

GenGuides | THE WPA

by Genwriters | History, Then and Now

In just a few short years, the Federal Writers Project (FWP), under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration, created a body of knowledge that has proven valuable to researchers throughout the nearly seven decades since it was produced. Never before, or since, has a federally-funded project so thoroughly chronicled the everyday culture of American life. The work performed in the 1930s and 1940s has resulted in better access to significant documents for historians and genealogists. The documents and manuscripts created by the FWP can be found in libraries, archives, and other historical repositories across the United States. With the rise in popularity of genealogy over the past decades, the works created by the FWP have become sought-after resources by a new generation of researchers.



HISTORY OF THE WPA

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) became the 32nd President of the United States with an overwhelming victory over Herbert Hoover in 1932. He took the oath of office in March 1933 after perhaps the lowest year during the Great Depression. Millions of Americans were unemployed and there seemed to be no hope for an economic turnaround in the near future. The American public was dissatisfied with Hoover's *laissez faire* economic policies; he was sure the economy would recover on its own without Federal assistance or interference. Roosevelt offered hope that might bring the Depression to an end with his promise of a New Deal.

On 12 May 1933, Congress passed the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), just one of the many relief programs established under the Roosevelt administration. The impetus behind FERA was to alleviate the unemployment that was a result of the Depression. Roosevelt's goal was to provide substantial work opportunities for the unemployed and those opportunities would be created and funded

by the Federal government. FERA became the first stage in the evolutionary process to focus on public unemployment by way of the Civil Workers Administration and the Works Progress Administration (later to be known as the Works Projects Administration, or WPA).

Early in 1935, Roosevelt decided to emphasize public works over direct relief. The principal result was the Works Project

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HISTORY OF THE WPA

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Administration (WPA) which was created 6 May 1935. The goal of the WPA was to provide substantial projects and work opportunities for the unemployed. These projects must be useful, not frivolous, and should employ a large number of needy unemployed workers. WPA projects were varied: from cemetery beautification to library construction to Spanish lessons for those in the armed forces to mosquito control, and beyond.

With Roosevelt's simple statement – small, useful projects – the President opened the door for the Federal Writers Project. The official announcement of the writer's project program provided for the employment of

writers, editors, historians, and other researchers to work on the American Guide project. The people who answered the call were men and women from the breadlines. Lawyers, teachers, and librarians worked side by side with published authors. The Federal Writers Project did not limit itself to just one type of writer. There were fiction writers, copywriters, poets, newspapermen, publicity writers, technical writers, and others, working on the myriad of projects. The Federal Writers Project effectively removed thousands from the breadlines and gave them employment that was meaningful – working on substantial projects.

THE FEDERAL WRITERS PROJECT



With the birth of the Federal Writers Project (FWP) under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration, the search was on for projects that would provide employment to the greatest number of out-of-work citizens. Two projects begun under FERA were deemed worthy to continue: documenting American folklore and the audio recording of former slaves' autobiographies. Neither project was large enough in scope to keep a nation working, so the search was on for more ideas. With an overabundance of nonfiction writers signing on to the project, a broad non-fictional program was needed. A project that had been proposed over a year earlier now came to the forefront. The project would create guides that detail points of interest in the cities, towns, and hamlets across the United States. Travel guides, known as *Baedekers*, had been in existence since 1827 and were produced by a German-based company. The guides, introduced as a part of the FWP, would have a more local flavor to appeal to a broader cross-section of the American public.

The Federal Writers Project produced approximately 276 volumes, 700 pamphlets, and 340 leaflets and articles.

AMERICAN FOLKLORE PROJECT

Until the Federal Writer's Project was created, American folklore had been used solely by scholars who viewed it formally as a strictly historical remote past. The FWP broke down those formal academic barriers and brought contemporary aspects to American folklore thereby increasing public interest in the subject. The American Folklore Project undertaken by the FWP included interviews centered on the American experience of recent immigrants and how these immigrants integrated their own customs including cooking, family rituals, holidays, medical remedies, and folklore into their American lives. But perhaps the more valuable contribution to the FWP American Folklore Project were the more than 2,300 interviews that were conducted with former slaves. This project was meant to capture their struggles with daily life. The transcripts of these valuable histories fill volumes and are accessible through a searchable database that is a part of the American Memory Collection on the Library of Congress website located at <http://lcweb.loc.gov/wpaintro/wpahome.html>.

AMERICAN GUIDE BOOKS

The American Guide Series, also called WPA Guides, was written as part of the Federal Writers Project between the years 1935 and 1943 by writers who wrote about the states, cities, and towns in which they lived. They captured the essence of smalltown America in their projects. The WPA Guides were written in a driving-tour format where even small villages along the route got a mention. The historical value of the guides is great because they were written by the residents of the states. They were written to serve automobile tourism which was blossoming during this time. In the early years of the Great Depression people stayed close to home, but by 1936 the economy was beginning to recover and car travel was easier. The Guides included short essays of the state's natural and political history, economy, social life, racial and ethnic groups, arts, and recreation; important cities and towns and points of interest; and detailed point-by-point road tours across the state.

The Depression years were a hard time in America. Morale was low and, although the tide was turning by the late 1930s, many American citizens still found it hard to make a living let alone find pride in their country. Many believed that the projects of the Federal Writers Project, specifically the American Guide Series (or WPA Guides) might spark a renewed interest in American life and culture. In less than four years, the project produced some three hundred twenty publications, of which one hundred were full-sized books. A guide was done for each of the then 48 states, the territory of Alaska, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D. C., for a total of 51 guides. In addition, there were about 30 city guides to cities such as New York, San Francisco, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. Other regional publications on the topics of U. S. Route 1, the Oregon Trail, New England, Ghost Towns of Colorado, and the Death Valley Guide round out the collection.

