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**Working Hard or Hardly Working? An Examination of Work Relief in Upstate
New York, 1931-1943**

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ABSTRACT

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Working Hard or Hardly Working? An Examination of
Work Relief in Upstate New York, 1931-1943.

Becoming the first U.S. state to provide direct funding and administrative support for work relief to its cities, counties and townships; with the creation of the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration in November of 1931, New York took its first steps in what would become a long tradition of work relief in the state. However, existing academic examinations of work relief in upstate New York in large part ignore activities in the state's upstate region in favor of higher profile operations in New York City. This thesis attempts to chart the rise and developmental trajectory of work relief in upstate New York between the years of 1931 and 1943.

To accomplish this task, this report examines the genesis of New York work relief under the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration, expansion under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and maturation under the Works Progress Administration. The investigation of these agencies has revealed that work relief in upstate New York during the Great Depression operated through a continuum of programs, spanning from the establishment of the New York State TERA in late September of 1931 to the discontinuation of the WPA in June of 1943. In the upstate region, between late 1935 and 1938 the WPA built on legacies established by the TERA, FERA, and Civil Works Administration in order to orchestrate a substantial shift of unemployed individuals from local relief rolls to federally funded, locally sponsored work projects tailored to the specific needs of the region's municipalities and unemployed populations. However, the ultimate success of the Administration in the

upstate area was sacrificed by federal budgetary cuts and regulations over the course of 1938 and 1939 which, resulting in the reversal of positive trends established in 1936, and sparking discontent among relief populations in the state's large industrial communities. Despite a renaissance in the WPA's activities in the early 1940's, the result of increased military production stemming from World War II, the impact of work relief operations in upstate New York remain mixed.

As they operated in upstate New York, work programs were highly successful in the facilitation of diverse projects and programs flexible enough to provide appropriate employment opportunities and socially useful projects to the varied agricultural and industrial communities of the upstate district. On the other hand, each of the TERA, FERA and WPA proved unable to completely address the volume of relief needed across the region, with many of the area's largest cities in 1940 financially unable to supply federally required financial contributions in order to continue participation in the WPA.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Historiography

On October 10th, 1929, members of the Schenectady Rotary Club gathered for their weekly luncheon meeting and lecture at the Hotel Van Curler on Washington Street in Schenectady. That particular Thursday, those in attendance enjoyed a lecture from Union College Professor George D. Kellogg entitled “Prosperity, Speculation and the Federal Reserve System” that aimed to discuss and explain the wave of prosperity that had crashed over the United States during the preceding decade.¹ Outside of Schenectady, during the late 1920’s interest in the nation’s good fortune captivated citizens across the country. Following eight years of the Republican “New Era,” a period of policy oriented explicitly towards aiding business and increasing economic efficiency, the nation appeared to be on the brink of unprecedented and enduring stability and prosperity. By 1929 the national unemployment rate measured a paltry 3.2%, wages and prices were holding constant, industrial output surged, and profits remained high and stable throughout the majority of the 1920’s.² By all means, to many Americans President Herbert Hoover’s promise of “triumph over poverty” articulated in his acceptance speech for the Republican Party nomination for the presidency in 1928 seemed to be without a doubt imminent.³

However, with the arrival of October 29th, 1929, “Black Tuesday,” and the diminishment of 90% of the New York Stock Exchange’s value, any and all

¹ “Professor Kellogg to Address Rotary Club,” *The Schenectady Gazette*, October 10, 1929. Pg. 15.

² Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-40*, 29; Nick Taylor, *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of The WPA: When FDR Put The Nation To Work*. (New York: Bantam Book, 2008), 9.

³ Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-40* (Chicago: Ivan R Dee, 1989), 29.

proclamations of sustained affluence for the American people came crashing down.⁴

Beginning in earnest with that fateful October day, by 1930 the Great Depression had brought about the collapse of over 50,000 businesses.⁵ By 1932 over 3,600 banks had closed their doors as industrial output plummeted from \$949 million to \$74 million.⁶ At its worst the Great Depression reduced as many as 15 million men and women, 24.9% of the U.S. population in 1933, to a state of hopeless unemployment.⁷ Even those individuals fortunate enough to retain employment during the period more often than not found themselves providing for their families on drastically reduced hours and substantially cut wages. A grim reminder of the times, the 1930 suicide note of an out of work mechanic from Houston, Texas offers insight into the bleak situation faced by many Americans during the Great Depression.

There is no work to be had. I can't accept charity and I am too proud to appeal to my kin or friends, and I am too honest to steal. So I see no other course. A land flowing with milk and honey and a first class mechanic can't make an honest living. I would rather take my chances with a just god than with unjust humanity.⁸

As prevailing societal attitudes regarded charity and public aid as the shameful last resorts of failed persons, many individuals felt they were left with few other options.

Following the election of Democrat Franklin Roosevelt to the presidency in 1932, nationally evolving attitudes on relief combined with negative reactions to the scale of despair seen among unemployed populations to catalyze the creation of a new option for out-of-luck workers. Following the examples of progressive states like New York, New

⁴ Taylor, *American-Made*, 7.

⁵ Taylor, *American-Made*, 9.

⁶ Taylor, *American-Made*, 9; William Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1931-1935*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 1.

⁷ Taylor, *American-Made*, 1,542.

⁸ Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-40*, 11.

Jersey, and Pennsylvania who expanded the role of state governments in relief over the course of 1931 and 1932, with the establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in 1933 the federal government entered the business of relief in a striking and unprecedented way.⁹ Over the course of the next two years, President Roosevelt and his team of New Dealers funneled billions of dollars into state and federal “work programs” like the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration in New York and the Civil Works Administration (CWA) nationally, meant to stymie the worst effects of the depression while simultaneously creating useful and worthwhile public works.¹⁰ Following the employment of 4,264,000 individuals under the highly successful and popular CWA during the winter of 1933-1934, with the approval of the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act of 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the largest and longest running work program of the New Deal, came into existence.¹¹

Active between 1935 and 1943, the WPA employed millions of previously unemployed workers, providing money and self-respect not afforded by direct relief or charity. By the time of its demise in 1943, the WPA had employed over 8,500,000 Americans over the course of its operation.¹² In its first five years alone, the WPA completed 250,000 projects. According to Nick Taylor, author of a recent chronicle of the WPA, *American Made*, by the time of its termination the WPA had played a part in

⁹ Josephine Brown, *Public Relief 1929-1939* (New York: Henry Holt And Company, 1940), 94-98

¹⁰ The PWA, as a public works program, must be distinguished from the CWA and WPA. While its projects employed a significant number of workers on welfare rolls, status as a relief recipient was by no means a requirement of PWA employment. Unlike the WPA and CWA, the employment with the PWA was not work relief but public employment, often mediated by private contractors. Nick Taylor. *American-Made*, 114.

¹¹ Nick Taylor. *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of The WPA: When FDR Put The Nation To Work*. (New York: Bantam Book, 2008), 543.

¹² Taylor, *American-Made*, 3.

the construction of “650,000 miles of roads, 78,000 bridges, 125,000 civilian and military buildings, 800 airports... and 700 miles of airport runways.”¹³ These physical works, alongside school lunch programs, nursery school operations, commissioned artwork, concerts, plays, and a host of other ventures in the performing arts provided out-of-work Americans a viable option for relief that did not involve relatives, “the dole,” or the dreaded feeling of hopelessness and shame associated with direct relief. In essence, the WPA represented a form of relief without the stigma of relief.¹⁴

Unfortunately, while the existing research on work relief is vast, the amount of scholarship dedicated to its influence in non-urban regions is highly limited. That which is dedicated to regions like upstate New York, often overshadowed by their larger urban neighbors like New York City, is next to negligible. It is this dilemma that is addressed in the body of the study at hand. This thesis examines the distinct role and character of work relief in upstate New York between the years of 1931 and 1943. Here it is argued that work relief in upstate New York during the Great Depression operated through a continuum of programs, spanning from the establishment of the New York State TERA in late September of 1931 to the discontinuation of the WPA in June of 1943. In the upstate region, between late 1935 and 1938 the WPA built on legacies established by the TERA, FERA, and CWA in order to orchestrate a substantial shift of unemployed individuals from local relief rolls to federally funded, locally sponsored work projects tailored to the specific needs of the region’s municipalities and unemployed populations. However, the ultimate success of the Administration in the upstate area was sacrificed by federal budgetary cuts and regulations over the course of 1938 and 1939 which, resulting

¹³ Ibid., 523.

¹⁴ Ibid., 523.

in the reversal of positive trends established in 1936, sparked discontent among relief populations in the state's large industrial communities. Despite a renaissance in the WPA's activities in the early 1940's, the result of increased military production stemming from World War II, the impact of work relief operations in upstate New York remain mixed. As they operated in upstate New York, work programs were highly successful in the facilitation of diverse projects and programs flexible enough to provide appropriate employment opportunities and socially useful projects to the varied agricultural and industrial communities of the upstate district. On the other hand, each of the TERA, FERA, CWA and WPA proved unable to completely address the volume of relief needed across the region, with many of the area's largest cities in 1940 financially unable to supply federally required financial contributions in order to continue participation in the WPA.

The Temporary Emergency Relief Administration of New York, perhaps the smallest of the pre-WPA relief set-ups examined, has received the least amount of scholarly attention since its termination. That said, from the earliest analyses of the program in the early 1940's through those presented in the first decade of the 21st century, general sentiment regarding the TERA has seen little change. The vast majority of work on the TERA has come in the context of broader publications on other subjects. Josephine Brown's 1940 work *Public Relief 1929-1939* provides the earliest account of the administration, and examines it within the framework of wider relief developments through the 1930's. Brown very briefly inspects the work of the TERA, unpacking the policies of the organization and detailing their impact on later programs.¹⁵ Brown argues that the program's "authority to reimburse and the power to enforce rules" gave it "a

¹⁵ Josephine C. Brown, *Public Relief 1929-1939* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1940) 90-94.

powerful lever for the improvement of relief, methods of administration and personnel.” However, more than anything, she else emphasizes the program’s importance for the development of other state relief agencies and federal work relief endeavors, and accentuates that the TERA’s role in establishing “an important precedent” for state to local relationships in the administration of relief.¹⁶ Nick Taylor’s 2008 anthology of the WPA, *American-Made*, characterizes the influence of the TERA in a way similar to Brown, contending that experiences of the TERA “formed components of the relief plan” which Harry Hopkins took with him to Washington in 1933.¹⁷ Offering a different perspective, in 2001’s history of the State of New York, *The Empire State*, editor Milton M. Klien emphasizes the TERA’s impact on state-level politics, particularly what he describes as its hand in dividing the state’s liberal and conservative political wings.¹⁸

Published in 1947, Alexander Leopold Radomski’s *Work Relief in New York State, 1931-1935* offers what has become the definitive academic account of the TERA. Providing a meticulously detailed report on the historical and administrative structure context of the TERA, like Brown and Taylor, *Work Relief* articulates the national significance of the TERA by emphasizing the state and federal imitations of the New York relief structure that followed its creation. However, in addition to arguing that the principles established in the TERA “formed the core proximate background out of where succeeding ‘permanent’ measures would come,” Radomski goes further than Brown or Taylor and singles out the TERA as singly “outstanding” among pre-federal relief

¹⁶ Ibid. 116, 140.

¹⁷ Taylor, *American-Made*, 98-99.

¹⁸ Milton M. Klein, *The Empire State: A History of New York* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 578-580.

operations.¹⁹ Despite its optimism, *Work Relief* is not blind to the TERA's shortcomings, and warns architects of future work relief programs to learn from the "so-called disadvantages of work relief." However, Radmonski's tone when discussing drawbacks such as increased cost over direct relief and competition with regular private enterprises, is fairly dismissive, a tell as to the author's affinity for and belief in the success and power of the TERA.²⁰

Benefiting from national prominence and the Great Depression's near-mythic status as the economic low point of 20th century America, the field of scholarship dedicated to chronicling and analyzing federal work relief programs active during the 1930's and 1940's, specifically the WPA, has grown immense. 81 years have passed since the advent of the first federal relief programs, and as a result, the analysis of the subject has evolved into a diverse and ever-changing field with a rich history of divergent and concurrent opinions sourced from political disciplines on either ends of the American spectrum.

For those federal relief programs that followed the TERA, genesis for scholarly analysis came with FERA/CWA/WPA director Harry Hopkins' 1936 account of his involvement in Depression-era work relief entitled *Spending To Save*. Examining each of the FERA, CWA and WPA, Hopkins' work offered what is perhaps one of the earliest detailed accounts of New Deal work relief and the attitudes and opinions beholden to those closest to its operation. Over the course of *Spending To Save*, Hopkins approaches each program addressed with an overwhelmingly positive attitude. With regard to the FERA, despite admitting that the program was never able to provide adequate relief to

¹⁹ Alexander Leopold Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State, 1931-1935* (Morningside Heights, New York: King's Crown Press, 1947), X, 1, 29, 79, 103, 134, 183, 234, 273, 315.

²⁰ Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State, 1931-1935*, 325.

those who needed it, he nevertheless hailed the organization's scope and applauded its physical accomplishments.²¹ Similarly, Hopkins lauded the CWA for its success in supplying federal employment to unemployed populations neglected by private industry and for its role as a probationary or preliminary version of the WPA.²²

Devoting only one chapter to the program itself, *Spending To Save* presents the WPA as a program oriented around the swift and direct employment of out-of-work parties rather than toward the completion of large-scale, grandiose projects designed to increase industrial production and indirect job growth as the PWA attempted. Describing the WPA as product of fervor for work relief which followed in the wake of the enormously popular Civil Works Administration in the winter and early spring of 1933/1934, Hopkins states that "the WPA was to be the flexible unit acting to equalize employment on larger projects," employing 3,500,000 persons, 90% of which were to come directly from relief rolls.²³ At its core, *Spending To Save* set the template for the standard overview of the WPA and its tenets, outlining basic standards of project creation, employment, wage scales, and ideology.²⁴

Not surprisingly, examined closely the work appears to be largely an exercise in self-congratulation and self-defense. Hopkins neglects to acknowledge most areas of contemporary and future controversy surrounding particular policies practiced by the New Deal. Instead, race, gender and age, the legitimacy of arts programs, and disagreements regarding WPA pay scales are all framed in positive angles for the WPA,

²¹ Ibid., 99, 164-165.

²² Harry L. Hopkins, *Spending To Save: The Complete Story of Relief* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1936). 125.

²³ Hopkins, *Spending To Save*, 166/167.

²⁴ Ibid., 162, 163, 167-169

with focus given only on the positive aspects of each.²⁵ In *Spending To Save*, Hopkins established the standard from which future analyses of the WPA have deviated. What's more, Hopkins sought to distinguish the WPA from traditional work relief. It was his belief that by offering standardized wages akin to those found in private industry rather than relief via earmarked subsidies for the purchase of particular groceries and commodities, the stigma of helplessness and dependence created by conventional forms of welfare could be broken.²⁶ Hopkins positive take on the administration represented the opinions of those who created the program, an assessment akin to a mother's critique of her child; quick to celebrate positive attributes and slow to recognize deficiencies. *Spending to Save* was published in in 1936, only a year after the program's inception and far too early to provide commentary on the program's future developmental issues. While a later publish date may have tempered this noticeable lack of critical analysis to an extent, as it stands the work nevertheless provides the earliest and most optimistic view of the WPA published.

Examinations of the CWA and FERA published after *Spending To Save* have tended to offer assessments of the program much different from Hopkins'. Two works, Forrest A. Walker's *The Civil Works Administration: An Experiment in Federal Work Relief, 1933-1934* (1977) and Bonnie Fox Schwartz's *The Civil Works Administration, 1933-1934* (1983), serve as the primary authorities on regarding the CWA. Both Walker and Schwartz approach the CWA with measured enthusiasm that do not reach the levels articulated by Hopkins. Each work asserts that the program was neither a brilliant blast of progressive liberalism as modern liberals have imagined, nor was it rooted in tradition

²⁵ Ibid., 161-163, 167, 169-171, 175-177.

²⁶ Ibid., 114.

and conservatism to the level argued by revisionist histories.²⁷ Instead, both Walker and Schwartz characterize the CWA as a mild success; a program whose centralized structure was of undeniable importance for the development of future programs like the WPA, but which if allowed to continue would not have had any noticeable positive effect on the overall economic recovery of the nation.²⁸

Similarly, since the late 1930's the FERA has been discussed with relative brevity. No master works have been written on the FERA, and what has recorded often appears in the context of more general discussions regarding relief, the New Deal, and the Roosevelt Administration. In 1940's *Public Relief*, Brown reserves both praise and criticism for the program. Brown describes the early FERA as a fine project but inadequate for the sufficient provision of relief. She admires the late era of the FERA for its shift in focus from small projects to large construction endeavors, but strongly criticizes the program for its return to a budgetary deficiency wage scale, whereby monetary compensation was allotted according to assessed need determined by a social worker's investigation.²⁹ Brown further faults the program for its lack of initiatives in rural areas and for having an administrative structure that allowed some towns to not create projects where they were needed.³⁰ The works of Radomski, Walker, and Schwartz as well as Jason Scott Smith's *Building New Deal Liberalism* address the FERA in the process of explaining the works of the programs and theses at the center of

²⁷ Bonnie Fox Schwartz, *The Civil Works Administration, 1933-1934* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) ix.

²⁸ Forrest A. Walker, *The Civil Works Administration: An Experiment in Federal Work Relief* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1979), 164. For specific arguments, see Schwartz, *The Civil Works Administration, 1933-1934*, ix, vii, 213-259, 274-276; Walker, *The Civil Works Administration: An Experiment in Federal Work Relief*, 20-25, 155-158, 159, 164.

²⁹ Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939*, 241-242.

³⁰ Ibid.

their respective publications.³¹ Of these accounts, only Schwartz actually assesses the program's success, contending that, in its later stages the FERA was "no more than an un-acceptable makeshift" attempt at work relief.³² Walker and Smith merely speculate as to the program's role in developing future federal relief programs, with Walker arguing that it did not and Smith arguing that it did.³³

Early histories of the Works Progress Administration, penned during the halcyon days of the organization, tended to paint the venture as an almost unconditional success. Shrugging off period criticisms from the Right and Left, initial assessments of the program by and large valued the endeavor's vision over its actual implementation. These appraisals wholeheartedly endorsed the notion of a federally funded form of work relief which valued the "full employment of all peoples willing and able to work in occupations suited to their skills," over the physical and economic accomplishments of the projects undertaken.³⁴ Despite remaining generally positive in the tone, over time histories of the WPA have become increasingly specific and more openly critical of many aspects of the program itself. This criticism reached a fever pitch in the early 1960's, with New Left historians denouncing the program's motives and questioning the legitimacy of its liberal pedigree. Since then assessments have become substantially more measured. The past 40 years have seen a slow shift among New Deal academics towards an understanding of the WPA as a multifaceted organization whose positives and negatives cannot be neatly

³¹ Walker, *The Civil Works Administration: An Experiment in Federal Work Relief*, 20-25; Schwartz, *The Civil Works Administration, 1933-1934*, 240; Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works*, 102, 138.

³² Schwartz, *The Civil Works Administration, 1933-1934*, 240.

³³ Walker, *The Civil Works Administration: An Experiment in Federal Work Relief*, 20-25; Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works*, 102, 138.

³⁴ Arthur W Macmahon, John David Millett, and Gladys Ogden. *The Administration of Federal Work Relief. Studies in Administration*. (Vol. 12. Chicago: Published for the Committee on Public Administration of the Social Science Research Council by Public Administration Service, 1941), 380.

deciphered. Most recent accounts recognize the program as an extraordinary balancing act of ideology, practicality, and personalities that created a complex web of both constructive and damaging policy with consequences significant for not only depression era America, but for the modern epoch as well.

As the first years of the WPA came to pass and the public became divided in their support and derision of the administration, the first post-Hopkins scholarly analyses of the program produced compelling evaluations of the organization's strengths and weaknesses. However objective in nature, works published during the years of peak WPA activity to an extent maintained the positive tone exhibited by administration officials in their scrutiny of the program. Published in 1941 under the banner of the Public Administration Service, Arthur Macmahon, John Millett, and Gladys Ogden's work *The Administration of Federal Work Relief*, an account of the program's administrative processes, offered nothing but kind words for the WPA's work. Praising the organization's prowess in avoiding "the wastage of human resources," improving the national infrastructure, and pioneering new social services; Macmahon and company argued that "no matter what may be the future of the WPA, its reputation is secure."³⁵ The authors continued to praise the WPA's employment levels, physical accomplishments, cultural contributions, and the sheer size and collaborative nature of the program's administrative system.³⁶ Likewise, Donald S. Howard, author of *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy* published by the Russell Sage Foundation in 1943, treated the WPA with similar reverence to *The Administration of Federal Work Relief*, stating that

³⁵ Arthur W Macmahon, John David Millett, and Gladys Ogden. *The Administration of Federal Work Relief. Studies in Administration*, 380.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3-10, 14.

It is the conviction of the writer that federal policy providing work for the jobless—even such work as the WPA has had the power to give—has been of inestimable value to millions of workers who otherwise would have been idle, and in many instances, without means of subsistence.³⁷

Further, Howard offered little reprimand for the program's discriminatory treatment of minority groups, specifically African Americans, women, and the aged— despite acknowledging the plight these groups faced.³⁸

However, in the face their overall laudatory tone, these works also provide the first real criticisms of the WPA from the published academic world. For instance, though Josephine Brown's *Public Relief, 1929-1939* praised the WPA over the systems of private relief typical of the period prior to the 1930's, by no means did she believe the WPA's work to be adequate. Brown praised the WPA's security wage for its superiority over former provisions of relief, but simultaneously characterized the program as concerned more with "work aspects" rather than "relief aspects" of the program, sacrificing quality of relief for quantity and leaving the quality of relief as low as was consistent with the bare minimums of the program's general employment goals.³⁹ In short, Brown was supportive of the WPA's general work, but did not believe the program went far enough. Similarly, in the last chapter of *Administration of Federal Work Relief*, "Some Lessons of A Multiple Program," Macmahon articulates a number of substantial criticisms for the New Deal's flagship work program, suggesting that, first and foremost, the retraining of workers should have been pursued more vigorously so to satisfy occupational voids on job sites. They also reproach the complexity and inefficiency in

³⁷ Donald S. Howard, *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy*. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1943.) 841.

³⁸ Donald S. Howard, *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy*, 276, 281, 282, 287-289.

³⁹ Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939*, 378, 424.

the organization itself. To Macmahon, for the WPA to be truly successful, the organization needed to streamline its processes of planning and better define the bureaucratic divisions within its operational structure, in the process creating a more straightforward role for the President in the program's decision-making processes.⁴⁰ More extensive in his analysis of the work of the WPA itself, Howard presents a number of substantial complaints regarding the WPA. Similarly to Brown, Howard argues that the kinds of jobs the WPA was able to offer the American public were neither of a scale nor caliber befitting the "richest nation in the world."⁴¹ Further, Howard openly disagrees with Hopkins that employment by the WPA does not constitute work relief. Instead he contends that the WPA's resemblance to work relief, as opposed to "real work," served as one of the program's biggest shortcomings, a critique that has continued, in one shape or another, into current analyses of New Deal work projects.⁴²

In fact, many of Howard's critiques chastise the New Deal for not going further with its works program than it did. Howard criticized the the WPA's use of a lower "security wage" over prevailing regional wages, condemned the program's curtailment of workers' organizing rights and political engagements, and blamed Congressional limitations on sub-par employment standards, conditions of employment, work type, and materials for stunting the potential success of the program. Additionally, he demanded future work relief endeavors that would expand the work of the WPA, and would ensure the employment of all who "(a) are not already employed at wage rates and under conditions meeting socially approved standards and (b) can practically be given useful

⁴⁰ Arthur W. Macmahon, John David Millett, and Gladys Ogden. *The Administration of Federal Work Relief. Studies in Administration*, 380-384, 392. See Chapter 16 in full for further details and examples.

