



Liberty Ships and Victory Ships, America's Lifeline in War

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(Courtesy U.S. Maritime Administration)

The officers and men of the Merchant Marine, by their devotion to duty in the face of enemy action, as well as natural dangers of the sea, have brought us the tools to finish the job. Their contribution to final victory will be long remembered.

--General Dwight D. Eisenhower on National Maritime Day, 1945¹

In the nearly 20 years following the end of the World War I, America's merchant fleet, including its cargo and passenger ships, was becoming obsolete and declining in numbers. A shipbuilding program began with the passage of the Merchant Marine Act of 1936. However, World War II provided the impetus to intensify those efforts eventually leading to a shipbuilding program that produced 5,500 vessels. Among them were 2,710 mass-produced ships known as Liberty ships. While reviewing blueprints of the Liberty ships at the White House, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who loved naval vessels and had an eye for design, mused aloud to Maritime Commission administrator Admiral Emory S. Land, "I think this ship will do us very well. She'll carry a good load. She isn't much to look at, though, is she? .A real ugly duckling."² Thus, the Liberty ships received their second nickname, "the ugly ducklings."

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When the United States entered World War II at the end of 1941, it had the beginnings of a great merchant fleet. But the lethal U-Boats, submarines of the German Navy, prowled the shipping lanes hunting American merchant ships. The Liberty ships proved to be too slow and too small to carry the tons of supplies the United States and her Allies would need to win the war. In 1943, the United States began a new ship-building program. These new ships would be faster, larger, and able to carry cargo long after the war was finished. These were the Victory ships.

The Liberty and Victory ships fulfilled President Roosevelt's prophetic words, serving the nation well in war and peace. Today, of the thousands of Liberty ships and Victory ships built during World War II, only a handful remain.



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Where this lesson fits into the curriculum

Time Period: World War II

Topics: This lesson can be used in U.S. history, world history, social studies, and geography courses on World War II.

Relevant United States History Standards for Grades 5-12

This lesson relates to the following National Standards for History from the UCLA National Center for History in the Schools:

US History Era 8

- **Standard 3A:** The student understands the international background of World War II.
- **Standard 3B:** The student understands World War II and how the Allies prevailed.
- **Standard 3C:** The student understands the effects of World War II at home.

Relevant Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

This lesson relates to the following Curriculum Standards for Social Studies from the National Council for the Social Studies:

Theme II: Time, Continuity and Change

- Standard B: The student identifies and uses key concepts such as chronology, causality, change, conflict, and complexity to explain, analyze, and show connections among patterns of historical change and continuity.
- Standard C: The student identifies and describes selected historical periods and patterns of change within and across cultures, such as the rise of civilizations, the development of transportation systems, the growth and breakdown of colonial systems, and others.

Theme III: People, Places and Environments

- Standard A: The student elaborates mental maps of locales, regions, and the world that demonstrate understanding of relative location, direction, size, and shape.



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Theme V: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

- Standard A: The student demonstrates an understanding of concepts such as role, status, and social class in describing the interactions of individuals and social groups.
- Standard B: The student analyzes group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture.
- Standard G: The student applies knowledge of how groups and institutions work to meet individual needs and promote the common good.

Theme VI: Power, Authority and Governance

- Standard C: The student analyzes and explains ideas and governmental mechanisms to meet wants and needs of citizens, regulate territory, manage conflict, and establish order and security.
- Standard G: The student describes and analyzes the role of technology in communications, transportation, information-processing, weapons development, and other areas as it contributes to or helps resolves issues.

Theme VII: Production, Distribution and Consumption

- Standard A: The student gives and explains examples of ways that economic systems structure choices about how goods and services are to be produced and distributed.
- Standard D: The student describes a range of examples of the various institutions that make up economic systems such as households, business firms, banks, government agencies, labor unions, and corporations.

Relevant Common Core Standards

This lesson relates to the following Common Core English and Language Arts Standards for History and Social Studies for middle school and high students:

Key Ideas and Details

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2

Craft and Structure

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.10



About This Lesson

This lesson is based on the National Register of Historic Places registration files for the SS *John W. Brown*, the [SS Jeremiah O'Brien](http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NHLS/Text/78003405.pdf) (<http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NHLS/Text/78003405.pdf>), (with [photographs](http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NHLS/Photos/78003405.pdf) <http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NHLS/Photos/78003405.pdf>), the SS *American Victory*, and the SS *Red Oak Victory*, the National Historic Landmark nomination file for the [SS Lane Victory](http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NHLS/Text/90002222.pdf) (<http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NHLS/Text/90002222.pdf>) (with [photographs](http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NHLS/Photos/90002222.pdf) <http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NHLS/Photos/90002222.pdf>), and other sources

It was published in 2004. This lesson was written by Jay Michalsky, a historical researcher. It was edited by Jean West, education consultant and Teaching with Historic Places staff. This lesson is one in a series that brings the important stories of historic places into classrooms across the country.

Objectives

1. To outline the reasons behind the massive merchant-ship building program the United ;
2. To examine how changing technology affected the conduct of warfare;
3. To compare and contrast the Liberty ships and the Victory ships;
4. To conduct oral histories with local people involved in supporting the war effort.

Materials for students

The materials listed below can either be used directly on the computer or can be printed out, photocopied, and distributed to students.

1. Two maps showing selected shipyards in the United States and the North Atlantic Ocean;
2. Three readings about Liberty ships and Victory ships;
3. Four photographs of Liberty ships, Victory ships, and convoys;
4. One stamp showing a Liberty ship.



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Visiting the site

The Liberty Ship SS *Jeremiah O'Brien* is located at Pier 45 on Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, California. The ship is open to the public and cruises are available. The ship is open daily from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., except on New Year's Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. There is an admission charge. For more information, contact the National Liberty Ship Memorial, Pier 23, San Francisco, CA 94111, or [visit the ship's website](http://www.ssjeremiahobrien.org/) at <http://www.ssjeremiahobrien.org/>.

The Liberty Ship SS *John W. Brown* is located in Baltimore, Maryland. The ship is open to the public and cruises are available. The ship is open Sundays and Wednesdays from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., except on Christmas. From I-95 take the Keith Avenue exit. Follow Keith Avenue west to Clinton Street. Turn right on Clinton Street and proceed to 2000 S. Clinton Street, Pier 1. For more information, contact Project Liberty Ship, P.O. Box 25846, Highlandtown Station, Baltimore, MD 21224, or [visit the ship's website](http://www.liberty-ship.com/) at <http://www.liberty-ship.com/>.

The Victory Ship SS *American Victory* is located near the Florida Aquarium in Tampa, Florida at Berth 271. The ship is open to the public and cruises are available. The ship is open Monday through Saturday 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sundays 12:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. There is an admission charge. From I-275 take the Downtown East exit to Jefferson Street. Continue south on Jefferson Street to Twiggs Street. Turn left on Twiggs Street to Channelside Drive. Turn right on Channelside Drive to York Street. Turn left on York Street to the Florida Aquarium parking lot. For more information, contact *American Victory* Ship, 705 Channelside Drive, Tampa, FL 33602, or [visit the ship's website](http://www.americanvictory.org/) at <http://www.americanvictory.org/>.

The Victory Ship SS *Lane Victory* is located at the Los Angeles Harbor in San Pedro, California. The ship is open to the public and cruises are available. The ship is open daily from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. There is an admission charge. From the Harbor Freeway (I-110) take the Harbor Boulevard exit. Stay to the right and follow the signs to Harbor Boulevard. Once off the freeway, stay in the center lane and go into the Catalina Terminal. Follow the signs to the SS *Lane Victory* at Berth 94. For more information, contact the United States Merchant Marine Veterans of World War II, P.O. Box 629, San Pedro, CA 90733, or [visit the ship's website](http://www.lanevictoryship.com/) at <http://www.lanevictoryship.com/>.

