

NJS Presents**Teaching NJ History****In this Issue:*****Digging Up the Backyard: Seabrook Farms and the Importance of Critical Local Histories*****By Andrew Urban****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v3i2.91>**

This article explores Seabrook Farms as a relevant case study in how local New Jersey histories can be connected to national and international narratives about displacement, resettlement, and government-sponsored labor migrations. It examines how students can participate in the creation of new scholarship and exhibits, and illustrates that there is still much to learn about the history of our state. In order to maximize its production of frozen foods, Seabrook Farms relied on federal policies and initiatives that allowed the company to recruit and hire Japanese American internees, German POWs, guestworkers from the British West Indies, black and white farm labor from the U.S. South, and Estonian and other Eastern European refugees from Displaced Persons' camps in postwar Germany. As this article argues, scholars concerned with the relevance of history, and the public humanities more generally, have an obligation to approach New Jersey's past with a critical and outward-looking perspective, so as to uncover the full economic, political, and social importance of local sites and stories.

By the 1940s, Seabrook Farms was the nation's leading and best known frozen foods manufacturer. Located in Upper Deerfield Township in Cumberland County, New Jersey, the company employed upwards of 6,000 workers during peak harvesting and production seasons. Although Seabrook Farms' founder, C. F. Seabrook, earned fame as a technological innovator who dramatically transformed how vegetables were stored and consumed, his experimental approaches to solving the labor shortages that the company faced were just as significant. As a recruiter and

sponsor of migrant labor, Seabrook Farms' reach and creativity was unparalleled. In the company's factories and fields, observers could find Japanese American internees released from camps in Arizona, Arkansas, and California; German POWs paroled from nearby Camp Dix; guestworkers from the British West Indies who arrived via bilateral treaty agreements; black and white farm labor from the U.S. South whose passage Seabrook Farms had paid; and Estonian and other Eastern European refugees sponsored from Displaced Persons' camps in postwar Germany.

It is surprising to discover how infrequently the name Seabrook Farms resonates with residents of New Jersey. Since joining the faculty at Rutgers, New Brunswick in 2010, I have taught the *Introduction to American Studies* course on four occasions. Each time, I have surveyed my one hundred or so students on whether or not they had heard of Seabrook Farms before. Even though the majority of my students come to Rutgers from New Jersey high schools – and many from the southern part of the state – only a tiny number have raised their hands affirmatively.

Historians often write and lecture about the silencing of certain narratives. Within the profession, there is awareness that unflattering histories are vulnerable to being expunged from textbooks and omitted from curricula not only for overtly political reasons – so that those in the present can avoid having to take responsibility for the actions and consequences of the past – but also because many students (and teachers) gravitate toward uplifting stories that reinforce desired national, communal, and individual ideals.¹ In fact, when Seabrook Farms has commanded attention, the emphasis has been on how this company town offered refuge to uprooted families and, with Japanese Americans in particular, welcomed this group at a time when they faced severe discrimination and outright hostility. Seabrook Farms was exemplary, the story goes, for being an

¹ The phrase “silencing the past” comes from Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s book of the same name, in which he explores how the Haitian Revolution has been excluded from the collective memory surrounding the Atlantic World’s struggle for independence. See Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

integrated community where black, white, and Asian Americans coexisted peacefully, and where a meeting of the American legion might be followed by a mochi-making demonstration or Estonian folk dance.² These representations of Seabrook Farms are not wholly inaccurate, yet they stop well short of critical analysis. They do little to explain the circumstances behind Seabrook Farms' diversity, for instance, and how this historic assemblage of people drawn from around the nation, and world, came to be. Seabrook Farms' anonymity is unfortunate because local history has earned a reputation, fairly and unfairly, for being insular.

A nuanced examination of Seabrook Farms shows that local history does not have to be parochial in its significance. The same can be said for other historic sites in New Jersey that were the recipients of migrants from far flung locations, and, like Seabrook, shaped by changes to how food and other goods were produced and distributed. One of the Seabrook Farms' local and national competitors, at least when it came to the production of canned goods, was Campbell's, based out of Camden. During World War II, Campbell's recruited some of the first Puerto Rican migrants to the southern part of the state to work in its factories.³

(Scroll for photograph)

² Both of these interpretations can be found in Charles Harrison's informative but hagiographic book, *Growing a Global Village: Making History at Seabrook Farms* (Holmes & Meier Publishing, 2003). These themes have also dominated the popular media's occasional stories on Seabrook Farms as well.

