

**NATIONAL HOME FRONT PROJECT**  
**Brooklyn Navy Yard Oral History Project**  
**Finding Aid**

[The Brooklyn Navy Yard Oral History Project](#) is an effort to capture the personal memories of those who worked on the Yard in their own voices. This project's mission is to document the evolving labor demographic of the Yard, beginning in the 1940s. Prior to World War II, women worked at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in a clerical capacity. In 1944, with most eligible men serving their country, positions opened up for welders, riveters, pipe fitters, and draughtswomen and women found work in trades positions for the first time. For many women, fresh out of school and eager to aid the war effort, this was the only time they worked outside of the home.

A grant funded partnership between the Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation and the Brooklyn Historical Society further expanded the project with an intention to make the collection accessible through both institutions, in particular the Yard's permanent exhibition, *Brooklyn Navy Yard: Past, Present, Future*. To date, labor and leadership at the Yard is documented, from the Shipyard era through the Industrial Park era.

Partnering with the National Home Front Project is the perfect opportunity for the BNY Oral History Project. The Navy Yard was at its most active during World War II: it was a 24-hour, 7-day facility, with 70,000 people reporting for work each day. These important stories of the men and women "behind the gun," are meant to be shared. The BNYDC Archives has worked to preserve and make available these interviews, and we are thrilled to join other institutions across the United States to make them further accessible in a centralized portal of memory.

Today, the Brooklyn Navy Yard (the Yard) is a mission-driven industrial park that is a nationally acclaimed model of the viability and positive impact of modern, urban industrial development. The Yard is now home to over 400 businesses employing more than 7,000 people. The Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation (BNYDC) is the not-for-profit corporation that serves as the real estate developer and property manager of the Yard on behalf of its owner, the City of New York. BNYDC constantly strives to provide an environment in which businesses and careers can take root and grow.

The Yard was once the nation's most storied naval shipbuilding facility, which for over 150 years built and launched America's most famous fighting ships, including the USS Maine, USS Arizona, and USS Missouri. The Yard also served as an important point of passage, home, and workplace for countless veterans as they served out country. Through its public programming, the Yard continues to honor and preserve this rich history.

For more information about this project and its World War II interview collection, please contact [archives@bnydc.org](mailto:archives@bnydc.org) or visit the [BNYDC Archives website](#).

**Project Coordinator:** Elizabeth McGorty, Archivist and Records Manager, Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives, [emcgorty@bnydc.org](mailto:emcgorty@bnydc.org)

**Website Partner Page:** <https://nationalhomefrontproject.org/brooklyn-navy-yard-oral-history-project>

**SoundCloud Playlist:** <https://soundcloud.com/nationalhomefrontproject/sets/brooklyn-navy-yard-oral-history-project-collection>

**Collection Summary:**

- Ford, Lucille “Lou”
- Hill, Pearl Margolis
- Johnson, Richard and Geraldine
- Kolkin, Alfred
- Levine, Sindonia “Sid” Kessler
- Lyons, Audrey
- Mauro, Antoinette
- Zinn, Howard

**Quantity:**

- Sessions: 8
- Narrators: 8
- Artifact Images: 4
- Audio Length: 14:32:22

## LUCILLE FORD

**Interviewee:** Lucille “Lou” Butler Ford

**Interviewers:** Sady Sullivan and Jennifer “Jenny” Egan

**Archival Processor:** Isabela Antonio

**Copyeditor:** Cameron Vanderscoff

**Date:** December 11, 2007

**Location:** Hempstead, New York

**Session Number:** 1

**Project:** National Home Front Project

**Interview Contributor:** Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives

**Accession Number:** FordLucille\_HFN-OH\_121107

### ABSTRACT

#### *Biography*

Lucille Butler Ford (b. 1922) is an African American woman who grew up in Harlem and the Bronx. Soon after graduating from Wadleigh High School, Lucille looked for work at the Brooklyn Navy Yard with a friend who was also from the Bronx. She began working as a messenger at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and was soon trained as a clerk typist in Building 77. Two of Ford's brothers were concurrently serving in the military during World War II. After leaving the Navy Yard in 1945, Lucille began working for New York Telephone, which is now Verizon. She currently lives in Long Island, New York.

