

**WPA Historical Records Survey  
Project & Its Impact on Genealogical  
Research**

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# **Historical Purpose**

- 1. Largest single project among many New Deal programs.**
- 2. Historical Records Survey created many inventories and records.**
- 3. Labor intensive and employed multiple levels of unemployed workers.**
- 4. Several inventories and record groups were created from scratch.**

# Historical Purpose

- 5. Impacted local, state, and federal levels.**
- 6. Federal government gradually discovered many historical records and documents were endangered or missing.**
- 7. Looking for Depression scapegoats. Political blame game. NOTE: Some historians say this may have been the most important!**
- 8. Established by executive order on 6 May 1935. In 1939 the agency's name was changed to Works Progress Administration. Before the agency was liquidated in 1942.**

# Goals and Objectives

- 1. Seek an educated workforce.**
- 2. Tasks were carried out by out-of-work historians, lawyers, teachers, researchers, and clerical workers.**
- 3. Organize historical materials, particularly the unpublished government documents and records.**
- 4. Crucial for multiple reasons:**
  - a. Considered basic in the administration of local government.**
  - b. Provide valuable data for students of political, economic, & social history.**

# Goals and Objectives

- 5. Create or update archival guides to facilitate and enhance the daily administration by federal and local government officials.**
- 6. Create community specific guides to:**
  - a. Assist the local business, legal, and educational communities.**
  - b. Functions and success depend on information from public records to conduct daily activities.**

# Goals and Objectives

- 7. Inventories attempted to sketch historical background of the county, city, territory, etc.**
- 8. Precise & detailed explanation of the organization and function of the governmental agencies whose records were listed.**

# **Highlights of Records Created by the WPA Historical Survey**

- 1. Created indexes of federal census records including Soundexes: 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920.**
- 2. Created indexes for some state, local, and specialized censuses such as various Native American enumerations, Dawes rolls, etc.**
- 3. Created a Soundex to naturalization petitions in various jurisdictions throughout the country.**
- 4. Compiled bibliographies of historical and local history materials.**

# **Highlights of Records Created by the WPA Historical Survey**

- 5. Organized and compiled inventories of courthouse, church, cemetery, and other related records.**
- 6. Especially important for pre-1900 research. Why?**
- 7. Folklore Project:**
  - a. Compiled life histories in narratives of former slaves, Native Americans, surviving soldiers from the various wars including the Civil War, Spanish American War, World War I, etc.**
  - b. Helped index and create many county histories.**
- 8. Began the creation of a nationwide network of historical and family photographs.**

# **Highlights of Records Created by the WPA Historical Survey**

- 9. Compiled descriptions & inventories of published/unpublished manuscripts found in various libraries, private collections, and agencies.**
- 10. Compiled place-name guides.**
- 11. Collected surviving historical artwork, posters, and heirlooms.**
- 12. Began indexing newspapers throughout the country.**

# **How Records/Inventories Were Compiled**

**Workers were assigned to entities that:**

- a. Held public and private records of interest to the government .**
  - b. Were valuable from a public perspective.**
- 1. In archives, historical societies, public and university libraries, workers compiled inventories of manuscript collections.**
  - 2. In courthouses, town halls, offices in large cities, they inventoried official records, land, probate, tax, voters registration, court records and dockets, and vital statistics records.**
  - 3. Besides compiling indexes, they also transcribed some of the records they found.**

# **How Records/Inventories Were Compiled**

- 4. Transcription of records gradually became the main duty.**
- 5. Workers discovered that previously compiled indexes and compilations were missing or completely inaccurate.**
- 6. NOTE: Some records were never located!**
- 7. In churches, they indexed and compiled parish/congregational records, seminary records, business and congregational meetings and minutes, registers, etc.**

# **Courthouses, Town Halls**

- 1. Inventoried records found at the time of project.**
- 2. Under each inventoried item, the complete content and applicable page numbers were listed.**
- 3. The format for each record was noted with applicable notations.**
- 4. Format normally fell into one of the following categories:**
  - a. Book**
  - b. Manuscript**
  - c. Legal Document**
  - d. Photograph**
  - e. Heirloom**

# Courthouses, Town Halls

- 5. Format notations include information specific content (if the records were on 3x5 cards, in bound volumes, stuffed in file drawers, or loose pages).**
- 6. If the inventory was actually published, it would state the year and place of publication.**
- 7. Published inventories usually the following:**
  - a. Layout map of the courthouse**
  - b. Concise history of the county or town**
  - c. Exactly where the records were located in the building and under what office's jurisdiction.**
  - d. NOTE: This was true at the time of publication. It may no longer be accurate.**
  - e. HOW DO YOU OVERCOME THAT?**

# Courthouses, Town Halls

## 8. Important Note:

a. For areas such as New England, published courthouse records are at the town-level and are referred to as town-hall records.

b. In Louisiana, these inventories were done at the parish level and are regarded as parish records. The name for counties in Louisiana are parishes.

