

YESTERDAY'S
NEWS

JERSEY JOURNEYS

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“We Need Jobs”: The WPA in New Jersey

On October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed. This event, which plunged the nation into the worst economic crisis this country has ever experienced, was known as the Great Depression. It was a time when one in four Americans could not find jobs, hundreds of banks closed, businesses failed, and fear and a sense of hopelessness filled much of the population. In New Jersey in 1929 the average person's income was \$839 a year; by 1932 it had dropped to \$479.

Presidential candidate Franklin Roosevelt, when speaking at the Democratic Convention in 1932, said “I pledge myself to a new deal for the American people.” These words became a reality when Roosevelt became President and created a number of government agencies to help the ailing economy and the millions of people out of work and money. The “alphabet soup” of federal programs he established included the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA), among others.

The Works Progress Administration was created in 1935 and renamed the Works Projects Administration in 1939. It was an ambitious New Deal program that



The Federal Arts Project, consisting of the Federal Writers, Theater, and Arts Projects amounted to the largest federal subsidy ever provided for the arts. This photograph is of WPA sculptor Angelo Walsh working on one of the seals for the Newark City Hall Chamber. The WPA Federal Art Project in New Jersey consisted of the following divisions: easel paintings, exhibitions, graphic art, index of American design, posters, sculpture, stained glass, model making, and murals. (December 1936) (WPA)

provided jobs for the unemployed. In its eight years it put 8,500,000 jobless to work, mostly on projects that required manual labor, at a

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THE WPA
IN PHOTOGRAPHS:
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The WPA in

All the photographs in this issue were taken by the Works Progress Administration to document the various programs. The photographs are in the New Jersey Historical Society collections. The date the photograph was taken on is in parentheses.



This photograph shows African American members of Newark's Federal Theatre Project rehearsing the production *Brother Mose* at the Market Street School. The 25 performances of the play were presented at the Orpheum Theatre. (April 1936)



In the language used in the 1930s, (especially in light of the national depression) the caption accompanying this picture says "The instructor (Miss Lillian Perron) reads to a group of crippled children that she instructs. The youngsters are brought to school by the W.P.A."

Most WPA projects involved unskilled laborers who worked on construction jobs. This picture shows men working in ditches that eventually held drainage pipes. You can see Newark Airport in the background. (March 1936)

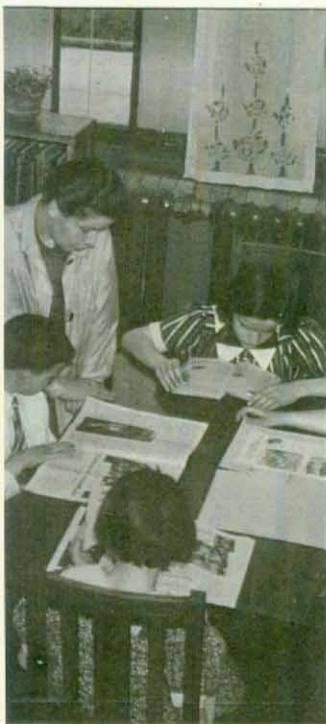


The Museum Extension Project began in 1938 "for the exclusive purpose of cooperating with New Jersey educators and the lending departments of libraries and museums by producing in quantity, visual aids to Education." The project's work ranged from making charts of the human circulatory system to dioramas and highly detailed models. These well-made pieces still make up a large portion of the Lending Collection of The Newark Museum.



Photographs

ns of the WPA in New Jersey. These
es.



This photograph shows a typical WPA Recreation Project. Children would be brought in after school and taught all the phases of woodworking by a WPA instructor. (April 1936)



While the majority of WPA jobs went to men, women were able to find some positions through the WPA. This photograph shows seamstresses working at the WPA sewing room in Union City. (August 1936)



ny sufferers of polio) the WPA caption that
ple, has in her charge a group of about 25
n a special bus where they attend the WPA
Library." (April 1936)



AN ODE TO THE WPA

The following poem was written by Edna M. Hill (Field Worker—District #7) and published in the "WPA New Jersey Memorandum: Historical Records Survey of June 1937." What does it tell you about the many projects the WPA engaged in? How important and valuable did the author feel the WPA was to those who were provided jobs? What besides money did WPA employees gain by working?

The WPA. is a wonderful thing,
With its promise of work and upbuilding,
It takes from the ranks the man who was
down,
And helps him regain his ambition.

It builds from the marshes a smooth, level
court,
Where youth can learn sportsmanship, ever,
By playing the game and learning to lose
Or win, with the same gracious, spirit.

From research and study in office and field
Rare volumes and works are discovered,
And long hidden papers are brought to the
light,
Revealing much sought after knowledge.

Churches whose history, records and sites
Should stand at the fore in famed story
Are thus pointed out and given their due,
As a factor in our nation's progress.