The Victory Ship SS *Red Oak Victory* is located in Richmond, California and is part of the Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front National Historical Park. The ship is administered by the

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Richmond Museum of History and is open to the public. The ship is open seven days a week from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. except when there is severe weather. Donations are requested. From either I-80 or I-580 take the Cutting Boulevard exit. Continue west on Cutting Blvd. to a four-way stop sign. Take a left on Dornan Drive through the Ferry Point tunnel to Terminal One, 1500 Dornan Drive. Please note the ship is scheduled to be relocated in early 2005. For more information, contact the SS *Red Oak Victory*, Terminal 1, 1500 Dornan Drive, Richmond, CA 94801, or [visit the ship's website](http://www.ssredoakvictory.org/) at <http://www.ssredoakvictory.org/>.

Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park, located in Richmond, California, preserves and interprets the history of the men and women who worked in the factories and shipyards in Richmond during World War II. It is a partnership between the National Park Service, the City of Richmond, the Rosie the Riveter Trust, and the Richmond Museum of History, and is made up of noncontiguous units near the Richmond waterfront. Many of the units are owned by the City of Richmond while others are privately owned. The park was created in 2000 and is still in development; therefore, certain sites are not yet open to the public. Several units are open to the public, including the Rosie the Riveter Memorial, which is open from dawn to dusk every day, the John J. Sheridan Observation Point, and the Victory Ship SS *Red Oak Victory*. For more information about the park, contact the Superintendent, Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park, 1401 Marina Way South, Richmond, CA 94804 or [visit the park's website](http://www.nps.gov/rori/index.htm) at <http://www.nps.gov/rori/index.htm> or the park's partner, [the Rosie the Riveter Trust](http://www.rosietheriveter.org/) at <http://www.rosietheriveter.org/>.

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Getting Started



(Stamp courtesy Iowa Stamps and Coins)

Why do you think the U.S. Post Office issued this stamp?

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Photo Analysis Worksheet

Step 1:

Examine the photograph for 10 seconds. How would you describe the photograph?

Step 2:

Divide the photograph into quadrants and study each section individually. What details--such as people, objects, and activities--do you notice?

Step 3:

What other information--such as time period, location, season, reason photo was taken--can you gather from the photo?

Step 4:

How would you revise your first description of the photo using the information noted in Steps 2 and 3?

Step 5:

What questions do you have about the photograph? How might you find answers to these questions?



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Setting the Stage

In 1936, Congress passed the Merchant Marine Act, creating the U.S. Maritime Commission to oversee "... that the United States shall have a merchant marine...to provide shipping service essential for maintaining the flow of such domestic and foreign waterborne commerce at all times, capable of serving as a naval and military auxiliary in time of war or national emergency, owned and operated under the United States flag..., composed of the best-equipped, safest, and most suitable types of vessels..., and supplemented by efficient facilities for shipbuilding and ship repair."¹ The fleet of ships responsible for this mission is called the U.S. Merchant Marine.

At the time the act was passed, the majority of the ships in the merchant fleet were over 20 years old. The original plan was to build 50 ships per year for 10 years. However, World War II began in 1939, when Hitler's Germany invaded Poland. The United States realized that the existing construction program was not adequate to meet the changing world situation. During World War II the Merchant Marine was nationalized, that is, the U.S. government controlled the cargo and the destinations, contracted with private companies to operate the ships, and put guns and Navy personnel (Armed Guard) on board. The government trained civilian men to operate the ships and assist in manning the guns through the U.S. Maritime Service.

With Hitler's attack on Great Britain in 1940, the need for the United States to increase ship production became critical. The British could no longer produce ships in great numbers and also needed food and supplies. The United States knew that if Great Britain fell it would have no allies in Western Europe. Under the Lend-Lease program (which enabled the president to transfer arms and equipment to any nation deemed vital to the defense of the United States), the U.S. agreed to build commercial ships for Great Britain. American ship builders began to construct these ships using an old, but reliable, English design.

In 1939 the German Navy launched submarine warfare in the North Atlantic Ocean to enforce a naval blockade against Great Britain. Their submarines, called *Unterseebooten* or U-Boats, sank great numbers of merchant ships approaching the British Isles. Under these pressures, the United States greatly increased the production of its own merchant fleet. Cargo ships were needed to ferry supplies to allies if the United States entered the war. The United States decided to modify the English design being used for the Lend-Lease ships. The new emergency cargo ships came to be known as the Liberty ships. Yet, between 1939 and 1940, only 82 vessels were constructed. In 1941, Congress passed the Ship Warrants Act, giving the Maritime Commission power to allot ship construction priorities. Since existing shipyards were working full capacity on naval contracts, the Maritime Commission established 18 new shipyards to work on these identical merchant ships. They were built on a common design in assembly-line fashion along the West, East, and Gulf coasts of the United States. Parts were manufactured in every state in the country.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 and U.S. entry into World War II, ships were being sunk by German U-Boats almost as fast as they were being built. The Maritime Commission called for 2,000 ships to be constructed by the end of 1943. (The Japanese also inflicted a toll on supply ships in the Solomon Islands and New Guinea, but following their naval and air losses at Coral Sea and Midway, in mid-1942, they were less of a problem to merchant shipping than the



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Germans.) The ship building effort was a success. Finally, the United States had enough ships to keep pace with the losses caused by the U-Boats.

However, the Liberty ships were slow and small. Their design had a weakness in the hull that caused ships to sometimes break in two. In 1943, the United States started a new emergency cargo ship program to replace the Liberty ships. The newer ships were bigger and faster with better engines. These ships were designated Victory ships. While the Liberty ships were designed to be the workhorse of the war, Victory ships could continue to be used after the war as part of the regular merchant fleet.

The Liberty and Victory ships were adapted to suit the operational needs of each branch of the military service. Many carried cargo, while others were fitted out as troop carriers. Some were used as tankers carrying fuel for ships, vehicles and aircraft. Still others were fitted out as hospital ships or used to transport enemy prisoners of war. Ultimately, both the Liberty ships and Victory ships served with distinction in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans during World War II.



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Locating the Site

Map 1: Selected Shipyards in the United States.



All of the shipyards built Liberty ships. The shipyards marked with a (V) also built Victory ships.



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Questions for Map 1

- 1) Compare Map 1 with an atlas or a map of the United States map. Make a list of the states where the shipyards were located. On what bodies of water were the shipyards located?

- 2) What effect do you think climate might have on producing ships? Would having a large population nearby be important? If so, why? Why do you think most of the shipyards that built Victory ships were located on the West Coast, and especially in California? Which shipyard on the East Coast built Victory Ships?

- 3) Why do you think it would be important to have shipyards along the East, West, and Gulf coasts, and not just in one area?

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Locating the Site

Map 2: North Atlantic Ocean



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Questions for Map 2

- 1) Using an atlas, world map or globe, locate the Atlantic Ocean, North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Greenland, Iceland, Germany and Great Britain. Mark them on Map 2.

- 2) Using an atlas or a United States map, locate New York City. Mark it on Map 2.

- 3) On Map 2, draw a line between New York City and Great Britain. This would be the most direct route between the two and a logical shipping lane. However, German submarines patrolled these shipping lanes. Try to determine other routes to get the supplies from New York City to Great Britain and chart them on Map 2. What might be the difficulties of traveling to the north to reach Great Britain? What might be the difficulties of traveling to the south?