⁴¹ Donald S. Howard, *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy*, 84

⁴² *Ibid.* 841,842.

employment in keeping with their skills and abilities.”⁴³ More than just representing, alongside Macmahon and Brown, the first significant negative critiques of the WPA from academia, Howard’s work represents the first step taken towards more substantial criticism of the WPA in later years. This trend culminated in the denunciation of the organization by New Left scholars in the 1960’s and by later conservative writers who have channeled the criticisms of their 1930’s conservatives. The fact remains however that early academic works detailing the functions and successes of the WPA firmly supported the organization, and often turned a blind eye to some of the WPA’s most controversial policies. In all, the attitudes conveyed in the work of early WPA scholars are embodied in the final chapter of *The Administration of Federal Work Relief* when speaking of the failings of the Administration it is said “But how much greater would have been the lost opportunities if something like the works program had never been attempted!”⁴⁴

As previously stated, the small strides taken towards more critical analysis of the WPA in the 1940’s gave way in the mid 1960’s to progressively more censorious examinations of the program, its accomplishments and its policies. However, this evolution did not occur on the turn of a dime. Over the course of the late 1950’s and early 1960’s works published by the likes of Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and William Leuchtenburg developed more complex arguments regarding the success and functionality of the WPA than contended by those scholars whose syntheses of the program were developed contemporary to its operation. The works of historians writing

⁴³ Ibid. 214-216, 218-228, 255-256, 264, 842/843, 845. Howard’s insistence on useful employment “in keeping with their (the worker’s) skills and abilities” represents a divergence from contemporary Macmahon’s previously stated insistence that a more vigorous regiment of retraining be implemented.

⁴⁴ Arthur W Macmahon, John David Millett, and Gladys Ogden. *The Administration of Federal Work Relief. Studies in Administration*, 380.

in this period are characterized by still persistent praise of the organization and its attempt to solve the puzzle of Depression era unemployment. However, this acclaim became tempered by more defined concerns relating to the program's internal relations, operational decisions, and successes in achieving its stated goals.

Viewed presently as perhaps one of the most influential histories of the New Deal to be produced in the postwar era, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s three-part work entitled *The Age of Roosevelt* is in its content largely evocative of the opinions of the New Dealers themselves where work programs are concerned, speaking favorably about the PWA and WPA and their symbiotic relationships with other New Deal pursuits.⁴⁵ However, the real value of Schlesinger's account is his a four-way clash of definition between Public Works Board members, particularly WPA head Harry Hopkins and former PWA director Harold Ickes, over spending priorities and direct versus indirect employment.⁴⁶ Similar to earlier works, Schlesinger's analysis does not pass explicit judgment on the potential limitations that bureaucratic quarrels may have imposed on the development of work programs like the WPA. Rather than condemn the disputes, he appears to celebrate them as part of the grander story of the New Deal, and even examines the implications of the handling of the WPA for the political successes of Roosevelt.⁴⁷ However, as recent analyses of Schlesinger's work have contended, *The Age of Roosevelt* offered in 1959 and 1960 the first detailed examinations of what has been referred to as "the backstage workings" of the New Deal.⁴⁸ In this way Schlesinger laid the foundations for future,

⁴⁵ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. *The Coming of the New Deal*, vol. 2 of *Age of Roosevelt* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 108.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 284; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. *The Politics of Upheaval*, vol 3. of *Age of Roosevelt* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 344-350, 590-591.

⁴⁸ Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works*, 9.

more critical analyses of the interpersonal relationships between WPA policy makers like those found in Nick Taylor's 2008 examination of the WPA, *American-Made. The Age of Roosevelt* represents the last hurrah for the overly celebratory accounts of the WPA that typified the post-war period.

Published a mere three years after the last volume of *The Age of Roosevelt*, William Leuchtenburg's *Franklin D. Roosevelt and The New Deal* has since its release become the benchmark publication for relatively evenhanded, mid-century synthesis of the WPA as well as the entire Roosevelt Administration.⁴⁹ Brought to press in 1963, Leuchtenburg's work grants only a small proportion of its page length to the WPA, and like its predecessors, awards a substantial level of praise to the organization. "By pre-depression standards," Leuchtenburg claims, "Roosevelt's works program marked a bold departure" from the largely hands off, laissez faire approach to relief pursued the Hoover administration before it.⁵⁰ What's more, Leuchtenburg states that by any criterion, the program was "an impressive achievement."⁵¹ However, alongside this praise is offered more measured and reasoned criticism of the program. Like Howard, Leuchtenburg derides WPA jobs as little more than a "disguised dole," far removed from the pay and conditions of legitimate employment.⁵²

Moreover, Leuchtenburg's work added substantial new critiques to supplement those similar to criticisms voiced by earlier historians. The analysis expressed in *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* was the first to articulate substantial concerns regarding the budgetary and economic consequences of WPA policies. According to

⁴⁹ As articulated later, despite offering a more balanced analysis of the WPA than offered by his predecessors, Leuchtenburg remains firmly sympathetic to the basic tenets of the organization itself.

⁵⁰ Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1931-1935*.130

⁵¹ Ibid. 130

⁵² Ibid.

Leuchtenberg's analysis, Roosevelt's budget was too thinly spread to adequately support public employment of the scale necessary in order for the WPA operate effectively. As a result of this course of action, the organization failed to employ a substantial proportion of the unemployed population, returning "some 10 million" of society's least fortunate members to ill-equipped state relief organizations for relief.⁵³ Leuchtenburg further criticizes the WPA for the program's decision to emphasize immediate employment rather than worthwhile projects, declaring the selection of former head of the CWA Harry Hopkins over PWA director Harold Ickes as program director "regrettable."⁵⁴ According to Leuchtenburg's evaluation, in emphasizing spending on employment rather than project costs, the administration restricted the potential size and scale of projects and created "make work" that offered no substantial benefit to persons other than WPA employees.⁵⁵ Further, he argues that Roosevelt sacrificed a prevailing wage for WPA workers in order to court the favor of private business and contractors whose favor he had fallen out of since the establishment of the NRA.⁵⁶ In spite of these criticisms, Leuchtenberg maintained a measured support of the program, praising construction works, educational initiatives, the Federal Writers Project, the Federal Arts Project, and vocational training under the National Youth Administration.⁵⁷ Leuchtenberg applauded the WPA's policy on race, stating that the removal of racial quotas allowed for increased allotment of employment and funds to blacks, unlike programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps.⁵⁸ *Franklin Roosevelt and The New Deal* represents a turning point

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 125.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 125.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 146/147.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 124-130.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 187.

in the academic tradition surrounding the WPA. Now far enough away from the program to enable retrospective analysis unaffected by nostalgic bias, real, substantive critiques of the WPA and of the New Deal in general could begin.

By the late 1960's the pragmatic analysis of the WPA present in the decade's early years gave way to drastically less sympathetic critiques from writers of the era's so-called New-Left, an emerging leftist movement in the United States influenced by budding radicalism in the anti-war and Civil Rights movements, which rejected the establishmentarian liberalism as well as old-line radicalism. Fresh thinking academics like Howard Zinn, Ronald Radosh, and Barton Bernstein penned works highly critical of a perceived veiled conservatism at work in the underpinnings of the WPA and the New Deal as a whole.⁵⁹ In an essay entitled "The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform," from a collection entitled *Towards A New Past*, Barton Bernstein provided the perfect representation of New Left critiques of the WPA. Though predominantly concerned with the NRA, Social Security, and the New Deal's progressive income tax, all of which Bernstein regarded as "conservative approaches" to recovery, the text characterized the WPA as too slow, too cautious, and too conservative for success.⁶⁰ To Bernstein the WPA failed largely as a result of President Roosevelt's conservative inhibitions regarding deficit spending, a criticism reminiscent of Leuchtenburg.⁶¹ Though in 1937 the government injected enough funds into the national economy to spike industrial production to 90% of the operating capacity the year before

⁵⁹ Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956*, 11.

⁶⁰ Barton J. Bernstein, "The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform," in *Towards A New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 268-272, 277/278.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 277.

the depression, seven million Americans remained without employment.⁶² Rather than engage in an honest and full attempt at a federal work program, by Bernstein's estimation Roosevelt handicapped the administration by cutting expenditures and attempting to balance the budget in 1937, withdrawing funds from a program that had already suffered from funding imposed limitations.⁶³ Beyond criticism of New Deal conservatism, Bernstein brought to the table a more direct reproach and skepticism of the WPA's relationship with minorities than previously pronounced in past eras of scholarship. Despite concurring with previous assessments of the race relations in the WPA which depicted the organization as relatively friendly to African Americans, at least when compared to other New Deal programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps, Bernstein breaks with his predecessors over the issue of why blacks were treated relatively well in the in the WPA. Bernstein asserts that blacks received WPA jobs, and at some locations equal pay, as a consequence of their position among the working poor rather than for their status as black Americans. While the black community, outside of a few intellectuals, did not feel the distinction significant, Bernstein believed the discrepancy to have substantial implications for the overall state of race relations in New Deal and post-war America, arguing that the WPA did not provide aid to Blacks based on the equality of their race, but on the severity of their poverty, making the issue a matter of practicality rather than equality that might apply to all aspects of life.⁶⁴ In their respective works *New Deal Thought*, "The Myth of The New Deal," and *Poor People's Movements*, Howard Zinn, Ronald Radosh and Frances Fox Piven argue similar critiques to those

⁶² Ibid., 277.

⁶³ Ibid., 278.

⁶⁴ Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and The New Deal*, 187; Bernstein, "The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform," in *Towards A New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, 279.

maintained by Bernstein, establishing a far-left academic appraisal of the Works Progress Administration focused largely on the fiscal and racial limitations of the organization which, according to Leuchtenburg, was no more radical than the objections of non-academic, old-time Marxists to the New Deal during its heyday.⁶⁵

Evolving from the harsh critiques which characterized New Left scholarship, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen more restrained, moderate assessments of the program and its effects. Accepting the institution's inadequacies while simultaneously embracing its achievements, by the late 20th century historians of the WPA came to disregard the assessments of the New Left as excessive and inaccurate. Writing in 1989, in his book *The New Deal: The Depression Years* Anthony Badger articulated a centrist take on the WPA which has typified the moderate character of most modern investigations of the administration. According to Badger, it is undeniable that surveys undertaken during the early 1930's witnessed "a growing unrest amongst the unemployed" and increased communist behavior. However, in direct response to arguments articulated in Piven's *Poor People's Movements*, Badger characterized assertions that depression-era work relief represented conservative shift designed to "restore stability" among the American people as entirely inaccurate.⁶⁶ Rather, Badger framed work relief as "progressive expansion" of the American government's commitment to the welfare of its people that established a developmental trajectory for federal aid to the poor.⁶⁷ The precedent set by the WPA, Badger argued, directly influenced the enlargement of the welfare state under Johnson's great society and other

⁶⁵ William E. Leuchtenburg, "The Great Depression and the New Deal," in William E. Leuchtenburg, *The FDR Years: On Roosevelt and His Legacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 232. Found in Smith on page 12.

⁶⁶ Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-40*, 201.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 201.

similar policy initiatives.⁶⁸ This same sentiment can also be found in *Building New Deal Liberalism* and *American Made*, both of which resemble *The New Deal* in their wide lens examinations of the WPA.

Over the past fifteen years, arguments articulated in examinations of the WPA have become increasingly more varied with respect to characterization of the program in a positive or negative light. Broader works targeting subjects like the developmental path of the WPA, the ideology of the New Deal and the effect of the WPA's emphasis on public works have, in general, tended to frame the administration in a relatively favorable light. Smith, for example, states in *Building A New Deal Liberalism* that the WPA was an "extraordinarily successful method of state-sponsored economic development."⁶⁹ In much the same way, in *Long Range Public Investment* (2007) Robert D. Leighninger asserts that the program's investment in public institutions like hospitals and public centers of recreation that still stand today provided long term benefits for the U.S. people, a "legacy (that) stands solidly and quietly all around."⁷⁰ Even in works that question the program's handling of race, gender, wages, funding and politics the organization has been depicted positively. For example, in Taylor's *American-Made*, the main argument articulated is that the WPA guided the United States to recognize its citizens more as a resource and less as a commodity, forcing it to recognize the need to cultivate that resource and provide for it lest it disappear.⁷¹ Meanwhile, specific examinations of the program's track record on controversial issues like race privilege and workers' rights have become increasingly more critical. Both Ira Katznelson's *When Affirmative Action*

⁶⁸ Ibid. 200-214, 244.

⁶⁹ Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956*, 19.

⁷⁰ Robert D. Leighninger, *Long-Range Public Investment: The Forgotten Legacy of the New Deal*, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 72, 75-77.

⁷¹ Taylor, *American-Made*, 530.

Was White (2005) and Chad Alan Goldberg's *Citizens and Paupers* (2007) have come down hard on the WPA for what they have characterized as blatant disregard for and mishandling of the systems of discrimination in place against non-white workers in the South and relief recipients nationwide.⁷²

The works detailed above contain mostly sympathetic views towards New Deal policy. Overall, published scholarly criticism of the WPA from conservative academics is rare, and overwhelmingly those publications that have criticized the program have offered only liberal critiques of perceived negative aspects of WPA procedures. That is not to say, however, that the conservative wing of the historical discipline has not provided its own scrutiny of Works Progress Administration practices and procedures. Fiscal conservatism has a long-standing objection to the New Deal in general, harboring particular disdain for the WPA. Even before the genesis of the WPA, conservative critics both in Congress and in media outlets like the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Sun* treated federally funded work relief with open hostility. Trumpeting concerns regarding the capacity for work relief projects to incur waste and graft, opponents of the method attempted to discredit its legitimacy in the public eye, nationally condemning the FERA projects as wasteful "boondoggles" undeserving of federal funds. Conservative attacks reached a fever pitch in 1938 when congressional conservatives on the now infamous Dies Committee attacked the Federal Writers Program as a hotbed for communist

⁷² Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth Century America*, (New York: Harper & Row, 2005), 38/39; Chad Alan Goldberg, *Citizens and Paupers: Relief, Rights, and Race, from the Freedmen's Bureau to Welfare*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 150-152.

activity, interrogating employees and administrators regarding their work for the project and capturing the attention of the nation.⁷³

The essential conservative critique articulated during the 1930's has endured far beyond the decade and circumstances of their origins. Edgar Eugene Robinson's 1951 publication *The Roosevelt Leadership 1933-1935* carried forward the criticisms voiced by the American Right into the second half of the 20th century. Despite dedicating only limited space to the WPA itself, Robinson depicted the WPA as little more than the frivolous expenditure of millions of dollars to cover the failures of the Public Works Administration and to secure votes in an election year.⁷⁴ Like Robinson, in his 2002 work *Rethinking The Great Depression*, Professor Emeritus at Marquette University Gene Smiley disparaged the WPA as a step which President Roosevelt took to "further improve his reelection chances."⁷⁵ Beyond characterization as a mere political maneuver however, Smiley expanded his critique to include retrospective analysis of the WPA's effectiveness in curbing unemployment. Smiley asserts that rather than helping to quickly reduce unemployment rates to pre-depression levels, the WPA in actuality slowed the decline of unemployment during the late 1930's and early 1940's as a result of the growing preference among unemployed workers for the steady and predictable work of the WPA when faced with the turbulent private sector as an alternative.⁷⁶

Most recently, Amity Shlaes' *New York Times* business bestseller *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* has provided perhaps the best example of the modern conservative evaluation of the WPA, and more broadly, the greater New

⁷³ Taylor, *American-Made*, 408-414, 422-426.

⁷⁴ Edgar Eugene Robinson, *The Roosevelt Leadership: 1933-1945* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1955), 170.

⁷⁵ Gene Smiley, *Rethinking The Great Depression* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 115.

⁷⁶ Smiley, *Rethinking The Great Depression*, 126.

Deal. In *The Forgotten Man*, Shlaes paints the portrait of a WPA predisposed to make-work and inefficiency, used for political gain, thirsty for spending, overly sympathetic to minorities, and a heavy burden to the taxpayer.⁷⁷ Shlaes' account of the New Deal, and specifically the WPA, clearly echoes the conservative critiques of the program voiced by its opponents in the 1930's. Essentially, *The Forgotten Man* presents the argument that in establishing and continuing to funnel money into the WPA, the Roosevelt administration was fast and loose with the taxpayer's money, and was thus "joyriding to bankruptcy" on their dime.⁷⁸ While the version of New Deal events presented by Shlaes fundamentally conflicts with the overwhelming majority of WPA histories and analyses, particularly with New Left inquiries in the 1960's, it represents an important undercurrent in WPA scholarship and cannot be ignored.

Unfortunately, while the litany of materials documenting the WPA in its more general capacities is immense, the collection of those resources detailing the WPA's role in upstate New York is miniscule. While brief mentions of the rural northern region of New York State can be found in select WPA histories, for instance in Howard's *The WPA and Federal Relief* and Macmahon's *The Administration of Federal Work Relief*, references are predominantly fleeting, used only to accentuate broader points concerning discrimination against relief workers in private industries, asymmetry in the awarding of WPA funds, and patterns of residency for skilled versus unskilled workers.⁷⁹ Details of the administration's upstate involvement are found most often in histories of the state itself that contain sections relating to the Great Depression. The most extensive account

⁷⁷ Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 250, 259, 275, 304, 323, 340.

⁷⁸ Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression*, 259.

⁷⁹ Howard, *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy*, 233, 149; Macmahon, Millett, Ogden, *The Administration of Federal Work Relief*, 354, 355.

of the WPA in upstate New York is offered by Milton M. Klein in his *The Empire State*, a historical account of New York State, beginning prior to Dutch invasion and concluding with the year 2000. *The Empire State* chronicles the plight of upstate cities, and to some extent smaller towns, from the onset of the depression through the start of World War Two. Though focusing principally on Syracuse, Rochester, Troy, Utica and Buffalo when describing the early days of the depression, a small amount of attention is given to rural agricultural regions in central New York..⁸⁰ Here Klein describes agriculture to have been “long in a slump,” but with the advent of the Depression, facing “utter disaster.”⁸¹ Klein not only depicts the early days of the depression, but also notes the rise of state-level attempts at work relief like the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA) as well as the role these organizations played in the state following their creation.⁸² With regard to the WPA itself, the organization’s presence in upstate New York was strong. As the administration went to work in Albany, Buffalo, Utica, Kingston, Syracuse, Rochester, Westchester and countless other upstate communities to build high schools, sewer systems, roads, bridges and parks, its popularity was proven by the electoral failure of so-called “upstate reactionaries” in solidly Republican counties in central New York who spat objections to the “monstrosity, commonly called the New Deal.”⁸³ In combination with *New York: A Guide To The Empire State*, a product of the WPA Federal Writers Project, which provides a laundry list of specific WPA projects in upstate New York ranging from the revival of old

⁸⁰ Milton M. Klein, *The Empire State: A History of New York*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) 575-580.

⁸¹ Klein, *The Empire State: A History of New York*, 576.

⁸² Klein, *The Empire State: A History of New York*, 578. Supplementary information on the TERA can be found in Radomski, Alexander Leopold. 1947. *Work Relief in New York State, 1931-1935*. New York: King's Crown Press.

⁸³ Klein, *The Empire State: A History of New York*, 581, 582, 585.

handicrafts on Native American reservations to the renovation of the College of St. Rose in Albany, the Buffalo Zoological Gardens, and night schools for disabled children, *The Empire State* imparts evidence of an extensive WPA presence in upstate New York, and also lends useful information regarding the material state of the region during the time of the program's operation.⁸⁴

The existing literary sources that pertain to the role of work relief in the rural and industrial communities of upstate New York are, at best, scarce. While the historiography of works regarding the WPA has grown exponentially over the past 80 years, encompassing an ever-expanding range of opinions and perspectives regarding the success, practicality, and ethics of the program, the fact remains that at best these analyses can provide lenses through which to examine the experience of the WPA in upstate New York. This study extends from the measured critiques of Depression era work relief that have typified the post new-left period of scholarship. Neither taking a purely positive or wholly negative stance on the matter, the argument presented here recognizes the undeniable successes of relief programs on both the state and federal level active between 1931 and 1943 and does not ignore the striking failures that accompany them. However, the specific position taken in this document most directly compliments that of Josephine Brown in *Public Relief 1929-1939*. Ms. Brown argues the integral position of the early New York relief structure in influencing and guiding the development of federal work relief in 1933, a contention that cannot be repudiated and which this paper makes clear. However, where Ms. Brown disparages governmental

⁸⁴ Dixon Ryan Fox, *New York :A Guide to the Empire State. American Guide Series*. (New York: Oxford University Press. 1940), 333, 221, 208, 194, 57.

focus on the “work aspects rather than on the relief aspects of their programs,” emphasizing “the employment opportunities offered, the assignment of workers on the basis of qualifications for the jobs to be done, and the operation of socially useful projects.”⁸⁵ In contrast, this thesis presents the government’s heavy attention to such aspects as a key aspect of the program’s successes in the upstate region, ensuring that the diverse municipalities and occupational populations of the area were able to engage in the projects that best provided employment for the distinct relief populations in their varied communities and enabling the pursuit of projects which have provided lasting social and infrastructural benefits through the present day. This is an aspect of relief which Brown shrugs off, but which this report finds important, especially for the purposes of judging the overall success of the WPA, as program goals articulated by National Director Harry Hopkins at the outset of the Administration’s work focused strictly on volume of employment and project creation rather than on perceived adequacy of relief on those jobs.⁸⁶ As stated by Hopkins in *Spending To Save*,

“In the relief business where our raw material is misery and our finished product nothing more than amelioration, effectiveness has to be measured in less ambitious terms than success. That work applies better to marginal profit, cash or otherwise. Relief deals with human insolvency.”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Brown, *Public Relief 1929-1939*, 378.

⁸⁶ Ibid; Hopkins, *Spending To Save*, 167.

⁸⁷ Hopkins, *Spending To Save*, 125.

Chapter 2: Work Relief In Upstate New York Prior to The WPA

On June 16th, 1935, newly appointed director of the Works Progress Administration, Harry Hopkins, arrived at Washington D.C.'s Mayflower Hotel. At some minutes after 10:00am, a late-to-arrive Hopkins entered the hotel's Pan-American Room to brief an assembled conference of state relief administrators on the proposed scope, responsibility and administrative structure of the yet-to-be-realized WPA. Taking the podium following a short introduction from Assistant Administrator Colonel Lawrence Westbrook, Hopkins relayed to those in attendance the key features of the program. At its most basic level, the administration's objective would be "to take 3,500,000 men and women who are now (were then) on relief throughout the nation and put them to work at useful public work."¹ Regardless of estimates concerning the WPA's potential effect on indirect employment, and even more important than the "secondary objective" of creating the best projects possible—the main concern of the WPA would be the movement men and women otherwise incapable of obtaining jobs in private industry off of relief rolls and into direct employment on federal work projects.² For an hour Hopkins provided administrators a concise overview of the WPA's more specific goals, administrative structure, system of finance, potential pitfalls and possible propensity for criticism — briefly introducing each topic and incessantly reminding those in attendance of the WPA's basic task.³

¹ Conference Transcript, *Preliminary Staff Conference*, June 16th, 1935, Box 25, Folder: "Administrators' Conferences, June 16-19, 1935, Folder 2," Harry Hopkins Collection, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York. Pg 2.

² *ibid*, 7/24.

³ *ibid*: 3-6, 9-11, 15-17, 19, 20, 23.

In concluding his remarks to the administrators, Hopkins took a moment to address the immense importance of the venture at hand. The director argued that the WPA represented for many administrators the single greatest chance to help the American people that would ever again occur during their lifetimes.⁴ However, profound though Hopkins declaration may have been, his remark downplayed the substantial role work relief was already playing in many states across the country. For both Harry Hopkins and the State of New York, the administration of work relief began in earnest in the year 1931 with the incorporation of TERA, the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration of New York. From 1931 until the federal takeover of work relief by the WPA in 1935, New York operated a complex and innovative system of relief that laid the groundwork for future federal endeavors. Unfortunately by 1935 the eroding quality of unrelenting financial strain compromised the adequacy of the New York program and necessitated a centralized federal intervention in order to continue the sufficient delivery of relief to unemployed populations.