³ This history can be found in the Records of the War Manpower Commission, Region III, Record Group 211, which are located at the Philadelphia regional branch of the National Archives.



From left to right, Harry Okamoto, Shoji Nakayama and Harry Ogata, veterans of the famed 442nd Infantry Regiment, receive commendation at the American Legion post in Bridgeton. These and other Japanese American veterans returned to the United States to find that their families had relocated from internment camps to New Jersey.

Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center, New Jersey Digital Highway, 1953.



Estonian folk dancers take part in a Christmas celebration at the Seabrook Farms community house, which hosted many of these events.

Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center, New Jersey Digital Highway, 1950.

Seabrook Farms also serves to counter the geographic bias that can often be found in how the history of internment is told and studied. Even if my *Introduction to American Studies*' students were for the most part unaware of Seabrook Farms, many were familiar with Western internment camps like Manzanar in California. To degrees they were knowledgeable of the fact that 120,000 Japanese Americans – 60 percent of whom were American citizens by birth – were detained without trials or even charges by the U.S. government during World War II. Because the Japanese American population was concentrated on the Pacific Coast, and the bulk of the internment camps located in the interior mountain west, the story of Japanese Americans' incarceration has been given a regional cast. Even among academics who study internment, there has only been a limited focus on the War Relocation Authority's work release program, which Seabrook Farms used to eventually hire approximately 2,500 Japanese Americans. This is a major gap in the scholarship. By the time the internment camps were officially closed at the end of 1945 – when only the Tule Lake camp for dissident internees remained open – roughly 35,000 internees had already been paroled to government-approved employers.⁴ Even though the term “parole” is not typically used to describe the work release of internees, it is accurate here. The choice for individual Japanese Americans was either to remain in the camps or to relocate to job sites east of the Mississippi River – returning to their homes on the West Coast was not an option. Seabrook Farms received more Japanese American parolees than any other site. It is the leading example of how internment encompassed a history of forced resettlement that played out over multiple stages, and stretched across the nation.

⁴ One history that touches on work release is Brian Masaru Hayashi's, *Democratizing the Enemy: The Japanese American Internment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004). Whether or not the term “parole” was useful to analyzing the plight of Japanese Americans at Seabrook Farms proved to be grounds for a rich debate among my students, who ultimately had to choose what language they wanted included in the exhibit materials they were creating.

Seabrook Farms' reputation for pluralistic harmony requires similar unpacking so that it does not become a watered-down congratulatory tale. Culturally diverse as Seabrook Farms was, race and ethnicity were categories of difference that the company used to try and manage and control its workforce. Well before Seabrook Farms became famous for being a refuge for Japanese Americans, the company was already employing a multiracial workforce. In 1934, Italian and black workers joined together for a series of strikes aimed at raising wages and winning union recognition. The local sheriff's office, which had no wish to go against C.F. Seabrook's interests, deputized members of Ku Klux Klan to attack the protesters. Trying another tactic, Seabrook at one point threatened to "fire all the Dagoes and just keep colored on," in a ploy to divide and conquer his workforce.⁵

In the aftermath of the 1934 strikes, Seabrook Farms made it a priority to find laborers whose circumstances made them precarious or vulnerable, and were therefore seen as less likely to demand better working conditions. The company touted Japanese American internees as an idealized source of labor in this respect, and perpetuated stereotypes about how this "model minority" was hardworking and uncomplaining – even if archival records show that the latter description was far from the case. Racial comparisons extended beyond the boundaries of the company town. The City Council President of nearby Bridgeton commented that while "he personally did not welcome the American-Japanese," he still thought them preferable to "the undesirable Southern Negro labor" because they would be "law-abiding." On numerous occasions, the hostility that white residents of Bridgeton expressed toward black migrants served as a crucial

⁵ On the 1934 strike and the labor struggles of agricultural workers in New Jersey more generally, see Cindy Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997). Seabrook's pejorative reference to the Italian workers he planned on firing was quoted in Lester Granger, "The Negro Joins the Picket Line," *Opportunity, Journal of Negro Life* 12, no. 8 (August 1934): 248.



A strikebreaker harvests beets while guarded by deputized Bridgeton locals. During the 1934 strike, picketing workers would routinely attack Seabrook Farms' trucks when they tried to get soon-to-rot produce to markets.

