WOMEN, WORK & WORLD WAR II
AT THE BROOKLYN NAVY YARD
Woman Worker Sorting Machine Parts

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By the Young Scholars of PS 307, Daniel Hale Williams Elementary School

ALEXIS DELACRUZ, CARTER H’ORRRY & JOSHUA MIMS

E. Bryan Cooper Owens
Young Scholars Program Educator
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Daniel Hale Williams Elementary School,
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It has been my pleasure to work with the Young Scholars of PS 307, Daniel Hale Williams Elementary School. The students that I have come to know, Carter H’orry, Alexis Delacruz, and Joshua Mims, have made this project a journey of discovery and gratification. With my teaching philosophy as a guide, I impart to my students not only the information and content, but also my passion for the material. My experiences as a student, a researcher, and an educator have allowed me to gain a very holistic understanding of the education process. This has allowed me to incorporate various perspectives into my teaching style, to visualize how my students perceive the material, and to approach teaching in ways that make students comfortable and confident.

I enjoy teaching because you have the chance to see that spark of interest ignite in a student. Engaging young minds and helping them to find their own course toward scholarship is an exciting, challenging, and rewarding endeavor. Witnessing the transformation of Alexis, Joshua, and Carter into scholars over the course of a few months has been an extremely rewarding experience. Fanning the spark of interest into a flame has been my privilege. During the last few months, these Young Scholars have discovered the origins of their neighborhood. As they documented the evolution of the Brooklyn Navy Yard and its environs, they developed an understanding and appreciation for the history of both the Navy Yard and their community.

The Young Scholars of the Daniel Hale Williams Elementary School have made the journey from student to scholar with grace and panache. Their insight, humor, and curiosity infuse this text. This book is a reflection of their hard work and enthusiasm. I am thankful for the opportunity to work with them and the chance to get to know them.

E. Bryan Cooper Owens
Brooklyn Historical Society
Young Scholars Program Educator
The Brooklyn Naval Shipyard was founded in 1801. The Navy Yard was used for building ships, docking ships, and repairing ships. The Navy Yard was also a base for soldiers during World War II (WWII). World War II, also known as the Second World War, lasted from 1939 to 1945. This was a war fought all around the globe. Many men went to fight in the war. Some of these men worked for the Brooklyn Navy Yard. They left their jobs behind. Many women and black men worked here in Brooklyn in their old jobs.

Some of the white men who stayed to work at the Navy Yard were hostile to the new black and women workers. Many men at the time did not believe that women should work outside of the home. Many white people at the time did not believe that they should have to work beside black people. After the war, many Navy Yard workers lived in some of the apartment buildings that are still here, like Farragut and Fort Greene houses.

During the war, women at the Navy Yard had jobs such as welding, cleaning and repairing ships, drafting plans, driving trucks, working in labs, and doing medical work. They worked in the Navy Yard and felt good about their jobs. The women were paid half of what the white men were paid. They were paid less because many in society did not value them as workers.

Today, the Brooklyn Navy Yard is no longer a part of the U.S. military. The Navy Yard no longer builds warships, but they do still repair ships. It is an industrial park that has many different companies in it. These companies make things like military armor, medical supplies and equipment, furniture, food, and art.

Brooklyn Navy Yard During WWII
Go fight for Britain. 1940. Photograph. NEIG 2369; Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn Collection.
2 WOMEN WELDERS
Sylvia Honigman Everitt and Ida Pollack were two women who began working in the Navy Yard in 1942. Sylvia and Ida spoke about their experiences working in the Brooklyn Navy Yard during World War II. They told their stories to an interviewer who was collecting people’s stories. This type of history is called an oral history. They talked about the kind of work they did and what it was like working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

**Sylvia** Someone told me... that they were interviewing people for the Navy Yard. They were going to hire women.

**Ida** ...1942. So we went, were interviewed, and we had to take an exam... we were called “mechanic learners,” which was a new title. And we were paid about half of what the third-class welders were paid — these were the men. The Navy Yard came up and I was all for it, because we all felt that we were helping getting rid of Hitler, who, at that time, was running all over the world, see. So we felt good about the job. Now when we got hired, they had a training period of about six weeks, it was, where they taught those of us who chose welding how to weld.