#### *Summary*

In this oral history, Lucille focuses on social life at the Navy Yard and the close friendships she formed during the three years she worked there. Lucille discusses the ethnic backgrounds and interactions between the female workers in Building 77 by sharing stories like those about Jewish friend who wanted to visit Harlem and how her mother made greens when she visited. Throughout the interview, Lucille reflects on race, family, and the professional and social world of women during World War II.

#### *Keywords*

*Brooklyn Navy Yard, New York, Harlem, race, African American, sailors, clerical work, typing, horseback riding, Building 77, women*

## PEARL HILL

**Interviewee:** Pearl Margolis Hill

**Interviewer:** Jennifer “Jenny” Egan

**Archival Processor:** Isabela Antonio

**Copyeditors:** Erica Fugger and Cameron Vanderscoff

**Date:** February 20, 2007

**Location:** Deerfield Beach, Florida

**Session Number:** 1

**Project:** National Home Front Project

**Interview Contributor:** Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives

**Accession Number:** HillPearl\_HFN-OH\_022007

### ABSTRACT

#### *Biography*

Pearl Margolis Hill (b. 1923) grew up in the Middle Village neighborhood of Queens. Pearl attended Grover Cleveland High School and two years at Queens College. After her husband joined the Army in the early 1940s, she decided to work at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in order to contribute to the war effort. Pearl has two sons and currently lives in Florida.

#### *Summary*

In this interview, Pearl details her work at the Brooklyn Navy Yard as a shipfitter in Building 4 and her later role in the mold loft after an injury. She fondly remembers her friends at the Navy Yard, seeing them in passing on Sands Street and working alongside other married and unmarried women as welders. Pearl also speaks about working the graveyard shift, writing to her husband, what she wore to work, and her longtime friendship with Sidonia “Sid” Kessler Levine.

#### *Keywords*

*Brooklyn Navy Yard, ships, women, New York, family, templates, welding, social life, letters, Middle Village*

## GERALDINE AND RICHARD JOHNSON

**Interviewees:** Geraldine Kiernan and Richard Johnson

**Interviewers:** Sady Sullivan and Daniella Romano

**Archival Processor:** Caroline Draper

**Copyeditor:** Cameron Vanderscoff

**Date:** August 7, 2008

**Location:** Norwich, Connecticut

**Session Number:** 1

**Project:** National Home Front Project

**Interview Contributor:** Brooklyn Navy Yard Oral History Collection

**Accession Number:** JohnsonRichardAndGeraldine\_HFN-OH\_080708

### ABSTRACT

#### *Biography*

Geraldine Kiernan Johnson (b. 1925) was born in Norfolk, Virginia, but her family moved soon after to the Washington, D.C. area. Her father, James Eugene Kiernan, was a member of Governor General Frank Murphy's staff and they lived in the Philippines from 1933 to 1936. Kiernan was transferred to the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 1940, after spending a few years at the Camden Navy Yard. In 1941, the family moved to join Kiernan in Navy Yard housing on Flushing Avenue. Geraldine Johnson worked at the bank on the Yard where the workers picked up their paychecks and attended the Packer Collegiate Institute.

Richard Johnson (b. 1919) grew up in Leominster, Massachusetts and Newark, New Jersey. He graduated from the Newark College of Engineering in 1941 and signed up to be an engineer for the Navy. After college, Johnson went to the Navy Post-Graduate School in Annapolis, Maryland, and then began working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard as a naval engineer and assistant hull superintendent. Geraldine and Richard Johnson were married in 1944 at the Officer's Club at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, after which they spent a few years in San Diego. At the time of this interview, the Johnsons were living in Connecticut.

#### *Summary*

This oral history focuses on Richard's work with the U.S. Navy and the Brooklyn Navy Yard, as well as Geraldine's father's work as a naval officer and a supervisor at the Yard. The Johnsons speak about their family history and lives before they moved to Brooklyn. Geraldine describes her life growing up and working at the Yard. Richard discusses wartime topics, such as the layout and organization of the shipyard, his day-to-day activities, promotions within the Navy, and the launch of the U.S.S. Missouri. He also describes the books and other materials he has collected about the history of the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

## *Keywords*

*Brooklyn Navy Yard, superintendent, hull, marriage, assembly, dry dock, social life, U.S.S. Missouri, repair, race, Navy*