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Determining the Facts

Reading 1: Liberty Ships

When war broke out in Europe in September 1939, the merchant fleet was caught unprepared to handle a massive seelift of war material. With continental Europe under German control, and Great Britain under devastating air attack, President Franklin Roosevelt decided to increase the pace of production to provide ships to America's British allies. The result was the emergency fleet program, which introduced the assembly-line production of standardized ships--the Liberty ships--in 1941. The Liberty ship represented the design solution that would fill the need for an emergency type of simple, standardized cargo steamer. Based on a British design, it could be mass-produced cheaply and quickly using assembly-line methods and could easily be converted to individual military service needs. The United States designated this new type of ship the EC2 (E for emergency, C for cargo and 2 for a medium-sized ship between 400 and 450 feet at the waterline.) Production speed grew more important as German submarines sank ships trying to break Hitler's naval blockade of Great Britain. The Allies needed ships by the hundreds to replace these losses and to increase the flow of supplies to England and, later, the Soviet Union.

The first of these new ships was launched on September 27, 1941. It was named the SS *Patrick Henry* after the American Revolutionary War patriot who had famously declared, "Give me liberty, or give me death." Consequently, all the EC2 type of emergency cargo ships came to be known as Liberty ships. Naming nearly 3,000 ships turned out to be harder than people thought. Unlike the later Victory ships, there was no plan for how the Liberty ships would be named. In the end, the Liberties were named for people from all walks of life. Ships were named after patriots and heroes of the Revolutionary War. They were named after famous politicians (Abraham Lincoln to Simon Bolivar), scientists (George Washington Carver to Alexander Graham Bell), artists (Gilbert Stuart to Gutzon Borglum who sculpted Mt. Rushmore) and explorers (Daniel Boone to Robert E. Peary). One ship was named the SS *Stage Door Canteen* after the famous U.S.O. club for military service members while another was named the SS *U.S.O.* in honor of the United Service Organization itself.

The Liberty ships were slightly over 441 feet long and 57 feet wide. They used a 2,500 horsepower steam engine to push them through the water at 11 knots (approximately 12.5 miles per hour). The ships had a range of 17,000 miles. Liberty ships had five cargo holds, three forward of the engine room and two aft (in the rear portion of the ship). Each could carry 10,800 deadweight tons (the weight of cargo a ship can carry) or 4,380 net tons (the amount of space available for cargo and passengers). The crew quarters were located amidships (the middle portion of the ship).

Many technological advances were made during the Liberty shipbuilding program. A steel cold-rolling process was developed to save steel in the making of lightweight cargo booms. Welding techniques also advanced sufficiently to produce the first all-welded ships. Prefabrication was perfected, with complete deckhouses, double-bottom sections, stern-frame assemblies and bow units speeding production of the ships. By 1944, the average time to build a ship was 42 days.



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In all, 2,751 Liberties were built between 1941 and 1945, making them the largest class of ships built worldwide.

Each Liberty ship carried a crew of between 38 and 62 civilian merchant sailors, and 21 to 40 naval personnel to operate defensive guns and communications equipment. The Merchant Marine served in World War II as a Military Auxiliary. Of the nearly quarter million volunteer merchant mariners who served during World War II, over 9,000 died. Merchant sailors suffered a greater percentage of fatalities (3.9%) than any branch of the armed forces.

The Liberty ship was considered a "five-year vessel" (an expendable, if necessary, material of war) because it was not able to compete with non-emergency vessels in speed, equipment and general serviceability. However, Liberties ended up doing well, plodding the seas for nearly 20 years after the end of World War II. Many Liberties were placed in the reserve fleet and several supported the Korean War. Other Liberties were sold off to shipping companies, where they formed the backbone of postwar merchant fleets whose commerce generated income to build the new ships of the 1950s and 1960s. However, age took its toll and by the mid-1960s the Liberties became too expensive to operate and were sold for scrap, their metal recycled. The first Liberty built, the *Patrick Henry*, was sent to the ship breakers (scrap yard) in October 1958.

Of the nearly 3,000 Liberty ships built, 200 were lost during World War II to enemy action, weather and accidents. Only two are still operational today, the SS *Jeremiah O'Brien* and the SS *John W. Brown*.



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Questions for Reading 1

- 1) What is the U.S. Merchant Marine? What was the 1936 Merchant Marine Act? If needed, refer to Setting the Stage.

- 2) Why did the United States want to build merchant ships?

- 3) How many total ships did the Merchant Marine Act call for?

- 4) Why were the ships known as Liberty ships? How were the individual ships named?

- 5) Why were so many Liberty ships built?

- 6) What purpose did the ships serve during the war? What purpose did they serve after the war?



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Determining the Facts

Reading 2: Victory Ships

In 1943, the U.S. Maritime Commission embarked on a program to design new types of emergency fleet ships, most importantly fast cargo vessels, to replace the slower Liberty ships. The standardized design adopted by the Commission called for a ship 445 feet long by 63 feet wide and made of steel. On April 28, 1943, the new ships were given the name "Victory" and designated the VC2 type (V for Victory type, C for cargo, and 2 for a medium sized ship between 400 and 450 feet long at the waterline).

The Victory ships ultimately were slightly over 455 feet long and 62 feet wide. Like the Liberty ships, each had five cargo holds, three forward and two aft. The Victories could carry 10,850 deadweight tons (the weight of cargo a ship can carry) or 4,555 net tons (the amount of space available for cargo and passengers), a larger load than the Liberties could manage. Victory ships typically carried a crew of 62 civilian merchant sailors and 28 naval personnel to operate defensive guns and communications equipment. The crew quarters were located amidships. The Victory ships were different from the Liberty ships primarily in propulsion, the steam engine of the Liberty giving way to the more modern, faster steam turbine. The Victory ships had engines producing between 5,500 to 8,500 horsepower. Their cruising speed was 15-17 knots (approximately 18.5 miles per hour).

The ship profile and the construction techniques of the Victories were also different from the Liberties. One important feature of the Victory ship was in the internal design of the hull, the ship's framework. The Liberty ships had the frames inside the hull set 30 inches apart. This made the hull very rigid. This rigidity caused the hull to fracture in some of the ships. The Victory ships had their hull frames set 36 inches apart. Because the hull could flex, there was less danger of fracture.

The first Victory ship completed was the SS *United Victory* (built at Oregon Shipbuilding, Portland, OR), launched on January 12, 1944 and delivered February 28. The next 33 ships were named after member countries of the United Nations (e.g., SS *Brazil Victory* and SS *U.S.S.R. Victory* [both built by California Shipbuilding Corporation, Los Angeles, CA], and SS *Haiti Victory* [built by Permanente Metals Corporation, yard 1, Richmond, CA]). The ships that followed were named for cities and towns in the United States (e.g., SS *Ames Victory* [built by Oregon Shipbuilding], SS *Las Vegas Victory* [built by Permanente Metals Corporation, yard 1] and SS *Zanesville Victory* [built by Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyards, Inc., Baltimore, MD]) and for American colleges and universities (e.g., SS *Adelphi Victory* and SS *Yale Victory* [both built by Permanente Metals Corporation, yard 2]). All of the ships' names ended with the suffix "Victory" with the exception of the 117 Victory Attack Transports that were named after state counties. The Maritime Commission built 414 Victory cargo ships and 117 Victory attack transports for a total of 531 vessels during the course of the war.



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Victory ships formed a critical maritime link to the theaters of war. These fast, large capacity carriers served honorably in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters of war. Ninety-seven of the Victories were fitted out as troop carriers; the others carried food, fuel, ammunition, material and supplies.

