early gender historians grouped all women together, race historians grouped all blacks together despite gender and class differences.
Some historians moved away from the general view of lumping all women or all blacks together by looking at black women in the defense industries. Eileen Boris separated the different genders and races in her exploration of wartime employment practices. She argued that a racialized understanding of manhood and womanhood, specifically the stereotypes of the black male rapist, the pure white female, and the unclean black woman, provided an arena for the debate on fair employment practices. She also argued that this fair employment debate connected to the larger structures of power and authority.\textsuperscript{28} She analyzed the physical and bodily closeness of white and black, male and female workers that sparked confrontations to show how economic issues transformed into sexual issues.\textsuperscript{29} Boris’s examination of wartime workers on both gender and racial fronts demonstrated the complicated nature of discrimination directed at blacks, especially black women, in the defense industry. She also suggested that the dual influence of race and gender on the wartime struggle for fair employment continued to mark the larger quest for equity and justice after the war.\textsuperscript{30} Deborah Hirshfield also looked at gender and race discrimination in the defense industry as a reason that black workers, women in particular, did not achieve drastic economic and cultural change. She argued that although white women and blacks broke into an industry defined as white and male, they did not turn to each other for help in their new environment.\textsuperscript{31} Women formed support groups based upon job type and age, but did not reach out to black men for

\textsuperscript{28} Eileen Boris, “‘You Wouldn’t Want One of ‘Em Dancing with Your Wife’: Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II,” \textit{American Quarterly} 50, no. 1 (March 1998): 79.

\textsuperscript{29} Eileen Boris, “‘You Wouldn’t Want One of ‘Em Dancing with Your Wife’: Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II,” \textit{American Quarterly} 50, no. 1 (March 1998): 81.

\textsuperscript{30} Eileen Boris, “‘You Wouldn’t Want One of ‘Em Dancing with Your Wife’: Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II,” \textit{American Quarterly} 50, no. 1 (March 1998): 98.

support because doing so nearly caused a physical conflict between the white men who saw themselves as protecting their women and the black men involved in the support groups. Even though they did not rely on each other for support, white women and black men both faced discrimination at the hands of the union that finally allowed them a minimal place in the organization because of wartime labor shortages. Hirshfield also showed that black women received the worst treatment in the defense industries. Black women held the least skilled, dirtiest, and heaviest jobs. Not to mention that war industries hired the fewest number of black women of all wartime employee groups. Even though labor shortages allowed new groups of workers into industrial positions, the postwar economy pushed most women out of industrial work and back into service jobs, with many black women returning to domestic service. Even though Boris and Hirshfield approached their topics from different angles, they drew similar conclusions that recognized the presence of racial discrimination in the workplace, especially for black women. Their arguments suggested that wartime defense jobs did not necessarily demonstrate a measure of progress for black women.

Other historians engaged in the war-as-a-catalyst-for-progress debate with a more obvious and direct focus on female black workers and their place in the workforce. Karen Tucker Anderson argued that focusing on wartime job improvements for black women understated the persistence of discrimination. Anderson argued that focusing on black women gave insight into the nature of prejudice and the sources and mechanisms

used by the labor force to perpetuate discrimination. Both employers and employees engaged in discrimination that kept nonwhite women in low wage and unskilled jobs. Managers used the fear that integrated workplaces would lead to strikes or slowdowns to justify not hiring blacks, but especially black women. White men did not have issues with an integrated workplace but rather with promoting blacks. However, white women cared more about maintaining social distance from black women and disrupted production over having to work with them. Because of this, employers generally kept black women out of jobs held by white women and segregated them to grueling, unpleasant, dirty jobs. Anderson argued that this continuous discrimination translated into more layoffs for black women and less rehiring to comparable jobs during the reconversion process. Anderson showed the continuation of racial prejudice in war industries and that black wartime employment proved significant because these barriers remained intact. Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo also recognized the persistence of racial discrimination for black women but looked positively on the women’s reactions to that discrimination. She argued that black women used their self-determination to establish new communities and resist discrimination. Black migrant women had a history of resisting economic marginalization and arrived in California determined to create better lives for themselves. Many of them were at the stage of their lives where they keenly

felt the influence of segregation in the South, which acted as a push factor for their migration. As they continued to experience racial prejudice, black women turned their heightened consciousness into civil rights activism. The war and their experiences during it brought a sense of urgency to Bay Area civil rights.\(^{39}\) Lemke-Santangelo agreed with other scholars that black women continued to experience discrimination. However, she looked at the discrimination as a motivation for civil rights activism and the changes that it brought about later. Although Lemke-Santangelo focused her argument on the Bay Area, her focus on the war as a catalyst for postwar civil rights leaves a gap in scholarship of whether the war meant progress in the workplace for black women or not.

The Richmond Shipyards provide the perfect case study to explore the intersection of gender, race, and labor. The wartime shortage of manpower opened up the shipbuilding industry to less traditional sources of labor, such as women and minorities. Also, the large scale recruitment of workers from the Midwest and the South changed the demographics of the area. Because the shipbuilding industry in Richmond developed during the war, local sexual and racial hierarchies were less ingrained than the more established defense industries in other regions.\(^{40}\) The prefabrication process and assembly lines introduced into the shipbuilding industry changed the nature of skilled jobs and allowed for the use of a large percentage of unskilled laborers, particularly women and blacks. However, this did not keep labor unions from using their closed shop agreements to perpetuate and extend sexual and racial divisions in the workplace. Most


\(^{40}\) As an example of what occurred in electrical and auto manufacturing see Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).
of the labor unions that controlled access to shipyard jobs had charters that limited membership to whites. The International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Ship Builders, Blacksmiths, Forgers and Helpers (Boilermakers’ Union, the IBB, or the union), which controlled access to the majority of jobs in the Richmond Shipyards, was no different but it had provisions for changing this. At the 1937 Boilermakers’ Convention, the union voted to continue to exclude black workers from full membership but empowered executive committees to create subordinate auxiliaries for them.\textsuperscript{41} This act codified the union’s exclusion of blacks from regular membership but it selectively cleared blacks for work without granting them membership early in the war.\textsuperscript{42} The Richmond Boilermakers’ Union did not create its black auxiliary until the spring of 1943. All of these factors played into the experiences of black women workers in the Richmond Shipyards during World War II and complicated their place in the progress narrative of women and black workers.

The sources I use portray this issue of dual discrimination from two different angles. The Kaiser newsletter, the \textit{Fore ‘n’ Aft}, portrays the prescribed attitudes of the industry. Its articles prop up the progress narrative by showing how far women and blacks have come with the jobs they perform in the shipyards. The Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) records counter the rosy images that appeared in \textit{Fore ‘n’ Aft}. Those also show the mechanisms of discrimination employed by both the Boilermakers’ Union and the Kaiser Shipyards to limit the employment opportunities of black women. The few letters found in this archive addressed to President and Mrs.

\textsuperscript{41} Herbert Hill, \textit{Black Labor and the American Legal System: Race, Work, and the Law} (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 186.
\textsuperscript{42} Charles Wollenberg, \textit{Marinship at War: Shipbuilding and Social Change in Wartime Sausalito} (Berkeley: Western Heritage Press, 1990), 75.
Roosevelt explained the desperation facing these workers as they attempted to secure defense work in the shipyards. The oral histories I use give a personal feel to the experiences of wartime residents of Richmond. These show the emotion and reasoning behind the experiences documented in the complaint forms and statistics in the FEPC files. Even though memory fades with time, the recollections of these wartime workers emphasize their experiences and the feelings associated with them. These sources allow me to demonstrate the mechanisms of racial and sexual discrimination faced by black women but also personalize their experiences and show how they confronted them.

Black women held the most tenuous position of the labor groups in the shipyards and they defined their idea of progress according to this position. Chapter 1 sets the stage for my discussion of the dual racism and sexism black women experienced in the shipyards. It examines the discrimination black women experienced from their coworkers and largely their acceptance of these forms of discrimination. Chapter 2 shows that black women chose to oppose discrimination when it challenged their ability to secure jobs in the shipyards. This chapter examines the measures that the shipyard management and unions utilized to limit the number of black women in the industry and to block their access to skilled positions. Chapter 3 explores the limited access black women had to advance into higher skilled crafts and to fill supervisory positions. Exploring these different aspects of discrimination in the shipyards and how black women responded to them sheds light on how the women themselves acknowledged and challenged the dual racial and sexual discrimination. It demonstrates where the black women workers placed themselves in the progress narrative. It was not the interpersonal racial tensions and insults black women experienced in the shipyards that incited their
opposition. Black women voiced their concerns and fought against the racism and sexism that kept them from securing work in the shipyards and severely limited their access and advancement into high skilled crafts and supervisory positions.
CHAPTER II

FACING INTERPERSONAL DISCRIMINATION IN THE SHIPYARDS

Just inside the February 9, 1945 issue of the *Fore 'n' Aft*, an article entitled “Slave Labor…Free Labor…” juxtaposed what life was like for blacks living in Lincoln’s time to their lives during World War II. Beneath the picture of a slave market, the article featured black shipfitter C. Brown. At the shipyard, he worked as a crew leader, and away from the yard, as the president of the Richmond branch of the NAACP. Since the beginning of the war, Brown and the NAACP worked to mobilize blacks to participate in all sectors of the war effort. Brown said, “About 12 per cent of the workers in these yards are Negroes. Most of them are in-migrants from the deep south. They find a friendlier spirit here toward the Negro people than they ever knew before, although discrimination still exists.” Brown’s comment might have portrayed Richmond in an optimistic light, and emphasized black workers’ success in breaking down the racial barriers that kept them out of the shipyards. Yet, Brown, a civil rights leader, remained determined to challenge racial discrimination. California lacked “Jim Crow” methods of segregation but it did not offer African Americans complete freedom and social equality. Black workers confronted microaggression in the shipyards from their coworkers. Migrant blacks expected greater freedom than they experienced in the South, yet they did not band together to confront the microaggression they experienced in the shipyards.