To understand the development of work relief in New York prior to the WPA, it is imperative to first understand the economic climate in New York during the opening years of the 1930's. The formation of TERA, as well as the more general tradition of work relief in New York prior to the WPA, was linked to the state's economic situation in 1930 and 1931. In 1930, the total employable workforce of New York State numbered approximately 5,523,337.⁵ Of these workers, roughly 5,225,964, or 95.2% found employment in white collar and blue-collar industrial occupations, while the remaining

⁴ Ibid 25/26

⁵ *Fifteenth Census of the United States*: (Vol. IV, Occupations, By States, Table 3, p. 1085)

267,273 persons, 4.8% of the whole, toiled on jobs in the agricultural sector.⁶ Removing New York City from the equation, the upstate region of New York counted approximately 2,469,262 employable persons, with 10.8% employment in agriculture.⁷ That same year, employment surveys conducted by the State Committee on Economic Security revealed a statewide joblessness rate of 12.4%; by 1931 the rate had almost doubled to 24%.⁸ By the inaugural month of TERA's operations, industrial powerhouses including Syracuse and Buffalo recorded that fewer than 60% of blue-collar workers in some of their cities' neighborhoods were employed in full-time positions.⁹ Even worse, in 1931 the state achieved a mere 68.8% of the employment level it had reached in the period from 1925 to 1927.¹⁰ In the city of Rochester employment achieved a meager 71.1% of its 1925 to 1927 level, while Utica, Buffalo and the Albany/Schenectady/Troy regions, registered 67.8%, 63.7%, and 60.9% respectively.¹¹ By late 1931, the health of New York's economy was clearly in a grim decline.

Across New York, cities and counties attempted to restrain rising unemployment with independent work relief efforts. At the close of 1930 a study conducted of 59 upstate New York cities found that only six had experimented with full-blown work relief during the year in question.¹² However, by the end of the winter of 1930-1931, a subsequent report produced by the same group found at least 27 of the same 59 cities investigated in the previous survey had, over the winter, created work relief programs in

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Extrapolated from *Fifteenth Census of the United States: (Vol. IV, Occupations, By States, Table 3, p. 1085)*. Numbers based on the assumption of negligible agricultural employment within New York City.

⁸ *Committee on Economic Security*, op. cit., Table 6, pp. 60-61 and Table 1-17, pp. 400-401.

⁹ *Committee on Economic Security*, op. cit., Table 11, p. 67.

¹⁰ New York State Department of Labor, *Trend of Employment in New York State Factories from 1914 to 1939*, Special Bulletin No. 206, 1940, pp. 108, 176-182.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² State Charities Aid Association, *Annual Report*, for the fiscal year ended September 30, 1931, *Forward Steps in Health and Welfare*, (New York: State Charities Aid Association, 1931) 14.

their communities—a 350% increase in matter of mere months.¹³ While these new endeavors were not the first examples of work relief to occur in the northeast—Special Commissions on work relief had been set up and funds were earmarked by Massachusetts in both the 1914-1915 and 1921-1922 depressions, and theories valuing work programs through almshouses and houses of industry in “the suppression of pauperism” existed since the mid 18th century –they were the first substantial moves towards work relief in the modern sense of the term that can be found in upstate New York.¹⁴ It is evident these initial city and town efforts, along with relief reform measures such as the Public Welfare Law of 1929 helped to lay the foundations for and push lawmakers towards the creation a state level work relief organization in New York.

By mid-1931 the state had begun to take its first substantial steps towards the establishment of state-sponsored work relief. On January 13th, 1931, the Joint Committee of New York State Department of Social Welfare and the New York State Charities Aid released their first report on the condition of relief structures in New York.¹⁵ The report’s findings offered evidence of rapidly rising relief costs in many upstate communities, but concluded that no significant barriers impeded local peoples and governments from shouldering the burden of added relief costs themselves.¹⁶ Despite not mentioning work relief explicitly, the committee did recommend initiating of additional public works

¹³ Examples of localized work relief efforts were diverse. In Rochester and Niagara Falls’ “Man-A-Block” Programs, individuals were assigned to tasks including snow shoveling and household help as a matter of part time work. In Rochester, the winter of 1930-1931 saw 77 projects funded by an \$815,000 fund comprised of a mixture of public and private funds. *Prospects for Unemployed Relief in 1931-1932 in 45 Cities of New York State*, August, 1931 8-9; *Governor’s Commission on Unemployment Relief*, op. cit., p. 12; Klein, *The Empire State*, 577.

¹⁴ Alexander Leopold Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State, 1931-1935*. (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1947) 33, 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 65; *Inquiry on Unemployment and Emergency Relief in the 59 Upstate New York Cities*, op. cit., 37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

programs through the state. The direct result of these works would, in theory, be the reduction of financial strain placed on city and county relief efforts by increased unemployment. More significantly though, the committee's suggestion signaled New York State's progress towards an expanded role in the administration of public relief.¹⁷ Seven months after the presentation of its first findings, the committee's second report depicted a scene far more severe than initially reported. In line with national trends, the committee found a large majority of upstate cities to be approaching a crisis in their ability to adequately fund relief measures.¹⁸ Out of 45 cities examined, almost all had expended "nearly as much or more for public home relief" in the first half of 1931 as had been used in the entirety of 1930.¹⁹ Frightening on its own, accelerated spending was accompanied by the virtual exhaustion of budgetary funds and inadequate contributions from private sources to compensate for the insufficiency of public monies.²⁰

In a substantial break from traditional theories marking relief as a responsibility of individual counties and townships (so-called "localized" sources), the Committee recommended that the most severely affected districts be given some form of state aid in order to counterbalance the draining effect of rapidly escalating relief responsibilities on local funds.²¹ From late summer through winter of 1931 New York State took great strides towards the establishment of state-aided work relief. By the end of August the measure had gained the support of Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In a special message to the New York State Legislature on August 28th, the Governor articulated

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939*, 89.

¹⁹ Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State, 1931-1935*, 65; *Prospects for Unemployment Relief in 1931-1932 in 45 Cities of New York State*, August, 1931, 3-4.

²⁰ Ibid., 65, 66.

²¹ Ibid., 63, 66.

support for the bill and professed a need for the state to “make available at once a large sum of public money to provide work for its residents... where useful public work can be found.”²² The Governor urged the legislature to act quickly on the statute presented to them. On September 23rd the Emergency Relief Act (ERA), formerly known as the Wicks Act, was passed by both houses of the state legislature and signed into law by the Governor himself, and on November 1st, 1931, New York State’s first foray into the realm of state-sponsored work relief went into operation.²³

The TERA was the first state administration in the nation to provide financial support to its cities, counties and townships for the establishment of work relief programs. The legislation benefitted from the uniquely progressive political climate created in New York under the Roosevelt Administration. The influence of Frances Perkins’ work on unemployment insurance, U.S. Senator Robert F. Wagner’s federal stabilization bill of 1931 and Gerard Swope of General Electric’s “plan for government cartels in manufacturing” all helped to propel New York to primacy with regard to the implementation of liberal reforms in many aspects of state labor policy.²⁴ But even in New York, prior to passage of the ERA, the basic sentiment regarding the disbursement of relief held by government administrators emphasized the inherently local nature of relief responsibilities. The preamble of the ERA itself noted that “the duty of providing aid for those in need or unemployed because of lack of employment is primarily an obligation of the municipalities.”²⁵ However, TERA acknowledged the “vitally necessary” character of state intervention and assistance in the aid process in the case of

²² Ibid., 66, 70; “The Special Message of the Governor to the Legislature, August 28, 1931, is reproduced in *Emergency Unemployment Relief Laws in the State of New York, 1931-1932*, op. cit., 23-30.

²³ Ibid., 66, 70; “The Special Message of the Governor to the Legislature, 23-30.

²⁴ Klein, *The Empire State*, 579.

²⁵ *The Emergency Relief Act of the State of New York*, (Sec. 1) Ibid. 84.

economic “emergencies” which, in their extreme nature, were considered to be detrimental to public health and safety. Increased relief loads meant that local relief funds, drawn from real estate and property taxes, imposed a drain on local consumption patterns.²⁶ This cycle of need left communities wholly incapable of handling the growing relief problem on their own.²⁷ Thus, the primary objective articulated in the preamble of the ERA was to shift a portion of relief costs resultant from exceptional unemployment from individual localities to the state government. As such, the preamble displayed that the rare and emergency character of the economic turmoil of the early 1930’s played a large part in the evolution of relief policies in New York. In turn, the innovative approach to relief responsibility set forth by the TERA laid the groundwork for further state and federal intervention into the relief process. In the six-month period following the ERA’s passage, the New York legislation was loosely copied by New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Rhode Island, Illinois and the state of Ohio.²⁸

The TERA was organized and operated in a manner relatively consistent with the basic precepts laid out in its articles of establishment. Within the TERA hierarchy, supreme “administrative authority” lay in a three-man panel referred to as the “State TERA Commission.”²⁹ In addition to the secondary function of acting as the official liaison on relief matters between New York and the federal government, the panel’s primary role was to examine and certify claims for home and/or work relief expenditures sent to them by city and county bodies known as “Emergency Work Bureaus” (ERBs). These ERBs represented geographically divided “public welfare districts,” based on

²⁶ Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939*, 96.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939*, 94-96.

²⁹ After amendment in 1935, the Commission expanded to six members. Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State, 1931-1935*, 85.

political borders.³⁰ These EWBs were boards consisting of three or more members selected by each city or county's mayor or board of supervisors and were the representatives of the State TERA Commission in each community.³¹ Following a 1933 "enabling enactment," a select number of counties and communities were authorized to replace their Emergency Work Bureaus with Emergency Relief Bureaus (ERB), equivalent organizations that not only supervised work relief in their districts, but home relief as well.³² Each EWB was tasked with providing, administering, organizing and planning work relief efforts for their respective districts.³³ Like the State TERA Commission on the state level, these EWBs acted as local liaisons between city and county relief structures and federal relief programs.³⁴

The program had an almost immediate effect on New York's unemployed population. In the program's first two months, projects for the Departments of Health, Education, and Conservation, as well as for those of Public Works, Agriculture and Markets and Mental Hygiene provided work for laborers of all occupational categories.³⁵ Through January 7th, 1932 projects supported by the TERA expended \$686,590 dollars.³⁶ The bulk of projects conducted consisted of light and heavy construction work on state-owned land and facilities. Eleven of the state's colleges benefited from \$96,350 dollars

³⁰ Ibid. 82, 87

³¹ Ibid. 87

³² Ibid., 82, Normally Home relief was the dominion of existing county and city public welfare commissioners.

³³ Ibid., 87

³⁴ It is important to note here the TERA's higher expenditure on work relief as compared to its home relief operations. At peak operation, outside of New York City and Long Island the administration expended only \$32,027,619.76 on home relief compared to \$44,519,236.52 on work relief. New York State, *Public Unemployment Relief in New York State—Fourth Year; September 1, 1935-August 31, 1935* (Albany: TERA, 1935), 36-37.

³⁵ The Temporary Emergency Relief Administration of New York, *Report of Temporary Emergency Relief Administration: Pursuant to Sec. 21, Chap. 798, Laws of 1931: January 11, 1932* (Albany, TERA: 1932) 7-10.

³⁶ Ibid. 7.

in improvements to campuses and classroom facilities ranging from the installation of new water mains to the painting and repairing of roofs on class buildings.³⁷ Additional work for unskilled laborers was provided in the rehabilitation of state park lands and the restoration of state mental health facilities in upstate locations like Utica and Syracuse.³⁸ In the program's first two months of operation, road grading proved the most popular project type for cities and counties across the state, with 235 proposals submitted. Following road grading, in order of descending popularity the construction of new roads, brush clearance, improvement to municipal and county water works and storm sewers, reforestation, and general repairs to public properties provided the most work for relief recipients.³⁹ White-collar workers were given employment on projects ranging from public data collection to the completion of topographical surveys for cartographical purposes.⁴⁰ Though less numerous than manual projects, work provided for professionally trained men and women was nevertheless provided. According to its own estimations, by January of 1932 the work accomplished by the TERA had "measurably met the situation" in New York in a manner both practical and effective.⁴¹

Shortly after the first state relief bills passed through legislatures in the fall of 1931, pressure for an expanded federal role in the distribution of public relief increased both inside and outside of Washington, DC. As winter approached, public welfare officials and sympathetic congressmen intensified calls for Federal relief. High-ranking social workers like William Hodson, the executive Director of the Welfare Council of New York City, urged President Herbert Hoover to "establish a productive partnership"

³⁷ Ibid. 8.

³⁸ Ibid. 9-10.

³⁹ Ibid. 14.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 10, 12, 14.

⁴¹ Ibid. 16.

between the Federal government and local relief authorities.⁴² Calling forth the best attributes of the national and local partners, proponents of federal relief argued that a combined enterprise would boost the overall quantity of funds available for relief operations, and would thus prevent the paralysis of local relief efforts as a result of insufficient funding.⁴³ By the end of December, two separate bills calling for the disbursement of federal funds to state and local relief agencies had been introduced in Congress. Offered by Senator Costigan of Colorado and Senator La Follette of Wisconsin, the two pieces of legislation contained similar text and each proposed to offer at least \$250,000,000 in relief monies. These funds would be administered via the Children's Bureau under a new "Federal Board for Unemployment Relief."⁴⁴ Both bills were referred to the Senate Committee on Manufactures where progress towards passage stalled, despite the consolidation of both measures under the heading of a single bill in January of 1932.⁴⁵

Over the next year, Congressional authorities debated the wisdom of federal involvement in local relief. Opponents of federal relief spending argued that increased expenditures on welfare would wreak havoc on the credit of the U.S. government, further hinder the recovery of private business and increase unemployment.⁴⁶ Some detractors even went so far as to question the constitutionality of federal intervention, arguing that the parameters of federalism placed the role of welfare squarely on the shoulders of state and local authorities.⁴⁷ According to this logic, opponents of federal relief spending

⁴² Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939*, 101.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 103.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 118.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 110.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 111.

argued that states would supplement local funds if necessary. These denied the existence of “pauper or helpless states” and flatly refused to support increased federal spending. Supporters of proposed legislation including Costigan, La Follete and New York Senator Robert Wagner argued their position based on an established record of inadequate local relief across the nation.⁴⁸ Citing the mounting inability of local welfare structures to shoulder increasing relief needs through 1930 and 1931, proponents of the legislation argued that without Federal aid localities would continue in an endless cycle of “depleted buying power, delinquent taxes, bankrupt municipalities and inadequate relief.”⁴⁹ On multiple occasions the TERA was presented on the national stage as an example of how national funding could and would help state and local relief structures to function more easily.⁵⁰

With the election of New York’s Governor Roosevelt to the Presidency in November of 1932, the conservatism of the Hoover administration was replaced with a new liberalism heavily influenced by Roosevelt’s work as Governor. As such, approximately two months after the 1932 Presidential election, on January 3rd of 1933 Congress assembled to hear arguments for and against a new bill designed to establish a federal system of funding for state and local relief.⁵¹ Following a year of continued bank failures, increased relief loads and decreased public relief appropriations, the January hearings revealed a situation more dire than that which had presented itself a year earlier. Testimony from Senator Costigan, the American Association of Social Workers, and the United States Conference of Mayors highlighted sharply decreasing local standards of

⁴⁸ Ibid. 113-117; Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism*, 29.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 114.

⁵⁰ S. 174 and S. 262, p. 85. Testimony of Paul Kellogg in Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939*, 116-117.

⁵¹ Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939*, 136.

relief and cuts to recreational health and education programs and argued fervently for passage of the legislation.⁵² TERA Director Harry Hopkins testified regarding his 14 months at the helm of New York State's relief administration.⁵³ Hopkins projected the relationship between local and state authorities under the TERA to the potential situation between state and federal administrators under the proposed national system. In closing his testimony, he recommended to the Congress the establishment of a federal relief apparatus with wide powers parallel to those authorized under the New York State ERA of 1931 and wholly endorsed the approval of the bill under examination.⁵⁴ On March 21st, 1933, President Roosevelt submitted his final plan for federal relief to Congress. Swayed by the testimonies of Hopkins and others, on May 8th and 9th the Congress passed the Federal Emergency Relief Act. On May 12th, President Roosevelt signed the act into law, awarding \$500,000,000 in unexpended Reconstruction Finance Corporation funds for the purposes of federal relief.⁵⁵

With the creation of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration under the Federal Emergency Relief Act, Harry Hopkins vacated his position as TERA director in order to take charge of the new Federal equivalent in Washington, D.C. Famously, in his first two hours as FERA administrator, Hopkins distributed approximately \$5,336,317 for projects and work in eight states, exhausting slightly over one percent of the entire FERA budget in a quarter of a workday.⁵⁶ Of greater significance for New York, as the Hopkins era at the TERA closed so too did the program's independence. Though FERA, according to the TERA manual of Procedures, possessed "no constitutional or statutory

⁵² Ibid. 137-139.

⁵³ Ibid. 140-141; Taylor, *American-Made*, 99-100.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Taylor, *American-Made*, 100; Brown, *Public Relief, 1929-1939*, 142.

⁵⁶ Taylor, *American-Made*, 103.

authority whatever over the New York State TERA,” the organization “exercise(d) a very practical control by virtue of its discretion as to the granting and withholding of Federal relief funds.”⁵⁷

When entering the FERA leadership, Hopkins exhibited a clear preference for funding work relief over direct relief endeavors. Believing direct relief to sacrifice an individual’s spirit in order to save his or her body, Hopkins advocated for the provision of unemployed workers with employment at an “assured wage.”⁵⁸ This solution, the Director believed, would “save both the body and the spirit.”⁵⁹ As a result, to Hopkins FERA’s main objective was to “remove from the relief rolls and place in gainful occupations as many persons as possible.”⁶⁰ However, the desperate relief situation present in the U.S. during 1933 did not allow for work relief to be pursued to the degree Hopkins desired. In 1933, when the FERA became active, approximately ten percent of Americans existed on “bare subsistence levels” of food and income, only able to survive through receipt of public relief.⁶¹ For FERA, this immediate need dictated that emphasis be placed on the swiftly delivered direct relief as opposed to work relief, the benefits of which were dispensed far more slowly.⁶²

⁵⁷ Manual, *A Manual of Procedure of the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration of New York*, Item 013, April, 1935, Box 31, Folder: TERA Manual of Procedures, Hopkins Collection, FDRL.

⁵⁸ Dr. June Hopkins, “Harry Hopkins and Work Relief During the Great Depression,” The Social Welfare History Project, last modified 2013, accessed March 19, 2014, <http://www.socialwelfarehistory.com/eras/harry-hopkins-and-work-relief-during-the-great-depression>; Dr. June Hopkins, “The Road Not Taken: Harry Hopkins and New Deal Work Relief,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29 (2): June 1999, 306-316.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ June Hopkins, “The Road Not Taken: Harry Hopkins and New Deal Work Relief,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29 (2): June 1999, 306-316.

⁶¹ Dr. June Hopkins, “Harry Hopkins and Work Relief During the Great Depression,” The Social Welfare History Project, last modified 2013, accessed March 19, 2014, <http://www.socialwelfarehistory.com/eras/harry-hopkins-and-work-relief-during-the-great-depression>.

⁶² Dr. June Hopkins, “Harry Hopkins and Work Relief During the Great Depression,” The Social Welfare History Project, last modified 2013, accessed March 19, 2014, <http://www.socialwelfarehistory.com/eras/harry-hopkins-and-work-relief-during-the-great-depression>; June

As a result, for the first two years of FERA's operation its influence on the procedures of TERA was virtually negligible. Until the first complete federal takeover of relief by the CWA in December of 1933, the FERA's largest influence on TERA was through "Special Federal Programs" developed by FERA and passed on to New York. In fall of 1933 TERA created new bureaucratic divisions to tackle the execution of these projects. Ranging from "College Student Aid" to distribution of surplus commodities, "Free Milk for Needy Children," "Emergency Education," "Relief to Transients," "Rural Rehabilitation," and even facilitation of the Civilian Conservation Corps.⁶³ In reality few, if any, of these programs with the exceptions of transient care and the Civilian Conservation Corps engaged in work relief. Even if they did, expenditure on these projects was, across the arc of the TERA, very little. Between 1931 and 1935 disbursement of funds for these programs (in New York State) reached only 2.5% of the whole, amounting to only \$15,725,585 out of a total \$932,797,000.⁶⁴ Of that \$15,725,585, only \$2,762,339 was spent on programs with even the slightest capacity for work relief functions.⁶⁵

While during this early period TERA work relief operations existed largely separate from the FERA, observations from FERA field reporters provide a vital look into the performance of the New York program during that period. In September of

Hopkins, "The Road Not Taken: Harry Hopkins and New Deal Work Relief," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29 (2): June 1999, 306-316. See also: Michael Katz, *In The Shadow of The Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1986), 226-229, 233-34, 238.

⁶³ Manual, *A Manual of Procedure of the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration of New York*, Item 022, April, 1935, Box 31, Folder: TERA Manual of Procedures, Hopkins Collection, FDRL.

⁶⁴ This figure does not represent the whole of relief funds granted from the U.S. government for the period between 1931 and 1935. The figure given represents only that allotted for Special Federal Programs. The figure exhibits the small federal spending which occurred in New York between 1931 and 1933, as these Special Federal Programs were the overwhelming majority of federal relief expenditures in the state during that period. Temporary Emergency Relief Administration, *Five Million People—One Billion Dollars*, June 30, 1937, Albany and New York: TERA, Table II, 56-61.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

1933, FERA field reporter Lorena Hickok, a confidante of Hopkins and the Roosevelts, embarked on a seven-day tour through upstate New York. Visiting Corning, Rochester, Syracuse, Watertown, Ogdensburg, Malone and Plattsburgh, Hickok sought to ascertain the scope, efficiency and adequacy of the relief structure in place in the region. In her report Hickok is wildly positive about the general condition of relief as it appeared in the cities that she visited. “Well the relief set up in New York—which I have been told is considered a model for the whole country—is truly remarkable” Hickok began. She lauded the relief structure and adequacy of relief in the state—so far ahead of what she saw in other states that there simply was no basis for comparison.⁶⁶ Presented in contrast to paralyzing political divide in Kentucky, large unemployment organizations uniting against sub-par relief in West Virginia and a relief program “practically in a state of collapse” in Pennsylvania, she portrayed the TERA of New York is portrayed as an organization which is run on “a most efficient scale.”⁶⁷

Hickok described the projects undertaken during the first incarnation of TERA as the results of “a good deal of ingenuity, both in the kind of the projects and in the financing... where there is little money for materials and equipment.” At the time of Hickok’s report in September of 1933, the state offered a 40% reimbursement to cities and counties for relief expenditures found eligible for state aid.⁶⁸ Offering largely blue-

⁶⁶ Report and Letter, Lorena Hickok *Excerpts from Lorena Hickok’s letters to Eleanor Roosevelt and Report to Harry Hopkins, September 1933*. September, 1933, Box 12 Folder: Federal Emergency Relief Administration Papers,” Lorena Hickok Collection, FDRL.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ The vast majority of aid fell under the designation of “reimbursable,” however; according to TERA itself there remained an “inability to enumerate reimbursable local relief expenditures in an all inclusive manner.” Non-reimbursable costs included: “Expenditures for rent of buildings used for the purpose of administering relief;” Salaries of regular public employees not giving fulltime to Emergency Unemployment Relief, and/or not under the supervision of the Unemployment relief authority;” Salaries of relief workers not directly under the supervision of the Unemployment Relief Authority;” Purchase of automobiles and other equipment used in connection with relief administration;” Non-relief skilled labor,

collar, manual labor employment, the projects described in the Hickok report more often than not involved construction work updating the infrastructure and general aesthetic of the towns in which they operated. For example in Corning, a mid-sized industrial town located in Steuben County and supported by the glass industry, one TERA project cut out thousands of poplar trees whose roots were damaging the city's sewer system.⁶⁹ Workers then replaced the poplars with maples and elms, thereby salvaging the municipality's existing infrastructure while still maintaining the city's aesthetic charm.⁷⁰ Beyond this, workers curbed and guttered streets; renovated, painted and cleaned the town's health clinic located in city hall; and further out in the county TERA relief workers constructed new roads and rehabilitated the old through topping them with macadam. These projects again provided work mostly for unskilled laborers as well as for a select number of skilled individuals.⁷¹ In the town of Fulton in Oswego County, local Episcopal clergy sponsored the initial cleaning and dredging of a long-soiled local lake. After the lake was dredged the water was purified and a portion of the shore was transformed into a recreational beach for community use.⁷²

Hickok cited Syracuse, a city which shortly after being visited had approximately 2,000 work relief employees, as having the most impressive work relief projects of all

other than supervisory and administrative personnel, requiring full-time;" and "Any expenditure not made in accordance with the terms of the ERA and the rules and regulations of the Administration." Manual, *A Manual of Procedure of the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration of New York*, Item 022, April, 1935, Box 31, Folder: TERA Manual of Procedures, Item 043, Hopkins Collection, FDRL.