At the war's end a number of Victory ships were offered for sale by the Maritime Commission. One hundred and seventy were sold, 20 were loaned to the U.S. Army and the rest were stored as part of the reserve fleet. When the Navy no longer needs to use a ship but wishes to reserve it for a future emergency, it tows the ship to storage harbors, empties it of all fuel and cargo, and seals its windows and doors. The ship is protected from salt-water corrosion by a cathodic protection system and the interior spaces are dehumidified. This technique is called "mothballing," because it echoes how people preserve a wool sweater that is put away for the summer.

Some vessels were reactivated to serve during times of national crisis, including the Korean War, the Suez Canal closure of 1956 and the Vietnam War. Other vessels were retained as logistic support ships as part of the Military Sealift Command, which in 1970 became the single managing agency for the Department of Defense's ocean transportation needs. The command assumed responsibility for providing sealift and ocean transportation for all military services as well as for other government agencies. In 1959, eight Victory ships were reclassified and refitted as instrumentation, telemetry, and recovery ships for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in support of America's space program. On August 11, 1960, the former SS *Haiti Victory* (renamed the USNS *Haiti Victory* (T-AK-238)) recovered the nose cone of the satellite *Discoverer XIII*, the first man-made object recovered from space.

Over the years, many ships in the reserve fleet have been sold for scrap, their metal to be recycled. Of the thousands of Liberty ships and Victory ships produced only a small number remain.



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Questions for Reading 2

- 1) When and why did the Maritime Commission start a new program to replace the Liberty ships?
- 2) How were the Victory ships different from Liberty ships?
- 3) How were the Victory ships named?
- 4) What is "mothballing"?
- 5) Describe the ways the Victory ships were used after World War II.
- 6) Why are there so few Liberty and Victory ships today?



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Determining the Facts

Reading 3: Serving the Potomac River Valley

As the years went by, age took its toll on the Liberty and Victory ships. Many ships became too expensive to operate; insurance companies did not want to cover these old merchant ships. In most cases, they were sold for scrap. The reserve fleet was also being sold for scrap. What was once a proud fleet was now down to a precious few vessels. Some historic preservation and veterans organizations became interested in these ships and a handful were saved from the ship breakers. The following are the histories of five of these ships that have been preserved as floating museums to honor their service to the United States and to honor the mariners who sailed upon them.

The Liberty Ship SS Jeremiah O'Brien

The SS Jeremiah O'Brien is a World War II cargo ship and the product of a standardized design. The ship was named for Jeremiah O'Brien, a Revolutionary War hero who lived in Machias, Maine. In 1775, O'Brien led other residents of Machias in the capture of two British merchant ships. Using these captured ships, O'Brien captured the British armed schooner HMS *Margaretta*. This was the first naval action of the American Revolution.

The keel (the bottom beam or plate juncture that runs the length of a ship) for the SS Jeremiah O'Brien was laid at the New England Shipbuilding Corporation, in South Portland, Maine on May 6, 1943. She was launched on June 19, 1943. The ship was owned by the federal government and operated by Grace Line, Inc. For the next year, the ship carried ammunition and grain, as well as other dry cargo. In June 1944, the Jeremiah O'Brien supported the D-Day invasions by ferrying supplies between Great Britain and Normandy, France 11 times.

After the war, plans were made to transfer the ship to the U.S. Army for conversion to a hospital ship. The conversion never occurred and the ship was "mothballed" at the reserve fleet near San Francisco. In 1966, the U.S. Maritime Administration wanted to preserve a Liberty ship and chose the Jeremiah O'Brien. The ship was designated a National Historic Landmark (NHL) in 1986. NHLs are nationally significant historic places designated by the Secretary of the Interior because they illustrate the heritage of the United States. Over the years, the ship was restored and is now a museum in San Francisco, CA. She is only one of two Liberty ships still operational. The ship participated in the 50th anniversary of the D-day landings in 1994.

The Liberty Ship SS John W. Brown

The SS John W. Brown is a World War II cargo ship built by the U.S. Maritime Commission. In 1942, she was built in 41 days at the Bethlehem-Fairfield Shipyard in Baltimore, Maryland. She was launched on Labor Day, September 7, 1942. The ship was named after an American labor leader who organized workers in shipyards.

After being launched, the ship sailed to New York and departed on its maiden voyage on September 29, 1942 carrying supplies to the Middle East. In 1943, the ship was converted to carry troops as well as cargo. Later, the John W. Brown supported combat operations in the



Liberty Ships and Victory Ships, America's Lifeline in War

Mediterranean Sea. The ship was involved in the Allied landings at Sicily and Anzio in Italy, and southern France. After the war ended in Europe, the John W. Brown carried U.S. military personnel home.

In 1947, the Maritime Commission loaned the ship to New York City to use as a training vessel for high school students interested in maritime jobs. However, it became too expensive to run the school, and the ship was returned to the Maritime Commission and put into storage with the reserve fleet on the James River in Virginia. Historic preservation groups, including Project Liberty Ship and the Baltimore Museum of History (MD), wanted to protect the ship and it was transferred to them to turn into a museum in Baltimore, MD. She is one of only two Liberty ships still operational.

The Victory Ship SS American Victory

The SS American Victory was launched on June 20, 1945 at the California Shipbuilding Corporation yards in Los Angeles, California. The ship was named after American University in Washington, D.C. in honor of the school's contribution to war training and weapons research in both World War I and World War II. The ship's first voyage was in July 1945 carrying military supplies to Manila, Philippines.

After the war, the ship was used by the American Export Lines carrying cargo in support of the Marshall Plan, a U.S. economic diplomacy plan to help rebuild Western Europe after the war. On one of its many voyages, the American Victory was caught by ice in Odessa, Russia. Rather than wait for an ice breaker to clear the shipping lanes, the captain of the American Victory used her to break the ice!

In 1947, the American Victory was put into the reserve fleet. In 1952, the ship was brought out of "mothballs" to carry military supplies in support of the Korean conflict. After the Korean War, she was again sent to the reserve fleet. In 1963, the Navy planned to convert 15 Victory ships, among them the American Victory, as forward depot ships. These ships would be loaded with supplies and ammunition and placed around the world to support American troops if needed. However, the Navy canceled the plan in 1966 and that same year, the American Victory was again brought out of "mothballs" to support the Vietnam War. She carried military vehicles, telephone poles, explosives, and bombs.

In 1969, she was again put in the reserve fleet. In 1999, the American Victory was acquired by a preservation group and turned into a museum in Tampa, FL.



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The Victory Ship SS Lane Victory

The SS Lane Victory was built by the California Shipbuilding Corporation in Los Angeles. She was launched on May 31, 1945. The ship was named for Lane College, which was established as a high school for black youths in 1882 by Isaac Lane, a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church at Jackson, Tennessee. The school grew into a prominent liberal arts college. On her first voyage, June 27, 1945, the ship carried supplies in the Pacific. She was operated by American President Lines.

In 1950, the Lane Victory was used to evacuate Korean civilians and U.N. personnel at Wonsan, South Korea during the Korean War. The ship also saw duty during the Vietnam War. In 1970, the ship was placed in the reserve fleet. Because of her excellent condition, the Maritime Administration decided to set aside the Lane Victory for preservation. In 1988, the Lane Victory was acquired by the U.S. Merchant Marine Veterans of World War II and turned into a museum in San Pedro, CA. In 1990, the ship was designated a National Historic Landmark.

The Victory Ship SS Red Oak Victory

The SS Red Oak Victory was built by the Permanente Metals Corporation, Shipbuilding Division Yard 1 in Richmond, California, across the bay from San Francisco. Her keel was laid August 15, 1944 and she was launched November 9, 1944. She is one of the last ships built by the Richmond Shipyard during World War II. The ship was named after the community of Red Oak, Iowa, which suffered the highest per capita casualty rate of any American community during World War II. On December 5, 1944, she was commissioned as the USS Red Oak Victory (AK-235) for the U.S. Navy to be used as an ammunition carrier.

