

# The WPA: Antidote to the Great Depression?

by Nick Taylor



*Detail from a poster for an exhibition in Chicago on the WPA (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)*

When President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in March 1933, estimates of the number of jobless workers in the United States ranged from thirteen million to as high as fifteen million—a quarter of the working population. Every class of worker was affected: laborers, factory workers, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, secretaries, clerks, salesmen and women, teachers, architects, engineers. No one was immune. The new president spelled out the problem in his inaugural address. “Our greatest primary task,” he said, “is to put people to work.”

His first steps toward job creation, however, were limited in scope, slow to gear up, or temporary. The Civilian Conservation Corps paid young men to work in national and state parks and forests; their numbers never reached more than 300,000 at any given time, and the \$25 they sent home from their \$30 monthly paychecks had limited effect as stimulus. The Public Works Administration, created under Title II of the National Industrial Recovery Act, would build magnificent dams, bridges, and other major projects that took a lot of planning. Its administrator, interior secretary Harold Ickes, deliberated at length before approving project plans, and these factors assured that the PWA had a far greater impact on the national infrastructure than on unemployment. The Civil Works Administration put 4.3 million of the unemployed to work during the winter of 1933–1934 but closed, as designed, after just five months; it prevented hardship during a harsh winter but failed to deliver long-term benefits.

Roosevelt’s presidency was therefore two years old before he launched his primary attack on unemployment—the Works Progress Administration. Under administrator Harry L. Hopkins, a former social worker who had headed relief efforts in New York when Roosevelt was governor and started the first federal relief agency once Roosevelt was in the White House, the WPA put over three million Americans to work in its first year of operation. Hopkins believed fiercely in giving the poor the dignity of work.

WPA rules were geared to maximize employment among the people hardest hit by the depression. Ninety percent of WPA jobs went to workers on relief, meaning that they were certified as poor and in need of government help. (Supervisors and administrators made up the remaining 10 percent.) Moreover, WPA rules specified that 90 percent of project budgets would be spent on labor, with the remainder to cover materials, machinery, and administration. Both rules were designed to put

money in the hands of people who needed it the most, and therefore would spend it most quickly, funneling money into the economy.

There was plenty of work for the unemployed to do. Even in the 1930s, the United States still had a largely nineteenth-century infrastructure. Rural and secondary roads were for the most part unpaved, and the rainy season turned many of them into swamps of mud. The first thrust of the WPA's road-building program was improving farm-to-market roads and also building new rural roads and bridges where they were needed. The WPA also improved and built new inter-city roads and paved countless city streets and sidewalks. These helped not only farmers but eased travel generally, benefitting sales and delivery people, truckers, and commuters, indeed everyone whose job depended on getting from one place to another safely, quickly, and efficiently.

Many homes outside of towns and cities had no running water when the WPA came into being. Their residents pumped water from wells and used outdoor privies that attracted flies and were often sanitary hazards. WPA workers built and installed hundreds of thousands of sanitary "fly tight" privies that were designed to keep the flies out.

More importantly in terms of public health, the WPA built and improved water and sewer treatment systems all around the country, from major cities including Oakland, California, to small towns such as New Concord, Ohio. The agency also drained swampy areas that bred mosquitoes that caused malaria, installing free-flowing watercourses in their place.

The WPA also coincided with the start of civil aviation in America. New, larger airplanes were just making inter-city passenger service more efficient, but many of those planes had no place to go. Travelers to New York City had to land in Newark. Washington, DC, used an airport consolidated from two smaller fields split by a major road, so that before planes landed and took off flagmen had to go out and wave down traffic. The WPA used its labor-intensive model to build and improve airports from runways to hangars and administrative buildings. It built LaGuardia Airport in New York, the city's first commercial airport, National in Washington, and hundreds more around the country.

WPA laborers and skilled trade workers also built thousands of public buildings, from schools and hospitals to city halls and courthouses. Agency rules that limited spending on materials often forced the builders to use native stone and wood that gave much WPA construction a distinctive look.

WPA construction projects were highly visible, both because of the distinctive red, white, and blue signs that went up on the sites and because work on roads and streets assured there would be passersby. Groups of men with shovels and wheelbarrows did much of the work in these labor-intensive settings, and often one group seemed to be waiting on the other. The WPA worker leaning on his shovel became a cliché among critics of Roosevelt's New Deal, and comics and citizens alike claimed the initials stood for "We Poke Along" or "We Piddle Around."