⁶⁹ Report and Letter, Lorena Hickok *Excerpts from Lorena Hickok's letters to Eleanor Roosevelt and Report to Harry Hopkins, September 1933*. September, 1933, Box 12 Folder: Federal Emergency Relief Administration Papers," Lorena Hickok Collection, FDRL.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

seven cities visited during her trip.⁷³ After a personal tour of a number of the city's work projects given by County Unemployment Commissioner Crandal Melvin, Ms. Hickok recounted in her report what she believed to be the crown jewel of the Syracuse program and also "the most ambitious project" which she had seen anywhere: a six mile boulevard-park recreational complex constructed in the country surrounding Syracuse proper. In addition to a walkway and open park area, the compound included a low-cost public swimming pool used by over 100,000 individuals by the end of the summer of 1933, a reproduction "old French fort, a salt museum to honor the salt springs which helped to financially build Onondaga County in its earliest days, and a large athletic field to be used by all of the schools in the Syracuse metropolitan area."⁷⁴ The project was able to provide a substantial amount of work for both skilled laborers like draughtsman, stonemasons and carpenters, as well as for the untrained, unskilled workers who comprised the majority of the Syracuse workforce in the early 1930's.

However, alongside her general acclaim Hickok pointed to a number of faults within the TERA with potential significance for the overall health of the program. First among these problems was the issue of increasing labor organization and communist agitation in a number of larger upstate cities and towns. Across the nation, the early 1930's witnessed a marked rise in levels of protest activities in unemployed populations. As early as 1929, communist led groups known as "Unemployed Councils" mobilized unemployed persons in massive protests against the current systems of labor and

⁷³ "\$12 Relief Pay To Continue," *Syracuse Journal*, October 21st, 1933, 2. While page number was discernable on this particular issue, many newspapers found in the same location, a web archive for historical newspapers from New York State entitled www.fultonhistory.com, were scanned in a manner such that page number was cut off. For a full listing of papers see Appendix I.

⁷⁴ Report and Letter, Lorena Hickok *Excerpts from Lorena Hickok's letters to Eleanor Roosevelt and Report to Harry Hopkins, September 1933*. September, 1933, Box 12 Folder: Federal Emergency Relief Administration Papers," Lorena Hickok Collection, FDRL.

ownership.⁷⁵ In addition to radical leftist protest, more mainstream groups including veterans and organized labor engaged in widespread protests, building through the 1930's and culminating with peak activity in 1939.⁷⁶ In contrast to national trends, according to FERA reports upstate cities by and large lacked discernable signs of communist influence or unemployed organizations during the early 1930's. Altogether, in Hickok's assessment, the region was populated by "pretty docile people," unlikely to be enticed by radical elements. Despite the general trend, through 1933 communist and pro-labor groups began to form within and infiltrate upstate communities. In Rochester 5,500 individuals employed on work relief projects throughout the city went on strike to demand a full forty cents per hour as opposed to the thirty that was the standard pay at the time, they succeeded. The striking workers then demanded sixty cents.⁷⁷ In Syracuse two communist organizers from Detroit arrived in mid-1933 to advocate to the City Commissioner of Public Welfare Leon H. Abbot on behalf of particular relief cases. According to Mr. Abbot, these individuals were both unemployed and did not plan to seek employment while in the city, and thus they were "run out of town" by the police.⁷⁸ In addition to these individuals, Syracuse also dealt with a Syracuse University student who, in the opinion of Hickok had probably "read a little Tolstoy, and perhaps a little Trotsky."⁷⁹ The individual, not on relief himself, held a meeting in the auditorium of Syracuse's Central High School where he presented a petition to be sent to Governor Lehman demanding that supervisors on work relief jobs be prevented from "pushing" the

⁷⁵ Harold R. Kerbo and Richard A. Shaffer, "Lower Class Insurgency and the Political Process: The Response of the U.S. Unemployed, 1890-1940," *Social Problems* 39:2 (1992), 150.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Report and Letter, Lorena Hickok *Excerpts from Lorena Hickok's letters to Eleanor Roosevelt and Report to Harry Hopkins, September 1933*. September, 1933, Box 12 Folder: Federal Emergency Relief Administration Papers," Lorena Hickok Collection, FDRL.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

workers, demanding relief be more adequate, and asking something be done about a stalled, formerly work relief job, known as the Lay Creek Project.⁸⁰ However, support for the student petered out quickly. Additionally, reports from Schenectady and Buffalo suggested the presence of strife similar to that seen in Rochester. While organization of unemployed persons was not a large problem for most of the upstate region, in select cities administrators feared the creation of a powerful political minority from the groundwork laid by fringe elements.⁸¹ This potential became an area of concern for the program and would come to influence the shape of federal relief legislation in coming years.

Organizational issues were not the only difficulties to surface under the TERA. Political and administrative problems, though they did not pose a large threat to the overall viability of the TERA structure, complicated welfare operations in a number of upstate cities as a result of patronage and partisan divides. According to the Hickok report, the general level of bi-partisan cooperation within the TERA on the state level was spectacular. Republicans and Democrats cooperated easily, and even the Republican Commissioner of Public Welfare in Rochester Dr. Christopher G. Parnall was quoted as saying that, though a Republican man from a Republican city, when requesting assistance from the State TERA board, he was always treated as if he were a Democrat from a Democratic city.⁸² However, regionally, minor political manipulation did occur. In Allegheny County, despite a year's work put in to prepping, designing and shaping the county relief structure, the county Board of Supervisors voted to return control of relief to each of 29 individual townships within the district, creating 29 patronage appointments in

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

the middle of an election year.⁸³ In Rochester the former mayor was ousted by the banking community, the entire relief structure was overhauled and a new intake system for relief cases created.⁸⁴ Beyond these two cases, in Syracuse Mayor Marvin created problems with his “dramatic” tendencies, and in Oswego a TERA field representative reported in 1933 that the situation in the city’s relief structure, reportedly the “most politically minded in the state,” was usually “something of a mess.”⁸⁵ One particular instance in Syracuse, a plan to clean up, dredge and construct a new sewage disposal plant and sewer around Ley Creek, a project hoped to be a high employment opportunity, was turned over to a private contractor, the brother of a city commissioner, who used mostly machines and far fewer people than would have occurred should it have been conducted as a public work relief project.⁸⁶ On the state level, delays in project approval from Albany impeded the progress of work relief projects all across the upstate region. The highly localized nature of most political problems associated with work relief, for better or for worse, serves as a testament to the truly decentralized structure of TERA outside of the approval process.

Along with organization and politics, as well as smaller problems including the limited and inconsistent nature of federal assistance and disagreement over particular home relief practices, two concerns spotted in the Hickok report grew to be significant for the later development and capabilities of the TERA. The first was the plight of the upstate farmer. In the early 1930’s within its population the state of New York counted

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

approximately 50,000 rural farm families within its borders.⁸⁷ The vast majority of these farm families, especially in the western and northern tiers of the state, were easily separated into two categories of agriculturalist: subsistence and dairy.⁸⁸ By 1933, in some parts of the state the seasonal employment which subsistence farmers once depended on for cash for taxes was no longer readily available. In Steuben and Livingston counties, highway repair jobs once coveted by subsistence farmers were transferred to work relief projects. Under the escrow system at work in these counties, payments for work were distributed slowly and in increments over a span of time after work was completed.⁸⁹ This system ensured that subsistence farmers could never at any one time have enough liquid cash to pay their taxes. As a result the properties of these farmers were put up for sale, and owners were given six months to redeem the house, with six percent interest added on to the original price.⁹⁰ Subsistence farmers were ineligible for assistance through the federal farm and home loan programs, and lost their homes on a regular basis.⁹¹ Meanwhile, drought conditions and low milk prices in the northern reaches of the state prevented farmers from growing or purchasing feed for their herds. As a result these farmers were forced to shoot their cows, thus decimating some of what contemporarily were considered “some of the finest herds in the country.”⁹² It is true that the state of New York attempted to tailor some aspects of relief to farm communities, creating farm to market roads, transplanting families from marginal farms to subsistence

⁸⁷ Conference Transcript, *Preliminary Staff Conference*, June 16th, 1935, Box 25, Folder: “Administrators’ Conferences, June 16-19, 1935, Folder 2,” Hopkins Collection, FDRL. Pg 63.

⁸⁸ Report and Letter, Lorena Hickok *Excerpts from Lorena Hickok’s letters to Eleanor Roosevelt and Report to Harry Hopkins, September 1933*. September, 1933, Box 12 Folder: Federal Emergency Relief Administration Papers,” Lorena Hickok Collection, FDRL.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

homesteads, repairing dilapidated farm buildings, and developing rural counties into more industrial centers. However, these attempts largely fell outside of the realm of work relief and demonstrate the inability of work relief, as it was formulated in much of upstate New York, to handle the specific needs of the mixed agricultural/industrial upstate economy.⁹³

Initially, the second of these significant troubles appears as less of a reason for worry and more a motive for celebration. Despite 36.4% and 38.2% statewide unemployment in 1932 and 1933 respectively, compared to the rest of the nation many portions of upstate New York financially and economically remained in relatively secure in their fiscal condition.⁹⁴ If we are to take as reliable the contents of a personal letter from Hickok, the TERA field reporter, to Eleanor Roosevelt from the same month as her report from upstate New York, in 1933 it appeared that in Corning, NY, where only 700 families registered for relief and the local glassworks almost once again reached their 1925-1927 production peak, there had barely been a Depression at all.⁹⁵ In Syracuse, the city expended over \$1,000,000 dollars for its six-mile boulevard-park project. This sum was so large that in the opinion of FERA administrators, most communities even of a similar size to Syracuse would never be able to complete such a high-cost project.⁹⁶ Even the reimbursement rate of 40% project cost offered by TERA was considered by FERA representatives at the time to be far more than could be shouldered by most states in the

⁹³ Conference Transcript, *Preliminary Staff Conference*, June 16th, 1935, Box 25, Folder: "Administrators' Conferences, June 16-19, 1935, Folder 2," Hopkins Collection, FDRL. Pg 64/65.

⁹⁴ *Committee on Economic Security*, op. cit., Table 6, pp. 60-61 and Table 1-17, pp. 400-401.

⁹⁵ Report and Letter, Lorena Hickok *Excerpts from Lorena Hickok's letters to Eleanor Roosevelt and Report to Harry Hopkins, September 1933*. September, 1933, Box 12 Folder: Federal Emergency Relief Administration Papers," Lorena Hickok Collection, FDRL.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

Union.⁹⁷ Deceiving in its positive appearance, the relative prosperity of New York ensured the eventual doom of its relief program. The TERA was constructed to fit an economic situation by all accounts more prosperous than the rest of the nation. As upstate cities and towns began show signs of financial instability late in late 1932 and through 1933, Clinton County reported \$63,000 in unpaid taxes in 1932 and citizens in Syracuse were taxed at a rate of \$5 per every \$1000 in order to support work relief efforts, the ropes holding up the system of reimbursement began to show signs of heavy strain.⁹⁸ And with the leaders in many northern tier communities like Ogdensburg predicting a heavier relief load in 1933 than in 1932, the weight on those ropes could only increase.⁹⁹

Despite four year's experience in the business of work relief, by late 1933 upstate New York fell into fiscal crisis. As predicted in Lorena Hickok's 1933 report on the region, as New York descended further into the depths of depression its towns and counties were no longer capable of financially supporting work relief endeavors. The situation in Montgomery County between 1933 and 1935 can be used as a clear-cut, start-to-finish example of this phenomenon. By the time of the WPA, Montgomery County desperately required new forms of externally financed work relief to provide reprieve from the perpetual economic drain of work program funding. In keeping with national trends, as early as 1933 the county exhibited signs of substantial strain in its attempt to adequately fund work-programs within its borders.¹⁰⁰ On April 13, 1933, the

⁹⁷ "That just wouldn't work at all I'm afraid in some states where the counties are all broke." Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Citing U.S. Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1934* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1934), p. 207., In his book Walker claims an almost nine billion dollar leap in the Gross total debts of local governments between 1922 and 1932. Walker, *The Civil Works Administration: An Experiment in Federal Work Relief, 1933-1934*, 17.

Montgomery County Board of Supervisors appropriated \$25,000 for the operation of projects under the auspices of the TERA.¹⁰¹ Still, by May 16th of that same year, the continuation of work relief projects required the allotment of additional funds in order to pay the salaries of men employed on particular project sites.¹⁰² By June 13th additional funding was already needed on top of that awarded less than a month earlier for the payment of workers employed on projects improving the grounds of the Montgomery County Sanatorium.¹⁰³ Records show that by September 12th the situation had become critical. Demonstrated by Resolutions 87, 88 and 89 of the Mont. County Board of Supervisors, by the early fall of 1933 the board had all but exhausted the funds necessary for the continuation of sufficient work relief projects within the county. Faced with a \$25,820.78 deficit in the County Welfare Department, the Board of Supervisors were forced to use \$27,000 of county road funds to pay off the debt incurred by the department.¹⁰⁴ The next two resolutions appropriated \$10,000 “for the continuation of work relief projects,” and diverted \$25,000 worth of county road funds for use on TERA functions as a result of insufficient county reserves.¹⁰⁵ When taken in the context of consistent budgetary increases over the course of the four months preceding these

¹⁰¹ Resolution No. 48, “Resolution Appropriating Sums of Money for Work Relief Projects and Rescinding Previous Resolution Relating to Work Relief Projects,” *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1933* (Fonda, New York: 1933).

¹⁰² Resolution No. 62, “Resolution Appropriating a Sum of money for Work Relief as Supplemental to Resolution No. 48, Proceedings of 1933,” *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1933* (Fonda, New York: 1933).

¹⁰³ Resolution No. 74, “Resolution Appropriating a Sum of money for Work Relief as Supplemental to Resolution No. 48, Proceedings of 1933,” *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1933* (Fonda, New York: 1933).

¹⁰⁴ Resolution No. 87, “Resolution Authorizing County Treasurer to Use County Road Funds to Pay Deficit in County Welfare Department,” *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1933* (Fonda, New York: 1933), 71.

¹⁰⁵ Resolution No. 88, “Resolution Appropriating a Sum of Money for Work Relief Projects Supplementing Resolution No. 48, Proceedings of 1933,” *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1933* (Fonda, New York: 1933) 71; Resolution No. 89, “Resolution Authorizing County Treasurer to use County Road Funds for TERA Purposes,” *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1933* (Fonda, New York: 1933), 71.

measures, the actions suggest the dire straits which the unsustainable growth of demand for work relief placed the rural counties of upstate New York. Unable to maintain their existing programs with allotted funds, the county had been forced to increase spending until they were unable to continue without depriving one of the county's essential roles, road maintenance, of the funding necessary to carry out its functions. As 1934 approached, upstate communities operated under increasingly ominous circumstances.

Those pressures that distressed Montgomery County were felt in a similar manner in cities and states throughout the country. Nationally, after a summer of promising industrial resurgence, domestic economic performance dropped off in the fall of 1933.¹⁰⁶ Employment and production declined, and in the last week of September 1933, 33% of all economic gains made in the four-month period between March and July of that year disappeared.¹⁰⁷ In October, the Department of Commerce index of manufacturing production reported a score of 74, down 28 points from July's high of 102.¹⁰⁸ What was worse, despite engagement of 2,000,000 formerly jobless individuals on FERA projects across the country, the shortcomings of these projects were readily apparent to FERA administrators.¹⁰⁹ Disparate state standards in pay and project approval resulted in many jobs that served little to no use for either the workers they employed or the communities by which they were sponsored.¹¹⁰ Further, in contrast to New York, administrative incompetence in many state relief structures across the South and West ensured that sizable swaths of the nation's unemployed remained jobless and without any hope of

¹⁰⁶ Schwartz, *The Civil Works Administration, 1933-1934*, 36.

¹⁰⁷ Walker, *The Civil Works Administration: An Experiment in Federal Work Relief*, 23.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 26-27.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 28.

relief as cold weather approached.¹¹¹ By the end of fall, mounting fear surrounding President Roosevelt's first winter in office forced FERA administrators to begin work on a new and intensive short-term federal program designed to help unemployed families endure the winter of 1933-1934.¹¹² The new program would be more top-down in design than the FERA, with the federal government directly controlling spending on projects and the employment of out of work persons. In this manner, the Civil Works Administration was born.

On November 9th, 1933, Executive Order 6420-B officially created the Civil Works Administration.¹¹³ The attentions of top FERA administrators, including Harry Hopkins, Jacob Baker and Corrington Gil, shifted from the former program to the organization of the new centralized form of federal relief under the CWA.¹¹⁴ The main mission of the CWA was to "provide regular work on public works at regular wages for unemployed persons able and willing to work."¹¹⁵ Between November 9th and March 29, 1934 the CWA took over all relief work operations in New York, providing the upstate region with extensive works projects to support unemployed families through the harsh winter months of 1934.¹¹⁶ In the state of New York, the TERA assumed management of the CWA, and as period sources have phrased the transition "the CWA virtually absorbed the preceding program of work relief."¹¹⁷ Projects and personnel previously hired under the independent TERA were transferred wholesale to work under the CWA. Despite continuing the projects and maintaining the employment authorized under TERA, the

¹¹¹Ibid. 28.

¹¹² Schwartz, *The Civil Works Administration*, 36.

¹¹³ Walker, *The Civil Works Administration*, 2.

¹¹⁴ Schwartz, *The Civil Works Administration*, 41.

¹¹⁵ Walker, *The Civil Works Administration: An Experiment in Federal Work Relief, 1933-1934*, 45.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 2.

¹¹⁷ Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State, 1931-1935*, 116.

CWA was in many regards very different from that organization which preceded it. The CWA instituted a national quota for work relief hires of 4,000,000 individuals to be filled by the start of January 1933.¹¹⁸ Individual quotas for each state were determined by averaging a state's population (75% of the equation) with the number of cases open in that state (25% of the equation). Under this system, New York was allotted 396,000 jobs under the CWA program.¹¹⁹ Half of the jobs were to be filled by individuals signed onto relief rolls on November 16th, 1933; the remaining half would be employed via public recruitment and labor unions.¹²⁰ Perhaps most noticeable and most significant difference between the CWA-TERA relationship and that which was enjoyed under the FERA-TERA relationship was the absence of monies made available for the endeavors of state, county or local levels of government.¹²¹ The structure was far more federally controlled than the FERA and would serve as a model for the future evolution of federal work projects, specifically the Works Progress Administration. Additionally, in contrast to the budget deficit payouts allotted to workers by the TERA and the \$.30 per hour minimum wage for all workers under the FERA, the CWA established a system of prevailing wages based off of the wage formula active under the Public Works Administration.¹²² In this manner the CWA for the first time provided work relief employees with a prevailing wage, the same system instituted for the WPA in 1935. The CWA expended significant sums of money in New York at an exceptionally fast rate, exhausting \$100,120,000, twenty-two per cent of all relief funds expended in New York State between 1931 and

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Schwartz, *The Civil Works Administration*, 48.

1935, in just four months.¹²³ The organization marked a distinct change in the manner in which work relief was handled in upstate New York. More than anything, the top-down federal control and diverse projects foreshadowed the structure of the WPA in the years to come.

Montgomery County, a mid-sized county in central New York with a mixed agricultural and industrial economy, benefitted greatly from the CWA. The CWA operated a total of 114 projects in the county's 11 cities and towns, employing a total of 610 individuals and disbursing a total of \$141,154 in wages over the course of four months.¹²⁴ In their fundamental character, the projects executed by the CWA in upstate New York in many respects resembled those provided by the work relief organizations that preceded it. Similar to those works completed under the TERA the overall bulk of CWA projects concentrated on manual labor, with average counties in the upstate area operating blue-collar projects over white-collar at a ratio of approximately 2 to 1.¹²⁵ All throughout Montgomery County, cities and towns benefitted from improvements carried out on county and municipal roadways, water works, dams, schools, wood lots, sewers, forests, and even recreational facilities like the skating rink constructed in Fort Plain/Minden.¹²⁶ Also like TERA, the CWA engaged in projects oriented towards professional workers in addition to their working-class focus. Apart from the Town of Charleston, all municipalities in Montgomery County played host to at least one professional project during the CWA's operation, with all but Glen and Mohawk

¹²³ Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State, 1931-1935*, 78.

¹²⁴ Exact project data in Montgomery County exhibits a ratio of 81 to 37. *CWA Projects Report, 1933-34*. Montgomery County Historical Archives, Box 645: Montgomery County Board of Supervisors, "Work Relief," *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1934* (Fonda, New York: 1934), 65.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ *CWA Projects Report, 1933-34*. Montgomery County Historical Archives, Box 645.

sponsoring bookbinding assignments and all except Palatine and Canajoharie engaging in work involving the compilation of historical archives.¹²⁷ Additionally, the county's CWA projects employed clerical workers for the Department of Public Welfare and County Clerk's office, nurses for public health clinics, and even census aids.¹²⁸

By mid-December it became evident to Federal administrators that this initial appropriation of \$400,000,000 allotted to the WPA in November would not carry the program through the winter as had been initially planned.¹²⁹ To compensate, starting on January 18th hours were curtailed.¹³⁰ On February 15th workers already employed elsewhere but receiving work on the CWA were discharged from project payrolls. On March 2nd, wage cuts were instituted in order to prolong the program's operation.¹³¹ On March 31st, the program officially closed shop and the main responsibility for work relief in New York returned to the TERA/FERA organization, with the new "FERA Work Division" continuing a limited number of former CWA projects under its authority.¹³² The condition of relief in upstate New York by late 1934 was mixed. Despite FERA field reports from the cities of Troy, Schenectady, Gloversville, Utica, Niagara Falls, Corning, Elmira, Johnson City-Endicott and Massena which revealed a "rebound of business from panic level" to a status of "below-plateau," by and large the relief load in these cities in fact rose as winter approached. Gloversville, Utica, Niagara Falls, Corning, Elmira, and Messina all predicted substantial raises in the relief load during the

¹²⁷ *CWA Projects Report, 1933-34*. Montgomery County Historical Archives, Box 645.

¹²⁸ *CWA Projects Report, 1933-34*. Montgomery County Historical Archives, Box 645.

¹²⁹ Walker, *The Civil Works Administration: An Experiment in Federal Work Relief, 1933-1934*, 131.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* 132.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 133. Additional information in Taylor, *American-Made*, 129-137.

¹³² *Ibid.* 145.

winter of 1933-1934 as compared to the year before.¹³³ Despite the strong work accomplished by the CWA and the TERA before it, the trend in unemployment remained upward, as remained the trend in relief.

By 1935, increasingly desperate municipal and county finances and unrelenting unemployment forced the state to take more dramatic action in order to keep its local governments fiscally solvent. TERA offered counties and individual localities seeking to establish work relief operations in their municipalities 75% reimbursement for all costs expended for pay and materials.¹³⁴ In the first four months of 1935 Montgomery County alone managed to maintain a total of 29 fully operational work relief outfits across the county, 21 that were sponsored by the county itself and nine that were subsidized by individual localities.¹³⁵ Totaling \$52,249.46 in expenses, the projects at work between January 1, 1935 and May 1, 1935 received a grand total of \$39,092.57 in funding from TERA.¹³⁶ By comparison, for these same operations the county itself expended a mere \$10,882.05, while individual towns and villages contributed \$1,974.84.¹³⁷ The physical accomplishments that resulted from TERA work in upstate New York are astounding. Between April 1934 and June 1935 TERA crews constructed or improved approximately 4,094 miles of roads, streets, and highways; 405 miles of sidewalks, paths and trails, 313 bridges, 4,878 public buildings, 630 major recreational facilities, and countless sewage

¹³³ Report, Miss Ernestine Ball, *Report for Mr. Hopkins of Six Weeks' Survey of Relief Load and Employment Situation in Troy, Schenectady, Gloversville, Utica, Niagara falls, Corning, Elmira, Johnson-City Endicott, Messina*. October 1934, Box 65, Folder: Ball, Ernestine—New York State, Hopkins Collection, FDRL.

