

OFF BASE

S
T
R
E
N
G
T
H

*at
home*



Wilmington, North Carolina, designated World War II Heritage City

§ Story and Photos by Katie Begley

Wartime Wilmington, NC, in the early 1940s looked very different from the modern port city of today. Soldiers, sailors, and airmen from all five military branches came to the city and nearby areas to train before going to fight on the frontlines. Many Wilmington residents worked at the North Carolina Shipbuilding Company, one of the largest wartime ship manufacturers, and they constructed 234 ships over five years. Thirteen USO clubs throughout the region held dances and provided a much-needed opportunity for rest and recreation. The city's population almost tripled as wartime efforts drove the economy and daily life of Wilmington residents.

What hasn't changed in Wilmington in the 75 years since the end of World War II is the dedicated patriotism and commitment to legacy in this North Carolina coastal city.

Wilmington, North Carolina, was recently given the distinction of America's first World War II Heritage City in a ceremony at the USS North Carolina, a World War II-era battleship on the Cape Fear River. The program is run by the National Park Service as a way to recognize "historic contributions to the United States' war effort" by cities across the United States, as well as what those cities have done to preserve their WWII history. Wilmington has the honor of being the inaugural recipient of this designation.

Retired Navy Captain and World War II historian Wilbur Jones spearheaded the preservation of Wilmington's World War II heritage and the National Park Service's World War II Heritage City program, working with local, state, and national leaders for 12.5 years. His work culminated in the ceremony on the USS North Carolina on September 2, 2019. President Trump, Senator Thom Tillis,

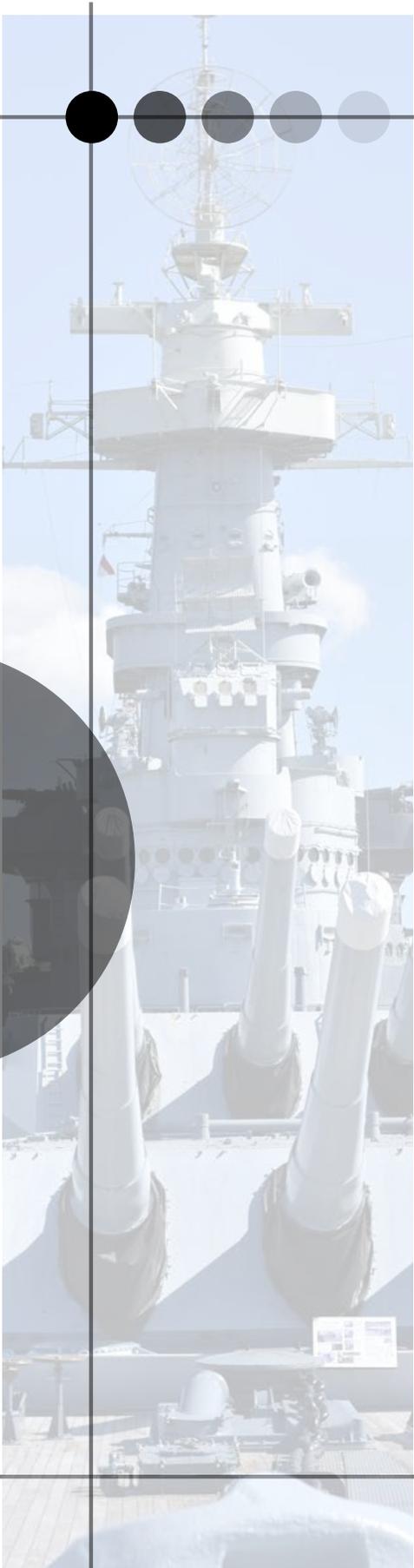
and Congressman David Rouzer were all in attendance, as well as Jones, who was recognized by the President as the person who "championed the cause of World War II Heritage Cities," to which he responded with a snappy salute.

"It was my calling in life," said Jones, as he spoke of bringing attention to Wilmington's World War II heritage. "As important, maybe more, is what we have done to preserve it." In 2001, Jones founded the World War II Wilmington Home Front Heritage Coalition, an all-volunteer 501c3 organization dedicated to "identifying, preserving, and interpreting World War II history" in the region.

Wilmington's wartime spirit is on full display at the historic Hannah Block Historic USO/Community Arts Center, now a home for both community arts classes and programs and a World War II museum. Stepping through the USO's original door and across the creaking wood floors, visitors can walk in the footsteps of the service members and liberty belles that frequented the bustling organization during the War. World War II artifacts on display include the champagne bottle used to christen the SS Roger Moore in 1943, a replica of the posted college football scores from the USO's heyday, and donated military uniforms worn by prominent Wilmingtonians who served in WWII.