In January 1945, after sea trials, she loaded over 10,000 tons of ammunition from the Port Chicago Ammunition Depot, Concord, California and departed for Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. In February 1945, she steamed to a remote area of the South Pacific called Ulithi Atoll where the world's largest formation of Allied forces had amassed for the invasion of Japan. From March to May 1945, the USS Red Oak Victory (AK-235) replenished numerous vessels of the Pacific fleet. From June to October 1945, she supported the liberation of the Philippine Islands. In November 1945, she headed home to Seattle, Washington where she was decommissioned on May 21, 1946 and returned back to the U.S. Maritime Commission.

In May 1947, she was leased to the Luckenbach Gulf Steamship Company, Seattle, Washington. She made several voyages, most notably supporting the UN forces engaged in the Korean War with military cargo. From 1957 to 1965 she was in storage by the U.S. Maritime Commission. In December 1965, she was leased to the American Mail Lines and until December 1968, supported U.S. forces engaged in the Vietnam War. She was placed back into storage until September 1998, where she was obtained by the Richmond Museum Association to be restored back to her original operational launch condition. Today, the Red Oak Victory is an integral part of the Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park.



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Questions for Reading 3

- 1) What was some of the cargo these ships carried?

- 2) Looking at a world map or atlas, locate some of the places to which each of these ships carried cargo. Does this give you a better appreciation for the mission of the seamen who served in the Merchant Marine? Why or why not?

- 3) Unlike the Liberty ships, which were built to be expendable, the Victory ships were designed to last for at least 20 years after being built. What examples can you find in the reading to support this?

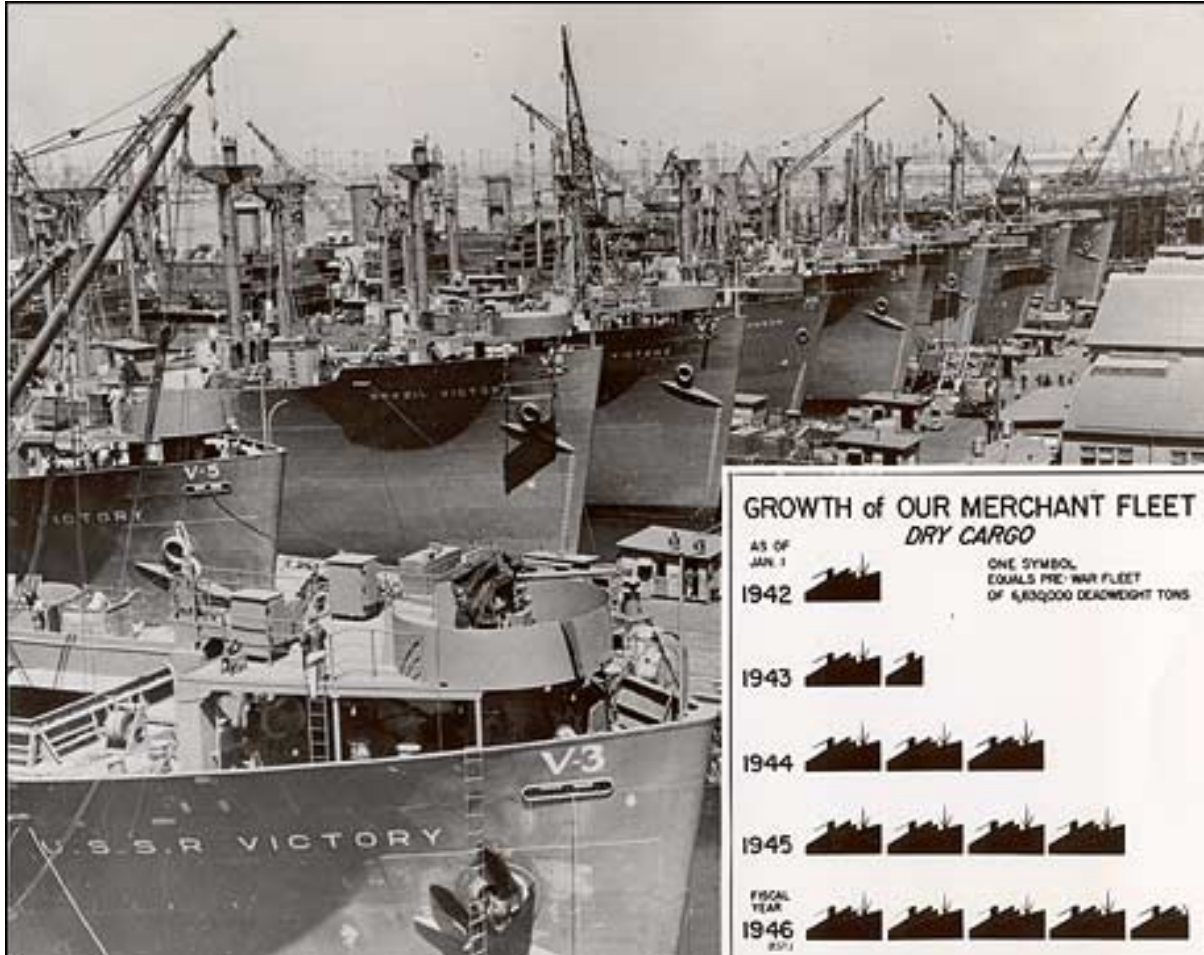
- 4) Of the thousands of Liberty and Victory ships built, only a few remain. Why do you think it is important to preserve these ships?



Liberty Ships and Victory Ships, America's Lifeline in War

Visual Evidence

Photo 1: "Your Merchant Marine Has Grown."



(Courtesy U.S. Maritime Administration)



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Caption for Photo 1:

Press release from the War Shipping Administration, May 20, 1945.

War Shipping Administration
Washington, D.C.

News Foto Release No. 76, (#2 of 5).
For Release May 20, 1945.

Your Merchant Marine Has Grown

American merchant shipyards have built four ships for every prewar ship we had. Our fleet of Liberty, Victory, C-type and other vessels reached an all-time high of more than 3,500 dry cargo vessels, and more than 900 high-speed tankers.

This huge fleet, in 1944, moved out of the United States more than 72 percent of 78,500,000 tons of cargo shipped. Three percent were carried by the U.S. armed forces and 24 percent by the combined tonnage of other United Nations.

Transfer of troops and supplies from Europe to the far Pacific, over sea lanes ranging from 12,000 to 18,000 miles, will demand maximum efficiency in the use of our huge fleet under control of the War Shipping Administration and the United Nation's pool.

--WSA photo 4235

(Courtesy U.S. Maritime Administration)



Liberty Ships and Victory Ships, America's Lifeline in War

Questions for Photo 1

- 1) A press release is a statement or an article that the government and other organizations give to newspapers to announce news and information. Why would the War Shipping Administration think it was important for newspapers to print this article and photograph?

- 2) Look at the chart in the above photograph. What statistical information does this chart present? By how much has the amount of cargo carried grown between 1942 and 1945?

- 3) How does this photograph of the shipyard help you in answering Question 2? Explain.

- 4) Photo 1 shows both Victory ships and Liberty ships under construction. Can you find the Liberty ship in Photo 1? What clues did you use to determine the difference between the Victory ships and Liberty ships?

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Visual Evidence

Photo 2: "Salute Your Merchant Marine on Maritime Day--May 22."



(Courtesy U.S. Maritime Administration)



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Caption for Photo 2:

Photo release from the U.S. Maritime Commission, May 13, 1945.

U.S. Maritime Commission
Washington, D.C.