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44 Microaggressions refer to subtle, often nonverbal, putdowns experienced by blacks. The accumulation of these offenses hurt blacks’ self esteem and is the result of subjective social discrimination. See Peggy C. Davis, “Law as Microaggression,” *The Yale Law Journal* 98, no. 8 (June 1989): 1559-1577.
Southern blacks migrated to the defense industries in California not just for economic reasons but to escape the racism they experienced back home. Recalling the promise of better economic opportunities, Willie Mae Cotright remarked, “Everybody wanted to come to California to live better.” Her comment directly spoke to better wages offered in the shipyards but also to the expectation of less racial discrimination. Cotright went on to recall the feeling of excitement blacks had as they journeyed across the country, “The opportunity. That’s what it was, just the opportunity. That we had, at least the blacks had, coming out. Be able to do things we had never been used to.” This expectation of greater freedom and casting off the discrimination that plagued them at home remained a common sentiment that black migrants expressed. Matilda Foster recalled at the same time that blacks relocated for higher wages, they also came for “better conditions, and everything.” Virgil Hooper also remembered how people felt about relocating to California. He stated, “They left Texas and came to California where it felt like they had more freedom.” Black migrants expected and sought greater freedom in California, yet many were disappointed. They still experienced racial discrimination even though they left behind the “Jim Crow” segregation of the South. Disappointment with discrimination in California lead Mary Head to remark that “it

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always has been more prejudiced in Richmond than any place I’d ever been.”

Black workers experienced much of this racial discrimination in the shipyards and female black workers experienced additional discrimination due to their gender.

Historians of World War II defense work argued that male workers felt threatened by the opening up of traditionally male industries to women workers. Chester W. Gregory documented that male workers demonstrated their disapproval for working alongside women by refusing to assist them on the job. Charles Wollenberg found a similar dynamic in the Bay Area. He argued that men feared women encroaching on their jobs and expressed that resentment in their treatment of their new female coworkers. However, women shipyard workers eventually won them over. Gregory even found that men accepted their female coworkers when the women proved their capabilities and worth on the job. Deborah Hirshfield agreed that men begrudgingly accepted their new coworkers but argued that they continued to resent women for infringing on their “man’s world.” According to Hirshfield, they worried that women might achieve the same rank and get paid as much as they did.

Articles appearing in the Fore ‘n’ Aft reflected this gender animosity in the shipyards. The March 5, 1942 issue ran an article demonstrating this desire to keep women out of the shipyards. “That Was No Welder, That Was My Wife!” featured a

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50 Charles Wollenberg, Marinship at War: Shipbuilding and Social Change in Wartime Sausalito (Berkeley: Western Heritage Press, 1990), 58.
rumor that a woman had been passing herself off as a male welder in the Todd Shipyard for many months. The shipyard only discovered her true identity when she received first aid for a job related injury. The newsletter acknowledged that this kind of gag was also common in World War I. However, it also reflected the abiding attitude that women did not belong in the shipyards. The article even stated, “This makes a fine story but don’t believe it could happen!” According to the narrator, women simply could not perform shipyard jobs as well as men. A comic featured in the April 2, 1942 newsletter also demonstrated the male disapproval of women in the yards. “If Ladies’ Day Comes” showed two women gossiping about another woman when they were supposed to be working (Figure 1). This also showed males’ sentiment that women would not take shipyard jobs seriously and prove to be a nuisance rather than actually contributing to the war effort. Early in 1942, Fore ‘n’ Aft

Figure 1: Fore ‘n’ Aft April 2, 1942
This comic demonstrated the sentiments men had about the opening up of the shipbuilding profession to women.
Image Courtesy of the Richmond Museum of History.

53 “That Was No Welder, That Was My Wife!” Fore ‘n’ Aft, March 5, 1942, Richmond Museum of History, Richmond, CA.
54 “If Ladies Day Comes.” Fore ‘n’ Aft, April 2, 1942, Richmond Museum of History, Richmond, CA.
both revealed and supported male workers’ concerns about the potential opening up of their all male craft to women.

Later in the fall of 1942, the Kaiser Shipyards began hiring women and the *Fore ‘n’ Aft* reported on this change in the labor force. Yet the newsletter continued to display some of the lingering resentment and biases men held throughout the war toward their female coworkers. An article in the September 10, 1943 issue asked the question: “Anybody know a shipyard craft in which women are not employed?” The author explained the occupations that women filled. It featured a female blacksmith helper and quoted her supervisor as wanting to hire more like her because of the good work she did.55 This article voiced the shock that men continued to express with all the jobs women did well in the shipyards, and attempted to encourage men to be more accepting of their female coworkers when they proved their competency on the job. However, the *Fore ‘n’ Aft* continued to mock women for their feminine qualities that made them “unfitting” to work in the shipyards. For example, a safety illustration reminded crane operators to pay attention to their signal men and avoid distractions, such as a sexy woman gesturing.

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suggestively in the crane operator’s direction (Figure 2). This illustration suggested that women caused many of the problems in the shipyards. Even late in the war, the newsletter continued to minimize the contributions of women to the shipyards and the war effort. The front cover of the May 12, 1944 Fore ’n’ Aft expressed thanks for the contributions mothers made to the war effort. Underneath the cover photo of a woman in full welding gear with her tools, the caption thanked mothers for their industrial contribution in addition to “their full-time job of loving.” No matter how much women contributed to the war effort and what industrial jobs they filled, their worth still hinged on their primary role as wives, mothers, and homemakers. The Fore ’n’ Aft continued to minimize the contributions of women in shipbuilding throughout the war. In “When the Women Arrived…D’Ya Remember?” the author had the perfect opportunity to express how much the industry benefited from women’s work. Instead, the article focused on women’s initial inexperience: “The worst thing was that all those girls who never had wielded a hammer before acted as if they had done nothing but build ships and weld steel.” The article credited women for keeping up the morale in the shipyards. The men of the shipyards refused to acknowledge the extent of the contributions made by their female coworkers and continued to mock them for stereotypical female qualities that seemed to make them unfit for industrial labor.

However much women’s industrial contributions were unappreciated, female workers in the shipyards did not point out this treatment as they remembered their wartime work experience. Margaret Louise Cathey, a white woman welder, recalled the

56 “It’s The Law,” Fore ’n’ Aft, April 2, 1943, Richmond Museum of History, Richmond, CA.
57 Front Cover Photo, For ‘n’ Aft, May 12, 1944, Richmond Museum of History, Richmond, CA.
camaraderie that existed between the members of her crew. She recollected, “I guess I was lucky, because the men that I worked for and worked with were very congenial and didn’t treat me any different, or lord over me, or have that kind of attitude. No, they were all very nice and very helpful. I was lucky maybe. I don’t know about the other ladies in the shipyard, but the ones I worked with seemed to be very content with what they did and how they were treated.”

African American welder Mary Head also remembered having some of her male coworkers help her out. In the midst of describing the process of getting ready to work—putting on the protective gear and setting up all the necessary equipment to weld—she stated, “Sometimes the ladies could find men that kind of want to talk to you, they would set you up.”

Head’s recollection showed that, at least in her case, the men offered their assistance because they wanted to get to know them better and perhaps take advantage of an opportunity to flirt. Some women may have used their sexualized status to their advantage, as Head suggested. However, as scholars have noted, women were as likely to suffer from sexual harassment on the job.

Women who worked in the shipyards faced a range of threatening behavior from their male coworkers. Verna Jones Bailey worked as a sheet metal worker in the Kaiser Shipyards. It was her job to orient and train the new workers, including men. She recalled, “It’s rather weird when they bring out a couple of big husky men and tell you to show them what to do. You go at this very gently, you know. You don’t want to act like you’re being the boss. You wonder what they’re thinking, but they always were nice

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about it.” Bailey described her tentative position as an authority figure for the new male recruits and her attempts at not threatening their masculinity. Bailey may not have recalled issues with her male coworkers feeling threatened by her position in the shipyards but that was not the case for all women. Lewis Van Hook’s wife found herself in a less desirable position working alongside her male coworkers. Van Hook’s wife worked on a welding crew in the double bottom of the ship. The men in the crew picked on her and told her what to do. Van Hook took the issue to his wife’s supervisor who rectified the problem by transferring her to another location. Some of the details may have been lost in the retelling of the story by the husband of the victim, but the situation still attested to the fact that some male coworkers treated their female counterparts badly. And as a black woman, Van Hook’s wife might have even had it worse because of her gender and race.

Besides just a lack of respect that men showed women on the job, their aggression also took the form of sexual harassment. Patricia Buls worked in the requisition department at the Kaiser Shipyards and did not recall any sexual advances made toward her but did remember advances made to one of her coworkers. Men kept making sexually suggestive comments toward Buls’s coworker, “a pretty stenographer.” Her supervisor took control of the situation. “If anything like this happened, she’d go out and she’d just read the riot act to whoever was responsible for it. Because she said, you know, ‘There’s no need for that. These are young women and they haven’t been exposed

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to this sort of thing, and they don’t need to be exposed to it now.”63 The supervisor’s comments suggested that this type of male attention was not an uncommon occurrence. Buls preface to this incident of sexual harassment demonstrated the sentiment that this inappropriate treatment was just a regular part of working with men. She recalled, “Maybe because I had been raised with four boys, working with men was okay. It was fine. I didn’t think they were all out to seduce me. I had no problem with that.”64 Male aggression and sexual harassment was a very real part of the shipyard experience for women of all races, even if they did not readily tell of these experiences.