¹³⁴ Montgomery County Board of Supervisors, "Report of Home Relief Bureau," in *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1935* (Fonda, New York: 1935) 131. ***

¹³⁵ Montgomery County Emergency Relief Bureau, *Disbursements On County Projects, Jan. 1, 1935 to May 1, 1935* (Canajoharie, New York: 1935), Montgomery County Historical Archives, Box 598; Montgomery County Emergency Relief Bureau, *Disbursements On Local Projects, Jan. 1, 1935 to May 1, 1935* (Canajoharie, New York: 1935). Montgomery County Historical Archives, Box 598.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

plants, water lines, sewer lines, drainage ditches, reservoirs, and garbage disposal plants.¹³⁸ The organization even planted 1,013,000 trees, shrubs and vines.¹³⁹

The projects conducted under TERA in upstate New York were diverse in both character and purpose. The lion's share of endeavors undertaken by workers under the combined TERA/FERA were of a similar stripe to those pursued by the CWA and by the TERA on its own. By and large projects tended to be tailored to the skills and experience of the blue-collar worker, focusing on tasks favorable to unskilled workers able to engage in manual labor to improve the infrastructure and public appearance of the communities in which they functioned. In the first four months of 1935, Montgomery County employees engaged in work improving County Roads 35, 53, 90, and 103; in reforesting the land surrounding the County Sanatorium; in renovating public buildings including the White House in Canajoharie, the County Court House in Fonda, and the St. Johnsville Community House; and even in the construction of public facilities like the Fort Johnson School and a water reservoir and skating rink in Canajoharie.¹⁴⁰ But projects were not limited to manual pursuits. Administrators worked to accommodate formerly white-collar workers trained in professional skills who were adversely affected by the Depression. Administrative positions in bookbinding, record keeping, the County Clerk's office, and Public Welfare among other occupations provided white-collar workers in the overwhelmingly blue-collar Montgomery County with a handful of positions to address their specific needs.¹⁴¹ In addition to traditional manual/professional

¹³⁸ Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State, 1931-1935*, 293

¹³⁹ Montgomery County Emergency Relief Bureau, *Disbursements On County Projects, Jan. 1, 1935 to May 1, 1935*; Montgomery County Emergency Relief Bureau, *Disbursements On Local Projects, Jan. 1, 1935 to May 1, 1935*.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

occupational offerings, TERA projects often worked to provide depressed communities with services oriented toward practical aid. In Montgomery County, subsistence gardens, sewing rooms, logging/wood lot operations, and gravel beds provided both work and material relief to families lacking clothing, food, and fuel.¹⁴² Beyond simply aiding upstate New York's unemployed population, the work conducted by TERA funded projects represented an evolutionary step in the path to the style of work relief provided by the WPA. Despite engaging in labor for wages in a manner similar to that found in private industry, TERA workers in Montgomery County received compensation according to assessed need on a scale of six, eight, and twelve dollar "budgetary deficiency."¹⁴³ Nevertheless, the categorical breadth and scale of TERA funded projects in the pre-WPA era testify to the highly developed nature of work relief in upstate New York prior to the WPA.

After the end of the CWA the Montgomery County was again required to award \$15,000 to the continuation of work relief programs in the district. By April 12th, 1934, the county was forced to offer the sum of \$25,000 to pay off debts incurred as a result of relief spending in the previous year.¹⁴⁴ It is clear that by 1934, work relief had become a millstone around the neck of the county, dragging it toward financial ruin and the inability to function.¹⁴⁵ The increasingly reckless behavior of Montgomery County

¹⁴² Ibid; Lester Herzog, *Women's and Professional Projects* (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936), 7.

¹⁴³ Montgomery County Emergency Relief Bureau, *Relief Client Status for April* (Canajoharie, New York: 1935). Montgomery County Historical Archives, Box 598.

¹⁴⁴ Resolution No. 74, "Resolution Appropriating a Sum of Money for the ERA and Providing for Disbursement Thereof," *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1934* (Fonda, New York: 1934), 55; Resolution No. 78, "Resolution Appropriating a Sum of Money to Pay Deficit in County Welfare Department and Allocating Funds Hereby Appropriated and Heretofore Provided For," *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1934* (Fonda, New York: 1934), 57.

¹⁴⁵ There is evidence that by August 8, 1935, the county held \$34,494.04 in unexpended relief funds allocated by the budget of that fiscal year. This statistic runs contrary to the general trend set forth between

officials demonstrates that up to a year before the creation of the WPA, upstate New York was in frantic need of aid to remain solvent despite still increasing work relief obligations. It is obvious that New York State, between 1931 and 1935, developed a highly advanced and influential system of work relief for those citizens living inside its cities and towns. Work was diverse, readily available, and paid up to sixteen dollars per week for work done on relief projects, a full two dollars more than the average minimum wage for private industry in 1933.¹⁴⁶ However, the system New York created was simply too ambitious for its own financial capabilities. Reasonable though its precepts were at the programs inception, as the upstate New York declined to the level of depression felt in nearby states and counties began to turn bankrupt, the system could not support itself. What is worse, those efforts that the TERA made to aid districts no longer able to afford 60% share of project costs by lowering sponsor contributions to 25% only served to accelerate the money loss of the entire system. By mid 1935 upstate New York required significant outside help in order to continue aiding its relief population.

1933 and 1934. It is possible that this surplus occurred as a result of WPA work during the year, however it is also conceivable that it came to exist as a result of a less burdensome case-load in the first half of 1935. I have not uncovered the information necessary to determine this. Resolution No. 82, "Resolution Making Unexpended Work Relief Monies Available for the WPA," *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1935* (Fonda, New York: 1935), 73.

¹⁴⁶ Report and Letter, Lorena Hickok *Excerpts from Lorena Hickok's letters to Eleanor Roosevelt and Report to Harry Hopkins, September 1933*. September, 1933, Box 12 Folder: Federal Emergency Relief Administration Papers," Lorena Hickok Collection, FDRL.

Chapter 3: 1935 and the Birth of The WPA

As night descended on Washington, DC the evening of January 4th, 1935, in a similar fashion the city's political and social elite fell upon the chambers of the U.S. Capitol Building. Quickly, the galleries overlooking the U.S. House of Representatives filled with eager eyed and civically inclined civilians, while the seats below stood empty, ready to be occupied by members of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate.¹ Before long however, the designated occupants of these seats filed into position as well, with Representatives and Senators entering the chamber from their respective sides of the Capitol. As the crowd sat waiting, The President of the United States Franklin D. Roosevelt made his way to the Capitol. Upon his arrival, with some assistance the President approached the podium situated at the front of the chamber. After a minute of pleasantries exchange between the Roosevelt, Vice President Garner and Speaker of the House Joseph W. Byrns, the Commander in Chief took the stage. The President's annual address to the 73rd Congress of the United States was about to begin.²

The President's remarks opened with what, by 1935, had become relatively boilerplate statements on the nation's economic and political condition. However, a third of the way through his speech, Roosevelt began to speak about the pursuit of the "security of the men, women and children of the nation," presenting the concept as the primary task of the government in 1935 and arguing that "every major legislative

¹ Nick Taylor. *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of The WPA: When FDR Put The Nation To Work*. (New York: Bantam Book, 2008), 160.

² Ibid.

enactment” of the 74th Congress should work toward that end.³ Building on this notion, the President reviewed the nation’s past and current recovery efforts. Stressing the work of the NIRA and FERA, Roosevelt argued that the direct relief programs which had typified relief efforts since the beginning of the depression had thus far been inadequate in providing aid to struggling persons. Further, the president voiced concerns about the potential for home relief to demoralize workers and engender a debilitating dependency on the federal government among those who received it. Concluding his remarks on the dangers of home relief, the President advanced to propose the legislative agenda for which the speech, and in part his Presidency, would eventually come to be remembered for.

Declaring, “The Federal Government must and shall quit this business of relief,” Roosevelt presented a plan whereby “local responsibility” for direct welfare would resume and “with the exception of the normal public building operations of the Government, all emergency public works shall be united in a single new and greatly enlarged plan.”⁴ This plan, seeking to engage the 3,500,000 employable but unemployed Americans, would supersede the FERA with a centrally administered, top-down relief structure. Projects under the new program were to 1) provide “permanent improvement” to national living conditions, 2) provide compensation larger than current direct relief payments, but not so considerable as to dissuade workers from accepting private employment, 3) emphasize direct labor, 4) be largely self-liquidating, 5) not compete with private industry, 6) assure work to current relief recipients for the coming year, and

³ Ibid..

⁴ Ibid..

7) operate in communities “where they will serve the greatest unemployment needs” as depicted by the current relief rolls.⁵

Suggesting a price tag of \$4 billion, the President put into motion the initial groundwork for what, in four months time, would develop into the Works Progress Administration (WPA).⁶ For the nation, this would mean seven years of massive public work relief projects in every state, county and community. In upstate New York, the program would bring about a dramatic transformation in the administration of work relief. Initially, the implementation of the WPA would confuse and create anxiety among New York relief administrators on both the town and state levels. However, by the end of 1935, the Works Progress Administration would come to occupy an integral role in the upstate relief structure, one that both benefited the state through the flexible creation of projects and caused tensions as a result of its top-down bureaucratic structure and control of funding.

The theoretical origins of a centralized federal works program trace back to the period that directly followed the conclusion the Civil Works Administration. Through 1934, former TERA, CWA and FERA administrator Harry Hopkins pressured the President for a continued and enlarged federal jobs program.⁷ By mid-April, Hopkins confided to select colleagues his belief that Roosevelt now supported an extended works program, one which might cost as much as six billion dollars and span several years.⁸ In the spring of 1934 the FERA studied workers on relief rolls in 79 cities spanning the

⁵ Ibid..

⁶ Taylor, *American Made*, 162

⁷ Taylor, *American Made*, 142

⁸ Ibid..

United States to assess the current state of relief across the nation.⁹ These studies examined race, industry, white-collar/blue collar employment, gender, age, wage and skill; compiling data by which the FERA administration could “take the relief people out of the realm of unreality.”¹⁰ The data from the FERA studies were used to help shape a broader reconstruction of federal relief, meant not only to alter work relief, but to work towards the creation of a permanent safety net for the unemployed. However, analysis by upper level FERA officials regarding the appropriate shape of the proposed reorganization of federal work relief did not begin in earnest until September of 1934.¹¹

From September through December, the FERA and the Committee on Economic Security (CES), a commission whose main board included Hopkins and whose inner committees were filled with FERA administrators and alumni, researched the issue of how to remodel the Federal government’s relationship with relief.¹² Just before Christmas of 1934 the Committee submitted to the President its official recommendations for the restructuring of federal relief policy. In its report the committee provided the administration with a wide proposal for a program of “employment assurance.”¹³ The first aspect of the proposed set up called for a general expansion of public employment whenever private employment should slack. In general, the committee suggested that work relief replace direct relief wherever possible, and advocated for the creation of public works designed to absorb both blue-collar and white-collar individuals who occupied relief rolls.¹⁴ The second part of the committee’s proposals appealed for new

⁹ Harry L. Hopkins, *Spending To Save: The Complete Story of Relief* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1936). 160

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Macmahon, *The Administration of Federal Work Relief. Studies in Administration*, 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24-26

¹³ *Ibid.* 27

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26

payroll taxes to be used to fund unemployment compensation for out-of-work individuals as well as a program of old age insurance.¹⁵ To analyze the Committee's report, Roosevelt called together a small advisory group including Hopkins, the Secretary of the Treasury and the Director of the Budget to assess the situation and make further suggestions for the new shape of federal relief. In their most basic elements, the recommendations made by the CES would with time develop into the basis for the Works Progress Administration and the Social Security Act.¹⁶

Despite these recommendations, by the time of the President's address on January 4th of 1935, the definite mechanisms of the new work program were not yet decided.¹⁷ For the first three months of 1935 debate raged over questions essential to the formulation of the relief structure. Should the new program seek the revival of heavy industries or should it aim simply to employ as many individuals on relief rolls as possible, thus enabling rapid reinvestment of funds into local economies?¹⁸ What sort of projects should be created? How should they be funded and should their emphasis be on constructing worthwhile projects or producing mass employment opportunities? Beyond these questions, the issues of project self-liquidation, wages, capital reimbursement, rural rehabilitation, who to employ, how long the program should last, how much money would be available for the program, and how the administration should be organized all needed to be considered before any concrete plan could be adequately articulated.¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid, 27; Taylor, *American-Made*, 177.

¹⁶ Taylor, *American-Made*, 177.

¹⁷ Macmahon, *The Administration of Federal Work Relief. Studies in Administration*, 28

¹⁸ Ibid. 28

¹⁹ Ibid. 28-43.

Over Christmas week of 1934, a Joint Resolution was drafted by an interagency coalition and introduced to Congress as H.J.R. 117 on January 21st 1935.²⁰ Proposing a relief program costing four billion dollars with \$880,000,000 from previous appropriations, H.J.R. 117 disappeared into the depths of committee and sub-committee negotiations.²¹ Eleven weeks later, the newly titled Emergency Relief Appropriations Act emerged from the Senate. Offering \$4.8 billion to be spent on work relief, the compromise bill also included the requirement that workers receive a “security wage” lower than current prevailing wages and the condition that the Senate approve all appointed positions paying over \$5,000.²² It is important to note, however, that wage scales were developed in each region according to prevailing wages as a result of compromise language in the act requiring the President to fix wages at a level that did “not affect adversely or otherwise tend to decrease the going rate of wages.”²³ On April 8th, 1935, President Roosevelt passed the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act into Law.

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With the new work relief endeavor now funded by the Congress, President Roosevelt turned to arranging the administrative structure of his organization. The President valued the swift employment and high proportion of costs dedicated to labor associated with “light public works,” the kind of which were undertaken by TERA, FERA and the CWA. As a result Roosevelt selected the former director of each of those organizations, Harry Hopkins, to man the helm of the new relief structure.²⁵ Technically

²⁰ Ibid. 44

²¹ Ibid. 45

²² Ibid. 53; Taylor, *American-Made*, 169

²³ Macmahon, *The Administration of Federal Work Relief. Studies in Administration*, 53.

²⁴ Taylor, *American-Made*, 169

²⁵ Ibid.

speaking, Hopkins would serve only as leader of one part of a three-part administration. Named Director of the program's Works Progress Division, Hopkins was placed in charge of "tracking work projects and keeping them moving on schedule."²⁶ The second division of the organization, the Division of Applications, was headed by Frank Walker and was designed to make initial approvals and rejections of project applications submitted by state, county and local sponsors.²⁷ The third partition of the program, the Advisory Committee on Allotments, was managed by PWA director Harold Ickes, and brought together representatives from across the public and private sectors to meet weekly and send recommendations on projects to the President for approval.²⁸ With the general structure complete, on May 6th 1935 President Roosevelt signed the Executive Order that created the new relief organization. The Works Division, known now as the Works Progress Administration, quickly overshadowed its two peers and became the nation's primary proprietor of work relief.²⁹

Hopkins wasted no time in beginning the transition of Federal relief from the FERA to the WPA. In mid-May Hopkins brought to the WPA former FERA administrators Aubrey Williams, Corrington Gill and Jacob Baker as well as Ellen S. Woodward, the former head of women's and professional works under the FERA.³⁰ On June 16th of 1935 Hopkins assembled fifty individuals selected to head WPA operations in each of the fifty states, known as State Administrators, at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, DC for a four-day conference explaining the general work of the WPA and

²⁶ Ibid. 170

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid. 172

³⁰ Ibid. 177

the roles administrators would play in the states that they represented.³¹ The first day of the conference featured a total of eight speakers, each presenting on a different facet of the WPA. First to speak, Hopkins made remarks regarding the general scope of the W.P.A.'s responsibility, organization and administration. The main goal of the program Hopkins told the audience would be to "take 3,500,000 men and women who are now (were then) on relief throughout the nation and put them to work at useful public work."³² This task, according to Hopkins, was to be conducted through existing governmental agencies in a manner in contradiction to FERA policy whereby grants were made to states for work conducted by individuals classified as state employees.³³ By contrast, the individuals working for the WPA, with the exception of those employed under contract, would be federal employees—receiving federal checks, federal benefits, and federal compensation.³⁴ To ensure that projects met every criterion for WPA funding the administration would require each project, after initial approval, to be supervised, managed, and periodically inspected by WPA administrative employees. In addition to these requirements the WPA would be obligated to "report to the president at regular intervals upon the progress of all the projects going on in the United States." These reports would update the President regarding the number of men of men and women at work and the amount of money spent by the administration."³⁵

The focus of the new program would be on swift and mass direct federal employment and project creation. Unlike the PWA or other heavy-industry focused

³¹ Conference Transcript, *Preliminary Staff Conference*, June 16th, 1935, Box 25, Folder: "Administrators' Conferences, June 16-19, 1935, Folder 2," Hopkins Collection, FDRL. Pg 1.

³² *Ibid.*, 3,9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

programs, the WPA's definition of employment included only jobs explicitly created on the projects approved by the Administration. Rather than indirect job creation, the WPA would concern itself strictly with immediate employment opportunities for those individuals already known to be on relief rolls. These persons were to move from the relief rolls to direct employment on jobs expressly created by the WPA for that purpose. While admitting that indirect employment was inevitable, in his remarks Hopkins explicitly stated that "men on the relief rolls that may get jobs in other ways" were not the priority of the WPA.³⁶ The character of the jobs created by the organization would be varied and flexible depending on the needs of the particular project's sponsoring agents. As Hopkins' in his review of Federal work relief during the Great Depression, *Spending To Save*, these projects would have three primary criteria in their creation and approval. First, "The number of eligible relief workers in the locality." Second, "their skills." And third, "the kind of project will be of the greatest usefulness to the community."³⁷

The first of these criteria, that which placed emphasis on a district's volume of eligible relief cases, would come to ensure the greater size of relief structures and programs in cities and heavily populated sections of country as compared to rural regions with low population density. Hopkins' second requirement would have ramifications for the diversity of projects and occupational skills provided for by said projects in each community. The third prerequisite, that which specified each project must be of considerable utility to the municipality in which it operated, restricted communities from engaging in projects in the vein of street cleaning, garbage removal and snow removal—

³⁶ Ibid., 7

³⁷ Hopkins, *Spending To Save*, 167.

the hallmarks of make work and previous work relief ventures.³⁸ In this manner, the emphasis in the WPA was placed on more permanent projects, those that invested in municipalities' long-term stability and well-being. While Hopkins' criterion for appropriate, labor-intensive projects might appear to be relatively restrictive, their effect in shaping WPA policy had great effect on the development of relief operations in upstate New York. The guidelines ensured that, in a region characterized by wide tracts of open farmland interspersed with regions of intense industrial development, at times in the same county, project funding would go by and large to sizable cities rather than to more thinly populated rural locales. More importantly though, the focus on projects representing the greatest usefulness to the community in which they operated created a space for flexibility between the urban and rural areas of New York, an elasticity that during the WPA's upstate operations would ensure the establishment of appropriate projects to accommodate both sides of New York's population.

Following Hopkins' speech, employees and administrators received lectures on "Intake policies and procedures, transition from relief to work status, educational programs, and transient programs" from Mr. Williams; professional and service policies from Mr. Baker; "reporting, accounting, disbursing, liaison with other work agencies, and research" from Mr. Gil; and women's work from Mrs. Woodward.³⁹ Over the next three days of the conference, administrators broke up into smaller groups based on regional administrative divisions created by the WPA in order to more easily manage

³⁸ Though other restrictions on project type were not specified, Hopkins articulated that administrators could "undoubtedly think up some fancy thing that is illegal, but not many," assuming that the projects were all public in character. Conference Transcript, *Preliminary Staff Conference*, June 16th, 1935, Box 25, Folder: "Administrators' Conferences, June 16-19, 1935, Folder 2," Hopkins Collection, FDRL. 11,12.

³⁹ Conference Transcript, *Preliminary Staff Conference*, June 16th, 1935, Box 25, Folder: "Administrators' Conferences, June 16-19, 1935, Folder 2," Hopkins Collection, FDRL.

operations. Group 1, consisting of New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland, met with Regional Chairman R.C. Branion to listen to a second series of more detailed lectures regarding many of the topics touched on in the addresses given the conference's first day.⁴⁰ The group heard in-depth information regarding Emergency Education Programs, transients, reemployment, professional service projects, wage scale and labor relations, project safety, women's work and reporting, accounting, disbursing, procurement, investigation and compensation.⁴¹ In the weeks and months after the conference, administrators were provided with more specific guidelines for the many of the program's essential functions. As state directors became better informed regarding sponsor contributions, funding, hiring, project applications and the process of transition from FERA to the WPA, each state developed its own.⁴²

As early as mid-May of 1935, New York State TERA administrators, made nervous by rumors surrounding the "new business" of work relief created by the ERAA and the President's May 6th executive order, began to make inquiries of the Federal government in order to better ascertain the situation into which they would be soon be stepping. On May 13th, only a week after the program officially came into existence, New York TERA Chairman Alfred P. Schoellkopf contacted Hopkins to inquire as to "instructions" or "more definite" information pertaining to the new program.⁴³ In response to Mr. Schoellkopf's probing, Hopkins explained to the Chairman that he had

⁴⁰ This would eventually morph into Region One.

⁴¹ Conference Transcript, *Preliminary Staff Conference*, June 16th, 1935, Box 25, Folder: "Administrators' Conferences, June 16-19, 1935, Folder 2," Hopkins Collection, FDRL

⁴² According to Hopkins in *Spending To Save*, approximately 90% of all WPA employees were to be drafted directly from relief rolls. In addition to this, sponsor contributions were required only to the fullest extent to which a sponsor could offer to afford.

⁴³ Telephone conversation, Mr. Schoellkopf to Mr. Hopkins 5/13/35, Box 76, Folder: "New York," Hopkins Collection, FDRL

not “quite decided how to operate in New York” as of that point in time.⁴⁴ All that he could offer Schoellkopf was word that he would meet with an engineer on the matter shortly and that he had heard from the Governor that the state preferred “that the TERA not have anything to do with it (the new program),” an assertion that surprised Schoellkopf.⁴⁵

Worried by the uncertainty surrounding the transition process from FERA to the WPA, the Schoellkopf requested that Hopkins let the TERA know the planned organization in New York prior to any other body, political or otherwise so enable the TERA to remain in control over the powerful relief structure that existed in New York City. Though its relationship with the TERA was not distinct from those enjoyed by any of New York’s many other large cities, the EWB of New York City received and expended more TERA funding than any other single municipality in the New York State. In the period between September 1, 1934 and August 31, 1935 the NYC EWB spent \$81,456,580.48 on work relief projects within the city, approximately 62% of total state expenditures for the same period.⁴⁶ As such, ambiguity regarding the transition from the FERA to the WPA prompted concern among state TERA administrators over the future of the administration’s ability to control New York City. Fearing several months of insubordination from NYC should city officials receive first word on WPA policies, Schoellkopf sought to ensure that the state TERA administration was the firstpoint of contact of any and all structural plans for the WPA in the state of New York.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ New York State, *Public Unemployment Relief in New York State—Fourth Year; September 1, 1935-August 31, 1935* (Albany: TERA, 1935), 36-37.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Schoellkopf also questioned Hopkins regarding the advance submission of ongoing TERA proposals as project applications for work to be done under the WPA. Despite his belief that the projects in question would “qualify under the new program,” Schoellkopf was instructed to merely earmark potential programs for the time being, holding them until the WPA was scheduled to start on July 1st.⁴⁸ On June 20th Schoellkopf again contacted Hopkins in attempt to receive more definite information about the WPA’s planned operations for New York State, and was only offered reassurance that the program would “put some people to work.”⁴⁹ Schoellkopf’s persistence in questioning Hopkins regarding the future of relief in New York State illustrates the uncertain feeling among New York administrators even two months prior to the real start of the WPA’s operations. The TERA was anxious to begin the transition process as soon as possible, and the vagueness of plans caused administrators to agonize over what affect the changeover might have on the TERA’s ability to adequately manage its current affairs and over the fate of government subsidization of direct relief uncertain after the strictly work-oriented WPA.

Interestingly, at no point in the conversation did Hopkins make clear whether his inability to offer Schoellkopf information regarding the WPA’s operations in New York was due to general uncertainty surrounding state-level implementation nation-wide or if it came as a result of the specific conditions present in New York State. While it is

⁴⁸ Ibid. Hopkins stated that if Schoellkopf were to submit a proposal at the present time, the administration “would just send them back.”