Women whose skill with the needle and
shears,
Was limited, crude and most needed
Learn to cut, fit and sew robes to grace any
state,
And to beautify homes by this practice.

Artists, musicians, skilled craftsmen and
toilers
All find a wide field of endeavor
And teachers share knowledge with those
who lack much
Of the joy of study and travel.

All Classes and creeds have a part in the
work
Of making our country's adjustment
And bringing her back to her place in the
world
As a pattern of excellent living.

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cost of \$11 billion. The WPA also included a provision for unemployed artists and writers: the Federal Arts Project.

Over the years the WPA produced nationally 651,000 miles of road, 125,110 public buildings, 78,000 bridges, 8,000 parks, and 800 airports. The Arts Project produced many paintings, drawings, sculptures, and more than 2,500 murals for public buildings.

In New Jersey, 100,000 men and women went to work for the WPA in 1936. A sampling of some WPA projects include the building

of Roosevelt Stadium in Jersey City, building of a Greek Amphitheater in Montclair State College, restoration of the Grover Cleveland House in Caldwell, and building of Speedwell Park in Morristown. In seven years, the WPA built more than 6,000 miles of roads and constructed 326 new bridges and repaired 324 others.

The Arts Project similarly benefited New Jerseyans with thousands of works of art and jobs for the unemployed. In its "Summary of Activities and Accomplishments" brochure the WPA stated that "although the primary objec-

tive of the Federal Arts Project of the WPA is the employment of artists from the relief rolls, the project has been able to create works of art for the public which have a definite social value to the community."

This issue of *Jersey Journeys* uses photographs taken of WPA projects in progress to better understand how this government program not only gave work and restored confidence to the unemployed, but also left a legacy of highways, parks, murals, and sculptures for us to use and enjoy. ★

DID YOU KNOW . . .

that in the Society's collections are several books written and/or compiled by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of New Jersey, including *Stories of New Jersey, New Jersey: A Guide to Its Present and Past, and Inventory of the Church Archives of New Jersey: Presbyterians*.

WHAT'S HAPPENING AT THE SOCIETY

Come visit the New Jersey Historical Society at 52 Park Place in downtown Newark. See our three exhibitions, *Paul Robeson: Bearer of a Culture; History's Mysteries; and Up on the Boardwalk, Down by the Sea: Photographs of Atlantic City from the Corbis Collection* and participate in free Saturday Family Programs and School Vacation Programs. These programs are designed for children ages 5 and up accompanied by an adult.

Sat., March 6, 1999; 1:00 p.m. and 2:30 p.m.

Herstory Family Workshop—Explore the role of women in history and create

an object to represent a job done by women today.

Sat., March 13, 1999; Available 10:00 to 5:00 p.m.

Family Self-Guided Activity—If the Walls Could Talk. If the walls could talk what would they say? At the front desk pick up a self-guide game box.

Sat., March 20, 1999; 1:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Spring Cleaning—Celebrate the first day of Spring at NJHS! Look at what we "found" cleaning our "attic" and help us identify the objects" from the past.

Sat., March 27, 1999; Available 10:00 to 5:00 p.m.

Family Self-Guided Activity—If the Walls Could Talk. If the walls could talk what would they say? At the front desk pick up a self-guide game box.

Schedule subject to change; for updated information, call (973) 596-8500, and press "3."

NJHS Hours

Office hours: Mon.–Fri., 9 a.m.–5 p.m.

Public hours: Tues.–Sat., 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

Library hours: Tues.–Fri., 12 p.m.–5 p.m.

Sat., 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

Closed Sunday and Monday

Admission to the Society is free.

For more information on Education Programs for grades Pre-K–12, after school and scout groups, family and adult programs, and Teachers' Services at the Society, please call the Education Department at (973) 596-8500.

READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Violins and Shovels. By Milton Meltzer, Delacorte Press, 1976. Art projects funded by the WPA are explained through photographs. Reading Level: Grades 5 and up.

Spotting the Leopard. By Anna Myers, Walker & Co., 1996. A daughter struggles to save money for veterinarian school while her father is put to work on WPA projects in the 1930s. Reading level: Grades 6 and up.

To order a subscription to *Jersey Journeys* call (973) 596-8500 and press "0."

Costs: Large classroom subscription (35 copies per issue, one Teacher's Guide) \$65. Small classroom subscription (25 copies per issue, one Teacher's Guide) \$50. Annual resource packet (2 copies per issue, mailed at year-end) \$25. Individual subscription (1 copy per issue) \$10.



Written by Susan Bernstein

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WORKING FOR WAGES WORDS

con·ven·tion	meeting of the delegates of a political party for the purpose of selecting candidates for office
crip·ple	a lame or partially disabled person
mu·ral	a work of art applied to a ceiling or wall surface
re·lief	welfare