News Foto Release No. 74, (#2 of 12)
Watch Your Release Date - Not before May 13, 1945.

Salute Your Merchant Marine on Maritime Day--May 22

Not done with mirrors: Victory ships almost as far as the eye can reach line up at a West Coast shipyard for final outfitting before joining our vast merchant fleet. On Maritime Day, May 22, we shall have nearly 300 of these crack cargo type in service, and 300 more will be delivered before the year is out.

--Maritime Commission photo 4236

(Courtesy U.S. Maritime Administration)



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Questions for Photo 2

- 1) This photo and caption was sent to local newspapers by the Maritime Commission to announce the upcoming Maritime Day. What do you think Maritime Day was about? Would Maritime Day be something worth celebrating? Explain.

- 2) What artistic elements did the photographer include in this Photo 2?

- 3) On the docks in front of the ships are lengths of chain. How might the chain be used on these ships?



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Visual Evidence

Photo 3: North Atlantic Convoy, 1941



(U.S. Naval Historical Center)



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Caption for Photo 3:

Photo 3 shows a convoy of ships in the North Atlantic. Some of the ships in the convoy are Liberty ships. In 1941, The United States established the forward military base in Argentia, Newfoundland to support convoy escorts and patrol aircraft. The photograph was taken from an airplane assigned to the USS *Albemarle* (AV-5), a seaplane tender (a ship built to house and support seaplanes), in October 1941. At the time the photo was made, the *Albemarle* was based at Argentia.

In the early years of World War II, German submarines, also known as U-Boats, threatened ships traveling across the Atlantic Ocean. Many cargo ships were sunk by the U-Boats. The United States and the Allies developed many ways to protect ships carrying supplies to Great Britain and the Soviet Union. Some of the many innovations that came out of World War II to locate submarines include radar, sonar, and high frequency direction finding.

Because ships traveling alone were almost certain targets for submarines, the U.S. and her Allies grouped the ships together in huge convoys. The Navy and Coast Guard escorted the convoys with destroyers. Unlike modern submarines, which can stay submerged for months at a time, the submarines in World War II spent most of their time on the surface and submerged only when attacking ships or evading detection. In areas that were close to land, airplanes were used to scout for submarines. Many of these scouting planes also carried bombs so they could attack detected enemy submarines.



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Questions for Photo 3

1) Using an atlas, locate Newfoundland, Canada. Look at Map 2. Where is Newfoundland located, in relationship to the line between New York and Great Britain? Why did it make sense to base convoy escorts and patrol aircraft, such as the seaplanes from the USS *Albemarle*, in Newfoundland?

2) Why would grouping ships together in convoys help protect ships from submarines?

3) Photo 3 shows part of the wing of the patrol aircraft. In what ways did the patrol aircraft help protect ships carrying supplies?



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Visual Evidence

Illustration 1: U.S. Merchant Marine Commemorative Stamp



(Stamp courtesy Iowa Stamps and Coins)

This stamp was issued by the U.S. Post Office Department on February 26, 1946 to honor the achievement of the United States Merchant Marine in World War II. The stamp depicts a Liberty ship unloading cargo.



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Questions for Illustration 1

- 1) Look up the word "commemorate" in the dictionary. What does it mean?

- 2) What is a "merchant marine"? Why do you think it was important to honor the Merchant Marine with a postage stamp?

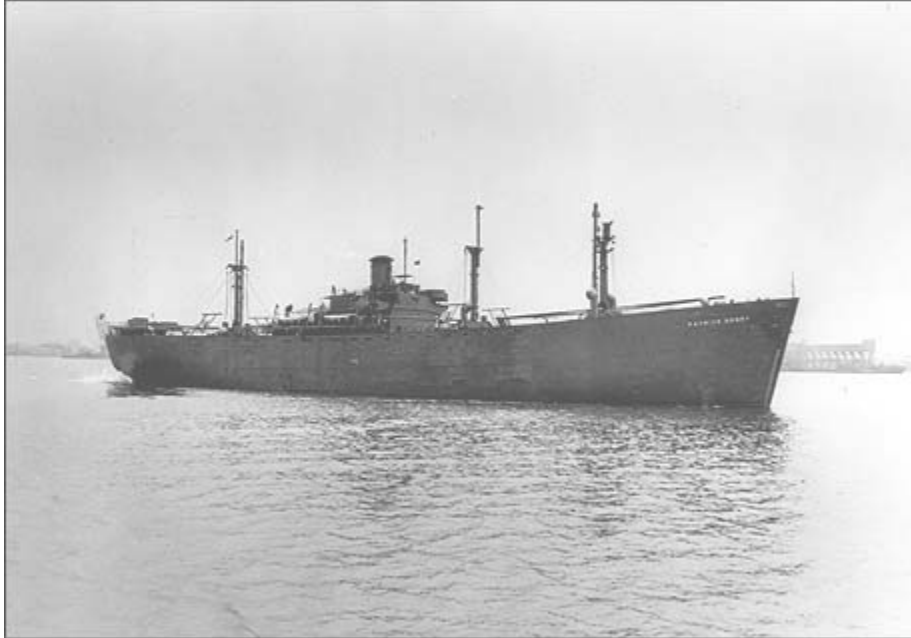
- 3) The words "Peace and War" are placed at the top of the stamp. Why do you think these words were put on the stamp? Why is the word "peace" placed first?



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Visual Evidence

Photo 4: Liberty Ship, 1941



(Library of Congress)

Photo 4 shows the first Liberty ship, SS *Patrick Henry*, shortly after its launch in September 1941.



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Questions for Photo 4

1) The ship was launched September 27, 1941. Considering the year it was built, what might be one reason why this Liberty ship doesn't have any weapons? If needed, refer to Setting the Stage.

2) Note the faint white markings on the bow of the ship. Those are numbers. What do you think the numbers are for? Based on your answer, can you determine if this ship is loaded or unloaded? How did you come to your conclusion?

3) The ship has three masts. What could they be used for? If needed, compare Photo 4 with Illustration 1.

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Putting It All Together

The Liberty ships and Victory ships were built in order to move troops and supplies during World War II. They were built in great numbers to counter the threat from submarines and to ensure that the flow of men and material was unhindered. The following activities will help students discover more about Liberty and Victory ships and the role their community and its residents played during World War II.

Activity 1: Pay Tribute to Local History

Have students design a postage stamp depicting an important event that happened in your community. Encourage students to be creative with designs and color. Students should share their "stamps" in class and hold a class discussion on why they chose to commemorate that particular event.



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Activity 2: Serving the War Effort

By using simple designs, perfecting mass-production techniques and building the necessary shipyards, the U.S. was able to produce the massive fleet of merchant ships needed to win World War II. However, there were not enough workers for all the new shipyards. Many men who could have built ships were serving in the armed forces. As a result of this labor shortage, many factories and shipyards hired women, minorities, and men unable to go to war to work on the assembly lines and in the shipyards to manufacture the products needed to prosecute the war. The women were given the nickname "Rosie the Riveter" after a worker in a popular song.

Ask students to locate persons in the community or their families who worked in the farms, factories and shipyards during World War II. Students may find that local organizations that serve veterans and senior citizens are a good resource for locating these individuals in their communities. Organize a class project to participate in the Veterans History Project of the Library of Congress by interviewing these persons and donating the interviews to the Library of Congress. See the [Library of Congress Veterans History Project website](http://www.loc.gov/folklife/vets/) at [http://www.loc.gov/folklife/vets/], or write to The Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 101 Independence Ave., SE, Washington, D.C. 20540 for more information. The project website offers sample interview questions for civilians who worked in support of the United States during the war. A free "Field Kit" is also available with tips for interviewing. You can [download the kit for free](http://www.loc.gov/vets/kitmenu.html) on the project's website [http://www.loc.gov/vets/kitmenu.html].