You had to learn how to weld flat material, which was the easiest. And then you had to learn how to weld vertical, and vertical was a little tricky, because gravity pulled everything down. So you had to know how to adjust the heat that you were using in the torch so that the metal would stay where you put it... So you wore leather and you had your hair in a cap, and you wore metal-tipped shoes and in the winter you wore a lot of underclothes. And then at one point... maybe after a year or so, we began to ask for equal pay for equal work. And there was a union... And they stepped in for us, and eventually, we got... $1.14 an hour, which the men were getting.

Sylvia Honigman Everitt and Ida Pollack both worked on weekdays and Saturdays. They felt good about their jobs and their teachers were confident in them.
3 LEARNING NEW SKILLS
The women who worked in the Brooklyn Navy Yard during World War II had to learn new skills for their jobs. They worked to support their families. Carmela Celardo Zuza was one of the women who began training for her job at the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Carmela  So I worked in the Navy Yard in 1942. I was 18 years old… they were hiring a lot of people, and most of the neighborhood men worked there, but my father was against me going because he figured, you’re going in to work in a, you know, a plant like that, it’s mostly men. So I said, Oh, let me try it… So they put us in a room with what they call mechanical instructors, and they trained us for three months, and I did arc welding.

So we worked on parts of the Missouri. We weren’t allowed to go on the ship, but we worked on the inner bottoms, overhead welding and vertical welding. And when we walked into the shop, the men told us to go home where we belong, in the kitchen. So we all yelled out, “Shut up!” But we showed them up, you know? So we worked on mostly the decks of the Missouri. Welding went on for months, but it was a great job. I loved it. And I had to go there to work, because I had to leave school, because two of my brothers were in the service and the other two were married. See, my father wasn’t well at that time.

The teacher that taught me, he was so wonderful. It was in electric arc welding, and he says, “You know, you’re going be putting parts of the Missouri together.” So I was a good welder, I tell ya, because I was artistically talented, and I had a very steady hand.

Carmela was able to learn new skills she never thought about before. The Brooklyn Navy Yard let her see what she could do.
The Naval Hospital at the Brooklyn Navy Yard was a place where black men and women were able to work. Robert Hammond was a black man who learned to be a naval corpsman. Robert Hammond experienced racism while working at the Naval Hospital.

Robert: And then we went to the Navy Corps School. We learned patient care, first aid, surgical duties. Also, emergency situations, how to set broken legs or broken arms, how to take out metal from people, things like that. And, once Corps School was over, I was sent with eight other men, and we went to the Brooklyn Naval Hospital.

When we got there, we were met by a chief petty officer. And he’s standing up there with his arms folded in, looking at us — we all had crosses on our sleeves. And he said, “Oh, we got some new stewards mates here.” But we weren’t stewards mates, we were corpsmen. And he put us to work in the kitchen washing dishes and serving food, stuff like that. Cleaning floors, and taking food up to the wards, that’s what our job was. We did that for maybe three or four days... we had a commissary inspection, and we’re all dressed up in our white uniforms... they had red crosses on those... this white officer came in. He was a lieutenant commander, and he said to us, he said, “You guys are looking pretty good.” He says, “You’re corpsmen aren’t you?” And we said, “Yes sir.” And then he said, “Well why are you in the kitchen?” and we said, “We don’t know.”
And what could we know at the time? We didn’t know that it was a policy of the Navy to segregate us. We knew something about it, but we didn’t know all about it…. he said, “Who’s responsible for this? How long have you been here?” And we said, “Almost 11 weeks.” He said, “You belong up on the wards, just where you’re going.” So he got the chief petty officer and… he said, “What are these men doing down here in the kitchen? They’re not steward mates. They’re corps, and they belong up on the wards.” And then he said, “Well, sir, you can’t send them up there with the white nurses. They’ll interact with them, and also they just wouldn’t know what to do if they got up there.” And that officer told him, “You get those men up on the wards, now. And if I come back down here and see one of them in this commissary, I’m going to bust you all the way down to a seaman second class.

