

INTRODUCTION

On October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed that preceded the Great Depression. It was a time of economic crisis, bank failures, and high unemployment. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office, one of his first initiatives was the New Deal. The New Deal was a set of programs created to counter the Great Depression. One program was called the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

The WPA was created on May 6, 1935, to put the unemployed back to work. The \$4.9 billion funded program was possible due to the Emergency Relief Act of 1935. As the largest of all the New Deal programs, the WPA offered a variety of jobs from construction to research to service to preservation.

When the WPA was terminated in 1943, it was determined that approximately 8.5 million people were put back to work. The results of the WPA projects are summarized in *The Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-43*. The records created by the WPA can help a genealogist find family, understand the historical context of the time, and develop locality guides to help with their research.

WPA PROJECTS

WPA Construction Projects

Construction projects were the most common project that an individual was hired to work on. The WPA was responsible for building or improving highways, roads, and streets; courthouses; airport facilities; parks; schools; military facilities; telephone lines; electric power lines; stadiums; hospitals; auditoriums; gymnasiums; firehouses; prisons; and more. There were also conservation efforts by planting trees, constructing dams, sealing abandoned mines, erosion control, and more.

Records

- National Archives – Record Group 69 - Records of the Work Projects Administration [WPA]
 - Series: Project Application Reference Cards
 - File Units are organized by year → State → County → City
 - Series: State Project Reports and Research Publications, 1933–1943
 - Series: Reports, Drawings, Blueprints, and Photographs Relating to Construction Projects, 1935–1939
 - Series: Project Files, 1935–1942
 - Series: Indexes to State Records, 1933–1943
- State and Local Archives

WPA Service Projects

The WPA service projects not only put the unemployed back to work but they also provided a need within the community. The service projects were generally classified into three categories: public activities, welfare, and research and records. The projects included library services, museum assistance, sewing rooms, making mattresses, school lunches, research assistance at universities and Federal Project No 1.

Records

- National Archives – Record Group 69 - Records of the Work Projects Administration [WPA]
 - Series: Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to [State]
 - Search Record Group 69 with keyword “sewing”
- State and Local Archives

Federal Project No 1

Federal Project No 1 was a service project completed across the country based on the arts. It consisted of music, art, theater, and writers’ projects and the historical records survey.

- Federal Music Program

The Federal Music Program provided work to musicians and music teachers. The program provided entertainment through symphony orchestras, musical ensembles, and operas. This project also provided music education, copied music scores, and music libraries.

An index of American composers and compositions are on file at the Library of Congress in the music division. To locate the copied music, search university and public libraries.

- Federal Art Project

The Federal Art Project provided work to various types of artists: painters, sculptors etc. The program held art exhibitions and painted murals for public buildings. This project also created posters for public agencies. Art education was taught in community centers and other public institutions.

Some murals can still be found in public buildings today. Many museums hold sculptures and paintings that were done during the Great Depression. The Library of Congress holds a collection of WPA posters.

- Federal Theater Project

The Federal Theater Project provided work for unemployed actors, stagehands, designers, and other theatrical workers. The majority of the project was held in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago, but there were some in other cities. The project put on plays, marionette shows, circuses and musical comedies.

The National Archives has a Series collection, “State Photographic Files Documenting Theater Productions, Facilities, Performers and Other Personnel, 1935–1939” within Record Group 69 that documents the Federal Theater Project.

➤ Federal Writers Project

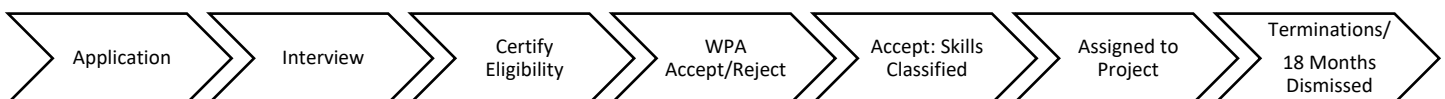
The Federal Writers Project provided work for unemployed writers, editors, and researchers. This project included an American Guide Series, oral histories, slave narratives, local histories, and more.

- American Guide Series – See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Guide_Series
- The slave narratives are located in the Library of Congress: “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938” - <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/>
- *American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940* – located at the Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-writers-project/about-this-collection/>
- *America Eats* (main editor Katherine Kellock)

➤ Historical Records Survey

The Historical Records Survey inventoried records of State, county, and local archives. This survey also included churches, other manuscript and early books and newspapers referred to as American Imprints. An inventory of Federal records kept in the States was also completed. The Survey also created indexes for many cemeteries, vital statistics, newspapers, naturalizations, photographed houses, and more.

- *WPA Technical Series, Research and Records Bibliography No. 7, "Bibliography of Research Projects Reports - Check List of Historical Records Survey Publications"*, Revised April, 1943 <https://archive.org/details/Researchbiblio/page/n7/mode/2up>
- *The WPA Historical Records Survey: a guide to the unpublished inventories, indexes, and transcripts*, Society of American Archivists. 1980
- FamilySearch wiki [https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Work_Progress_Administration_\(WPA\)_Historical_Records_Survey](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Work_Progress_Administration_(WPA)_Historical_Records_Survey)

DID MY ANCESTOR WORK FOR THE WPA?

ELIGIBILITY

- Need
- Capable
- 1 family member per household
- Register w/ US Employment Services
- Alien vs Citizen
- Give up Social Security benefits
- Age Limitations
- Residence requirements
- Cannot be in jail or prison

EMPLOYMENT TERMINATIONS

- Limited WPA funding
- Illness
- Injury
- Unable to perform duties
- Habitual absence
- Employee's improved financial status
- Refusal to accept private employment

CLUES IN RECORDS

The WPA hired our ancestors and then assigned them to projects based on their skillsets. So, when we are trying to determine if our ancestor worked for the WPA we need to keep in mind their occupation. Records that we should starting reviewing are:

- 1930, 1940, and 1950 censuses
- City Directories
- Newspapers
- Employment Cards
- Relief Rolls

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND FURTHER READING

Child, Sargent B. and Holmes, Dorothy P., WPA Technical Series, Research and Records Bibliography No. 7, "Bibliography of Research Projects Reports - Check List of Historical Records Survey Publications", Revised April, 1943, created by the Federal Works Agency, Work Projects Administration.

Colby, Merle, Division of Service Projects. Final Report on Disposition of Unpublishing Materials of WPA Writers' Program. Transcription from Chief Assistant, Librarian's Office, May 1943.

Great Depression. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Depression
: edited June 2024.

Hefner, Loretta L, Historical Records Survey (U.S.), and Society of American Archivists. The WPA Historical Records Survey: a Guide to the Unpublished Inventories, Indexes, And Transcripts. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000263007>

The Living New Deal. Living New Deal. (2024, March 26). <https://livingnewdeal.org/>

United States. Federal Works Agency. Final Report On the WPA Program, 1935-43. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. print. off, 1947. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001131675>