

WPA Era & Its Impact on Genealogical Research

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The year 1929 was one of the most tragic in American history. The infamous stock market crash coupled with the Great Depression that followed had a terrible impact on many Americans. Herbert Hoover and his successor, Franklin Roosevelt formulated many relief programs to attempt to stem the tide of misery and poverty throughout the country. The efforts were met with some success and many failures.

One of the most successful ventures was establishment of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA was the largest project among the many programs developed during the New Deal. For genealogists, one aspect of the WPA has been especially important. The Historical Records Survey under the WPA created many inventories and records which have benefited the entire genealogical research community. Some of the highlights of what was created include:

1. Burial listing in cemeteries
2. Federal and state census indexes
3. Indexes to naturalization records
4. Indexes to Newspapers
5. Inventories of records found in county courthouses
6. Descriptions of manuscripts found in various libraries
7. Place-name guides
8. Inventories of church records including the range of years and content covered by a church's christening records, and the names of those buried church cemeteries

Under the auspices of the WPA, workers went to archives, historical societies, public and university libraries and did inventories of manuscript collections. They went to courthouses, town halls, offices in large cities, and vital statistics offices and inventoried records. Besides compiling indexes, they also transcribed some of the records they found. The impact on genealogical research in today's era has been profound. Most researchers have used many of these items at some point in the research process.

Sadly, not everything compiled has survived. Decisions were made by various entities and governmental officials concerning certain records and indexes. Those that were considered of "no value" were destroyed. However, the majority of materials created or indexed during the WPA era survived and the entire genealogical community is grateful for the benefits they have provided.

The list below provides a brief overview of what was done.

Courthouses and town halls

In town halls, courthouses, and related buildings, the workers ferreted out and listed the records in existence at that time, the format, and the general contents. The format tells researchers if the records were on 3x5 cards, in bound volumes, stuffed in file drawers, or on loose pages. If the inventory was actually published, the book also contained a layout map of the courthouse, a short history of the county or town, and told exactly where the records were located in the building and under what office's jurisdiction.

One example of a published survey is Inventory of the County Archives Georgia. No. 106. Muscogee County (Georgia Historical Records Survey, 1941), which is found at many libraries. For areas in New England, the inventories were of town-level records.

Beyond the courthouse

In addition to inventories and record descriptions, workers compiled indexes for some county and town histories. First-ever histories were created for some localities. In Indiana, workers created indexes to a variety of historical publications for counties. These combined indexes are called *Index of Names of Persons and Firms* and indexed county histories, anniversary issues of newspapers, biographical information, and other publications.

Diaries and journals were transcribed, such as "The Diary of Alex Ramsay, a '49er." The transcription of this and a few additional ones related to those who sought gold in California are at the Wyoming State Archives. Workers interviewed people in the petroleum industry, pioneers, slaves, and others. The University of Arkansas Libraries Special Collections has a limited number of WPA "Early Settlers' Personal Histories of African Americans in Arkansas." Transcriptions are found at http://libinfo.uark.edu/Special_Collections/wpa/. Not all of the interviews had been slaves.

The workers inventoried and described manuscripts at many local, county, and state repositories, including local history sections of public libraries.

Cemeteries

Workers went to church and cemetery offices and listed the exact location of cemeteries and the records. In some cases, they listed the actual burials and covered both military veterans and other citizens. For select areas, the compilations were done in conjunction with the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). The DAR and the WPA in Iowa cooperated in a listing of veteran and non-veteran burials. Check these out on microfilm via the Family History Library and online at <http://iowawpagraves.org/>.

Church Records

WPA employees visited churches, synagogues, and other houses of worship. Many 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 any denomination in the area. These are known to be far from complete, but are still useful. A typical example is *Directory of Churches and Religious Organizations in New*

Orleans (Louisiana Historical Records Survey, Louisiana State University, 1941). Church inventories often include a short history of a church, details of previous buildings, what record books were found (sacramental, minutes, and donations), and what types of information are found in them.

Naturalization Indexes

Another aim of the WPA was to create a master index to county, state, and federal level naturalizations and other records. The end of the program came before this was accomplished. Partial naturalization combination indexes do exist for southern Wisconsin, northern Illinois, and eastern Iowa at the National Archives Great Lakes Region in Chicago. This and others are also on microfilm at the Family History Library. Another, covering naturalizations in Arkansas 1809-1906, Louisiana 1831-1906, and Texas 1853-1939, is at the National Archives Southwest Region in Fort Worth, Texas. At the National Archives Northeast Region in New York City, there is a WPA index to some New York naturalizations 1792-1906.