HISTORICAL RECORDS SURVEY PROGRAM

The Historical Records Survey Program surveyed and indexed historically significant records in state, county, and local archives. The program was begun in the winter of 1935-1936 for the purpose of preserving documents used by historical researchers.

The Historical Records Survey Program (HRSP) created massive bibliographies, inventories, indexes, and other historical materials. The intent of the program was to organize historical materials, particularly unpublished government documents and records which were produced by local governments and which provide valuable data for students of political, economic, and social history. Inventories produced by the HRSP attempted to do more than merely provide lists of records. The program attempted to sketch the historical background of the county or other governmental unit and to describe precisely, and in detail, the organization and function of the governmental agencies whose records were listed.

One great benefit of this program was the increased awareness to the value and fragility of the documents surveyed. While working through the inventorying process with HRSP workers, custodians of public records became more aware of the documents entrusted to their care. "Lost" records were found, documented, and preserved.

Family historians continue to reap the benefits of these works, which survive in original, microfilm, and published forms in libraries and archives all over the United States.

A sampling of projects completed by the Historical Records Survey Program:

INVENTORIES OF CHURCH ARCHIVES - The HRSP compiled church records at the state and local level. Although incomplete, the inventories remain the most comprehensive attempt of its kind ever made. A typical entry for church vital records would contain the name and address of the institution at the time of publication, ethnic orientation, comprehensive dates for each type of vital record, and a summary of baptisms, marriages, and deaths. Although this information has not been updated since the original inventories were conducted, they still capture valuable information about churches and church records at a point in time during the 1930s and 1940s making them valuable historical documents for historians and genealogists alike.

VITAL RECORDS - The HRSP conducted the most exhaustive attempt to compile a list of available vital records in the United States during the 1930s. The goal was for each state to publish an inventory, or guide, to the vital statistics records available for various counties, cities, and towns within its jurisdiction and to indicate where the records were filed. Forty states actually took part in this project.

NATURALIZATION INDEXES - Most states participated in the nationwide project to locate, index, catalog, and photograph naturalization records predating 27 September 1906. The National Archives

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HISTORICAL RECORDS SURVEY PROGRAM

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holds these indexes in microfilm form. Lists of the availability of these microfilms can be found on the National Archives website located at <http://www.nara.gov>. Most original naturalization records are held at the state or county level of government while a few are held by the National Archives. The indexes created by the HRSP are helpful tools in determining the location of specific naturalization records.

INVENTORIES OF COUNTY ARCHIVES - The HRSP inventoried various county courthouses. Because many original county records have not been microfilmed, and most are held at the local level, the indexes produced by the HRSP are valuable tools for researchers today to locate records to use in genealogical and historical research.

SOUNDEX

Perhaps one of the most important tools created by the Historical Records Survey Program was the Soundex index coding scheme. After the Social Security Act was passed in 1935, a nationwide effort to register all citizens for the program was initiated. During the registration process, widespread surname misspellings caused many problems in matching names. To help alleviate this situation, the Soundex system was adopted. The Soundex was a coding system for surnames that accounted for the variations of spellings. Each surname was assigned a code beginning with an alpha character followed by three numerical digits. The code was based on the way the name sounded phonetically rather than how it was spelled. The Soundex System was a breakthrough for indexing records and is still in wide use today, particularly for indexing census enumerations.

THE WPA LIVES ON

The early 1940s found America entering World War II. To free up funds needed for the war effort, the WPA was dissolved by presidential order in 1943. A majority of the records had been given to state archives and historical societies where they were microfilmed, indexed, and made available for general use. Some records had already been given to the Library of Congress and the National Archives. Others, sadly, were destroyed.

The growth of interest in genealogy, coupled with the emergence of the Internet, have sparked renewed interest in the documents produced by the WPA and more specifically, the guides and indexes created by the FWP. Many of these records have found their way into mass distribution outlets through published manuscripts and microfilm series. Genealogists have long relied on microfilms of WPA records, and many of those microfilms are being digitized for the Internet. The USGenWeb Census Project is migrating the census index

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THE WPA LIVES ON

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microfilms to the Internet thanks to hours of labor of many volunteers. Many WPA cemetery projects are also finding their way online. While no federally-funded WPA-type project currently exists, hundreds of people across the United States have visited their local historical societies to view WPA records. The American Guide Books are experiencing a new wave of interest as genealogists seek to build a community for their ancestors. The guide books provide valuable social history context information to round out a family history.

The usefulness of the WPA compilations lead many genealogy researchers longing for similar projects today. Imagine using federal tax dollars today to index courthouse records, compile travel guides, and conduct interviews with our aging population to discover more about the people of America. These were the projects of the WPA

Today, the Library of Congress catalog of WPA holdings can be accessed through their website at <http://www.loc.gov>. The American Memory Collection (located at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>) is home to American Life Histories, 2,900 manuscripts representing the work of over 300 writers from twenty-four states during the Federal Writers Project. The Folklore Project, also accessible through the American Memory Collection, documented in writing the culture of pioneer and frontier life through songs, essays, and stories.

Many WPA and FWP projects were incomplete at the time the programs were discontinued. World War II intervened and brought the work on the projects to an end. Additionally, some counties and localities were missed in the WPA compilations. Researchers today have rallied together to create volunteer projects to fill those gaps as well as to bring other projects up to date.

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