⁴⁹ It appears that Schoellkopf’s inquiries regarding the future relief set up in New York State were so persistent that Hopkins grew short in his responses when questioned. To Schoellkopf’s June 20th attempt, Hopkins replied “I haven’t anything more definite, except that we are going to put some people to work but I don’t know how many. I can’t tell that. You are in the same boat as everybody in every state in the Union. I can’t make a firm commitment now as to how many I will put to work.” The statement shows obvious annoyance with Schoellkopf and is particularly blunt. Telephone conversation, Mr. Schoellkopf to Mr. Hopkins 6/20/35, Box 76, Folder: “New York,” Hopkins Collection, FDRL

certainly true that New York would eventually become the only state to separate into two distinct administrative structures, one for upstate and one for New York City, there is not significant evidence to show that set up in the state suffered or was delayed as a result of division between the two regions or to an extent any worse than occurred in other states.⁵⁰ On June 20th, 1935 Hopkins told Schoellkopf that as TERA director he was “in the same boat as everybody in every state in the Union.”⁵¹ This remark implies that earlier assertions made by Hopkins, specifically those in which he professed an inability to make firm commitments on employment quotas or offer any more definite information on transitional procedures, likely reflected the condition of the WPA as a whole and not the particular situation faced in New York State.⁵²

In New York, city and county administrators, as well as average citizens, exhibited a similar impatience in the wait for new information regarding the coming changes in relief in the state. Starting in June of 1935, local media outlets began to report on developments in the transition from the FERA to the WPA. On Friday, June 21st the *Troy Times Record* stated that new and highly anticipated information regarding the WPA would be released to the public the following Monday. However, at the time of the article’s publication, the *Times Record* still knew very little about the WPA. Other than that readers could expect further information soon, the paper was only able to relay little more than the name of the program. Despite having scarce substantive intelligence on the new relief set-up, the demand for new WPA material was so great that the article went to press anyway. The piece also included a statement from the city EWB stating that the

⁵⁰ Taylor, *American-Made*, 187.

⁵¹ Telephone conversation, Mr. Schoellkopf to Mr. Hopkins 6/20/35, Box 76, Folder: “New York,” Hopkins Collection, FDRL

⁵² Ibid.

bureau's administrative personnel knew so little about the bureau's fate with the coming WPA, that they speculated that they might be "scrapped entirely."⁵³

On June 26, while covering news that New York cities had been called to submit to the WPA their "worthwhile projects" for consideration in an attempt to "speed up New York State's public improvement program," *The Binghamton Press* also reported on a number of other program updates of varying importance for both potential workers and perspective sponsors. For administrators and sponsors, the paper's news that projects would have to be submitted to the administration's state and national offices for approval and that no quota had yet been set for upstate employment or funds had not yet been added little insight that might be useful for future project planning. However, reports that New York's wage scale would be "lower than some other sections of the country" and that WPA employees would not be included on relief rolls, would not be considered relief cases and would therefore not be subject to home investigations carried great significance for employable individuals at that time dependent on relief.⁵⁴ The news conveyed to workers the WPA's emphasis on the dignity of recipients of employment on its projects and provided valuable insight into what sort of compensation might be expected for those who became employed on administration projects.

Of particular importance for the future of works projects in upstate New York, on August 1 WPA Director Hopkins pronounced that the administration was to "put emphasis on rural work." Hopkins stated that plans had been drafted for "a wide variety of pick and shovel projects, with a special emphasis on farm to market roads" in "open country" areas. Hopkins pointed also pointed to "small dams, levees, rebuilding streets,

⁵³ "New Relief Plan Expected To Be Revealed Monday," *The Times Record* (Troy) June 21st, 1935, page 13.

⁵⁴ "Cities of State Are Asked for Works Plans," *The Binghamton Press* June 26, 1935, 15.

waterworks and sewage disposal, extension of lighting systems, community sanitation projects, recreational projects, stream pollution control and sanitary surveys” as examples of projects designed to fill the employment and community needs of increasingly destitute rural populations.⁵⁵ This proclamation from Hopkins set an informal template for rural work in New York and accurately predicted many of the specific projects conducted in the upstate region over the course of the WPA’s operation.

As summer continued, administrators at last began to receive more specific instructions for how to handle the turnover of relief from the FERA to the WPA. Through August, counties throughout New York engaged in active planning for the transition from TERA-Works Division projects to those funded and operated by the WPA. By August 2 the state TERA announced plans and procedures for the carryover of existing state relief projects through the start of the WPA period. Work relief project sponsors and work bureau chairmen were instructed to turn their efforts to the submission of project applications to the WPA in attempt to authorize a transfer of their projects to the administration, and were warned to draft plans to “take care of the workers” active on current projects should applications be denied. In a letter to sponsors and bureau chairs, Executive Director of the TERA Fred Daniels warned that the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration could not assure the availability of state funds for the continuation of existing work relief projects past August.⁵⁶ However, Daniels could ensure the unavailability of state monies for any and all projects begun after August 31st.⁵⁷ By mid-month the preparation and authorization of WPA projects statewide was well underway.

⁵⁵ “WPA To Put Emphasis on Rural Work,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 8/1/35 See also “Farmers ‘Way Back’ To Get Work Relief Aid,” *Canandaigua Daily Messenger*, August 26th, 1935. Page 1

⁵⁶ “Regulations for Work Relief announced to Sponsors, Chairs,” *Canandaigua Daily Messenger*, August 2nd, 1935, Page 3

⁵⁷ Ibid.

In Ontario County, by August 16th the county WPA Director had already surveyed 25 different WPA projects across his district, 10 sponsored by the County itself and 15 sponsored by individual townships.⁵⁸ The TERA held a portion of active projects in TERA control until September 1st in order to continue work on the projects.⁵⁹ But when the TERA ceased funding of work relief projects on the first of September, the WPA came into full operation in upstate New York.

For the duration of 1935, the WPA rapidly expanded the program of public works in upstate New York. Targeted by federal, state and local sponsors to fill the specific needs of individual localities and unemployed populations, the projects that began in 1935 offered diverse employment opportunities for out-of-work individuals.

Montgomery County started 106 works programs throughout the county and within each of its 10 municipalities during the last five months of 1935. Employment opportunities were created for all occupational backgrounds and were tailored by the county and by each town to the specific needs of their communities. Amsterdam, the only city in the county, accounted for fifty-six of the county's work projects. While these Amsterdam projects varied, the vast majority can be classified as manual labor executed by unskilled laborers. In 1935 the city of Amsterdam sponsored 28 separate roadwork projects spread out through the whole of the city. Roadways like Clizbe Avenue and Church Street were curbed, graded and resurfaced, intersections were widened to ease congestion, and in the cases of town roads Nos. 1 through No. 8, repairs were made, paths were corrected and surrounding areas were landscaped and drained to facilitate safer and more reliable travel routes on the outskirts of the town. Beyond roadwork, the city employed workers on 15

⁵⁸ "Council Calls Referendum On \$6,000 Bond Issue for Kershaw Park Completion," *Canandaigua Daily Messenger*, August 15, 1935, page 3

⁵⁹ Telephone Conversation, Mr. Hopkins to Mr. Herzog, August 19, 1935

separate sewer extension projects; repaired a culvert damaged by spring flooding at the city reservoir; began construction of a new athletics complex; renovated and painted city hall, its annex and the city firehouse; operated a gravel pit; and continued work on a former TERA/FERA project, an 18-hole municipal golf course “located adjacent to the northerly boundary of the city.”⁶⁰ The occupational needs of women and professional workers were addressed through two separate allocations for city-sewing rooms, the institution of a city-level WPA nurse program, attendants at recreational facilities, and the indexing and filing of city historical records by former clerical workers.⁶¹ The wide range of projects undertaken in the city provided its unemployed with a variety of employment opportunities within their individual occupational skill sets.

The more rural communities of Montgomery County created 50 projects throughout the course of 1935. These town-sponsored projects in many ways mirrored the recommendations for rural projects provided by Harry Hopkins that August. Road work was conducted in each of the county’s rural communities with particular attention to county farm-to-market roads like County Road #75-2 in the Town of Florida, County Roads including #103 in Fonda, gravel roads through the farm-heavy Town of Minden, and repaired county roads in the town of Root.⁶² Community sanitation projects like the installation of waterlines, sanitary sewers, and storm sewers in Canajoharie, basic sewer improvements in Fonda, the installation of storm sewers in Fort Plain, installation of a

⁶⁰ As it appears in the body of Mayor Carter of Amsterdam’s 1935 “Mayor’s Address to the Common Council of the City of Amsterdam:” “For many years there has been considerable discussion relative to building a municipal golf course for this city.... On December 12th (1934) you authorized the acquisition of 182.271 acres of land as recommended and at an aggregate cost of \$14,866.24.” “The Mayor’s Address to the Common Council of the City of Amsterdam,” in *Proceedings of the Common Council, 1935*, City of Amsterdam Historical Archives, City Hall, Amsterdam, NY; Microfilm, “Works Progress Administration Central Office Starting Target, Reel 10, Reference Card Location Project File E.R.A. Acts 1935-1938,”

FDRL

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

water supply for Palatine Bridge and malaria control in Fonda for the first time brought to many of these communities municipal water supply, with “complete fire protection” and “adequate house service” and modernized sewer systems.⁶³ Flood control measures in St. Johnsville and Canajoharie, the former via a creek-deepening project and the latter through the construction of a retaining wall along the Canajoharie Creek, protected and repaired the small communities following minor damages resulting from heavy rains in July of 1935 which devastated much of Central and Western New York.⁶⁴ The rural towns of Montgomery County also sponsored projects including sewing rooms, tax-map reassessment, and field surveys to employ women and professional workers.⁶⁵

The county itself sponsored a large number of projects very similar to those initiated by its individual municipalities. Over the course of the year, the county Board of Supervisors sponsored a total of 16 projects with work designed for manual laborers, professional class individuals, and women.⁶⁶ Manual laborers in both cities and rural areas were provided with projects for the repair of county roads, especially farm-to-market roads, not included in the Federal Aid System, for the landscaping and improving of county highways along with adjacent public property, operation of gravel pits, sidewalk improvement, and the rehabilitation of cemeteries.⁶⁷ These workers were also tasked with providing aid to affected communities in the direct aftermath of July 1935 flooding.⁶⁸ For former clerical and professional workers, the county sponsored a number of projects created in an effort to accommodate the specific skill sets these workers

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid. The Federal-Aid System was a network of highways whose maintenance and updating was already accounted for under the Federal-Aid Highway Program started under the Wilson Administration in 1916.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

offered. Jobs offered for these workers ranged from the inventory and classification of “all public records of county, town, village and public collections” to resurveys of county and town lines, to brainstorming of how to revitalize “the normal flow of private capital” in order to kindle recovery in employment in “building and allied trades.”⁶⁹ For what was considered women’s work, the county sponsored countywide sewing room operations as well as nursing and bedside services for those on relief within the county.⁷⁰ Beyond the county, in the field of education the state sponsored emergency nursery school programs and, recognizing the special needs of out-of-the-way rural children, stipulated for the provision of social services to students in rural school districts.⁷¹ These projects highlight the still keen awareness of varying citizen needs at the county level, recognizing the universal needs of work for unemployed unskilled, professional and female laborers while understanding that residents of rural and urban communities each face different daily problems than the other.

Additional projects, designed by the individual municipalities in which they functioned, highlight the benefit of the WPA’s flexibility on the local level to allow town supervisors to sponsor projects distinctively beneficial to their localities.⁷² Improvements made to the County Home Farm by the Town of Fonda and the construction of a hangar and administrative buildings at the Fort Plain Airfield epitomize uniquely rural projects enabled by the set up, with farm improvements only possible in municipalities where farming was possible and the construction of the hangar and administrative buildings

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Additional projects including, but not limited to fire lane construction, stone quarry operation, and gravel-crushing plants are also representative of the phenomenon. Ibid.

serving to increase Fort Plain's connection to larger communities.⁷³ On the flipside, the arrangement also enabled more urban centers like Amsterdam to engage in projects specific to their own needs. On September 4th 1935, Amsterdam's Mayor Carter swayed the city Common Council to approve the submission of a project application to the WPA requesting funds for the construction of both a new water filtration plant and new incinerator complex.⁷⁴ While it is unclear whether or not these projects were ever approved or completed, the freedom to draft and apply for such facilities testifies to the manner in which the malleable sponsorship procedures of the WPA benefitted mixed rural/urban regions like upstate New York.⁷⁵

Throughout the rest of upstate New York, projects proceeded in much the same manner as occurred in Montgomery County. A large amount of work done in rural New York communities during the fall of 1935 was designed by those municipalities in response to severe flooding during summer flooding during July of 1935. Efforts in Broome, Chenango, Cortland, Delaware, Otsego, Sullivan, Tioga, and Tompkins Counties, District 8 of the upstate New York WPA, focused on flood abatement and prevention in order to ensure the viability of vital farm-to-market roads closed after the floods of 1935.⁷⁶ The maintenance and protection of farm-to-market roads was of paramount importance for these western counties, with agricultural production accounting for the majority share of the region's economic output. A large supplier of milk and dairy products for major northeastern cities, the combined fluid milk output of

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ "Mayor Gets Authority To Ask Government Grants For Filtration and Incinerator," *The Amsterdam Evening Recorder*, Sept 4, 1935.

⁷⁵ This early ambition in city-specific projects was not limited to Montgomery County, Schenectady, NY proposed to the WPA a low-cost housing project to provide shelter to the city's working poor. "Fate of City Housing Project Yet In Dark," *The Schenectady Gazette*, September 21, 1935. Pg. 14.

⁷⁶ Lester W Herzog. *WPA in the Susquehanna Country*. (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936)

District 8 totaled 1,984,479,000 pounds in 1934.⁷⁷ To protect the lines of transit for milk shipments the counties in the district prepared projects for creek bed clearance, construction of new banks and dikes and reforestation.⁷⁸ In Ontario County, by late November between 300 and 400 men were engaged in projects ranging from roadwork on farm-to-market highways such as the Phelps-Mott, Hopewell-Curran and Smith-Wass roads, to waterproofing and lining at the Phelps Reservoir, facilities improvements at Kershaw Park and expansion of fencing at State farm located within the county.⁷⁹ In Montgomery, Schoharie and Ontario counties a statewide project for the control of malaria allocated funds to fill in swamps and manage wetlands in order to completely eradicate the disease in the region.⁸⁰

Beyond manual labor, the state and its municipalities devised a large number of projects designed to supply employment opportunities for women and white-collar workers. By the mid-1930's approximately 11% of individuals on relief in upstate New York belonged to the professional class.⁸¹ As such, in a similar manner to construction and infrastructural projects, professional projects both created work for a particular unemployed population and utilized the skills of that population for the general betterment of the region. Across New York, state and county projects provided projects in the fields of education, clerical work, nursing and recreation. On August 26th the New

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ "Dibble Pledges Full Relief for Workers: 'Big Skeeter' Fund," *The Canandaigua Daily Messenger*, November 22, 1935.

⁸⁰ 111,000 allocated to Canandaigua for "mosquito control" measures in swamps or along the shores of Lake Canandaigua; 111,454 for Montgomery and Schoharie counties—\$84,985 to Montgomery, \$26,469 to Schoharie. "Grant To Curb Malaria Poser For Officials," *The Schenectady Gazette*, November 17, 1935; "Leading Events of The Past Week In The Surrounding Counties," *The Otsego Farmer*, November 25, 1935; "Dibble Pledges Full Relief for Workers: 'Big Skeeter' Fund," *The Canandaigua Daily Messenger*, November 22, 1935.

⁸¹ Lester Herzog, *Women's and Professional Projects*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936).

York State WPA announced a new \$4,495,089 program of adult education for the state. Employment was provided for thousands of teachers and recreational workers, and classes were conducted in literacy for “illiterates and foreign born adults,” “commerce, industry, technical work, art, agriculture and home making, general cultural subjects and hobbies.”⁸² In addition to adult education classes, at least 25 towns and cities throughout the state provided “emergency nursery schools” for the continuation of student education as well as for the disbursement of social services to attending children in areas where these essential amenities were unavailable or rare as a result of the Depression.⁸³ The WPA also employed 600 relief-eligible graduate and registered nurses in a state wide nursing program, active across all upstate counties. The program provided aid for 450,000 families in New York, offering healthcare to “800,000 children under 16 years of age, bedside nursing of the unemployed sick in almost half a million families, health supervision to prevent sickness,” and prenatal care for expecting mothers. The work conducted under these programs again testifies to the exhaustive quality of the early WPA in the upstate New York region.⁸⁴

By December of 1935 the trend of upstate Works Progress Administration activities was overwhelmingly positive. According to WPA publications, during the first half of November the number of active projects and employees in District 8 jumped by

⁸² “New Project In State To Take Up Unemployed,” *The Canandaigua Daily Messenger*, August 26, 1935; Lester Herzog, *Women's and Professional Projects*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936).

⁸³ Schools were located in Saratoga Springs, Albany, Amsterdam, Hudson, Canajoharie, Schenectady, Poughkeepsie, Beacon, Millbrook, Yonkers, Tuckahoe, Peekskill, Little falls, Oswego, Ogdensburg, Canton, Potsdam, Syracuse, Ithaca, Ludlowville, Rochester, Geneseo, Niagara Falls, Buffalo and Lackawanna. “State Ends WPA Nursery Schools,” *The Rome Daily Sentinel*, December 26, 1935; “Little Falls, Canajoharie Nursery Schools Closed by Education Division Order,” *The Gloversville Morning Herald*, December 27, 1935; Lester Herzog, *Women's and Professional Projects*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936).

⁸⁴ “WPA Includes Nursing Care in New Program For Needy in State,” *The Canandaigua Daily Messenger*, December 4, 1935; Lester Herzog, *Women's and Professional Projects*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936).

46 projects and 1,202 persons, from 70 and 1,700 at the beginning of the month, and to 116 and 2,902 by its midpoint.⁸⁵ On November 12th, the upstate New York WPA announced that as of November 2nd a total of 33,445 individuals employed by the works program upstate, compared to 223,125 employed in New York City and a total 1,007,208 employed nationwide.⁸⁶ As of December 15th, virtually all employable individuals on relief rolls in upstate New York had been removed and were engaged by WPA work projects, with 169 projects in operation and 3,843 individuals on the books.⁸⁷ In Montgomery County, outside of the city of Amsterdam, between September and October of 1935, 116 relief clients were taken off of rolls and added to WPA projects. Further, in February of 1935 a total of 562 residents of Montgomery County (outside of the city of Amsterdam), received home relief and/or work relief. Following two months of steady WPA employment in September and October, home relief cases declined by almost 50%, to just 306 cases as individuals left relief rolls in part for jobs on the WPA.⁸⁸ Though some critics of the WPA have claimed that, even during this period, the program never employed enough people, it remains that those certified as employable for the purposes of WPA work were indeed employed with the WPA in these instances. From the information that is available, it is evident that, as the organization itself stated in retrospect in 1936 regarding its activity in District 8, during 1935 the Works Progress Administration in upstate New York “moved swiftly toward the accomplishment of its purpose.”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Lester W Herzog. *WPA in the Susquehanna Country*. (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936)

⁸⁶ “State Leads In WPA Workers,” *The Schenectady Gazette*, 11/13/1935

⁸⁷ Lester W Herzog. *WPA in the Susquehanna Country*. New York: Works Progress Administration. 1936.

⁸⁸ “Report of Montgomery County Home Relief,” *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1935* (Fonda, New York: 1935), 130

⁸⁹ Lester W Herzog. *WPA in the Susquehanna Country*. New York: Works Progress Administration. 1936.

Despite this apparent success, however, by the end of 1935 a number of problems small and large still existed in aspects of the upstate relief structure. Perhaps the largest of these problems was significant disconnect between perceived and actual regional project-related needs as conceived by federal administrators. For instance, as previously mentioned the Federal government drafted and approved a statewide malaria and mosquito eradication project designed to remove the disease from upstate New York. However, according to relief administrators in several of the communities who received funding for anti-malaria projects, malaria had never been a problem in their areas. District health officer of the State Department of Health Dr. James S. Walton of Amsterdam informed reporters of the *Schenectady Gazette* during November of 1935 that there was “no necessity for such a program in Montgomery County” as in the few years before the projects there had been “only a few cases” of malaria known in the region, and none considered to be out of the ordinary.⁹⁰ In fact, *The Otsego Farmer* from Cooperstown New York reported that no officials in either Montgomery or Schoharie County were aware of any presence of malaria bearing mosquitoes in either county.⁹¹ What’s more, these disbursements were often made without consultation of local authorities previous to their approval. In Montgomery County, Dr. Walton was quoted at stating that he personally had no knowledge of a grant having been made for malaria control, and “as far as he knew,” one had not been requested by a local sponsor.”⁹² In both cases, those federal employees who drafted the project were out of touch with on-the-ground conditions regarding malaria, and created a project of little to no value for

⁹⁰ “Grant To Curb Malaria Poser For Officials,” *The Schenectady Gazette*, November 17th, 1935.

⁹¹ “Leading Events of The Past Week In The Surrounding Counties,” *The Otsego Farmer*, November 29th, 1935.

⁹² “Grant To Curb Malaria Poser For Officials,” *The Schenectady Gazette*, November 17th, 1935;

many of the areas it touched. While the cases in Montgomery and Schoharie counties are not enough to prove widespread misjudgment of local needs in the Federal government, it is important to understand the problem did exist.

Beyond simply creating ineffective projects, conflict between the federal government and state/local institutions also had the capacity to create bureaucratic gridlock within the state's relief structure. Disputes between the federal government and existing departments of the New York state government resulted in occasional roadblocks for projects in the state. In one instance, disagreement over wage rates for educators in WPA emergency nursery schools resulted in the December 26th shut down of WPA schools and parent education classes in twenty-five cities throughout the state.⁹³ For six months prior to the shut down, negotiations between the State Department of Education and the WPA attempted to establish a compromise between the high prevailing wage for New York teachers and greatly reduced wage advocated by Works Progress Administration officials. Under the WPA, potential educators would make 50% below average pay rates offered to New York teachers in periods of normal economic activity.⁹⁴ Further, the wage rate arranged under the WPA was even 25% lower than the lawful minimum wage required for rural elementary school teachers, the lowest paid in the state.⁹⁵ Assistant Commissioner for Elementary Education Dr. J. Cayce Morrison articulated the state's case against the WPA rates, arguing that the salary level fixed by the WPA for supervisors were far too low for the hiring of adequate staff.⁹⁶ However the WPA would not budge and alleged that it would run the schools entirely independently if

⁹³ "State Ends WPA Nursery Schools," *The Rome Daily Sentinel*, December 26th, 1935.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

the state would not comply. As state institutions like the Department of Education took time to adjust to WPA presence throughout 1936, clashing ideologies ensured at least some level of friction as a result of the WPA's new and different policies.

Beyond these larger administrative and oversight related issues, a series of smaller problems also met the upstate WPA in its first months. First, protests over wage rates and hiring practices signaled that not all unemployed or relief-receiving individuals were taken care of or satisfied by the WPA. In mid-December, in Catskill, NY, WPA employees planned a protest in response to an administration ruling stating that “only men on relief from May to November” were eligible for WPA jobs. The men, who in their own words had “toiled hard for five years to stay off of federal relief and to keep self respect,” as a result of the ruling were to lose employment with the Works Progress Administration for the immediate future. As a result, the workers resolved to demonstrate against a decision that they interpreted as a failing on the part of the government to respect their ill-fated attempts at earning an honest living.⁹⁷ On December 3rd, representatives of organized labor in upstate New York held a 75-delegate conference to seek a statewide strike of all WPA projects unless demands for an assured prevailing wage (as opposed to a security wage) were met or unless a meeting was secured on the matter with New York State Governor Lehman and President Roosevelt.⁹⁸ The resulting strike lasted seven weeks between December of 1935 and January of 1936, resulting in declared but uncertain victory for those skilled workers agitating for explicitly defined

⁹⁷ “WPA Employees Plan to Hold Protest Meeting,” *The Canandaigua Daily Messenger* December 12th, 1935, page 1.

⁹⁸ “Organized Labor To Seek Wage Conference,” *The Canandaigua Daily Messenger* December 23rd, 1935, page 1.

prevailing wages.⁹⁹ These issues show a larger disjunction between those upstate workers eligible for work with the WPA and the larger body of unemployed individuals.

These issues were supplemented by inter-county disputes over contributions towards particular programs and disagreements over the viability of the new relief set up. In Ontario County, two separate conflicts over relief spending drove a wedge between members of that county's Board of Supervisors. The first conflict developed out of an August 15th dispute over a potential \$6,000 bond issue to fund the completion of completion of a particular park program under the WPA.¹⁰⁰ The second quarrel arose from a November 21st disagreement over the creation of a \$3,500 fund for the establishment of a county 4-H Department summer camp not located within the county.¹⁰¹ In each instance the proposed project created substantial rifts between Board of Supervisor members in that county as a result of ideological differences regarding the appropriateness of funding non-infrastructural programs under a work-relief program.