Robert Hammond shows us that a black man who worked at the Brooklyn Navy Yard took pride in his job even though people discriminated against him.
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THE BROOKLYN NAVY YARD LEGACY
The Brooklyn Navy Yard is important because men and women made ships for the war to defend the United States. The workers were welding and building and helping people. They worked very hard on the ships. They did work that was hard and dangerous. They worked in conditions that were hot and difficult. Even though blacks and women did not get paid as much as the white men did, they worked hard anyway. The Brooklyn Navy Yard was also important because Americans worked here during World War II.

Also, the Brooklyn Navy Yard’s history is important because it teaches the future generations facts on wars and history. Teaching children about history helps build our minds. Also, history can help students do well on tests, and we can get good grades when we study history.

Farragut Housing Built to Accommodate Brooklyn Navy Yard Workers

Today, the Brooklyn Navy Yard is one of the largest manufacturing centers in New York City. It provides manufacturing jobs to people who live in the surrounding community today, and for generations to come.
ABOUT
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Photographs courtesy of E. Bryan Cooper Owens

ALEXIS
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MIMS
**Chief petty officer** – a senior non-commissioned officer in the United States Navy.

**Commissary** – a store for provisions operated by the United States military.

**Corpsman** – an enlisted member of a military medical unit.

**Desegregate** – allow people of different races to be together in all places.

**Docking** – the procedure of maneuvering a ship into a dock.

**Drafting** – drawing blueprints and writing instructions to help build ships. A draftsman does this kind of work.

**Electric arc welding** – when you use a lot of heat to make metal fuse together and stay together after it is cool.

**Enlist** – voluntarily join to become a member of the Army, Navy, etc.

**Fuse (fusing)** – to join or combine (different things) together.

**Lab** – a place where scientific experiments are conducted.

**Lieutenant commander** – a mid-ranking officer in the United States Navy.

**Mechanic learner** – a person learning how to electric arc weld.

**Oral history** – An oral history is when people talk about their life to an interviewer who collects their stories.

**Overhead welding** – fusing materials together that are above the worker’s head.

**Seaman second class** – the second-lowest enlisted rank in the U.S. Navy.

**Segregate** – to not allow people of different races to be together in certain places.

**Stewards mate** – a low-ranking member of the United States Navy Commissary Branch.

**Union** – an organization of workers formed to protect the rights and interests of its members.

**Vertical** – anything standing, pointing, or moving straight up or down.

**Vertical welding** – fusing materials together that are standing, pointing, or moving straight up or down.

**Ward** – a department of a hospital.

**Welder** – a person whose job is to weld materials together.

**Welding** – to join pieces of metal together by heating the edges until they begin to melt and then pressing them together.
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Woman Factory Worker Overseeing Machinery

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library.
“African American woman operating a large piece of machinery.” New York Public Library Digital Collections.
Women, Work, and World War II at the Brooklyn Navy Yard is the result of a 6-month Young Scholars partnership between Brooklyn Historical Society and PS 307. The Young Scholars program is designed to introduce a core group of students to the dynamic process of historical research about their neighborhood and to share these students’ interpretive work beyond the walls of their classroom. Young Scholars programs truly express Brooklyn Historical Society’s mission to connect the past and present and make the vibrant history of Brooklyn tangible, relevant, and meaningful for today’s diverse communities and for generations to come. These programs are a hallmark of Brooklyn Historical Society’s Education Department.

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