



COASTAL GEORGIA
**HISTORICAL
 SOCIETY**

Our mission is to connect people to Coastal Georgia's dynamic history through the stories we share and the collections we preserve.

The Coastal Georgia Historical Society is dedicated to the original vision of our founders to serve Glynn County and the Coastal Georgia region. In the spirit of our refreshed mission statement, shown above, a series of articles will explore the dynamic history of our region. This article is the second of four installments appearing the second Saturday of each month through December.

Building Brunswick's Liberty Ships: African Americans and the J.A. Jones Shipyard



Aralee Cox launches the Liberty ship named for her late husband, William Cox, December 30, 1944.

In March 1942, Brunswick, Georgia became one of 18 locations selected by the U.S. Maritime Commission for building a new class of cargo ship known as the Liberty ship. An immense complex was constructed west of the present-day Sidney Lanier Bridge where six vessels could be built simultaneously.

Soon after war was declared in December 1941, the U.S. and her allies faced a critical situation. German submarines were sinking an alarming number of merchant ships carrying vital supplies overseas. Massive mobilization of American shipyards was needed to replace these ships as Allied forces fought to control the Atlantic Ocean.

Thousands of workers flocked to Coastal Georgia for the higher wages offered at the J.A. Jones Shipyard in Brunswick.



Launching Liberty ship SS Robert J. Banks, December 20, 1944.

In the segregated South, defense industries provided new opportunities for African Americans. Even before the war began, President Roosevelt recognized the important role of Black workers in mobilizing for war. In response to urgent requests from African American leaders, he signed Executive Order 8802 prohibiting ethnic or racial discrimination in defense industry hiring.

By 1943, many African Americans worked at the Brunswick shipyard. Some successfully aligned with the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America, gaining limited access to skilled positions. However, Black workers still faced discrimination. Even in defense industry jobs, their wages were lower than those of white workers, and they were often assigned to the graveyard shift from midnight to 8 a.m. Black women were limited to unskilled jobs, such as carrying pieces of steel from one area of the yard to another, in contrast to their white counterparts who were given the chance to train for skilled positions such as welding.



Ida Mae Lawson (center), who worked at the shipyard carrying pieces of steel for welding, remembers, "Some work was real heavy." Her story is featured in the Liberty Ship Gallery at the Home Front Museum. Pictured here with her family at the grand opening in 2018.

To recognize the important contributions made by African Americans throughout our nation's history, the U.S. Maritime Commission named 17 Liberty ships in honor of prominent individuals, as well as merchant mariners who died from enemy action. SS *Robert Abbott*, launched from a California shipyard in 1944, honored the Glynn County native who founded America's foremost African American newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*. Two of the ships named for Black merchant mariners were built in Brunswick -- SS *Robert J. Banks* and SS *William Cox*. Banks, a cook on SS *Gulfamerica*, perished when the tanker was torpedoed and sunk off the coast of Jacksonville, Florida. Cox, a fireman on the merchant ship SS *David H. Atwater*, was killed when the ship was attacked off the coast of Virginia.

At the Brunswick shipyard, African Americans were an important part of the workforce that built 85 Liberty ships and helped our nation win the war. The Coastal Georgia Historical Society invites you to learn more about the wartime stories of our area at the World War II Home Front Museum on St. Simons Island.

Free Admission to the World War II Home Front Museum for Glynn County Residents

Saturday, October 9 – Sunday, October 17

World War II Home Front Museum, 4201 First Street, St. Simons Island

Monday–Saturday, 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

Sunday, 12 p.m.–5 p.m.

Show proof of Glynn County residency to receive free admission.

Visit coastalgeorgiahistory.org for more information.

The Coastal Georgia Historical Society is headquartered in the A.W. Jones Heritage Center, located on the campus of the St. Simons Lighthouse Museum. The Society is the owner of the St. Simons Lighthouse and custodian of the Lighthouse Keeper's Dwelling and Historic Coast Guard Station at East Beach, which houses the World War II Home Front Museum. We welcome the public to the museums 360 days a year.