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Activity 3: Carrying the Supplies

The Liberty ships and Victory ships carried many different types of important supplies in support of the war including food, fuel, vehicles, ammunition, and spare parts. Ask students to locate farms or factories in your community that supplied the war effort. Have them research how they supported the war. The local historical society or library's local history section is a good place for students to start their research. Students may need to look at old phone books, city directories, or newspapers to determine which businesses were active in their community during the war and whether they were involved in war production. Students should share the information they have discovered in the form of papers, project boards, computer slideshows, skits, or oral presentations.



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References and Endnotes

Introduction

¹ War Shipping Administration, Press Release 2277(W), Maritime Day 1945--Military Leaders Praise Merchant Marine (18 May 1945).

² John G. Bunker, *Liberty Ships: The Ugly Ducklings of World War II* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1972) p. 6.

Reading 1

Reading 1 was compiled from John Gorley Bunker, *Liberty Ships: The Ugly Ducklings of World War II* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1972); Harry Butowsky, "SS Jeremiah O'Brien" (San Francisco County, California) National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1985); James P. Delgado, "Lane Victory" (Los Angeles County, California) National Historic Landmark Nomination Form (Washington D.C.: Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1990); Curtis P. Junker, revised by Peter E. Kurtze, "SS John W. Brown" (Baltimore City, Maryland) National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1996); Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II. Vol. 1, The Battle of the Atlantic, September 1939-May 1943* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1950); and L.W. Sawyer and W.H. Mitchell, *The Liberty Ships: The History of the 'Emergency' Type Cargo Ships Constructed in the United States During World War II* (Cambridge, Maryland: Cornell Maritime Press, 1970).

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Liberty Ships and Victory Ships, America's Lifeline in War-- Supplementary Resources

Liberty Ships and Victory Ships, America's Lifeline in War will help students in understanding how the United States mobilized a massive construction effort to build a large merchant fleet to serve in war and peace. Of the thousands of ships built during World War II, only a small number remain. Those interested in learning more will find that the Internet offers a variety of materials about the people, vessels, and organizations associated with this great accomplishment.

National Park Service Maritime Heritage Program

The National Park Service's Maritime Heritage Program works to advance awareness and understanding of the role of maritime affairs in the history of the United States by helping to interpret and preserve our maritime heritage. [The program's website](#) includes information on National Park Service maritime parks, historic ships, lighthouses, and life saving stations. The home page features a poignant poster illustrating the sacrifice of the merchant mariners.

National Park Service

Warships Associated with World War II in the Pacific:

Excerpts from a National Historic Landmark Theme Study

[This online book](#) provides historical background, specifications, and photographs for 26 vessels associated with World War II.

National Historic Landmarks Program

A program of the National Park Service, [visit their website](#) for information on the [The World War II Home Front National Historic Landmark Theme Study](#), the [SS Jeremiah O'Brien](#), and the [SS Lane Victory](#).

World War II in the San Francisco Bay Area

This [National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places' on-line travel itinerary](#) provides information on 31 historic places listed in the National Register that reflect the San Francisco Bay Area's role in the "Arsenal of Democracy." The itinerary includes information on the *SS Red Oak Victory* and the Richmond Shipyard. Also available are detailed essays on Seacoast Defense, Shipbuilding, Mobilization, Women at War, the Port of Embarkation, and Preservation.

Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park

[Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park](#) is operated as a partnership between the National Park Service, the City of Richmond, the [Rosie the Riveter Trust](#) and the Richmond Museum of History. The park opened in 2000 and is still in development. The park preserves and interprets the history of the men and women who worked at the factories and shipyards in and around Richmond, California in support of World War II. Among the many units of the park is the site of the Richmond Shipyard (which built many of the Liberty and Victory ships), the automotive plant (which produced military vehicles), the Rosie the Riveter Memorial, the Liberty Ship Memorial and the [SS Red Oak Victory](#) (a World War II era Victory ship). The *SS Red Oak Victory* is currently undergoing restoration, please check the website for updates.

United States Maritime Administration

This agency under the Department of Transportation oversees the merchant marine of the United States. [Visit their website](#), for more information on the merchant marine, including an Education page.



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United States Merchant Marine Academy

[Visit the website](#) of the school in Kings Point, New York, that trains future officers of the merchant marine. The site also contains links to the Maritime Museum, which includes artifacts and historic pictures.

United States Naval Historical Center

[The Naval Historical Center website](#) contains an excellent, detailed collection of historic photographs, primary documents, and oral history interviews. During World War II, the Navy provided the U.S. Naval Armed Guard that manned the Liberty and Victory ships' defensive weapons and the communications equipment. The Navy also provided convoy escorts and anti-submarine patrols.

United States Coast Guard Historian's Office

[The Coast Guard Historian's Office website](#) has an extensive site on the history of the Coast Guard, including documents, photographs, and a Kids and Teacher's page. During World War II, the Coast Guard provided escorts for convoys and anti-submarine patrols, as well as the International Ice Patrol to keep the shipping lanes safe.

Naval Historical Foundation

A non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and promoting the Navy's proud heritage. The Foundation supports the activities of the Naval Historical Center. [Their website](#) has information on primary sources including oral histories, memoirs and personal paper collections.

U.S. Maritime Service Veterans

Veterans of the merchant marine and U.S. Naval Armed Guard operate [this extensive website](#). This is a comprehensive site about the history and traditions of the merchant marine. There are extensive histories of the merchant marine in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

American Rosie the Riveter Association

This is a national organization made up of the women who worked in the factories and shipyards during World War II. [The website](#) includes a newsletter and links to related sites.

Historic Naval Ship Visitors Guide

[This website](#), maintained by the Historic Naval Ships Association, is a worldwide listing of historic ships that are open to the public, including ships' histories and contact information.

NOVA: Hitler's Lost Sub

The PBS series NOVA aired an episode on the discovery of a sunken German submarine off the coast of New Jersey. [The website](#) includes a history of this U-Boat, a virtual tour and a transcript of the show that includes a detailed account of the Battle of the Atlantic during the early years of World War II, when the submarine threat to shipping was at its height. The website also has a Teacher Resources page.

German Submarine U-505, Chicago Museum of Science and Industry

Submarines were a major threat to shipping in the Atlantic Ocean during World War II. The museum has a German U-Boat on display, the U-505, which was captured by the U.S. Navy in World War II. The submarine has been designated a National Historic Landmark. The museum maintains an [online exhibition about the U-505](#).