Historians have documented sexual harassment in the defense industries and recognized it as a bigger issue than many of the women remembered. In her study of sexual stratification in the shipyards, Amy Kesselman acknowledged the impact of sexual harassment on the lives of female workers. She argued that the sexual hierarchy imposed on job classifications contributed to the sexual harassment experienced by women. Like Buls’ example, women had an easier time dealing with the harassment from a coworker as opposed to a superior. Even though women could usually alleviate the harassment by transferring to a new area, women still shouldered the blame for male sexual attention and largely had to deal with it on their own.65 Nancy Baker Wise and Christy Wise also explored the influence of sexual harassment on women’s wartime experience in more than just the shipyards. Wise and Wise argued that an equal number of women were

65 Amy Kesselman, Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and Reconversion (New York: State University of New York, 1990), 60-63.
treated with respect by their male coworkers as were women faced with sexual harassment. Although they acknowledged the widespread prevalence of this problem, Wise and Wise also argued that women drew a line with what they put up with and would not stand for more serious acts of sexual harassment. Without directly tackling the issue of sexual harassment in the shipyards, Deborah Hirshfield acknowledged women’s concern for their treatment at work. Women dressed like men for protection but also to deemphasize their gender while on the job. Most of these historians focus on the sexual harassment directed at white women without taking into account minority women as well. Likely black women experienced sexual harassment to a greater degree than their white counterparts. Eileen Boris studied how workers’ identities were racialized and sexualized identities divided the workplace. At times, Boris argued, white women initiated the violence directed at black women and men. This especially included brutality and sexual harassment directed toward black women. Surprisingly, the oral histories of black women in the Richmond Shipyards did not reflect these findings. The oral histories looked at black women’s wartime experience through a racialized lens rather than a gendered lens. The government’s interest in race over gender also supported this focus as the FEPC investigated racial discrimination but had no provisions to investigate gender discrimination. Perhaps this lack of evidence and government

69 Executive Order 8802 limited its concerns with discrimination to those concerning “race, creed, color or national origin.” It failed to mention gender discrimination. As such, black women had a government outlet to fight against racial discrimination but not gender discrimination. See Herbert Hill, Black Labor
efforts to end racial but not gender discrimination affected how black women viewed themselves first as African Americans and as women second.

In much the same way that the new additions to the workforce lead to gender tensions, it also provoked racial tensions in the shipyards. Having migrated from Texas, African American worker Eddie Eaton attributed the racial problems in Richmond to the influx of migrants from the South. He recalled, “I understand that they got along real fine around Richmond. The people that were there, they got along real fine. But when the people moved in from the South, that’s when it started. That’s when the problems started. They tried to keep it as the South was.” Eaton credited that uneasiness to white migrants’ attempts to bring their racial superiority with them to the East Bay. As a black woman, Lee Wilson frequently worked on a mixed race crew, yet she still noticed racial discrimination “here and there.” She recalled, “they were not openly, shall we say, prejudiced, they were not openly prejudiced, they were just like, say it under their breath.” Wilson saw and experienced racism on the job and it frustrated her. But she tried to ignore it since, as she said, “well, you know, you don’t pay stuff like that no attention.” Wilson expected to deal with racism on the job. She made a conscious decision that she could overlook the verbal racial prejudice in the shipyards, perhaps because she had become so accustomed to this abuse.


Mary Head suffered more than simple verbal slurs. Head worked on an all female crew but very few of them were black. She recalled having a hard time on the job because “certain people didn’t want to work with certain ones...because people was from all over the world.” As Head described how her background affected her ability to make friends at work, she added the caveat that “it’s not only the nationality of a person, it’s just the moods we get in.” Head recognized one of the workplace implications for people’s racism, yet she remained quick to justify it as more than just racial discrimination. Although not the target of racism as a white woman, Patricia Buls recalled getting into an argument with one of her coworkers in the drafting department in the shipyards. Her coworker called her a “nigger-lover” because she stood up for her black coworkers. “He said, ‘You’re always standing up for them.’ I said, ‘Maybe it’s because they need it.’” Buls remembered the racial tensions in the shipyards and how that flared up into arguments, even between whites based on where they stood on racial issues. While blacks and whites felt the racial tension in the shipyards, physical fighting was rare. Many years after the fact, Lewis Van Hook remembered his brother telling him a story about a fight between a black and a white stage rigger. The white man dropped his hammer hitting the black man working bellow him. The black rigger angrily challenged the white rigger to a fight. They fought until the crew pulled them apart. The next day someone asked the black rigger about the outcome of the fight. “He told them

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he didn't want to know who won the fight.” Van Hook was not directly involved in the incident but the fact that he remembered it proved significant. If physical violence occurred on even a semi regular basis in the shipyards, one incident would not have stood out so clearly in Van Hook’s mind. The fight also showed that not all blacks could brush off racism forever. And yet, these black workers did not remember instances where they were the recipients of this discrimination, whether in the form of microaggression or the more obvious threatening behavior. Black women interviewed by the Rosie the Riveter project did not remember challenging the more personal racial insults and day-to-day discrimination in the shipyards. Their memories focused more on their fight against racism in their communities as opposed to their workplaces.

Kaiser’s Fore ‘n’ Aft tried to paint a rather rosy picture of racial harmony in the workplace. It featured a number of articles emphasizing the cooperation between black and white workers. Through most of the war, the newsletter brought special attention to black workers who excelled on the job. However, in 1945, it turned to accentuating the common bond blacks and whites felt in the shipyards and how this helped them be better workers. On the cover of the February 9, 1945 issue, an article titled “Free and Equal” emphasized the multiracial crews in the shipyards. The article stated, “There’s one thing about them that the casual visitor notes at once. Most of the crews are mixed in color and

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75 Some psychological studies suggest that remembering traumatic events as an observer may be a form of emotional avoidance. See Lucy M. Kenny, Richard A. Bryant, Derrick Silove, Mark Creamer, Meaghan O’Donnell, and Alexander C. McFarlane, “Distant Memories: A Prospective Study of Vantage Point of Trauma Memories,” Psychological Science 20, no. 9 (September 2009): 1049-1052.

nationality. What’s more, they like it that way out there.” From the supervisor “right on down the line, they’re satisfied with existing cooperation.” This article demonstrated Kaiser’s support of the president’s propaganda agenda of furthering racial harmony. And yet, the Fore ’n’ Aft acknowledged that this was not always the case. “Being An American,” a very pointed editorial in the June 29, 1945 newsletter, demonstrated the racial change brought about by the war. “This is something we’ve all had to learn in the course of this war: that we’re all in it together, whatever the color of our skin, the ancestry of our parents, the kind of church we were brought up in. And anybody he’s ever been called a derisive name to indicate that he’s a Negro, or a Jehovah’s Witness, or a Jew, or a native of Oklahoma should just remember his claims to Americanism are as good as anybody’s, if he’s a loyal citizen.” This statement indicated that war taught people with different nationalities, races, religions, etc. to get along, yet it remained an ongoing process. According to the editor, Americans needed to heed President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s advice and set their differences aside: “Americanism is a matter of the mind and heart. Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry.” The editorial very bluntly affirmed that if people, and especially Kaiser Shipyard workers, were not putting cooperation above their private feelings, then they were not good workers or good Americans. Even toward the end of the war, and after blacks had worked in the shipyards for several years, an unknown shipyard worker still felt the need to point out that racism made people un-American. A weekly column highlighting some

of the good things going on in the shipyards, the “Chirps” column in the June 1, 1945 newsletter also took up this issue of what it meant to be an American. It stated,

A platehanger in Yard Two sends in this letter chirping his boss: “I'm in a crew with four different kinds of people-Negro, Chinese, Filipino and White. The boss is a real American, and he knows that all of us are, too. It makes it easy to know he does not make the least distinction between us. When the colored guys on our crew know they are as highly thought of as the white, it makes working a lot easier. I know, because I've had other bosses who don't act the way this one does.”  

Racial discrimination continued to be an issue for shipyard workers if a column dedicated to informational and uplifting tidbits needed to feature a letter praising a boss who treated all his crew members with the same respect. This comment made treating all races the same a qualification for being a true American. If racial discrimination was not an issue, no one would have felt the need to equate equal treatment to true Americanism. The *Fore 'n' Aft* both demonstrated the evolution of multiracial treatment in the yards, but also that equal treatment of workers still had a long way to go.

Women and blacks faced harsher treatment on the job because of their gender and race. Women frequently faced sexual harassment and blacks confronted racial discrimination in the shipyards. However, black women faced the double burden of harsher treatment because of their sex and race. Yet with all this discrimination emanating from the shipyards, black women did not largely recall and reflect on experiences of microaggression in the shipyards. This record of the everyday instances and the black women who openly opposed them may be lacking but it does not mean that black women did not oppose any racial or gender discrimination. Black women instead fought against the mechanisms of institutional racism that kept them out of the shipyards.