Acme Newspictures, 1934.

point of reference in explaining why there was less antipathy than expected to the resettlement of Japanese American internees.⁶

Finally, despite being a local history, Seabrook Farms challenges New Jersey students – and students across the country – to debate and discuss civic questions that are integral to our contemporary politics and policies. Americans tend to think about asylum solely as a matter of humanitarian concern, or, where opposition to increasing the number of refugees the United States will accept exists, as a matter of national security. Again, these are not irrelevant points, but they miss how asylum has always had an economic dimension as well. When Seabrook Farms began sponsoring European refugees after the passage of the 1948 Displaced Persons' Act, it was able to accommodate more than 500 Estonians due to the fact that it met the law's requirement that refugees have both employment and housing prior to entering the United States. Today, refugees from countries like Somalia can be found working in towns dominated by the meatpacking industry – doing the most dangerous of jobs – precisely for the same reason.

What I have discussed above only scratches the surface of how Seabrook Farms matters as a complex and multilayered local history. The research and analysis that I conducted with undergraduate and graduate students at Rutgers, which began in the fall 2015, has already resulted in a wide array of content and interpretive angles. My Rutgers course, *Public Histories of Detention and Mass Incarceration*, was offered as part of the [Humanities Action Lab](#) initiative, a collaboration of more than twenty colleges and universities. Students curated a panel that is now part of the [States of Incarceration](#) travelling exhibition, and will be seen by audiences across the

⁶ The Bridgeton City Council President was cited in a letter from the city's mayor to C.F. Seabrook. That document can be found in Records of the War Relocation Authority, Record Group 210, located in the National Archives in Washington, D.C, and on the exhibit site listed below.

United States (and perhaps even abroad). By focusing on how Seabrook Farms' history connects to other histories of incarceration, and how this company took advantage of captive labor – and workers who were greatly limited in their freedom to contract and move between jobs – we were able to frame the site's significance in a novel and illuminating way.

My students and I also completed the first steps toward creating what will eventually be a permanent and interactive online resource dedicated to the study of Seabrook Farms. A prototype of this site now exists on the New Jersey Digital Highway, under the title: ["Invisible Restraints: Life and Labor at Seabrook Farms."](#) When completed, this online project will treat Seabrook Farms as a local case study that can be used by educators across the country to explore the histories of government-sponsored labor migrations that took place in the mid-twentieth century, while also presenting the human stories and struggles that accompanied the journeys that Japanese Americans, Barbadians, Jamaicans, Estonians, and black and white Americans made to get to New Jersey. It will contain a host of curricular materials, lesson plans, and primary sources that can be used in classrooms studying internment, guestworkers, refugees, and the history of agriculture. Already Rutgers students have put to great use the firsthand accounts of former residents of Seabrook Farms and photographs and images from the company's records, National Archives, and Library of Congress.

The possibilities for how this website will evolve remain open and limited only by funding and time. I hope this article prompts readers of this journal to weigh in with their own opinions and thoughts about why and how Seabrook Farms matters, and what might be learned from its histories. Consider, also, the other sites throughout New Jersey that might be assessed in classes and other educational settings. George Washington may have never slept at Seabrook Farms – to paraphrase the public historians' time-honored joke about what sites tend to get preserved and

commemorated – but this is all the more reason to make sure that it -and other little-known but significant sites like it- are thoroughly interpreted and shared with audiences both in New Jersey and beyond.⁷

Andy Urban is an assistant professor of American Studies and History at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. His first book, [Brokering Servitude: Migration and the Politics of Domestic Labor during the Long Nineteenth Century](#), will be available in January 2018. An article that he wrote on Seabrook Farms and how its history might inform proposals to reform laws governing agricultural guestworkers and refugees appeared on Public Radio International's [The World](#) website. The “States of Incarceration” exhibition will open at Douglass Library on the Rutgers, New Brunswick campus, on January 22, 2018, and be on display until March 9. Information on the exhibition can be found [here](#).

(Scroll for photograph)

⁷ To wit: Mary Ann McGann, “George Washington slept here: NJ homes where our founding father spent time,” February 13, 2014, http://www.nj.com/inside-jersey/index.ssf/2014/02/george_washington_slept_here_nj_homes_where_our_founding_father_spent_time.html.



At the States of Incarceration exhibit opening at the New School in New York City, a panel situates Seabrook Farms' history within a larger timeline of events and dates relating to the history of mass incarceration.

Photograph by Chris Choi, 2016.