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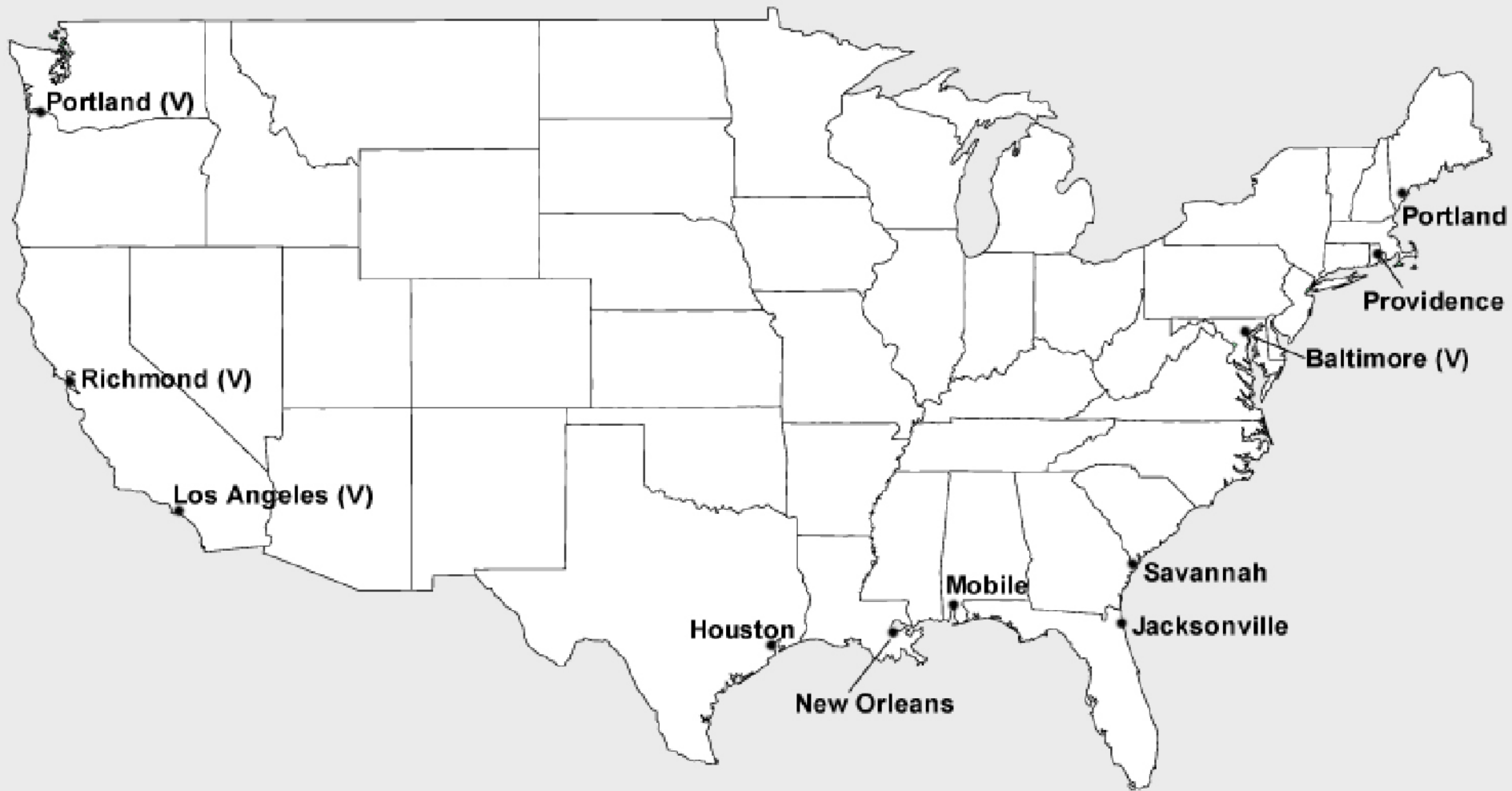


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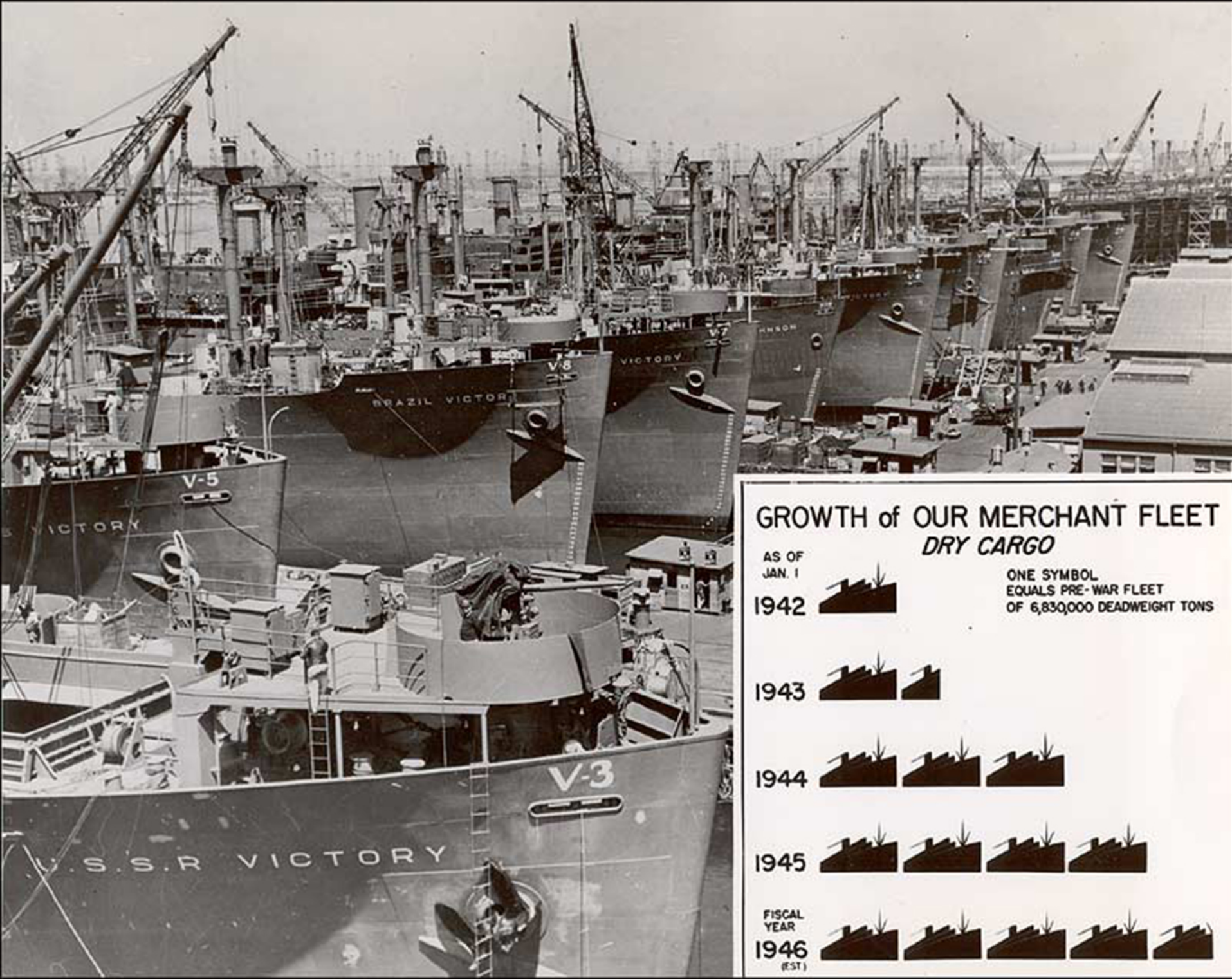
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Many lessons are available that relate to *Liberty Ships and Victory Ships, America's Lifeline in War*.

- President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Merchant Marine Act of 1936 that was the impetus for the emergency ship-building program. Learn more about President Roosevelt in [Springwood: Birthplace and Home to Franklin D. Roosevelt.](#)
- To learn more about the U.S. Navy in the Pacific see [Remembering Pearl Harbor: The USS Arizona Memorial, The Battle of Midway: Turning the Tide in the Pacific](#), and [Attu: North American Battleground of World War II.](#)
- A few Victory ships were used in the early years of America's space program. See the lesson [America's Space Program: Exploring a New Frontier.](#)







GROWTH of OUR MERCHANT FLEET *DRY CARGO*

AS OF
JAN. 1

1942



ONE SYMBOL
EQUALS PRE-WAR FLEET
OF 6,830,000 DEADWEIGHT TONS

1943



1944



1945



FISCAL
YEAR

1946
(EST.)





U.S.
MERCHANT
MARINE

PEACE AND WAR

UNITED
STATES
POSTAGE

3¢