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79 “Chirps,” *Fore ’n’ Aft*, June 1, 1945, Richmond Museum of History, Richmond, CA, 6.
and out of skilled shipbuilding crafts. Black women may not have fought against the way they were treated in the shipyards but they did fight against the shipyards and unions that sought to limit their economic opportunities, opportunities that played a huge role in their decision to relocate to California.
CHAPTER III
FIGHTING FOR DEFENSE JOBS IN THE KAISER SHIPYARDS

For Mildred Foster, living and working on a farm in Arkansas did not provide the economic opportunities she hoped for—working the land did not provide a way for her or her family to get ahead. News from family and friends about opportunities for work in California boosted her spirits. Having already traveled to California, Foster’s brother wrote to her about the merits of factory work. He wrote that she could make more money in California than she could if she stayed in the South. Foster recalled, “Well, it was a way you could make more money, you know. Better wages, that’s why so many people left and emigrated to California because of the money, the better conditions and everything.” Like Foster, Willie Mae Cotright who grew up in Louisiana, heard that she could make a better living in California. She remembered seeing leaflets at bus stations and other public places advertising work in the Bay Area shipyards. Cotright reflected, “You know, they were saying about California: it’s so great, you could do so much, make so much money and everything.” After working hard for menial wages, “we were hearing how much in California we could make, so everybody wanted to come to California to live better.” African Americans left their homes in the South, initially looking for better wages and work opportunities that they believed California and its defense industries would offer them. Black Southern women migrating to California

during the 1940s initially defined progress in economic terms, specifically the ability to get a higher skilled, higher wage job than they were able to secure in their home states. Many dreamed that work in the defense industries would afford them these opportunities. For many who migrated to Richmond, working in the shipyards did offer them a better way to make a living. But for others, the shipyards denied them these economic opportunities.

National defense contracts encouraged the intense growth of a new shipbuilding industry in the Bay Area. Historian Marilyn S. Johnson noted that the growth of the Kaiser's shipbuilding empire in Richmond was the most important wartime development in the East Bay. This industry changed the population demographics of the area as Kaiser targeted the South and Midwest for workers. Johnson argued that the new workers came to fulfill their patriotic desires to help the war effort and to escape unemployment at home. Migration appealed to black Southerners because of the intense economic disparity they experienced at home. Particularly for black women, access to jobs in the shipyard allowed them a chance to get out of domestic service. Although the shipbuilding industry provided new jobs, migrant black women did not escape racial discrimination they experienced in the South. 82

Historian Cleveland Valrey argued that World War II brought socioeconomic changes for African Americans in the Bay Area. Valrey agreed that blacks travelled to the shipyards to find relief from poverty that lingered from the Depression Era. He argued that wartime ideology and labor shortages challenged racial discrimination. Labor

shortages caused by the draft opened up the shipbuilding industry to people of color when whites previously dominated it. These labor shortages lured blacks out of their menial, low paying service jobs and into high paying industrial work. This labor shortage guaranteed blacks jobs but not equitable treatment in the shipyards. Although racial discrimination in hiring and in the workplace still prevailed, Valrey suggested that the changes that occurred during and because of the war still provided proof of significant racial accomplishments in the Bay Area.\textsuperscript{83}

Black women in the South largely occupied positions in the domestic sphere. Like most women at the time, they cared for their families and homes, and for some this included working on their family farms. However, many black women also worked outside their homes caring for the homes of affluent whites in their communities. This domestic work offered little compensation for their labors or a way to better their economic standing. Higher wages in the shipyards offered these black women the chance at a better life. Many years after the fact, black women employed in shipyards during the war still vividly remembered the drastic increase in pay that they received. As a young girl in Arkansas, Mildred Hooper would clean the kitchen of her father’s employer every day after school. She would get paid one dollar for a whole week of cleaning.\textsuperscript{84} At the time, one dollar seemed like a lot of money for her. However, as stories about good jobs in the shipyards trickled back into the South from former residents, she began to feel dissatisfied with the conditions at home. Aller Hunter felt this draw to the Richmond

\textsuperscript{83} Cleveland Valrey, \textit{Black Labor and Race: San Francisco Bay Area in World War II} (Jackson, MS: Church House Publishers, 2001), 229, 30, 26, 32, 34, 31.

shipyards and the lucrative jobs that they provided. Back home in Texas, she worked as an in-home care provider for a Jewish woman and made about $3.50 a week before migrating to Richmond. She remarked, “I did make more money in California than I could in the South. Three dollars in a week, they make more than that in a day out here. I made more than that in the shipyard, a day.”\textsuperscript{85} Better wages drew black women to the shipyards in Richmond, allowing them to improve their financial situation, but also to leave behind work in the domestic sphere.

Black southerners who acted on the advice they found in the letters and leaflets soon found out that the stories they heard did not correspond to the reality of finding work. Initially, these black migrants had to navigate the hiring system. For most, this began at the United States Employment Service (USES) which would recommend individuals to the shipyards to fill work orders based on their previous experience and training. The shipyard hiring hall would officially offer them a position or refer them to a training course and then send them on to the union office to get the necessary clearance to work. During the war, the unions controlled access to jobs in the industries that provided necessary war materials to the government. The Labor Division of the Office of Production Management negotiated “stabilizing agreements” that allowed unions to have closed shops, mainly in the aircraft, construction, and shipbuilding industries, in return for not striking during the war and thereby disrupting vital war production.\textsuperscript{86} In Richmond, the Boilermakers’ Union served as the gatekeeper for the majority of


shipbuilding jobs. This relationship between the shipyards and the union would prove to be the biggest factor to overcome for blacks, especially black women, in acquiring the work they sought in the shipyards. However, better economic opportunities and financial security were worth the fight. And to push for change, black workers used the Fair Employment Practice Committee.87

Despite the fact that Executive Order 8802 banned discrimination based on “race, creed, color, or national origin” in government agencies, unions, and companies engaged in war-related production as of June 25, 1941, the Boilermakers’ Union continued to reject African American workers outright well into 1942. On September 3, 1942, Etta Cain wrote to President Roosevelt explaining her ordeal attempting to acquire work in the shipyards. When she completed welding school and passed the test, she and the seven others who passed with her went to the union to get cleared to work. The union accepted the other seven but refused to accept her because she was colored.88 Similarly, on November 18, 1942, Lillian Stevenson wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt to describe her experience and ask for help procuring a job in the shipyards. Five weeks prior to her letter, she went to the USES to apply for work at one of the Kaiser Shipyards. The USES said that they did not have any work for blacks that day so they sent her to the National Defense School to train as a welder and promised her a job when she completed her training. She completed the course and passed the welding test. Still the Boilermakers’ Union refused to admit her because she was a black woman. Stevenson noted that the

88 Etta Cain to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, September 3, 1942, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 2 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
shipyards were in need of welders and the union was hiring every other race. She insisted that the union had no excuse to reject these women because they met all the necessary requirements, including training, to fill jobs as welders. Nevertheless, the union denied them work clearance purely because of their race. This type of discrimination was common for black women in the Richmond Shipyards. On January 29, 1943, the Area Advisor Committee on Discrimination under the War Manpower Commission released a report detailing specific cases of discrimination that they spent the last five months investigating. The majority of these cases included black women the union turned away for racial reasons. It was not coincidental that the majority of these cases involved women. In fact, IBB Local 513 told Ms. Johnnie Mae Blunt that it did not have provisions yet for clearing Negro women. Even though the union at the national level previously created provisions for accepting black workers into its all-white membership, Local 513 had yet to comply. Barred from full union membership, they could not secure work clearance if no black auxiliary existed in the area. This lack of a black auxiliary succeeded in keeping many blacks, especially black women, from securing employment well into the war.

Even though the union continued to deny black women employment in the shipyards by denying them membership, it did not keep all blacks or even black women from securing employment prior to the creation of a black auxiliary in Richmond. After

89 Lillian Stevenson to Eleanor Roosevelt, November 18, 1942, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 2 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
90 Area Advisory Committee on Discrimination, FEPC, January 29, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 2 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
91 Area Advisory Committee on Discrimination, FEPC, January 29, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 2 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
Frances Mary Albrier completed twice the amount of required training to become a welder and passed the welding test at Kaiser Shipyard 2 in September 1942, the union denied her clearance because it did not yet have a black auxiliary in Richmond. She took her complaint to the director of the shipyards and the public relations manager who sent her back to the union with special permission to clear her for work. Occasionally, the union made these types of exceptions but mostly, black women did not benefit as a group. Albrier recalled that she was one of two black women in the shipyards and the other one had a fair complexion. The union cleared her for work, but in order to keep her work permit, she had to join auxiliary A-36 when Local 513 set it up seven months later. 92 This special treatment from the union remained the exception rather than normal procedure.

The Boilermakers’ Union more commonly used other tactics to keep blacks from acquiring work at the shipyards prior to the creation of the auxiliary. An inter-FEPC telegram communicated problems with the union not clearing blacks for work. Meanwhile, the shipyards recruited in several Southern cities with blacks making up at least 7% of the new recruits. Even though the shipyards clearly needed more workers, the union continued to refuse black workers clearance by creating new qualifications that the majority of them could not meet. As of March 1943, Local 513 had recently established a new rule that it would not clear black workers who were not residents or registered voters of Contra Costa County. As FEPC field representative Clarence R. Johnson pointed out, this new rule only applied to blacks and remained just another way

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to exclude or limit their ability to find work in the shipyards.\textsuperscript{93} On May 28, 1943, Sam Sherman wrote to the president complaining of this policy of discrimination based upon residency. Although he already claimed membership in A-26 in Oakland, Sherman attempted to join Local 513 so he could work in the Richmond Shipyards. However, the union refused his membership, “so now 513 union are trying to stop the people from working out there unless they join their union. And you cant [sic] join their union unless you live in Richmond, Calif.”\textsuperscript{94} The FEPC responded on June 14, 1943, to inform Sherman that Local 513 was under investigation as to whether it denied membership based upon race or residency. The letter also mentioned how denying union membership based upon residency was in line with the policy created by the War Manpower Commission so that defense industries would utilize local laborers first.\textsuperscript{95} In an inter-
FEPC communication on June 23, Clarence R. Johnson mentioned that Local 513 no longer required workers to reside in Richmond. Johnson strongly implied that this policy changed because of the creation of its black auxiliary A-36.\textsuperscript{96} Although the FEPC representatives did not directly acknowledge that the residency requirement ceased to exist because of the newly created auxiliary, the timing of the change and fact that they

\textsuperscript{93} Clarence R. Johnson, Field Representative of Minority Group Service, FEPC to Lawrence W. Cramer, Executive Secretary, FEPC, March 13, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 2 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.