# **Local History Projects**

- 1. Compiled indexes for county/town histories.**
- 2. Worked with local historians in creating published histories for localities.**
- 3. Created indexes for local publications such as newspapers, business directories, etc.**
- 4. Organized and indexed manuscripts at many local, county, and state repositories, including local history sections of public libraries.**
- 5. Participated in collecting data for local history files.**

# Cemeteries

- 1. Went to church and cemetery offices and listed the exact location of cemeteries.**
- 2. Compiled indexes based on the burial registers or card files from the beginning to present .**
- 3. Visited military cemeteries, began indexing their records for the first time in an organized manner.**
- 4. In some states, they worked in conjunction with the DAR and local genealogical societies.**
- 5. Many of these complications are available in libraries such as the DAR (Washington, DC), Family History Library (Salt Lake City), Allen County Library (Fort Wayne , Indiana) and local libraries in the area of interest.**

# Church Records

- 1. WPA employees visited churches, synagogues, and other houses of worship.**
- 2. Inventories of church records were compiled—some are for all churches of a specific denomination in one city or state; others were directory-type listings of all the churches of all denominations.**
- 3. Church inventories often include:**
  - a. Short history of the church.**
  - b. Details of previous buildings.**
  - c. What record books were found (sacramental, minutes, and donations).**
  - d. What types of information are found in them.**
  - e. Congregation rosters or prominent members.**

# Naturalization Records

- 1. Federally mandated goal was to create a master index to county, state, and federal level naturalizations and other related records.**
- 2. Unfortunately, the program was terminated before this was accomplished.**
- 3. National Archives, Allen County Library, FamilySearch (under the Family History Library icon), and Footnote.com websites are best sources to view a complete listing of what was completed.**

# **Newspapers**

- 1. Compiled card indexes to many newspapers nationwide.**
- 2. Clipped important local events out of surviving newspapers and created many family and local history files which were put into local libraries and repositories.**
- 3. Assisted many local societies and LDS with microfilming after WPA was terminated.**

# Vital Records

- 1. Considered most relevant & accurate WPA records.**
- 2. Divided by sections: births, marriages, deaths, divorces.**
- 3. In most cases each section includes a brief description of what the legal requirements were governing these specific records types at the time of the survey.**
- 4. In some cases, localities were keeping records before the state mandates.**
- 5. Identify alternative entities such as churches or other civil groups that may have been charged with keeping these records before state mandates.**

# Vital Records

- 6. Identify what county and state officials may have been responsible for records during particular time periods.**
- 7. Entries may provide clues regarding the unavailability of some records and other options to search.**
- 8. In some cases, the compilers provided citations to the state statutes, legal requirements, or codes governing each of these record groups.**

# Vital Records

- 9. State records sections include specific information about what data was recorded on the record during the various time periods.**
- 10. County records sections list the counties for each record group and describe the records kept by time period.**
- 11. While the exact format may vary by state and jurisdiction, most states tended to follow a similar style.**

# **American Folklore Project**

- 1. Part of the oral history project.**
- 2. 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.**
- 3. Oral histories included more than 2,300 interviews that were conducted with former slaves.**
- 4. Slave interviews were conducted in nearly all southern states as well as most New England states.**

# **American Folklore Project**

- 5. Native Americans, unfortunately, were not interviewed extensively.**
- 6. While references to “Indians” in the Library of Congress collection are voluminous, most of them are from the perspective of European American settlers.**
- 7. The libraries at the University of South Dakota, and Oklahoma are good places to find collections of Indian folklore and interviews.**

# **Locating WPA Record Compilations**

- 1. Handout contains 11 most prominent repositories.**
- 2. Many local, regional libraries with genealogy collections may also have collections unique to localities/regions.**
- 3. Tracking these compilations down can be a challenge:**
  - a. Libraries and various repositories have a variety of ways to catalog holdings.**
  - b. Many original WPA compilations have been republished by various authors, editors, genealogical historical societies, etc.**

# Locating WPA Compilations

- c. In some cases, the new titles will not reflect original WPA origins.
  - d. Using the search term *WPA or Works Progress Administration Records* may or may not bring up all possible items.
4. The following search tips may help in the location process:
- a. Check the website for the state library in the state you are conducting research. The following website <http://www.libraryspot.com/libraries/statelibraries.htm> contains links to all 50 state libraries.
  - b. Each state library website as well as most public libraries offer online holdings search capability.

# Locating WPA Compilations

- c. Check the website and resources for the state historical society in the state you are conducting research.**
- d. Many state historical societies either have research collections at a private facility or within a large public or academic library near their locality.**
- e. Check the website for the county historical society.**

# Locating WPA Compilations

- f. With the emergence of the Internet, WPA records have found their way into mass distribution.
- g. Most prominent example is the [USGenWeb Census Project](#), where volunteers are migrating the census index microfilms to the Internet.

# **End of the Historical Records Survey/WPA**

- 1. When the United States entered World War II in 1941, Americans went to work building war machines.**
- 2. By 1942, it was clear that the WPA had run its course. Roosevelt signed the order terminating the WPA, which ended on June 30, 1942.**
- 3. After the WPA was dissolved, the records, now in the hands of state archives and historical societies, were microfilmed, indexed, and made available for use.**