The WPA did more than just construction work. Its large Women's and Professional Projects division operated thousands of sewing rooms where workers, the large majority women, made clothing and bedclothes for families on relief. Teachers taught adult education classes and

supplemented staff at local school districts whose numbers were decimated by the economic crisis. Doctors and nurses inoculated flood victims. Librarians and book repairers, researchers, and newspaper indexers were among the other white-collar workers for whom jobs were created by the WPA.

Federal One, the WPA's arts division, ran projects in art, theater, music and writing. In addition to paintings, prints, and sculpture, the Federal Art Project created murals in schools, hospitals, and other public buildings. The Federal Theater Project staged everything from circuses to puppet shows, and using non-relief talents like John Houseman and Orson Welles, brought some of the most memorable moments in American theater history to the stage. The Federal Music Project was the largest of the arts units, with about 15,000 workers and performers, and it entertained millions who attended symphonic concerts, operas, and popular music. The Federal Writers Project nurtured great writers including Saul Bellow and Richard Wright, and produced landmark guides to every state and major city. Music and art classes also were enormously popular, and reached millions of people.

The arts projects never employed more than 40,000, a tiny portion of the workers employed by the WPA. The rolls reached a total of about 3.3 million in the fall of 1936. The success of WPA paychecks in stimulating the economy might be judged by the unemployment rate, which had dropped to fourteen percent early in 1937. Roosevelt believed the economy had turned the corner and moved to cut spending. WPA jobs were cut in half, and its budget for the fiscal year starting July 1937 was \$1.5 billion, less than a third of its original appropriation of \$4.8 billion. That fall employers and employees started contributing to Social Security for the first time, and Roosevelt also tightened bank reserve requirements. The removal of stimulus was devastating, a recession in which industrial production plunged along with the stock market, and unemployment shot back up to 19 percent.

Roosevelt changed course in March of 1938, and by that fall, WPA rolls reached their highest point at about 3.4 million.

The WPA's remaining life was affected by the calculus of war. Japan had invaded China in July 1937. Hitler annexed Austria in March 1938 and took over the Czechoslovakian border area called the Sudetenland that fall. Italy under Mussolini was increasingly bellicose after invading Ethiopia in 1935. Spanish fascists were at war against the elected government. With the rise of fascism in both hemispheres Roosevelt tried to prepare the nation for a time when it might have to go to war.

America had neglected its military after World War I. Isolationists held sway in Congress. They wanted the country to stay out of any kind of foreign involvements. In fact, the bill that created the WPA contained a provision against certain types of military spending—"no part of the appropriation shall be used for munitions, warships, or military or naval materiel." This had not stopped military planners from using the WPA to refurbish Army and Navy camps, however. In its first months, the WPA approved tens of millions of dollars for work on military posts around the country. It also built hundreds of armories for National Guard units.

Once Hitler invaded Poland in 1939 and war spread throughout Europe, defense spending started to ramp up. That included more work on military bases by the WPA, but also production of planes, warships, and weapons that started to push unemployment down. By the end of 1940 the unemployment rate was back down to 14.6 percent.

Unemployment was still high enough to keep the WPA in business, but its workers were increasingly employed at military work—constructing barracks and other buildings at bases that were rapidly expanding due to the draft that started in the fall of 1940. The Lend-Lease program by which the United States sent military aid to England starting in 1941 reduced unemployment further still.

In 1941, unemployment dropped below ten percent for the first time since 1929. After Pearl Harbor that December, all holds were off on military spending and WPA workers moved quickly into the private economy. Unemployment dropped to 5 percent in 1942, 1.9 percent in 1943 when the WPA ended, and below 1 percent in 1944. It is hard to argue with those who contend that it was the war that ultimately ended the Depression.

But the legacy of the WPA points to its necessity. It employed 8.5 million people in its eight years, and there were always eligible people on the waiting list for jobs. It brought America's infrastructure into the twentieth century, adding 650,000 miles of roads and 78,000 bridges to the country's transportation network. It improved the nation's health with water and sewer treatment systems and new hospitals that were among 125,000 new WPA-built civilian and military buildings. It advanced the age of civil aviation with 800 new, improved, or enlarged airports. Its work on military bases and the workers it trained helped the services meet the demands of World War II. It provided comfort to millions in the form of clothing and bedding they could not afford to buy, fed millions of children hot school lunches they otherwise would have done without, and brought the arts to millions who had never been exposed to them. People today still play golf on WPA-built courses, swim in WPA swimming pools, and ski at WPA winter sports complexes. In all ways, the WPA broadened Americans' access to their country.