\textsuperscript{94} Sam Sherman to President Roosevelt, May 28, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 1 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.

\textsuperscript{95} George M. Johnson, Assistant Executive Secretary, FEPC to Sam Sherman, June 14, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 1 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.

\textsuperscript{96} Clarence R. Johnson, Field Representative of Minority Group Service, FEPC to George M. Johnson, Assistant Executive Secretary, FEPC, June 23, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 1 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
mentioned this information in the same letter was not a coincidence. Although Sherman’s case involved a black man, black women faced the same challenge with union clearance. In investigating a case of discrimination on May 22, 1943, the USES highlighted that the residency requirement virtually excluded all blacks from employment. The FEPC found that black women made up a disproportionately large section of the unemployed because of the union’s discriminatory policies.97

Although Local 513 created its black auxiliary in the spring of 1943, thereby allowing black workers to join the Boilermakers’ Union, the creation of A-36 did not end the discriminatory hiring practices abounding in Richmond. The FEPC made a list of job candidates rejected by A-36 from May 13-17, 1943. Over those few days, the auxiliary rejected at least six women who met all the specifications for employment as student welders and the shipyards even approved them for work before sending them to the union for clearance. A-36 told all of these women some variation of the same story that the shipyards were not hiring any more welders.98 However, this turned out to be a complete lie. A May 22 investigation with the business agent for Local 513 revealed that the shipyards possessed the following open work requests: 500 arc welders (men and women), 250 welder trainees (men and women), 1000 student welders (men and women), and 1000 boilermakers’ helpers (men only). The union flat out rejected all blacks starting

97 United States Employment Service Form 510, May 22, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Administrative Files, 1941-1945, Box 3, Folder WMC Sam Kagel, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
98 List of Rejections by A-36, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Administrative Files, 1941-1945, Box 3, Folder WMC Sam Kagel, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
May 14th and even informed the USES of this policy on May 18th. Even though the open work orders and list of rejections showed convincing evidence of racial discrimination by the union, the FEPC’s investigation yielded a formal explanation of the union’s views: “Local #513 takes the position that they have accepted ‘their fair share’ of the negroes working at the yards, and that it is unfair to them to insist that they accept all persons on the basis of qualifications regardless of color.” Local 513 even offered to accept a few blacks on a very selective basis, which the FEPC found unacceptable. Although Local 513’s creation of an auxiliary might have alleviated some of the racial discrimination in hiring, the union continued to stand in the way of blacks acquiring work at the shipyards.

At the same time that black workers faced discrimination from Local 513 and A-36 that kept them out of work, the shipyard hiring hall also rejected workers. Throughout the entire month of May 1943, when black workers went to the shipyard hiring hall at the referral of the USES, the hiring hall told the majority of them that they were not suitable for welding or that the shipyard was not hiring. The hiring hall told Clara Hudson that the shipyards were not hiring even though she already belonged to the union. The union first rejected Artie Mae Vann on the 14th but told her that it would accept her on the 21st. However, on the 21st, the hiring hall denied her the necessary dispatch slip she needed to take to the union. Of the fourteen blacks who filed complaints with the USES, eleven...
were female and this list represents only those who bothered to file formal complaints. These cases of discrimination demonstrated that the union and shipyards both worked to limit the employment of black women. In a May 22 investigation, the FEPC found that the Kaiser Shipyards repeatedly and flagrantly rejected all black workers even when they met all the requirements set by the yards and the union. The report also mentioned that during this wholesale rejection of black workers, personnel managers for the shipyards wired recruiters regarding the shortage of 35,000 workers and the critical shortage of 5,000 welders. Even with all this evidence, the shipyards maintained that they did not engage in discriminatory hiring practices. Despite the fact that the shipyards denied it, the evidence clearly showed that the shipyard hiring hall acted as an agent of discrimination that kept black women from securing defense jobs. At least during this time, and probably for much more of the war, the Kaiser Shipyards engaged in outright racial discrimination in the hiring process.

Perhaps to justify outright rejection of black workers or just to minimize those allowed membership in the union, Local 513 established a quota system for A-36 to refer black workers to the shipyards. When A-36 met the quota, it could not refer any more workers. In April 1944, Dorothy Thomas sought a position as a student welder but A-36 told her that it was not accepting new members. When the FEPC investigated this case, the business agent for the auxiliary said that the union only allowed them to make referrals to the shipyards on a quota basis set up by Local 513. At the time of Thomas’s

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101 Report of Discrimination from the USES and Shipyard Negro Organization for Victory, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Administrative Files, 1941-1945, Box 3, Folder WMC Sam Kagel, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
102 Kaiser Shipyards, United States Employment Service Form 510, May 22, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Administrative Files, 1941-1945, Box 3, Folder WMC Sam Kagel, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
rejection, the union had an open work order from the shipyards for 35 student welders. All through the month of April, the FEPC investigated similar claims made against A-36 of turning away black women, typically from welding positions in the shipyards, because it was not accepting new members. Yet, at various times during the month, there remained as many as 150 open positions that these black women might have filled.

Shipyard 3 approved Annie T. Henry to work as a student welder and sent her to A-36 where she paid her union dues. They then sent her to Local 513 where the union told her that they had no work available at Yard 3 and sent her back to the auxiliary to get a refund. Although not outright rejected for work by the auxiliary, the outcome still demonstrated that the union kept blacks from acquiring work in the shipyards even though there remained a need for their labor.

Even though the USES recorded this issue of quotas in the spring of 1944, other unions also practiced this policy before the FEPC began looking into cases made against the IBB in Richmond. The FEPC investigated the issue of the Laborers’ Union Local 886 in Richmond using the quota system to reject black workers in May 1943. On May 10, Local 886 received an order from Yard 3 for 125 women laborers, yet it only referred 73 workers in 10 days because it had no available white women to refer and had filled its black quota. Had Local 886 eliminated the quota system, it could have filled those jobs with black workers. Instead, it was commonplace for work orders to go days unfilled.

The investigation revealed that Laborers’ Union referred only one out of every ten black

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103 United States Employment Service Form 510, April 15, 1944, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-311Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
104 Memorandum, April 7, 1944, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-311Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
women who were completely qualified for the job. The quota system limited the number of blacks allowed in the unions, but more importantly for those denied membership, it kept them from procuring work in the shipyards. This hit black women disproportionately hard because they continued to arrive in Richmond to take advantage of defense contracts well into the war, whereas many of the black men already had defense jobs or were serving in the military by this time. A sample count taken by three of the eight shipyard placement officers revealed that in a single three day period, 123 black women requesting work who had met all job specifications were turned away. The quota system kept black women out of both skilled and unskilled work in the shipyards for which they were both willing and able to fill.

Problems that arose with the auxiliary to the Boilermakers’ Union across the Bay in Sausalito also played a part in the employment of blacks and their interaction with A-36 and Local 513 in Richmond. In the fall of 1943, black workers at Marinship began to take issue with the newly created auxiliary that the union forced them to join. They were frustrated with the control the auxiliary extended over their employment while it did not allow them to enjoy traditional union benefits. Months after its creation, about half of the blacks employed at Marinship still refused to join the auxiliary. Soon the union retaliated and ordered Marinship management to fire about 430 black workers unless they paid

105 Laborers’ Union Local 886, United States Employment Service Form 510, May 22, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Administrative Files, 1941-1945, Box 3, Folder WMC Sam Kagel, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
106 Laborers’ Union Local 886, United States Employment Service Form 510, May 22, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Administrative Files, 1941-1945, Box 3, Folder WMC Sam Kagel, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
their union dues within 24 hours. A few days later, eighteen black workers took their case to the federal district court. But the court dismissed their case citing that the federal courts lacked jurisdiction over the matter. However, this did not stop the eighteen workers who then took their case to the Marin County Superior Court. The court ruled against segregated auxiliaries on February 17, 1944. The union and Marinship management appealed the case to the California Supreme Court where it took almost a year to come to a formal decision. On January 2, 1945, the California Supreme Court ruled that the union membership offered to black workers was “discriminatory and unequal” and that “an arbitrarily closed union is incompatible with a closed shop.”

The decision went on to explain that the union obtained a monopoly on the supply of labor because of the closed shop agreements so it had certain obligations. The decision stated that “Its asserted right to choose its own members does not merely relate to social relations; it affects the fundamental right to work for a living.”

Although as this case progressed, it did not inspire the auxiliaries in Richmond to change any of their discriminatory practices. It almost had the opposite effect of making members of the Boilermakers’ Union even less tolerant and accepting of black workers. On January 28, 1944, Edward Rutledge, the FEPC examiner-in-charge, concluded that Local 513 shut down A-36 after the Marinship situation arose. Although the union shut down A-36 for a period of time during the legal issues over black auxiliaries, Marinship black

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110 Edward Rutledge, Examiner-In-Charge, FEPC to Harry L. Kingman, January 28, 1944, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Administrative Files, 1941-1945, Box 3, Folder WMC Sam Kagel, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
workers’ fight against black auxiliaries did not inspire the Richmond auxiliary to end or even change its discriminatory practices.