Newspapers

That card index to a newspaper you found in the local history room at the public library may be the product of WPA workers. They also clipped newspaper articles. In a few cases, the actual newspapers did not survive long enough to be preserved on microfilm and the clipping or index may be all that survives. Some indexes were actually published, such as the *Index to Marriage Notices in the Southern Churchman 1835-1941*, a religious newspaper based in Virginia.

Vital Records

In Indiana, transcripts and/or indexes of county birth, death, and marriage records were compiled. State, county, and a few city vital records offices across the country were surveyed. These are helpful in understanding what format the records were in, years they covered, details found on the records, and whether or not there was an index at the time of the survey.

Who did the work

Many involved with the Historical Records Survey were “white collar” workers. This generally put the quality of the work a bit higher on the scale since many of the workers had some degree of training and educational background. However, as genealogists know, reading old handwriting or understanding the content of a record takes practice. Not all the material created by the workers was correct and inventories were not always complete.

Survival of the records

Not everything has survived. Many thought the creations not important, with no lasting value. However, significant results of the WPA era that are useful to genealogists have survived. The manuscripts created in Minnesota alone in the State Archives collection at the Minnesota History Center is almost 350 boxes. These contain some of the manuscripts for the books that were published and many original surveys and inventories that never made it into print. Each state varies in scope of what was surveyed and what has survived. Original files, inventories, and correspondence from Missouri are housed in the Western Historical Manuscript Collection at the University of Missouri-Columbia. It comprises 302 linear feet and is also found on 817 reels of microfilm <http://whmc.umsystem.edu/invent/3551.html>. Maine and Iowa are two of the states where little of the original manuscripts survived.

What didn't happen

Because the funding and need for the program disappeared with the advent of World War II, some inventories, indexes, and other results were never published. These are found in many repositories as manuscripts. For clues to finding them, check *The WPA Historical Records Survey: A Guide to the Unpublished Inventories, Indexes, and Transcripts* (Society of American Archivists, 1990). It is now out of print, but can be found in libraries. The Family History Library has it on microfiche, so it can be ordered at your local area Family History Center.

More on locating the WPA materials

One aim of the Historical Records Survey portion of the WPA was to have multiple published copies distributed throughout the country. The result is that many libraries have publications relating to other states and counties. The catalogs of historical societies, state archives, state libraries, and larger public and university libraries list the publications. One important online catalog to check is WorldCat www.WorldCat.org. The DAR library in Washington, D.C., the Family History Library, the Library of Congress, and the Allen County [Indiana] Public Library are examples of repositories that hold many WPA Historical Records Survey publications.

Seek out where the original WPA manuscripts are housed for your ancestral towns, counties, and states. Check RootsWeb www.Rootsweb.com, USGenWeb.com, and other online sources for transcriptions of WPA indexes.

Records on many levels

The WPA functioned federally in Washington, D.C., and in regional, state, and district or county offices. The funding came from the different levels also. Researchers often ask about records of the workers, such as job applications and payroll data. The vast majority of workers were not federal employees. The manuscripts that are found in various repositories may have some scattered employee records and correspondence.

Federal-level WPA material is found at the U.S. National Archives. Record Group 69, Records of the Work Projects Administration, is mainly housed at the NARA College Park, Maryland, facility. Another of the federal sets of New Deal era records is Record Group 162, General Records of the Federal Works Agency, also located at College Park.

Library of Congress

The Library of Congress, as part of its American Memory project, has two WPA collections online. "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938" contains more than two thousand first-person accounts.

Annie Thompson, of Biscoe, Arkansas, was about 55 when she was interviewed; she was born in Starkville, Mississippi. She said she was raised by "my father's sister and my grandmother. Later on I come to my daddy here and my stepmother had other children. I soon married. I've had a hard time. My grandparents was Harriet Edwards and William Snow." She continued with much on the lives of her ancestors and of herself.

The other collection is "American Life Histories," also from the Federal Writers' Project. The interviewees gave considerable personal details.

What can we do today?

To ensure people know about the wealth of information found in the WPA-era records, we can publish the indexes and surveys, write articles about them for our genealogical societies, and share the information in online outlets such as USGen Web. If you know of any WPA materials in Grandma's attic or in Uncle Arthur's basement, urge them to donate the papers to a historical society, archives, or local history room. Better yet, find the main repository of the WPA original records in the state to which those records correlate and donate them to that place.