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*Nick Taylor is the author of American-made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA (2008).*

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## SUGGESTED SOURCES

### BOOKS AND PRINTED MATERIALS

**The author of this article published a book on the WPA, now available in paperback as well:** Taylor, Nick. *American-Made, The Enduring Legacy of the WPA: When FDR Put the Nation to Work*. New York: Random House, 2008.

The publisher has also provided a website for the book, with resources, a discussion guide, and a timeline:

<http://www.randomhouse.com/bantamdell/wpa/>

**On the Civilian Conservation Corps:**

Salmond, John A. *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933–1942: A New Deal Case Study*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1967.

**On Harold Ickes and the PWA:**

Clarke, Jeanne Nienaber. *Roosevelt's Warrior: Harold L. Ickes and the New Deal*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Ickes, Harold L. *Back to Work: The Story of PWA*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1973.

**On Harry Hopkins, administrator of the WPA:**

Charles, Searle F. *Minister of Relief: Harry Hopkins and the Depression*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1963.

Hopkins, June. *Harry Hopkins: Sudden Hero, Brash Reformer*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

McJimsey, George. *Harry Hopkins: Ally of the Poor and Defender of Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.

Sherwood, Robert E. *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History*. New York: Harper and Row, 1948.

Watkins, T. H. *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes, 1873–1952*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990.

**On WPA projects:**

Bednarek, Janet R. Daly. *America's Airports: Airfield Development, 1918–1947*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001.

**On the Women's and Professional Project's division:**

Noun, Louise R. *Iowa Women in the WPA*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1999.

**General studies on WPA projects for artists and writers:**

Findlay, James A., and Margaret Bing. *The WPA: An Exhibition of Works Progress Administration (WPA) Literature and Art from the Collections of the Bienes Center for the Literary Arts*. Fort Lauderdale, FL, 1998.

McDonald, William Francis. *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969.

**On specific programs:**

Baker, Ronald L. *Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless: The WPA Interviews with Former Slaves Living in Indiana*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

Bold, Christine. *Writers, Plumbers, and Anarchists: The WPA Writers' Project in Massachusetts*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006.

Fagette, Paul. *Digging for Dollars: American Archaeology and the New Deal*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1996.

**On the Federal Art Project:**

Beckham, Sue Bridwell. *Depression Post Office Murals and Southern Culture: A Gentle Reconstruction*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.

Contreras, Belisario R. *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1983.

DeNoon, Christopher. *Posters of the WPA*. Los Angeles: Wheatley Press, in association with the University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1987.

Park, Marlene, and Gerald E. Markowitz. *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984.

**Federal Theatre Project:**

Anderegg, Michael A. *Orson Welles, Shakespeare, and Popular Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Bentley, Joanne. *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre*. New York: Knopf, 1988. [The life of the woman who was director of the Federal Theatre Project.]

Brady, Frank. *Citizen Welles: A Biography of Orson Welles*. New York: Scribner, 1989.

Flanagan, Hallie. *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre*. New York: Blom, 1965. [Reprint of Flanagan's 1940 book.]

Fraden, Rena. *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935–1939*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Houseman, John. *Front and Center*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979.

Quinn, Susan. *Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and a Cast of Thousands Made High Art out of Desperate Times*. New York: Walker & Co., 2008.

Sporn, Paul. *Against Itself: The Federal Theater and Writers' Projects in the Midwest*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

“New Deal Art during the Great Depression” from the Midwest Chapter of the National New Deal Preservation Association provides lists and images of WPA art works, murals, friezes, etc., all over the country, state by state:

<http://www.wpamurals.com>

### **American Memory from the Library of Congress includes several collections of interest:**

By the People, For the People: Posters from the WPA, 1936–1943, includes posters for WPA programs like the Federal Music Project:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaposters/wpahome.html>

The New Deal Stage: Selections from the Federal Theatre Project:

[memory.loc.gov/ammem/fedtp/fthome.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fedtp/fthome.html)

American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1940

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>

And related Collection Connections:

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/wpa-posters/>

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/florida-folklife/>

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/new-deal-stage/>

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/days-of-slavery/>

The Bienes Center in Broward County, Florida, “Education by Design” site provides visual aides from the collection, including the WPA’s Museum Extension Project, part of Women’s and Professional Projects:

<http://digilab.browardlibrary.org/wpa/>

For projects specifically in California, visit California’s Living New Deal Project:

<http://livingnewdeal.berkeley.edu/>