In January and February of 1944, black workers in the Richmond shipyards stepped up their criticism of the auxiliary hiring practices. They even put their jobs on the line to demonstrate this dissatisfaction. Black workers often received notice from the shipyard personnel department informing them that they were not in good standing with the union and that they needed to present new union clearance to the personnel department within 48 hours or risk loss of work title. Amazel Gordon received this notice on January 18, 1944 because she refused to pay her union dues. In writing to the Eleanor Roosevelt a few days later, Gordon described why she refused to pay her union dues. She explained that she did not want to pay dues to a union that harmed her and offered no protection to its members. Although this letter appeared to raise issues with a segregated auxiliary, Gordon’s concern for her employment took precedence. In her letter, she mentioned that she had two kids to support on her own and “now I would like to know if I must pay them in order to keep my job.” Her letter demonstrated her disgust with the auxiliary and the lack of protections it offered her, such as job security. She feared losing her job and her ability to secure a living for her family. Mrs. Richard L. Morrison echoed Gordon’s frustration with the “Jim Crow auxiliaries” and their treatment of her daughter and many others. Her concerns also centered on the effects of

111 Notice to Amazel Gordon, January 18, 1944, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 2 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
112 Amazel Gordon to Eleanor Roosevelt, January 24, 1944, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 2 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
113 Amazel Gordon to Eleanor Roosevelt, January 24, 1944, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 2 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
the auxiliary on employment security and opportunities. She pointed out that the union required blacks to pay monthly dues but offered them no job security after the war. She asked how the United States could accomplish a speedy victory when hundreds of black workers were “laid off because of prejudice.” Morrison also wondered how black workers could put in an honest day’s work and support victory when they were being deprived of an honest living. Probably the most telling part of the letter stated, “We aren’t asking for social unity, we are only asking for a chance to make an honest living.”

Although complaining about and refusing to pay dues to the Boilermakers’ Union appeared to be a protest against an organization that practiced racial discrimination, these letters revealed how this was not the main reason for their complaints. Black women complained about these practices because they kept them and their fellow workers from obtaining employment security. They were concerned about making a living and supporting their families. They wanted the union to protect their jobs just as it did for their white coworkers.

This concern about employment security proved very pertinent as the war came to an end and defense contracts sharply declined. Black women realized the fragile nature of their occupational status when they were the first fired from their wartime work in the shipyards, and in fact, all industrial jobs. Frances Mary Albrier blamed the union for this forced exodus of black women from the shipyards. She remarked that these women needed to belong to the union to get permission to work but it offered them none of the

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114 Mrs. Richard L. Morrison to Paul B. McNutt, WMC, January 25, 1944, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 2 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
benefits of regular union membership, like job security. This became ever apparent as the war ended because so did black women’s union membership.\footnote{Frances Mary Albrier interviewed by Malca Chall, 1977-1978, “Women in Politics Oral History Project, Black Women Oral History Project,” Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA, 142-143.} The unions and businesses collaborated to open up industrial jobs to white male veterans after the war, which pushed black women out of the shipyards and prevented them from acquiring new industrial jobs. Black women’s training and experience meant nothing in the postwar economy. Discrimination pushed black women back into service jobs, although most did not return to their prewar domestic service.\footnote{Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, Abiding Courage: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 107.} Lewis Van Hook’s wife experienced this discrimination toward the end of the war. During the war, she worked as a welder in the shipyards. The shipyards laid her off before her husband and neither of them received much warning. Although Van Hook found postwar work as a shipwright in the Moore Shipyard, his wife could not find any postwar industrial work. She eventually went on to work in a barber shop and then a cafeteria.\footnote{Lewis Van Hook interviewed by Judith Dunning, December 7, 1983, “On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California,” Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 34, 38-39, 44-45.} Not only did the shipyards lay off black women at the beginning of their downsizing, black women did not succeed in finding industrial work, jobs for which they were qualified in the postwar world. Most had to settle for less skilled and lower paying jobs in the service industry.

Black women initially came to the Bay Area to find lucrative work in the defense industries, especially the shipyards in Richmond. For those who were able to find employment, these jobs offered them a temporary ladder into higher skilled and higher wage industrial jobs from which they had been excluded in the South. Although black
women migrated for increased employment opportunities, many found these opportunities severely limited by the industry and the union. The discrimination practiced by both the union and the shipyards kept many black women from securing and keeping skilled industrial jobs. Because black women focused solely on acquiring industrial employment, the fact that so very few of them succeeded and only on a temporary basis demonstrated the lack of wartime effect on their overall employment. Because industrial jobs did not remain open to black women on a large scale after the war, this digression to prewar employment standards suggested that temporary employment gains did not translate into lasting racial and sexual equity. Historian Karen Anderson Tucker expressed it best when she said, “For black women, especially, what is significant about the war experience is the extent to which barriers remained intact.”

CHAPTER IV

STRUGGLING TO ADVANCE INTO HIGHER SKILLED AND SUPERVISORY POSITIONS

On February 9, 1945, employees of the Kaiser Shipyards picked up a *Fore ‘n’ Aft* newsletter with their weekly paychecks specifically dedicated to Lincoln’s birthday. A large picture of Lincoln’s face graced the cover, along with a photo amalgam of shipyard workers displaying their gender and ethnic diversity. Underneath the title, the newsletter went on to describe how African Americans and whites united to fight fascism—specifically, “In our armies, as in these shipyards, working people of all colors and races are fighting and winning a war for freedom.” This issue of the newsletter, published purely for the Kaiser employees, featured interracial cooperation in the shipyards. Many of the articles took an oversimplified and rosy look at how defense work during World War II supported Lincoln’s national goal of African American emancipation. For many minority workers, this optimistic view of the shipyards was not their reality. This gulf between the promise of equality and the lived experience of black workers was especially stark in the job classification and promotion process in the Bay Area shipbuilding industry. The deskilling of shipbuilding trades opened up the industry to minorities and women, most notably the occupation of welding, but access to the newly gender approved crafts remained off limits to black women. Shipyard management and union officials were unyielding in their opposition to hiring and promoting black women. Most

black women who successfully landed jobs in the shipyards became increasingly aware of the race and gender restrictions they faced in the workplace as the shipyards and union worked together to keep them out of higher skilled jobs and positions of authority.

Although black women faced dual gender and race discrimination in their initial ranking in the shipyards, much of the racial discrimination in job classification was directed at blacks at large. The Boilermakers’ Union played a significant role in the placement of African Americans in inferior job classifications. Besides limiting blacks to membership in its segregated auxiliaries, the auxiliaries only cleared blacks to work in lower skilled jobs.\(^{121}\) On April 3, 1944, T. Walker, the business agent for Local 513, called the Richmond office of the USES to provide information on the union’s current policy toward black referrals. He notified the USES of the union’s policy to severely restrict the acceptance of black workers, and that the union would not accept blacks for all classifications under its jurisdiction. Even under pressure from the FEPC, the union refused to amend its policy of discrimination.\(^{122}\) Other unions in the shipbuilding industry including the Steamfitters, Sheetmetal Workers, and Electricians Unions discriminated against black workers in a similar way. These unions refused to clear few, if any, blacks to work in the shipyards. The FEPC concluded that the pending discrimination cases from the Richmond shipyards over black restrictions to certain crafts resulted from a special arrangement between the company and the union to limit black

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\(^{122}\) United States Employment Service Form 510, April 4, 1944, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-311 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
employment and training for specific jobs. The FEPC seriously studied how the
structuring of the shipyards caused a labor shortage in crucial craft areas. Most of those
job classifications fell under the authority of the unions that discriminated against African
Americans. Blacks as a whole found themselves excluded from specific occupations
because of policies made by both the union and the company to restrict their access to
higher skilled and higher wage jobs.

Even some of the white workers in the shipyards recognized the absense of blacks
in specific departments or work locations. Although Patricia Buls did not experience this
discrimination firsthand because she was white, she recalled that there were no blacks
working in the drafting department at the shipyards. Betty Branan remembered the
effects of these discriminatory placement policies. Branan worked as a welder in the plate
shop where she does not recall working with any African Americans. She did not even
consider the possibility, given the strict segregation she experienced growing up in
Oklahoma. Branan recalled, “There were no colored people in there, not in the plate
shop. Now, there was in the shipyards. I don’t know why there wasn’t any in the plate
shop, and I never did think about it at the time because I was used to segregation.”

Although not the targets of this discrimination in job placement, white shipyard workers
sometimes recognized blatant patterns of discrimination that confined black workers to
specific occupations.

