

# Long Island Women Enter New Industries

## **Background:**

Large numbers of young men from Long Island entered the United States armed forces during World War II. At the same time, additional workers were needed to produce weapons and materials for the war effort. A serious "manpower" shortage was felt throughout the nation's economy. This opened the door for an infusion of "womanpower" on a number of jobs and in many industries that had previously only employed men.

Women workers were not new to the U.S. work force. In 1940, 27.9% of U.S. workers were women and 51.5% of these women workers were either married, widowed or divorced. What the war did was start to change the way that American men and women saw the role of women in production. By 1944, 36.3% of the U.S. work force was female and 59.1% of these women workers were either married, widowed or divorced. Partly as a result of trends that started during World War II, women on Long Island are now 45% of the employed work force. This includes 47.7% of women with children under age six work and 73.1% of women with children between ages 6 and 17.

On Long Island during World War II, large numbers of women workers were needed in a number of important industries. Rural areas of Suffolk County recruited women as agricultural workers. The Grumman plant in Bethpage needed to replace thousands of male employees on the assembly lines that were building the Wildcat fighter and the Avenger torpedo plane. The wartime demand for workers meant that women had new opportunities for job training and for employment on jobs that paid high salaries. National and local governments, schools and local colleges, and industry cooperated to provide training programs that paid women while they learned the job.

New possibilities for women also created new problems. Women and men both had to rethink traditional ideas about what they considered women's work and the proper role of women on the job, in the family and in society. Companies were concerned about how well men and women would work together. Many Long Island women responded to these challenges by becoming outstanding workers.