

The WPA

The Work Projects Administration (WPA), originally called the Works Progress Administration, was the largest government agency established to fight unemployment during the Great Depression. From its inception in 1935 as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the agency was responsible for refurbishing America's road infrastructure, erecting buildings and bridges, improving airports, developing the arts, and giving millions of its employees an honest wage and a job in the broken American economy.

By 1935, America had some twenty million people on government relief. The WPA paid heads of families on relief for a thirty-hour work week. The agency employed both blue- and white-collar workers, who did everything from building zoos and writing books to laying sewers, landscaping parks, and paving airport runways.

The WPA is well remembered for its contribution to American arts and letters. One program was the Federal Writers' Project, an ambitious venture that produced, among other things, a series of comprehensive state and regional guidebooks. The American Guide Series offered cultural essays, automobile tours, historical reflections, photographs, and more. The Writers' Project also produced extensive folklore research, including interviews with many former slaves recorded in the Slave Narrative Collection.

The WPA's reach in the arts extended far beyond the written word. Through the Federal Art Project (FAP), unemployed American artists were hired to decorate and create murals for public buildings such as schools, libraries, and post offices. They created some 200,000 works of art during the FAP's tenure. Among the artists who worked for the WPA were Thomas Hart Benton, Ben Shahn, Willem de Kooning, and Jacob Lawrence.

WPA photographers also captured the visual saga of America in the Great Depression. They depicted urban and rural life of the 1930s and extensively documented programs including the Federal Theatre Project, another artistic arm of the WPA. Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans took the best-known photos of the Depression, those showing poverty in rural America, under the direction of the Farm Security Administration, a sister relief agency created under the New Deal.

The WPA employed over eight million people during its existence, including writers Saul Bellow, John Cheever, Studs Terkel, Richard Wright, and Zora Neale Hurston. By the time the agency disbanded in 1943, it had bequeathed a legacy, both economic and artistic, that would benefit generations of Americans with its documentary precision, its enormous scale, and its human touch.