123 Memorandum, Edward Rutledge to Harry L. Kingman, January 28, 1944, RG 228 Fair Employment
Practice Committee, Administrative Files, 1941-1945, Box 3, Folder WMC Sam Kagel, NARA—Pacific
Region (SF), San Francisco, CA..
124 Patricia Buls interviewed by Kathryn Stine, February 12, 2003, “Rosie the Riveter, World War II Home
Front Oral History Project,” Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California,
Berkeley, 17.
125 Betty Branan interviewed by David Dunham, December 20, 2011, Pleasanton, CA, “Rosie the Riveter,
World War II Home Front Oral History Project,” Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library,
University of California, Berkeley, 15, 32.
Black women who relocated to the East Bay during the war found a variety of jobs that bettered their economic standing. However, these migrant women strongly coveted skilled and supervisory positions in the shipyards. Unfortunately, even as the shipyards actively recruited black workers, the union sought to keep them from procuring skilled defense jobs. The discriminatory policies that the union practiced to keep black workers out of skilled positions hit black women especially hard. In the shipyards, white men dominated the high skilled and supervisory positions while white women monopolized gender specific clerical and semiskilled jobs. Black men filled the better paying semiskilled and unskilled job classifications, which left black women at the bottom of the labor pool to fill in the least desirable and lowest paid jobs. Although some black women found jobs as trainees and helpers in the shipyards by the end of the war, most black women filled positions in the yards as janitors and laborers or they found work in other industries.\footnote{Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Abiding Courage: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 113.}

The union and shipyards worked together to keep black women out of skilled positions, like that of welder, using such tactics like the quota system and claiming that they were unfit for the position. Yet the shipyards still needed laborers and filtered black women into menial jobs as general laborers or janitors. About a week after Aller Hunter relocated to Richmond, she went to their hiring hall to find a job. Not initially sure what job she would fill, the hiring hall sent her to the shipyards as a general laborer despite the fact that she had a college education. At the shipyard, she worked the swing shift cleaning up the metal scraps from the welding and clearing the floor of water. Although
Hunter recalled her shipyard experience in a very matter-of-fact way, and even expressed her desire not to be a welder because of some of the physical conditions of the job, not all black women found themselves satisfied with jobs as mere laborers. Hattie Stillwell recalled that during the war she pulled a tank around Moore Shipyard lighting welding torches. She also remarked that the union severely limited the jobs black women could hold, “Wasn't nothing but scrubbing and cleaning up” and only a few people even got those jobs. These limited opportunities in the shipyards as laborers did not stop blacks from trying to get the Boilermakers’ Union to assign them to higher skilled and wage positions. Stillwell recalled how blacks would be at the union all day waiting for referrals to positions working with changing pipes: “they would pay more for taking the pipes out and re-changing them. So they’d give them all to the Mexicans and whites. And the blacks couldn’t get it.” The Kaiser Shipyards also supported this widespread classification of black women as laborers throughout the war. The Fore ‘n’ Aft ran an article in its August 28, 1945 issue highlighting the fact that women in the yards wanted to keep their jobs as long as they had ships to work on. Yet, the pictures that accompanied the article showed women with brooms in their hands, especially black women (Figure 3). This picture emphasized the fact that, even by the end of the war, the most socially acceptable positions for women to hold in the shipyards remained in general labor or janitorial positions.

129 Forrest Ammons, “It Wasn’t Easy—But They Did It,” Fore ‘n’ Aft, August 28, 1945, Richmond Museum of History, Richmond, CA, 4.
The shipyards and union directed racially discriminatory policies at black women designed to keep these women out of skilled crafts that they readily permitted white women to fill. Frances Mary Albrier responded to a call from several women’s organizations to come to the Kaiser Shipyards to help build victory ships. Assuming that the call requested all women, Albrier completed her training as a welder, passed the test, and went to the shipyard to be hired. The shipyard employment officer did not think he could offer her a position. When pressed, he admitted that it was because the union did not employ black women as welders or burners.

When Albrier confronted the director of the Kaiser shipyards, he claimed that the company did not discriminate against blacks because plenty of them worked in the yards. To which she replied that there were blacks working “as laborers, but you don’t have Negro women or men working as welders and burners in the higher skilled jobs.” Albrier took her case to the union per the instructions of the Kaiser Shipyards director. At the union hall, she found out that Local 513 was hiring many white women to work as welders even though they still needed to complete

Figure 3: Fore ‘n’ Aft August 28, 1945
It highlighted white and minority women in janitorial positions. Image Courtesy of the Richmond Museum of History.
training. She pressed her case but the union would not accept her. Albrier fought the discrimination until the union gave her a permit to work. Yet, her experience demonstrated that even when the shipyards greatly needed welders, the union only sent white women to fill these positions. As a black worker in Yard 1, W.A. Stiles wrote to the FEPC on February 15, 1943 to complain about the struggles he and his wife faced in the shipyards. According to Stiles, his wife went to the shipyard hiring hall where they told her that they were not hiring black women as welders or anything else. In exasperation, Stiles wrote “there just arnt any jobs for colored women” and went on to describe his wife’s failed attempts to secure work in spite of the fact that “my wife hold[s] a college degree and is qualified to do the jobs that she applies for from the ads in the newspaper but in each case she is greeted with we don’t use colored or we had so many on the waiting list already.” Many black women came to the realization that qualifications for skilled crafts in the shipyards did not open up these positions to them. Frances Mary Albrier also found out the limitations of her ability to pressure the shipyards into allowing black women to fill positions as welders. She sought to help other well-trained black women welders secure jobs in the shipyards but the company “absolutely refused to take them in” and even the USES told these women that they would get nowhere because the union would not let them in. Albrier continued to press for change. She wrote to President Roosevelt and the regional director of the War Manpower Commission for assistance in encouraging Local 513 to create a black

131 WA Stiles to FEPC, February 15, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 2 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
auxiliary. Albrier succeeded in getting the Boilermakers’ Union to create an auxiliary to clear blacks to work in the Kaiser Shipyards. Despite her efforts, the auxiliary supported the union and shipyard policies of keeping black women out of skilled crafts. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the auxiliary merely became another tool used to enforce the local’s discriminatory policies.

Like Albrier, Mary Head and Mary Etta Williams were able to counteract the racial discrimination tactics that kept them out of skilled shipbuilding crafts and land jobs as welders. Mary Head left her job in a pie shop to pursue a higher wage job in the shipyards. She was lucky enough to secure a position as a welder in the Moore Shipyard in Oakland. Even though the Moore Shipyard had a more lenient policy toward hiring black women as welders, it did not translate into black women filling the position in any large numbers. Head recalled that she worked with very few black women “because blacks was kind of discriminated on what type of jobs that they had.”

The Kaiser Shipyards were known for their discriminatory practices in hiring and job placement but a few still managed to slip into positions as welders. In the March 10, 1944 issue of Fore 'n' Aft, “Yard Briefs” celebrated some of the excellent work going on in Yard One, particularly the incredible dedication and indispensable skill of those individuals highlighted. Of those mentioned and pictured was black welder Mary Etta Williams. The article described her current work welding the first Victory ship on Way Seven.

Instead of praising her skill, it merely pointed out that Williams worked for Yard One for

almost a year as a welder (Figure 4). Her placement with the other two individuals accentuated her race and gender as her accomplishment—she worked as a welder when most other black women could not. This coverage in the Kaiser newsletter showed the company’s prescription of race and gender acceptance in skilled positions but in reality, the newsletter brought attention to the fact that hiring black women as welders still very rarely occurred even this late into the war. The shipyards hired some black women in the skilled position of welder, but this continued to be an anomaly not standard practice.

Career advancement also proved a problem for the majority of black workers but not for all of them. Matilda Foster began work in the shipyards in February 1944 as part of the janitorial crew. She recalled, “I started out working the shipyard, they called it ‘the

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yard.’ Working and picking up and cleaning the streets and things like that. And the next couple of months, they told me it would pay more scaling. And I took a test to get that job. They paying a $1.45 an hour.” She then went on to describe the physical difficulties of her new job. Foster may have focused on the physical strains of her job as a scaler, but did not say much of her experience of advancing into a skilled craft. Her testimony did not demonstrate the problems she might have encountered in the process of upgrading her work classification or even the lack of struggle thereof. Foster’s story demonstrated that as a black woman she was able to advance into a higher skilled and wage position.

Black workers’ correspondence during the war shed more light on the difficulties they encountered as they attempted to advance into skilled shipbuilding positions. W.A. Stiles wrote to President Roosevelt on February 15, 1943 complaining of his difficulty moving up from a common labor position to welder. He finally secured his transfer to welding but faced difficulties with the union because of the color of his skin. Stiles discovered that the FEPC’s fight against racial discrimination did not extend into the actual workplace. According to FEPC official George Johnson, Stiles’s race did not keep him from obtaining employment. Johnson went on to explain, “This Committee cannot assume jurisdiction over internal union procedures unless such procedures result in the failure of the person to secure employment solely because of his race, creed, color or

136 WA Stiles to FEPC, February 15, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 2 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
national origin.” The FEPC was willing to help blacks find jobs, but not to advance into higher skilled jobs. Black workers like Stiles, may have learned firsthand about the limits of federal advocacy.

Black workers and the FEPC blamed the Boilermakers’ Union for creating advancement obstacles. W.A. Stiles wrote to President Roosevelt concerning this problem. He said, “There shouldn’t be any discrimination in these trying times but it abounds a plenty in the shipyards and I do believe you can trace the trouble right to Local 513 Richmond.” Sam Sherman also brought up this issue to President Roosevelt a few months later. Almost as an afterthought in writing about the treatment of blacks in the Richmond Shipyards, Sherman added that the union “wont [sic] use a colored man in the talent he knows.” Historian Amy Kesselman also found that blacks had limited access to skilled jobs even if they had the training for them.

White locals maintained control over the black auxiliaries, including decisions about promotions and upgrading. Black workers had to seek permission from the white local to advance in the shipyards. The International President would then offer his final approval. This promotion process allowed white locals to keep blacks out of higher paying crafts and ensured the availability of those positions for their own white workers.