## **ALFRED KOLKIN ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT**

**Interviewee:** Alfred “Al” Kolkin

**Interviewers:** Jennifer “Jenny” Egan and Sady Sullivan; Judy Kaplan (daughter)

**Archival Processors:** Jannice Hall and Andrew Darlington

**Copyeditor:** Cameron Vanderscoff

**Interview Date:** July 15, 2008

**Location:** New York, New York

**Session Number:** 1

**Project:** National Home Front Project

**Interview Contributor:** Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives

**Accession Number:** KolkinAlfred\_HFN-OH\_071508

## **ABSTRACT**

### *Biography*

Alfred Kolkin (b. 1918) grew up in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx. After graduating from high school, Alfred worked for the Sperry Gyroscope Company in Downtown Brooklyn. He started working as a mechanic at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 1940 and was later promoted to a managerial position. During his time at the Yard, he was also an editor of a local union newspaper.

Alfred married his wife, Lucille “Lucy” Gerwitz Kolkin, shortly before enlisting in the U.S. Army during World War II. He began his training as a U.S. Navy Radio Technician in Sampson, New York, in 1944. Alfred was subsequently transferred to Chicago for more technical training and then on to California, where Lucy joined him. In the summer of 1945, he shipped out to Japan as a radio technician on the U.S.S. *Patroclus*, an auxiliary repair ship. Alfred completed his military service in January 1946 and then returned home to Brooklyn.

### *Summary*

During this oral history, Alfred speaks about his life growing up in New York and trying to find a job after graduating from high school during the Great Depression. He discusses his work as a machinist in Brooklyn Navy Yard’s Building 128, where he made ship parts and used a horizontal boring mill to finish the surfaces on castings for ship artillery. Alfred provides an overview of his union involvement and the difficulties of getting by with a family during union strikes. He further recalls his naval service and seeing Japan surrendering aboard the U.S.S. *Missouri* at the end of World War II. Alfred concludes this interview by reflecting on his jobs he

took after the war concluded, including his work in machine shops, a tool and dye factory, and a printing factory.

*Keywords*

*radio technician, auxiliary repair ship, U.S.S. Patroclus, aircraft carriers, castings, boring mill, U.S.S. Missouri, V-J Day, Pearl Harbor, Japan*

**SIDONIA LEVINE**

**Interviewee:** Sidonia “Sid” Levine

**Interviewer:** Jennifer Egan

**Archival Processor:** Patricia Rana

**Copyeditor:** Cameron Vanderscoff

**Date:** November 18, 2006

**Location:** West Palm Beach, Florida

**Session Number:** 1

**Project:** National Home Front Project

**Interview Contributor:** Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives

**Accession Number:** LevineSidonia\_HFN-OH\_111806

**ABSTRACT**

*Biography*

Sidonia Kessler Levine (b. 1919) began working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in November 1942 and manufactured parts for ships during World War II. She worked as a mechanic helper and shipfitter in Building 4 while her husband was deployed in Europe, even making her work uniform herself. During her tenure on the Yard, she had her picture taken for the *Shipworker* and did an interview with the *Brooklyn Eagle*. When her husband came home from the war, Sidonia stopped working at the Yard and was employed in other roles throughout her career, such as an office assistant. She currently lives in Florida.

*Summary*

In this interview, Sidonia speaks about how she came to work at the Brooklyn Navy Yard after spending some time at Western Electric. She mentions that she did very well on the Navy Yard test, on which she received the 15th best score out of 500 participants. Sidonia discusses the camaraderie on the Yard and the lasting friendships she made with the women she worked with in Building 4. She also details her job of converting blueprints into wooden templates and attending extra schooling at the Pratt Institute. Sidonia describes her visit to the Navy Yard in the 1990s as “sterile” compared to the liveliness of the atmosphere while she worked there.

*Keywords*

*Brooklyn Navy Yard, Brooklyn, New York, women, Navy, mechanics, Rosie the Riveter, Army, factory work, patriotism*

**AUDREY LYONS**

**Interviewee:** Audrey Garbers Lyons

**Interviewers:** Sady Sullivan, Jennifer “Jenny” Egan, and Daniela Romano; Susan Lyons (daughter)

**Archival Processor:** Patricia Rana

**Copyeditor:** Cameron Vanderscoff

**Date:** May 2, 2008

**Location:** Essex, Connecticut

**Session Number:** 1

**Project:** National Home Front Project

**Interview Contributor:** Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives

**Accession Number:** LyonsAudrey\_HFN-OH\_050208

**ABSTRACT**

*Biography*

Audrey Garbers Lyons (b. 1924) grew up in the Cyprus Hills neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. Audrey attended Brooklyn College before she left to work at the Brooklyn Navy Yard to help support her family after her father's business closed. Unlike some of the other workers at Navy Yard, she was a federal employee. Audrey worked as a parts inspector and used a micrometer to measure ship parts at the Yard from 1943 until World War II ended in 1945.