In 2006, the building was renamed in honor of Hannah Block, a proud Wilmington civic leader and military supporter who did a lot during her 96 years of life, including training beauty pageant contestants, serving as the first woman on Wilmington's City Council, and even acting as the city's first Mayor Pro Tempore. During World War II, she would entertain troops by singing and playing a worn upright piano that is still on display at the USO.

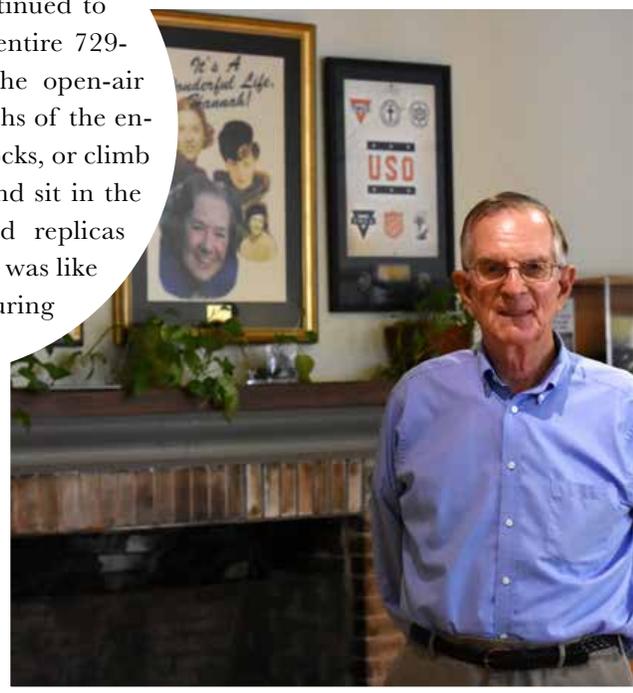
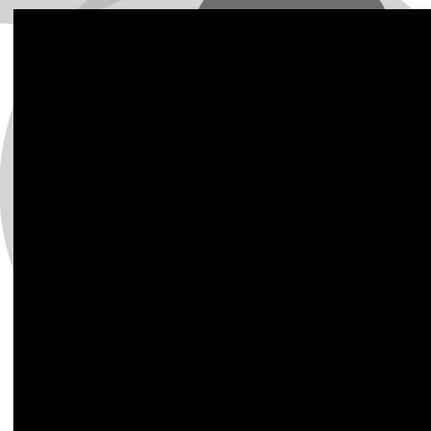




Across the Cape Fear River from the historic Wilmington River District, the USS North Carolina (BB55) sits moored.

This decorated World War II battleship found its way to its current berth after a 1960's "Save Our Ship" campaign raised funds to bring her home. School children across North Carolina contributed their dimes and nickels to fund the mighty battleship's trip.

The Battleship earned 15 battle stars during World War II and became known as the "Showboat." When the ship opened as a state museum dedicated to World War II Veterans in 1962, the patriotic spirit of Wilmington continued to thrive. Visitors can stroll the entire 729-foot length of the ship on the open-air walkway, venture into the depths of the engine rooms and gun loading docks, or climb up to the navigation bridge and sit in the Captain's chair. Placards and replicas around the ship show what life was like for those serving on board during World War II.



Jones and the WWII Wilmington Home Front Heritage Coalition plan to continue in their mission to bring recognition to Wilmington’s historic past and preserve the city’s legacy.

“We host dances at the USO, get-togethers for Veterans, and an Annual Pearl Harbor remembrance on December 7,” said Jones. Marrying the past with the future, the Hannah Block USO also highlights Wilmington’s thriving local arts scene. Visitors can meet in the restored WWII-era lobby and pass by the historic ticket booth on their way to a modern production in the center’s 200-seat main stage theater.

Other efforts being taken around Wilmington and the larger New Hanover country region include historic markers, a middle school named for Medal of Honor recipient Charles P. Murray, Jr., and a park named for William D. Halyburton, Jr., who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. Murray and Halyburton both attended New Hanover High School in Wilmington and are featured promi-



nently in the museum at the Hannah Block USO, alongside other memorials to the 258 New Hanover county servicemen and servicewomen who lost their lives during WWII.

The World War II Heritage City program is being further developed to bring more attention to historic contributions and preservation efforts around the country. “The program tells the home front stories of cities that best reflect one of the most transformative eras of our nation’s history,” said the National Park Service.

Wilmington remains a city that cherishes the legacy of the past while building upon it with an eye to the future. Wilmington, historians such as Jones, and patriotic Wilmington locals stand ready to pave the way for preservation efforts as the World War II Heritage City program continues to recognize the contributions of America’s cities and citizens during World War II.