137 George M. Johnson, Assistant Executive Secretary, FEPC to WA Stiles, February 23, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 2 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
138 WA Stiles to FEPC, February 15, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 2 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
139 Sam Sherman to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, May 28, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Closed Cases, 1941-1946, Box 6, Folder 12-UR-32 Boilermakers, Local 513 Richmond 1 of 2, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
140 Amy Kesselman, Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and Reconversion (New York: State University of New York, 1990), 40-41.
In December 1943, the FEPC acknowledged the racial discrimination blacks faced after the shipyards hired them. Edward Rutledge, a California FEPC examiner, pointed out that company hiring practices and union restrictions worked together to keep blacks in unskilled classifications, except welding and burning but they frequently refused to hire blacks for those positions as well. He outlined six discriminatory practices the Richmond Shipyards engaged in: “1) Specifying the types of crafts in which Negroes can be employed. 2) By limiting Negroes largely to labor classifications. 3) Limiting the number of Negroes in any one particular craft. 4) Failure to utilize Negroes in their highest skills. 5) Although critically short of supervisory personnel, failure to upgrade Negroes into supervisory positions. 6) Failure to train Negroes in certain crafts.” All of these practices demonstrated the extent of the discrimination that went on to keep blacks out of higher skilled and paid positions. In January 1944, Rutledge reiterated his claims that the unions in Richmond partly or wholly caused many of these cases of discrimination. The unions and shipyards arranged to keep blacks out of certain crafts thereby hindering “the maximum utilization of labor in the Bay Area.” Not only did black workers recognize the racial discrimination they faced, but the FEPC finally acknowledged the racial discrimination that continued to influence the job classifications and advancement of black workers even after they began work in the shipyards. Perhaps the FEPC extended their concern for discrimination past

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142 Edward Rutledge, Examiner-in-Charge, FEPC, to James Blaisdell, State Manpower Director, WMC, December 9, 1943, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Administrative Files, 1941-1945, Box 3, Folder WMC Sam Kagel, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
143 Edward Rutledge, Examiner-in-Charge, FEPC, to Sam Kagel, State Manpower Director, WMC, January 22, 1944, RG 228 Fair Employment Practice Committee, Administrative Files, 1941-1945, Box 3, Folder WMC Sam Kagel, NARA—Pacific Region (SF), San Francisco, CA.
the initial hiring process because of the severe shortage of skilled laborers in the shipyards that both the hiring and advancement processes contributed to.

Black workers faced the most discrimination with advancing into supervisory positions. Historian Karen Anderson Tucker indicated that white male workers feared working under black supervisors. They worried less about working in mix raced crews than under black supervisors.\textsuperscript{144} The February 9, 1945 issue of Fore ‘n’ Aft featured an article entitled “Free and Equal” about how well the races worked together in the shipyards. It praised mixed race crews, some under the leadership of women and some under the leadership of blacks. However, the woman crew leader the article praised was white while the black crew leader praised was male.\textsuperscript{145} This article meant to praise how far the shipyards had come with accepting and embracing nontraditional shipyard workers, yet it also showed the limitations of this acceptance. The shipyards did not accept black women as leaders of their crews. Matilda Foster recalled working on a mixed crew as a scaler. Her coworkers included three blacks, a Mexican girl, and two or three white women. The leader of her crew was a white woman.\textsuperscript{146} Although Foster fondly remembered working with these women, her sentiment did not undermine the inequality of a white woman leading a mixed crew of women. Aller Hunter also recalled working under the direction of a white crew leader. While working as a janitor in the

\textsuperscript{145} “Free and Equal,” \textit{Fore ‘n’ Aft}, February, 9, 1945, Richmond Museum of History, Richmond, CA, 1, 3.
shipyards, Hunter’s crew “had a leaderman, was caucasian. I think all us was black.”147 Hunter did not mention the gender of her crew’s leader. But interviewed 60 years later, she remembered that black women faced both gender and racial discrimination. They were not even permitted to lead crews consisting solely of black women. Another article in the February 9, 1945 Fore ’n’ Aft also illustrated the company’s reluctance to appoint black women to lead their own crews. “Willie Jones and His Sorting Crew” briefly discussed the desire for blacks’ right to work and desire to keep doing so after the war.

The article emphasized how considerable economic, social, and political advances had been accomplished over the last 25 years (Figure 5).148 Yet the

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article and its accompanying picture demonstrated the gendered restrictions of supervisory positions that allowed only black men to lead black crews, especially of black women. The fact that black women could not fill supervisory positions attested to the double burden they faced due to the racial and gender discrimination they encountered in the shipyards.

Black women working in the shipyards became increasingly aware of the gender and racial restrictions that limited specific shipbuilding crafts to them. The hiring process kept women out of the shipyards in general and especially the higher skilled crafts. The shipyards and the unions worked together to restrict blacks in skilled and semiskilled crafts, and black women faced even greater discrimination in work placement than black men did. Black women filled labor and janitorial positions because the shipyards and the union worked together to keep them out of all skilled positions. Even though white women and some black men filled positions as welders and burners, most black women could not. Black women were not even permitted to lead crews of other black women, let alone crews of anyone else. Wartime labor shortages opened up the previously all white male shipbuilding industry to blacks and women, yet the union and shipyards continued to impose race and gender restrictions that kept black women in the lowest paid and unskilled positions.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

For southern black women like Matilda Foster, Willie Mae Cotright, and many others, defense jobs in California offered them the hope of better economic opportunities and a better life. They flocked to the shipbuilding industry in the East Bay to secure jobs that took them out of domestic service and put them in higher wage industrial positions. However, the reality of the work situation in the Richmond Shipyards did not live up to their expectations. Black women found themselves denied access to the jobs that they migrated to acquire and increasingly barred from work in the shipyards altogether. For those lucky enough to secure jobs, they found that their skill level and training did not translate into higher level jobs. Black women filled the lowest level jobs in the yards; they worked as general laborers and janitors. Despite the reality of the work situation in the shipyards, black women fought for access to higher skilled and paid crafts.

Dual race and gender discrimination permeated all aspects of black women’s lives in the shipyards. Confronting interpersonal discrimination from their coworkers was part of the reality of working in the shipyards. Undoubtedly, at least part of this discrimination stemmed from the change in the workforce in the shipbuilding industry. Prior to the war-induced labor shortage, the shipbuilding industry had been solely the realm of white males. Opening up the industry to women and blacks did not guarantee them immediate acceptance or equal treatment. Many women dealt with sexual harassment from their male coworkers. Many blacks dealt with racist comments and behavior. And black women dealt with both forms of discrimination from their
coworkers. However, they did not emphasize or actively work to counteract these instances of microaggression. Instead, black women fought against the racism and sexism that inhibited their economic progress.

Black women confronted dual discrimination from both the shipyards and union as they attempted to secure jobs. The Boilermakers’ Union played a key role in keeping black women out of the shipyards and out of skilled crafts. Prior to the creation of its black auxiliary, the Boilermakers’ Union used residency requirements to keep blacks who did not live close enough to Richmond from gaining the necessary clearance to work at the Kaiser Shipyards. Once created, the black auxiliary became a tool for the union to deny black women work clearance. The union commonly told them that the shipyards were not hiring any welders even when the shipyards had already offered these women positions. The auxiliary also denied workers membership when it had filled its black quota for referring workers to the shipyards. Black workers across the bay at Marinship took their fight against the “Jim Crow auxiliaries” to the courts. They wanted full union membership and benefits. In response to the black workers’ challenges across the Bay, the Richmond auxiliary temporarily shut its doors and denied all blacks membership and work clearance. Black women fought against all these discriminatory hiring practices by writing to the President and complaining to the Fair Employment Practice Committee. In their complaints, they sought government support to end the racial and sexual discrimination that kept them out of the shipyards.

Black women also fought against institutional policies that kept them from advancing into skilled crafts and supervisory positions. The union and shipyards worked together to keep black women in unskilled and janitorial positions. Prior training and
skill did not factor into the placement of black women. They were denied positions as welders, despite their training, while the shipyards hired untrained white women to fill skilled positions as welders and burners. Being denied access to higher ranking jobs also extended to supervisory positions. White women led female mixed raced crews and black men supervised crews of black women, but black women were denied leadership positions, even over crews of all black women. They attempted to push back against these discriminatory policies but found little government support. The FEPC primarily addressed racism in hiring not in advancement. And when the FEPC began to take up the issue, it did so from the perspective that discriminatory practices in advancement created a labor shortage for vital skilled crafts.

This case study of the black women in the Richmond Shipyards complicates the historical view that World War II acted as a watershed for advancing race and gender equality in American society. Gender historians look at the continuation of traditional gender roles during and after World War II as reasons that women did not achieve progress in the workplace. However, these historians overlook the experience of black women when they assume that white women’s experience represented the norm. Race historians also engage in the progress debate by assessing whether the war altered the racial discrimination black workers experienced. They too take a sweeping look at blacks and overlook the gendered experience of female black workers. Exploring the dual gender and race discrimination black women experienced in the shipyards complicates the progress narrative. Black women do not fit neatly into either category because they dealt with both forms of discrimination. Not only that, but they fought back against both forms of discrimination. Black women fought back against the racism and sexism that
kept them from securing skilled positions in the Richmond Shipyards. They defined their own progress in economic terms. For those able to secure the jobs they desired, they likely saw the war as a means of personal economic progress. For those black women denied access to any job or skilled jobs, they likely identified with the lack of progress. And for the majority of black women who found themselves out of work and unable to secure other industrial work in the postwar years, they realized firsthand the limits of their economic progress.

This thesis tells the story of black women who worked or attempted to work in the Richmond Shipyards during World War II. It personalizes the narrative of racism and sexism that black women workers confronted by using their own words from letters they wrote imploring high government officials for assistance in landing jobs and from the oral histories they recorded many decades later. It also takes a deeper look at the mechanisms of discrimination the Boilermakers’ Union and the Kaiser Shipyards used to keep black women out of work and to limit their access to skilled jobs. However, this case study still has its limitations. It takes a very focused approach to discrimination by relying on the records from the FEPC and from oral histories. Neither of these sources provides a comprehensive view of the situation in the Richmond Shipyards. Nor can one apply the findings to the entire shipbuilding industry or the defense industries at large. However, this can lead to further exploration of dual discrimination in other shipbuilding companies or in other defense industries. This thesis shows that black women in the Richmond Shipyards fought against racism and sexism that worked to limit their economic opportunities during World War II.
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