*Summary*

During this interview, Audrey recalls that the women on the Yard mostly tested the smaller parts of ships. She also remembers talking and singing with the women she worked with, who were mostly college educated and worried about their husbands in the war. Audrey describes her section of the Navy Yard as a little village, explaining that she recognized everyone in her own building, but no one else at the Yard. She speaks about witnessing many historical events, such as christening of the U.S.S. *Missouri*, the appearance of President Harry S. Truman, and V-J Day. Audrey also remembers the smells from a nearby chocolate factory and the jumpsuit she wore at work.

*Keywords*

*Brooklyn Navy Yard, New York, women, Navy, mechanic, Rosie the Riveter, air raids, U.S.S. Missouri, D-Day, V-J Day*

## ANTOINETTE MAURO

**Interviewee:** Antoinette Irrera Mauro

**Interviewers:** Jennifer “Jenny” Egan

**Archival Processor:** Patricia Rana

**Copyeditor:** Cameron Vanderscoff

**Date:** July 31, 2006

**Location:** Brooklyn, New York

**Session Number:** 1

**Project:** National Home Front Project

**Interview Contributor:** Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives

**Accession Number:** MauroAntoinette\_HFN-OH\_073106

### ABSTRACT

#### *Biography*

Antoinette Irrera Mauro (b. 1925) began working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard just after she finished high school at the age of eighteen. Antoinette worked as a draughtswoman from 1943 until she was laid off just a few weeks after the war ended in 1945. She started working in Building 3 and later in Building 77 when her department was moved. Antoinette was called back to work in 1947 and again in 1950, until she became pregnant with her son the following year. Her husband, Louis Mauro, first worked with blueprints at the Navy Yard after he came back from the war and then was employed in the technical library until the Yard was decommissioned.

#### *Summary*

In this oral history, Antoinette details the work she did as a draughtswoman in the electrical department at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. She emphasizes how nice her co-workers were, even though there were only two women working in her department of twenty-seven workers. Antoinette also discusses her commute, Yard security, friendships with co-workers, and watching various ship launchings, like that of the U.S.S. *Missouri*.

#### *Keywords*

*Italian American, New York, women, Brooklyn Navy Yard, wartime production, ships, draughtswomen, Sands Street, U.S.S. Missouri, Margaret Truman*

## HOWARD ZINN

**Interviewee:** Howard Zinn

**Interviewer:** Daniella Romano

**Archival Processor:** Anna Garow

**Copyeditor:** Erica Fugger

**Date:** December 8, 2008

**Location:** Brooklyn, New York

**Session Number:** 1

**Project:** National Home Front Project

**Interview Contributor:** Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation

**Accession Number:** ZinnHoward\_HFN-OH\_120808

### ABSTRACT

#### *Biography*

Howard Zinn (b. 1922) grew up in Brooklyn, New York. He began working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard as an apprentice after taking a civil service test in 1940. Howard helped organize the Apprentice Association, which was an organization of apprentices who were not allowed to be a part of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions. Due to his work on the Yard, his family was able to move into a housing project in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. Howard left the Navy Yard to join the Army Air Force in 1943. After World War II, he went to college on the GI Bill and pursued a career as a historian. Howard became a civil rights and anti-war activist, and is best known for his book, *A People's History of the United States*, which prioritizes minority and marginalized viewpoints on American history.

#### *Summary*

In this oral history, Howard discusses his family background and his path to working at Brooklyn Navy Yard. He details his work as an apprentice shipfitter, and working conditions that he and other shipbuilders faced. Howard further offers insight into his salary and commuting experience, his work in organizing the apprentices' basketball team, and witnessing a workplace accident. Finally, he provides an overview of his early activism, and describes the segregation on the Yard and in the workers' unions.

#### *Keywords*

*Brooklyn Navy Yard, Army Air Force, New York, African Americans, Germans, race relations, union, family, apprentice, historian*