In spite of the swift achievements accomplished by the WPA between August and December of 1935, it is evident that some community leaders still had serious doubts about the ability of the WPA to successfully accomplish its self-professed goal of eliminating work relief as a local responsibility.¹⁰² Writing in November of 1935, the Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County clearly had, even after several months of WPA work, substantial reservations about the capability of the organization to lift the burden of relief from the shoulders of local governmental structures. In fact, some

⁹⁹ "WPA Strike End Sighted," *The Rochester Democrat-Chronicle*, January 13, 1936. Pg. 1.

¹⁰⁰ "Council Calls Referendum on \$6,000 Bond Issue For Kershaw Park Completion," *Canandaigua Daily Messenger* August 15th, 1935.

¹⁰¹ "Supervisors In Free-For-All Over \$3,500 Fund for Summer Camp for 4-H Club," *The Canandaigua Daily Messenger* November 21, 1935

¹⁰² "Report of Montgomery County Home Relief," *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1935* (Fonda, New York: 1935), 131-132.

individuals worried what might happen should the WPA fail to employ as many unemployed individuals as formerly done on work relief projects. If this was the case, many individuals predicted that the program would then increase the burden on communities by raising the amount of home relief cases within their boundaries.¹⁰³ Among county officials, concern mounted over the potential negative effects of relief on families and their children. In particular, fears of the capacity for “prolonged idleness” and “made work” to ruin work habits and “destroy health and initiative” fueled skepticism towards the new relief structure. These issues considered, it is no surprise that county leaders feared the possible short and long-term social and financial implications of a decrease in work-relief and increase in home-relief, should the WPA fail to engage at least as many workers as had previously been employed.¹⁰⁴ By the end of 1935, the WPA’s flexible sponsorship structure and direct federal funding enabled ample adjustment of work projects across the varied landscape of upstate New York. While doubts regarding the ability of the program still lingered in the minds of supervisors and administrators in some regions of the state as a result of bureaucratic deadlock and complete federal control over wages and budgetary concerns, the first year of the WPA set the stage for an explosion of new projects and reduction of relief rolls in 1936.

¹⁰³ “Report of Montgomery County Home Relief,” *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1935* (Fonda, New York: 1935), 131

¹⁰⁴ “Report of Montgomery County Home Relief,” *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1935* (Fonda, New York: 1935), 131, 132.

Chapter 4: The Rise and Fall of the WPA in Upstate New York, 1936-1943

By June 30th of 1943, the United States little resembled the nation it had been at onset of the Great Depression. Twelve and a half years on from Black Tuesday and the stock market crash that heralded the start of hard times, neither the the military, nor the political landscape, nor the economic situation of the United States bore even a passing resemblance the Pre-Depression U.S. The once-staunchly isolationist the United States in June of 1943 was less than two weeks away from the commencement of “Operation Husky,” a full scale Allied invasion of the island of Sicily and Southern Italy. After a year and a half of war in both the Atlantic and the Pacific, U.S. troops started the long march north towards Germany and Berlin that would help lead to the European war’s culmination two years later with the surrender of Berlin in the spring of 1945. On the home front, in little over a year the United States would elect to an unprecedented fourth term the man who had served as its Commander in Chief since 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt—a man who during his time in office expanded the size, economic role and power of the federal government in ways that could at the start of his presidency never had been conceived of by most mainstream politicians and citizens. However, the most noteworthy event of that early summer day in 1943 pertained not to the U.S. global presence or its President but to that President’s program which since had 1935 revolutionized relief and placed new public works in every American community. On June 30th, 1943, the Works Progress Administration closed its doors.¹ Expending approximately \$13,000,000,000 between August 1935 and June 1943, the WPA

¹ James Thrasher, “Last Project: WPA Buries Itself,” *Olean Times-Herald*, June 24, 1943. Page 1.

employed over 8,500,000 workers nationally.² In its era, the WPA create and rehabilitated countless miles of roadways throughout the nation, served over one billion school lunches to children of destitute families, and among other projects drained over 15,000 miles of malarial land. But on June 30th, all of these works came to an end. The WPA received, as President Roosevelt phrased it, the “honorable discharge” which it had earned.³

In upstate New York, the record of the Works Progress Administration by 1943 represented a state-level microcosm of those successes accomplished by the program nationally. From 1936 to the program’s demise in 1943, administrators of New York’s WPA built heavily on what had been accomplished by the program between August and December of 1935. During this period, New York State, its counties and municipalities developed projects tailored to the disparate occupational and communal needs of upstate cities and municipalities first addressed by the program in 1935. Flush with heavy appropriations from large relief spending bills passed through Congress in 1936, 1937 and to an extent 1938 the WPA was able to adequately lift the bulk of work relief expenditures from the shoulders of municipal accounts and place them on the back of the federal system. Despite the constant presence of internal and external difficulties that often frustrated the WPA’s progress, prior to 1939 the administration was largely able to accomplish its primary economic objectives.

However, by late 1938 and 1939, sustained cuts to the WPA’s operating budget, fundamental alterations to the program’s guiding regulations, and rising politicization of the relief program resulted in slowly increasing local welfare costs and increased unrest

² Ibid.

³ Ibid; “WPA Gets Honorable Discharge,” *The Troy Record*, May 3, 1943.

among upstate localities. After a turbulent 1939 and early 1940, the rise of war industries in the state of New York catalyzed a rebirth of the WPA, reoriented the administration towards the accomplishment of largely defense-oriented initiatives. Spurring the WPA along until mid 1943, the defense industries in upstate New York provided the WPA with a period of redemption before finally rendering the service unnecessary in by June of that year. Despite the disastrous effect of Federal cuts to the WPA through the late 1930's, the program nevertheless left a legacy of unprecedented federal public investment that produced results still visible today.

As warm weather returned to upstate New York in the spring of 1936, cities, towns and counties resumed work on WPA projects put on hold when cold weather descended on the state in December of the previous year. Large projects begun in September, October and November of 1935 were revived for the spring 1936 construction season. These projects provided the base of WPA work for the first half of the year, receiving new local and federal allocations. Containing more detailed instructions than their 1935 predecessors, these works continued to solidify the principles of what constituted a worthy project. For example, the East End Park project in Amsterdam, New York, evolved from simply "completion of athletic field" in 1935, to "Completion of athletic field, including construction of tennis courts, ball diamonds, running track and appurtenances on publicly owned property" in April of 1936.⁴ Similarly, in 1935 the Amsterdam Municipal Golf Course received an initial appropriation of \$51,742 and operated on the basic instruction to "construct municipal

⁴ Microfilm, "Works Progress Administration Central Office Starting Target, Reel 10, Reference Card Location Project File E.R.A. Acts 1935-1938," FDRL; Lester W Herzog. *WPA In The Capital District*. (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936)

golf course."⁵ In April of 1936 the initial appropriation grew by \$20,000, and the project description evolved to include "Construction of 18 hole municipal golf course, located adjacent to the northerly boundary line of the city; 181.4 acres have been acquired by the city" for this purpose.⁶ Finally, in October of 1936 the official project description for the Municipal Golf Course advanced to read: "Improve municipal golf course, construct parking space, tennis courts, rustic bridges, chain link fence, grass nursery, Improve creek, alter existing building for tool storage and remove old stone walls," receiving \$48,600 in supplementary funds to accomplish the newly articulated goals.⁷ These projects not only continued and evolved initiatives started and halted in 1935, but also reaffirmed the idea that WPA projects should be of "the greatest use" to the communities in which they were conducted.

Across the state, the pattern displayed in Amsterdam presented itself through the continuation of projects that not only accommodated the specific needs of their host communities, but also advanced along the program's developmental trajectory established by the projects approved in 1935. Expenditures within first six months of 1936 fell overwhelmingly on desperately needed projects updating local infrastructures across upstate New York. Allocations for roadwork included both repairs to city streets like those in Amsterdam which received additional funds to continue to widen intersections and grade, curb, resurface and pave portions of the city's downtown area; and for repair on rural routes like County roads #75-2 and #103 outside the towns of

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Florida and Fonda.⁸ Similarly, sanitary work and flood control projects received additional funding to continue work on critical infrastructural projects unable to be pursued through the winter. In this vein, projects constructing new water supplies, water lines and sewer systems as well as deepening flood-prone creeks within the villages of Palatine, Canajoharie and St. Johnsville were revived in April of 1936.⁹ Funds were also furnished for the maintenance of sewing rooms established in 1935 as well as for the continuation of nursery school operations and surveys for tax assessment purposes in Canajoharie and Amsterdam.¹⁰ With infrastructural projects providing work for manual laborers and white-collar projects supplying out of work professionals with employment, the projects continued in early 1936 laid the blueprint for the direction that the WPA would travel as moved forward.

The work undertaken in New York State in 1936 composed a loose catalogue of project types and project goals which in large part governed the approval of funds for proposed works through the better portion of the Administration's formative years. Apparent in both volume of projects and size of disbursements, infrastructural improvements to the roads, bridges, sewage, water delivery systems and flood control arrangements in urban and rural communities throughout the state comprised the bulk of work conducted in New York. Outdated and outmoded roadways both inside and outside village spaces received considerable attention through 1936. City streets, like Bird Road in the Town of Manchester in Ontario County, were widened graded, curbed, resurfaced

⁸ Microfilm, "Works Progress Administration Central Office Starting Target, Reel 10, Reference Card Location Project File E.R.A. Acts 1935-1938," FDRL.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

and paved to ensure easier, smoother travel through town.¹¹ In some communities, like St. Johnsville in western Montgomery County, municipal street improvements of this kind were pursued with such vigor that by the end of 1937, virtually 100% of village streets were paved with new macadam topping.¹² In the state's rural expanses the improvement of farm-to-market trunk ways solidified itself as a chief concern for most upstate communities. Highways of this kind, often seasonal at best up to this point, were grubbed, widened, ditched, resurfaced, and in many cases completely re-routed to reduce dangerous curves and steep grades as well as to ensure year-round accessibility.¹³ In Greene County, a largely rural region of New York with no cities and only a single incorporated village, by mid-1936 enjoyed 39 miles of new farm-to-market thoroughfares were constructed and 115 miles rebuilt.¹⁴ In Schoharie County, a region referred to by WPA administrators as a "wild and exceedingly rough expanse," 44.1 miles of new roads were constructed by the mid-point of 1936.¹⁵ In the Town of Maryland, Crumhorn Road, a rural school bus route impassable in the winter and spring, was improved for all season use.¹⁶ These projects were so beloved by local residents that at times citizen groups banded together to sponsor the projects on their own dime. For example, in Parksville in Sullivan County, citizens banded together to raise monies to put up the sponsor share and right of way costs for the Parksville-Cooley road, a route meant to "open a large country region heretofore inaccessible much of the year." The residents of the town organized a

¹¹ "Bird Road Widening as Project Approved," *The Canandaigua Daily Messenger*, February 25, 1936.

¹² "Parking Lot Work Started," *The St. Johnsville Enterprise*, November 10, 1937

¹³ Lester Herzog, *WPA In The Capital District*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*; Lester Herzog, *WPA In The Susquehanna Country*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936).

town dance in order to raise these funds, gathering \$1,140 in total.¹⁷ All across the state, roads formerly plagued by wagon tracks, winding paths up and down steep hills, deep gullies, boulders and “old fashioned ‘turn-outs’ popular 50 years prior” to the WPA’s work were replaced by modern roadways that, according to WPA reports circulated in the summer of 1936, created an “estimable boon to farmers and dairymen.”¹⁸

Ranking near equal in popularity to roadwork, water network and sanitation projects were identified as chief objectives of upstate community leaders through the volume of projects approved dedicated to the modernization of such systems. By the late 1930’s a significant number of upstate municipalities lagged behind the capabilities of modern technologies in the areas of water delivery and sanitation. As a result these projects flooded communities across the region and by mid-1936 came to represent a considerable proportion of the total workload of the upstate WPA. In relatively rural locales like Palatine Bridge, prior to the WPA, some villages still lacked adequate in-home water supplies. To remedy this, Palatine Bridge sponsored a project constructing a new water supply for the township, installing a 300,000 gallon covered concrete reservoir complete with pump house and new pipe lines to the village.¹⁹ This new water supply enabled the city to for the first time provide its residents with adequate fire protection and home service. In cities like Oneonta where water sources had already been long established, water provision was improved through the addition of supplementary spillways to reservoirs already in operation.²⁰ The Albany WPA erected what became the

¹⁷ “Construction Underway On Farm-To-Market Road,” *Middletown Times Herald*, September 14, 1936.

¹⁸ For additional information on farm-to-market roads, see Appendix II.

¹⁹ Lester Herzog, *WPA In The Capital District*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936); Microfilm, “Works Progress Administration Central Office Starting Target, Reel 10, Reference Card Location Project File E.R.A. Acts 1935-1938,” FDRL.

²⁰ Lester Herzog, *WPA In The Susquehanna Country*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936).

crown jewel of reservoir projects in the region. The “Basin C Albany Water Works System,” the completion of a trinity of storage reservoirs just outside Loudonville, provided the city with a maximum 93,000,000 gallons of water, greatly enhanced the water delivery capabilities of the city and ensured a satisfactory water supply for city residents through the 21st century.²¹ These water delivery projects were accompanied by upgrades to the region’s aging sanitary systems, and in large municipalities like Amsterdam, Cortland, Delmar, Troy as well as in rural communities including Catskill, Cairo, Athens and Hagaman, new sanitary and storm sewers were installed town-wide.²² Established industrial centers like Binghamton simply sought to prevent rainwater refuse from becoming a public health menace, and up-and-coming municipalities like Kingston installed storm sewers and pump stations in order to open land for new residential development.²³

Outside of these major infrastructural projects, the WPA moved its agenda in the direction of more general community development. Despite federal restrictions on the Administration’s potential involvement in non-public endeavors, enterprising townships devised ways to increase the economic viability of their municipalities and to attract business and employment opportunities to their areas. In the village of St. Johnsville, community leaders given a portion of the old Union Mills building by town resident Joseph H. Reaney, separated the newly public portion of the mill from the still private

²¹ Upgrades to the reservoir did not occur until 2013. Lester Herzog, *WPA In The Capital District*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936); Rick Karlin, Dam Safety Program Advocated,” *The Albany Times Union Online*. April 11, 2013.

²² Lester Herzog, *WPA In The Susquehanna Country*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936); Lester Herzog, *WPA In The Capital District*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936); “WPA Project In Watershed.” *The St. Johnsville Enterprise*. January 8th, 1936.

²³ Lester Herzog, *WPA In The Susquehanna Country*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936); Lester Herzog, *WPA In The Capital District*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936).

segment with a brick wall erected by the WPA in January of 1936.²⁴ In May, the town then used WPA funds to renovate the building into a space attractive to potential manufacturing operations, and in 1937 rented the public space to a private dress manufacturer, employing over 44 men on WPA work and bringing 200 new jobs to the village, according to local sources.²⁵ In Kingston, Ulster County, town authorities advanced a WPA project resulting in the construction of a three-story brick Pathological Laboratory located on the grounds of the Kingston Hospital. The laboratory served all hospitals and health departments in the city of Kingston and generated new science-related jobs in the community and potentially provided employment for WPA registered nurses.²⁶

Apart more economically driven operations, cities and villages across the state sponsored a large number of projects aimed simply at improving the aesthetics of their towns, providing increased entertainment and recreation opportunities for their residents. All sizes of townships engaged in the rehabilitation of public properties including firehouses, city halls, schools, sports complexes and even public parks. In the large city of Albany, renovations were made to the Capitol Building, the Governor's Mansion, the State Education Building, and even to public health facilities like the Hall Mansion Solarium for the rehabilitation of undernourished children and the Albany public baths whose facilities were used to help offer therapy to paralytic individuals according to the

²⁴ "Local Briefs," *The St. Johnsville Enterprise*. January 8th, 1936;]

²⁵ "WPA To Make Improvements In Local Mill," *The St. Johnsville Enterprise*. May 6th, 1936; "WPA Approves Projects Here," *The St. Johnsville Enterprise*. January 13th, 1937.

²⁶ Lester Herzog, *WPA In The Capital District*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936); Lester Herzog, *The WPA in Massena*. (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936); Microfilm, "Works Progress Administration Central Office Starting Target, Reel 10, Reference Card Location Project File E.R.A. Acts 1935-1938," FDRL Beyond these instances of economic improvement, in Fonda authorities submitted and received approval on an application for the creation of a reinforced concrete shop to provide workspace for barge canal employees, and in Fort Plain and Massena air fields were developed and improved in order to encourage business travel in and out of the communities.

same methods practiced in Warm Springs for President Roosevelt.²⁷ In the rural townships of Middleburgh and Sharon Springs, the WPA constructed athletic facilities surrounding the communities' public schools, and in Fort Plain the WPA erected a bandstand in the center of town for the hosting of public concerts and entertainment events.²⁸

In order to protect the new developments of the WPA and defend municipalities against regular destruction, flood control cemented itself as a major project priority following intense statewide flooding during the summer of 1935 and the spring of 1936. In locations ranging from tiny Dolgeville to the whole of New York WPA District 8, floodwalls were erected, streambeds cleared, new banks and dikes constructed, and reforestation efforts undertaken in order to mitigate any future damage from episodes of severe rainfall.²⁹ By 1936 flood control had become such a hallmark of the upstate WPA, that when President Roosevelt toured central New York in August of that year, he enlisted future Administration Director Col. F.C. Harrington to ensure arrangements were made to visit WPA flood control projects throughout the region.³⁰

Beyond projects for unskilled laborers, the program in upstate New York moved through 1936 in the direction of increased and diversified professional projects for the employment of formerly white-collar individuals. According to administration figures

²⁷ Lester Herzog, *WPA In The Capital District*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936); "Works Progress Administration Central Office Starting Target, Reel 10, Reference Card Location Project File E.R.A. Acts 1935-1938," FDRL; "WPA Approves Projects Here," *The St. Johnsville Enterprise*. January 13th, 1937.

²⁸ Lester Herzog, *WPA In The Capital District*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936); "Bandstand To Be Erected In Fort Plain as WPA Project," *The St. Johnsville Enterprise*. April 29th, 1936.

²⁹ "New WPA Wall In Dolgeville," *The St. Johnsville Enterprise*. June 6, 1937; Lester Herzog, *WPA In The Susquehanna Country*. (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936);

³⁰ Telephone conversation, Col. Harrington to Mr. Herzog, 8/10/1936, Box 76, Folder: "FERA-WPA Transcripts of Telephone Conversations with State Relief Directors and Other Officials, 1934-1938, New York—North Dakota," Hopkins Collection, FDRL.

³⁰ Ibid.

published in 1936, by midway through the WPA's second year approximately 11% of individuals occupying relief rolls in upstate New York carried with them backgrounds in "expensively acquired skills" in non-physical works including engineering, dentistry, library sciences and many other professional-class vocations.³¹ Operating on this information and under the belief that it was "economically unsound and socially undesirable" to place professionals on working class projects, lest their carefully learned skills and morale disintegrate, the New York State WPA established a statewide network of projects oriented around utilizing white collar abilities and talents.³² The "Emergency Adult Education Program," furnished with \$4,000,000 in early 1936, by mid-year employed 3,150 teachers, recreation leaders and assistants in a variety of educational positions throughout the state. The program offered a diverse catalogue of classes for working-class individuals still unemployed as a result of the depression. Courses included literacy modules, "bread and butter courses" in the economic, sociological and political troubles of the era, worker classes in Utica, Syracuse, and Rochester designed to educate affected parties on the socio-economic forces of the depression, vocational training in skills attractive to potential employers, and even "Emergency Collegiate Centers" for young people unemployed and who could not afford college tuition.³³ Educators were pulled exclusively from relief rolls, were not required to have a teacher certification degree, and earned wages according to local WPA pay scales. In all, between its separate programs for vocational education, adult education, worker's education, education for the physically handicapped and Emergency Collegiate Centers, the Emergency Adult Education program served in 1936 upwards of 40,000 students each

³¹ Lester Herzog, *Women's and Professional Projects*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936).

³² Lester Herzog, *Women's and Professional Projects*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936).

³³ Emergency Adult Education Program statistics for summer 1936: See Appendix III.

day. In addition to its Emergency Adult Education Program, the state furnished employment for professional workers in nursing and teaching positions in its “State Education Department Nursery Schools;” in office and clerical positions conducting historical records surveys, tax surveys, and as stenographers, filing clerks, and secretaries; as musicians in Federal Music Program sponsored orchestras and bands, and even in 123 sewing-room projects throughout the state.³⁴ By the summer of 1936, the New York State WPA employed approximately 16,000 individuals on over 735 professional projects throughout the state.³⁵ In these professional pursuits as well as the state’s established devotion to infrastructural projects, it is evident that over the course of 1936 the upstate Works Progress Administration expanded outward from its roots planted in 1935, and matured into a program entrenched in specialized labor pursuits tailored to the region’s occupational and communal demands.³⁶

The growth of the WPA over 1936 did not occur without complication. Throughout the year, political disputes within the WPA’s administrative structure caused hiccups in the otherwise smooth development of WPA projects. As early as January, political posturing from groups not aligned with the Roosevelt Administration challenged the state and federal approach to relief in areas under their control. On January 13th, 300 white-collar WPA workers in Buffalo were released from city work sites as a result of their physical inability to adequately serve as foremen on construction projects. Following these dismissals, a Buffalo area political boss by the name of Carr, a Democrat not affiliated with the administration, contacted Harry Hopkins in an effort to reverse the dismissals. Further, Carr desired to secure for Buffalo an administrative set up

³⁴ Specific Program Statistics: See Appendix IV

³⁵ Lester Herzog, *Women's and Professional Projects*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936)

³⁶ All education programs, nursing programs, and arts programs came into existence under the WPA.

completely independent of the state WPA, an arrangement similar to that which had been arranged for New York City.³⁷ While the event did not result in any substantial changes to Buffalo's relief arrangement, the occasion nevertheless forced the administration to meet with the aggrieved individual along with the members of Buffalo's Common Council in an attempt to appease and settle the dissident parties.³⁸ What's more, when Hopkins and Region 1 Administrator Ray Branion realized that none of the individuals serving on the city council were political allies recognizable to WPA leaders in Albany, the pair made the decision to deal with a figure who was not part of the council as their point man on the issue. In this, the incident revealed a substantial disconnect between the federal WPA administration and non-Democrat, non-Roosevelt forces in control of regional WPA operations as well as potential disengagement between select federal and local WPA officials.³⁹ Beyond this dispute, disagreements regarding statewide pay rates and hours between New York State Administrator Lester Herzog and WPA Commissioner Hopkins, as well as finger pointing between municipal, county and state officials regarding delayed paycheck delivery in Canandaigua, Elmira and White Plains resulted in confusion and provided evidence of at times sub-par communication and cooperation between federal, state, and local authorities.⁴⁰

³⁷ Telephone conversation, Mr. Branion to Mr. Hopkins 1/13/1936, Box 76, Folder: "FERA-WPA Transcripts of Telephone Conversations with State Relief Directors and Other Officials, 1934-1938, New York—North Dakota," Hopkins Collection, FDRL.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Telephone Conversation, Mr. Hopkins to Mr. Branion, 1/11/1936. Box 76, Folder: "FERA-WPA Transcripts of Telephone Conversations with State Relief Directors and Other Officials, 1934-1938, New York—North Dakota," Hopkins Collection, FDRL; "Lynch Scores Failure to Provide Supplemental Aid in Relief Workers' Cases," *The Canandaigua Daily Messenger*. March 3rd, 1936; "Pay Checks Are Still Delayed, Albany Says Elmira Has Charge," *The Canandaigua Daily Messenger*. April 2nd, 1936; Telephone Conversation, Mr. Hopkins to Mr. Branion, 5/18/1936. Box 76, Folder: "FERA-WPA Transcripts of Telephone Conversations with State Relief Directors and Other Officials, 1934-1938, New York—North Dakota," Hopkins Collection, FDRL.

Along with administrative disputes, more diverse and localized difficulties plagued the upstate WPA throughout 1936. In July, extreme drought afflicted much of western and central New York, regularly bringing temperatures in excess of 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and causing “upstate crops already damaged by drought” to wilt and wither away under the extreme temperatures.⁴¹ Farmers, unable to physically bear the heat were forced out of their fields, leaving crops and milk production (estimated to be reduced by 50% as a result of the drought) “at a standstill or deteriorating” according to contemporary accounts from Cornell University.⁴² Supplementing the stress placed on the agricultural industry by the July drought, from August 31st to September 1st, milk strikes from farmers statewide protested the below-subsistence level pricing of milk sales in the state.⁴³ Despite work projects designed to aid in milk transport and the employment of farmers, the WPA had no mechanism for providing support for dairymen with pricing issues.⁴⁴ As such, these strikes highlighted a side of the depression in rural New York that the WPA could not help.

In addition to external issues, administrators with little knowledge about specific regional needs created significant distress for unemployed persons. For example, following the resignation of the WPA nurse for Oneida County, relief administrators refused to hire a new nurse to replace her despite desperate appeals from regional health professionals. Further, these same administrators insisted that local children did not need

⁴¹ “State is Hard Hit By Drought; Damage Heavy.” *The Canandaigua Daily Messenger*, July 9th 1936.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ “5,000 At A Rally Back Milk Strike: Farmers in Meeting Up-State Are Unanimously Willing to Shut Off Supplies,” *The New York Times*. August 31st, 1936; “Milk Strike Start In 10 Days Hinted: Piseck Brothers Predict That ‘Holiday’ Will Be 85 to 90% Effective In This State,” *The New York Times*, September 1st, 1936.

⁴⁴ Other New Deal programs, such as the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, did however exist to aid farmers. The WPA was not equipped or organized to handle the specific and unique needs of the farming community.

and should not receive WPA sponsored (and WPA nurse delivered) diphtheria vaccinations. This decision incensed local health officials who remained steadfast in the conviction that these vaccinations were critically important to child health in the county.⁴⁵ In addendum to local concerns, specific groups were often left in the dark regarding their fate in relation to employment status on WPA payrolls. Nowhere was this situation better defined than in the case of veteran enrollment in the summer of 1936. As the delivery of bonus checks owed to veterans of the First World War loomed in June of 1936, vets enrolled in the WPA were largely not informed as to changes in their relief status after checks were delivered.⁴⁶

As 1936 reached its close, the upstate WPA found itself in the midst of both fantastic growth and pointed criticism. As evidenced by a number of syndicated newspaper editorials selected for inclusion in regional papers throughout the state, individuals already pre-disposed to disagreement with state-sponsored relief in general disparaged the WPA's structure and its workers.⁴⁷ Detractors asserted that WPA workers were both lazy and greedy, while the program itself was wasteful and only enabled worker's negative attributes.⁴⁸ It was even asserted in some communities that WPA employment had actually caused acute labor shortages in sections of the state, with the *St. Johnsville Enterprise* publishing such a claim on Armistice Day of 1936. However, despite the presence of problems in each section of the New York, these problems were not universal across the state. Further, they in no way hindered the ability of the WPA to carry out its most basic economic goal, that is, putting people to work on useful projects

⁴⁵ "District Health Chief Questions Attitude on Refusal of WPA Nurse," *The Canandaigua Daily News*, September 4th, 1936.

⁴⁶ "Vets Awaiting Decision Over WPA Question," *The Utica Observer-Dispatch*, June 5th, 1936.

⁴⁷ B.C. Forbes, "Top-Notch WPA Pay Unfair to Other Workers," *Syracuse Journal*, September 11th, 1936.

⁴⁸ Dr. Lewis Haney, "WPA Demoralizes Labor Ranks," *Syracuse Journal*, September 11th, 1936.

in a manner which would lift the primary burden of work relief off of the community and place it on the federal relief structure.

By the end of 1936, the New York Works Progress Administration created a network of diverse projects across the state that accommodated the unique needs of sharply varying communities and populations. Beyond this, the work of the WPA also produced results that suggested substantial gains towards the Administration's desired economic ends. By halfway through 1936, across the nation the WPA had met the employment goals set by federal administrators at the program's outset.⁴⁹ The massive spending policies of the New Deal had, by 1936, resulted in a steady economic growth and continued decline in unemployment, falling to under 17% from its 1933 high of 24.9%.⁵⁰ This economic progress worked with WPA employment to create a better living situation for unemployed populations across upstate New York.

Reports from the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors on the relief situation in that county at the end of 1936 suggested substantial improvement of the relief situation by the end of the 1936 fiscal year. Following a peak of 378 cases in January, simultaneous to the county's lowest recorded period of WPA employment during that year, by August of 1936 all employable members of families receiving home relief in Montgomery County were employed on either PWA or WPA jobs.⁵¹ Through September a total of 285 workers in Montgomery County were removed from relief rolls as a result of WPA (and to a small extent Public Works Administration) employment. This increase in Works Progress Administration employment reduced the number of individuals on

⁴⁹ Taylor, *American-Made*, 213.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 315.

⁵¹ "Report of Montgomery County Home Relief," in *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1936* (Fonda, New York: 1936), 144.

home relief in the county to a meager 152 cases outside of Amsterdam from 350 at the same time the year before and 699 in February of 1934.⁵² In Frankfort, New York, at an April 10th meeting providing elaboration from state officials regarding the role of the WPA in the upstate region, representatives from the state administration praised the community for its outstanding efficiency in the disbursement of WPA relief to its needy population.⁵³ After lauding Frankfort, State Administrator Lester Herzog and state supervisor of personnel for the WPA Charles D. O'Neal proclaimed that approximately 90% of all employable persons on relief rolls in central New York by April of 1936 had been transitioned to work on WPA projects, thus lifting the bulk of potential work relief expenditures off of regional communities.⁵⁴ Even indirect employment, an area which Director Hopkins explicitly stated there would be no conscious push towards, gained as a result of the WPA's demand for materials. In the first six months of 1936 approximately \$38,500 went towards the purchase of materials for projects in Schenectady, with 137 vendors benefiting from increased demand.⁵⁵ In all, economic indicators depicted healthy growth and significant achievement for the upstate WPA through 1936. Fueled by the highest national relief appropriation of the WPA's up to that point, the nationally the WPA provided 3,036,000 jobs for the unemployed, a number not paralleled for the rest of the administration's operation.⁵⁶

⁵² Ibid; "Report of Montgomery County Home Relief," in *Proceedings of The Board of Supervisors of Montgomery County, 1935* (Fonda, New York: 1935). 132

⁵³ "WPA Official Lauds Set-Up at Frankfort," *The Utica Observer*, April 10th, 1936.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ "\$77,000 Paid Out by City to Buy Materials," *The Schenectady Gazette*, June 26th, 1936.

⁵⁶ Particular criticisms regarding projects not considered "worthwhile" were answered in 1936. In particular, Administrators fired back at remarks directed towards swamp drainage and malarial control projects, stating "Those persons with the abnormal sense of sarcasm who snickered loudly at swamp drainage projects and 'mosquito control' should have seen it," in reference to the situation before swamp drainage had been done. Lester W. Herzog, *WPA In The Susquehanna Country*. (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936).

But even as the WPA expanded across upstate New York through 1936, a trend of layoffs and administrative cutbacks was to soon follow. As a result of the program's national success and the positive economic growth that persisted through the first half of 1936, President Roosevelt was subjected to increasingly heavy pressure to reduce deficit spending in accordance with the disappearance of those conditions that had originally warranted it. The President outlined in early summer an agenda of national cutbacks to the WPA meant to eventually reduce the program's work by 25%. Starting in June, national WPA payrolls began to decrease substantially, down from 3,036,000 at the end of February to 2,268,542 on June 20th, the lowest level of enrollment since November of 1935.⁵⁷ In July, the president reduced the WPA's operating budget by a total of 25%. On August 25th, in a conversation to New York State Administrator Lester W. Herzog, Deputy National Director Aubrey Williams disclosed to Herzog orders from President Roosevelt to slash New York State expenditure by approximately \$1,000,000 through the end of the year and into 1937.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the president demanded that New York reduce its administrative overhead costs to a level Herzog believed simply impossible to attain.⁵⁹

Continuing the downward direction begun over the summer, on September 1st the federal WPA began an even deeper retrenchment program designed to cut WPA payrolls by 175,000 persons nationally.⁶⁰ Further curtailment of WPA works occurred in late October as a result of the coming winter. Seasonal shutdowns forced many workers

⁵⁷ "Employment Is Decreasing In Entire Nation," *The Canandaigua Daily Messenger*. July 9, 1936

⁵⁸ Telephone Conversation, Mr. Williams to Mr. Herzog, August 15, 1936. Box 36, Folder: "New York," Aubrey Williams Papers, FDRL.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ The target reduction, in monetary terms, was articulated to be a cut of \$65,000,000, placing the budget at approximately \$120,000,000. "Big Reduction In U.S. Relief Costs Is Seen," *The Buffalo Courier-Express*. December 3, 1936.

across upstate back onto home relief. In Binghamton alone this resulted in the placement of 125 former WPA employees back on relief rolls.⁶¹ In early December, WPA officials in Washington announced an intended 33 per cent reduction in federal relief costs for 1937.⁶² This reduction added to September's retrenchment goals through the release of 250,000 WPA workers receiving employment as a result of drought conditions over the month of December.⁶³ The final goal of these cuts would be the reduction of national WPA employment to 2,000,000 workers.⁶⁴ In municipalities throughout the state these cuts to federal relief monies meant significant increases in county welfare costs. Over the course of November, Ontario County in the Finger Lakes region of New York recorded a more than \$4,000 increase in welfare costs over the amount expended the previous month, a 26% increase in relief spending.⁶⁵ Asserting that the increase in costs came "in a large measure" as a result of the WPA's summer and fall retrenchment measures, County Welfare Commissioner Harry K. Dibble and Chairman of the Ontario County Board of Supervisors Horace K. Seybolt noted that the WPA would not be accepting any new project applications until February 1st, when the WPA would announce its future plans.⁶⁶ Further, individuals transferred to relief rolls from work project payrolls during the fall of 1936 would "not be reinstated for work on other WPA projects before February 1st at the earliest."⁶⁷ By mid December, New York had reduced the size of its WPA payroll to 96,900 persons, and administrators planned to reduce rolls further to

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² "Union Expects WPA Curb on Outdoor Work," *The Binghamton Press*. October 31, 1936.

⁶³ "Big Reduction In U.S. Relief Costs Is Seen," *The Buffalo Courier-Express*. December 3, 1936.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ "Increase in Welfare Costs in County Are Noted for November," *Canandaigua Daily Messenger*. December 17th, 1936.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

85,000 by mid January of 1937.⁶⁸ On New Year's Eve, 1936, the *Canandaigua Messenger* reported the elimination of Ontario County Manager of the WPA. As a result of these sustained cutbacks, the roadblocks born from fiscal limitations overshadowed the memory of the administration's accomplishments.

It is crucial to note, however, that in cases of political crisis, limited increases in job allotments were in fact possible. Take, for example, the occasion of the 1936 strike of Remington-Rand factory workers across upstate New York. The strike itself occurred during November and December of 1936. In sympathy with the striking workers a group of New York State Senators approached both Hopkins and Williams on the topic, placing heavy pressure on the pair to find WPA employment for all workers involved. Bending to these senators in an attempt to remain in the good graces of upstate political forces, Williams enlisted Herzog to try to find jobs for the now out-of-work men. Herzog and Williams contemplated maneuvering around restrictions in order to place the men (by and large individuals not certified for work with the WPA) on WPA jobs. While the event never came to an end that explicitly broke rules in order to place non-certified, non-relief individuals on work projects as a political favor, it nevertheless exhibited the capability for political forces to maneuver WPA policy for better opportunities for their constituents in spite of broader state and national trends and policies.⁶⁹

Through the winter and early spring of 1937, the spirit of spending reductions only grew. Though work resumed starting in January on select projects across the state,

⁶⁸ The telephone conversation between Herzog and Williams where this information was disclosed also states a WPA policy in New York of not providing newspapers with specific figures regarding reductions and ramp-ups, a policy that is very problematic for research on the topic given the lack of state-level WPA Records. Telephone Conversation, Mr. Williams to Mr. Herzog, December 11, 1936. Box 36, Folder: "New York," Aubrey Williams Papers, FDRL.

⁶⁹ Telephone Conversation, Mr. Williams to Mr. Herzog, December 1, 1936. Box 36, Folder: "New York," Aubrey Williams Papers, FDRL.

by March the national unemployment rate rose slightly after reaching a depression low of 14%, perhaps the result of the retrenchment begun six months earlier.⁷⁰ On April 10th the Roosevelt administration insisted on the absolute necessity of “substantial reductions in expenditure estimates” if the government held any hope of a balanced budget for 1938.⁷¹ The President himself, following an April meeting with governors and other representatives from six states articulated his desire to further whittle down WPA rolls through 1937 and 1938.⁷² On May 14th, the Administration began a new retrenchment initiative intended to remove 525,000 WPA workers from rolls by 1938 in an attempt to make funds go further. State WPA directors received instructions from Washington to compel communities to offer a larger portion of project costs moving forward through 1937. At the time of this announcement, National Director Hopkins warned Congress, certain elements of which demanded that the WPA receive only \$1,000,000,000 in 1937, that “dropping 525,000 persons from WPA rolls would be successful only if private industry could hire those dismissed from government projects,” a warning which by late 1937 would have a profound resonance for the President and Congressional leaders.⁷³ As news spread about the proposed cuts, all but two of the nation’s Governors joined together in steadfast opposition to any substantial deviation from the nation’s 1936-1937 \$2,000,000,000 per year scale for work relief expenditures. Why roll back the very measures that had catalyzed economic growth? However, inspired by bellwethers like declining unemployment, industrial output at near 1929 peak levels, and relatively increased farm income in July of 1937, President Roosevelt pushed through a

⁷⁰ Taylor, *American-Made*, 345.

⁷¹ “WPA Projects To Resume At St. Johnsville,” *Utica Observer-Dispatch*. January 10th, 1937. “Reduction In Federal Costs are Necessary,” *Canandaigua Daily Messenger*. April 10th, 1937.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ “Work Progress Cutting Plan Is Started,” *Canandaigua Daily Messenger*. May 14th, 1937.

appropriations act which allocated \$1.5 billion for all federal relief expenditures and stipulated an increase minimum sponsor shares from 9.8% to 20.8% by 1938.⁷⁴

The Relief Appropriation Act of 1937 had an almost immediate effect on upstate New York, as well as the nation as a whole. Administrative personnel across the state were quickly stripped from WPA rolls. Nationwide cuts beginning in July cuts removed 60,000 men and women from administrative positions with the WPA, with upstate cities like Syracuse seeing reductions occur as early as July 6th.⁷⁵ The July 1937 cuts in many ways proved an extension of those started a year prior, in July of 1936. Like those cutbacks, the 1937 reduction was reported to come as the result of “improved business conditions.” As WPA workers moved to jobs in private industry, corresponding cuts were made to the program’s administrative staff in order to shrink it to a size appropriate for the smaller WPA workforce.⁷⁶ Many county WPA offices across the state and country were closed as a result of the July cuts. While some, like that in Geneva, reopened shortly after initial diminutions were handed down, the bulk of those who shut their doors remained closed and shifted their case-load to state offices in Albany.⁷⁷

Nationally, by the end of 1937 the positive industrial growth that had ushered in the 1937 appropriation legislation had begun to sour. September brought with it sharp sell offs on the New York Stock Exchange; October, a 14 per cent drop in national industrial production. As the year progressed and the economic decline begun in late summer worsened, the relapse became known publicly as “The Roosevelt Recession.”

⁷⁴ “Governors Are Nearly Solid Against Cut,” *Canandaigua Daily Messenger*. April 14th, 1937; Taylor, *American Made*, 346-347.

⁷⁵ Andrew D. Theobald, “Flashes,” *Syracuse Journal*. July 6th 1937.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid; “WPA Office In Geneva Reopens,” *Canandaigua Daily Messenger*, July 9th, 1937.

As 1938 arrived, over two million Americans employed in private industry during the summer of 1937 found themselves once again out of work.⁷⁸

Despite the recession, through much of 1938 and even during the cuts of 1937 the work of the WPA in upstate New York maintained a steady rate of success. In the state's northwestern region, known as WPA Area Six, work conducted in Cayuga, Herkimer, Jefferson, Lewis, and Madison, Oneida, Oswego and St. Lawrence counties over the course of 1937 and 1938 typified that completed throughout the state in the same period. Between October of 1935 and October of 1938, approximately 751 projects were completed, released to and accepted by their sponsoring parties in Area Six.⁷⁹ The physical accomplishments of these 751 projects provide further evidence for the heavy favoritism awarded to infrastructural projects in New York since the WPA's founding.⁸⁰ In total, Area Six's eight counties benefitted from 193 miles of new and improved roadways, 138.12 miles of new sanitary and storm sewer systems, 36.65 miles of water main pipes and even 312.68 acres of park space.⁸¹ Old favorites of WPA administrators endured through 1937 and 1938 alongside newer and at times more unique programs. Work continued on farm-to-market roads state-wide, with country roads like Town Routes #7, #8 and #21 receiving the excavation, grading, paving, shouldering, ditching and culverts of most modern roadways.⁸² Flood control efforts carried on in the North Country, with several cities in Area Six investing in creek straightening, riprapping, reconstruction of banks and dikes and the erection of new retaining walls to prevent

⁷⁸ Taylor, *American-Made*, 350.

⁷⁹ Lester Herzog, *The WPA Carries On*. (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1939).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Microfilm, "Works Progress Administration Central Office Starting Target, Reel 10, Reference Card Location Project File E.R.A. Acts 1935-1938," FDRL

future flooding.⁸³ At Stokes Reservoir in Oneida County, thirty-six miles of new water distribution lines were laid in order to bring adequate water supply and fire protection to communities throughout the county.⁸⁴ Even fish hatcheries were constructed and opened in Rome, Van Hornesville and in Brownsville, showing a take on WPA development that perhaps reflected President Roosevelt's own personal interest in conservation. In addition to these physical projects, in the summer of 1938 the WPA Emergency Nursery School project was shut down for the months of July and August in order to reassess and reorganize the manner in which the program operated.⁸⁵ The programs reopened in September newly streamlined, better organized and more cost-effective. In all, the programs actual work conducted by the WPA in 1937 and 1938 proved highly comparable in both type and spirit as those that fostered relative success in 1935 and 1936.⁸⁶

Through 1938, large sections of the state reported savings under the centrally organized Works Progress Administration when compared to the TERA/FERA set up in 1934. Brought to light in a report entitled "Comparison By Counties" issued by Administrator Herzog and compiled by the state WPA, the transition to a centralized relief structure under the WPA from the relatively independent and decentralized Emergency Work Bureaus of the TERA/FERA furnished upstate cities with enormous savings. In Erie County and Buffalo, in April 1938 the WPA expended \$201,847.44 less than local and community relief as administered by the regional EWB in October of

⁸³ Lester Herzog, *The WPA Carries On*. (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1939).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Telephone Conversation, Mr. Williams to Mr. Herzog, 5/18/38. Box 36, Folder: "New York," Aubrey Williams Papers, FDRL.

⁸⁶ Negative commentary on the WPA during 1937 did exist. However it more often than not consisted of broad claims regarding graft with no specific evidence to support the accusations. For an example, please see "The Meanest Graft" in *The Buffalo News*, November 16th, 1937 edition.

1934.⁸⁷ Where the EWB's of Buffalo city and Erie County employed a total 2,979 employees, the combined Buffalo/Erie County WPA offices in 1938 accomplished the same work with only 70.⁸⁸ Further, whereas Chautauqua, Genesee, Niagara, Orleans, Wyoming and Cattaraugus counties under the TERA/FERA each operated independent offices, under the WPA all six counties operated out of a single office, saving taxpayers a grand total of \$59,621.10 per month.⁸⁹ These provincial achievements point to a partial realization of the WPA's original goals even during a period of sharp cutbacks.

However, despite its regional successes, 1938 continued the decline of the Works Progress Administration. Debate over the 1938 Congressional reauthorization of relief appropriations for the WPA as well as the rest of the federal relief structure began in May and, almost immediately, reductions took place. The 1938 appropriation bill as drafted in the spring of that year disbursed only \$1.25 for use on the WPA to furnish jobs a target quota of 2,800,000 jobs across the U.S. from July 1 1938 to February 1st 1939, a drop of \$250,000,000 from 1937.⁹⁰ It was during this debate that a key figure in the fate of the New York WPA emerged from the shadows to take a central role in federal relief issues. Representative John Taber, a Syracuse Republican representing New York's 36th Congressional District and the ranking minority member of the House Appropriations Committee stepped to the plate during the 1938 reauthorization debates to voice his, and by extension, upstate Republican's views of the Works Progress Administration. Taber argued that the bill was "not a relief bill at all, but one for the construction of enormous

⁸⁷ "Savings Cited Under Central Set Up," *Buffalo New York Courier Express*, May 18, 1938.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ "Leaders Aim For Passage Of Measure," *Canandaigua Daily News*, May 10, 1938.

projects.”⁹¹ Expanding on this point, Taber continued to characterize the Works Progress Administration as a program of “wasteful” projects whose employment had “demoralizing effect” on individuals paid prevailing wages.⁹² Taber’s points make clear the antagonistic sentiment held by upstate Republican conservatives towards the work of the WPA, and predicted a push in the following year’s appropriation talks for the abolition of the prevailing wage.

The remarks of Representative Taber were by no means the only negative sentiments articulated towards the Works Progress Administration in 1938. Early on in February, town and county level community members involved with the WPA through the project application process delivered stern remarks to area newspapers regarding their recent interactions with the administration. In February of 1938, Saratoga Springs Mayor Addison Mallory was appointed by the Saratoga City Council to represent the city in all matters involving the WPA. Speaking candidly about the administration, Mayor Mallory disclosed to the *Saratoga Springs Saratogian* on February 15th that the WPA in Saratoga Springs and Glens Falls had been for two years a relatively “hit or miss affair.” With relative impatience, Mallory continued in his statement to express a palpable frustration with the slow and inconsistent manner in which the administration had dealt with Saratoga, suggesting that he would be “camping at the WPA doorstep” in order to get done what the city had tasked him with doing.⁹³ Elsewhere in the state, the WPA received more direct attacks on the program’s adequacy and on its record for adequately handling the unemployment crisis. On February 12th of 1938, the New York State

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ “Mayor Named by Council To Instill ‘Push’ In Local WPA Situation,” *Saratoga Springs Saratogian*. February 15th, 1938.

Association of Public Welfare Officials issued a statement alleging that the WPA failed to fulfill its promise to provide work for all employables on home relief rolls.⁹⁴ Further, the organization asserted that in order to make his administration look as if it was performing better than it actually was, Lester Herzog manipulated definitions of “employable” and “unemployable” when certifying home relief recipients for WPA work. By marking employable individuals as unemployable, Herzog would be able to make it appear as if a larger percentage of the “employable” population was at work on WPA jobs than actually was.⁹⁵ While it may be true that not all employables were able to be put on relief rolls in 1937 or 1938 (especially in the Capital District where despite incoming WPA jobs a total of 287 eligible individuals remained on home relief rolls in Schenectady), this failure was not the fault of the state administration.⁹⁶ The WPA had plenty of jobs, periodically opening positions for home relief transfers to occupy. For example on May 18th of 1938 a total of 1,000 vacant positions opened throughout the state.⁹⁷ However the budget cuts of 1937 and 1938 ensured that there would simply never be enough jobs open to accommodate all individuals receiving direct relief. This criticism was popular with liberals supportive of expanded relief expenditures and increased deficit spending.

By 1939, Congressional restrictions on federal relief spending and policies generated discontent and unrest throughout upstate New York. In 1939 conservatives in Congress set out to “fix” the WPA. Opponents of the program sought to alter the WPA in such a manner that would minimize those elements of the organization they found

⁹⁴ “Eligible Rule Up To Herzog, Group Asserts,” *Albany Knickerbocker*, February 12th, 1938.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ “WPA Projects to Take 150 to 287 off Welfare,” *The Schenectady Gazette*, February 9, 1938.

⁹⁷ Telephone Conversation, Mr. Williams to Mr. Herzog, May 18, 1938. Box 36, Folder: “New York,” Aubrey Williams Papers, FDRL.

most objectionable. On a long list of complaints, highest among conservatives' concerns were the WPA's continued deficit spending and perceived "leftist" tendencies, particularly in the arts programs, investigated by the infamous Dies Committee of the House Un-American Activities Committee.⁹⁸ Following a series of smaller restrictive pieces of legislation passed over the course of the spring of 1939 on June 30th, 1939, President Roosevelt signed into law the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act of 1939, setting aside \$1,755,600,000 for all federal relief activities.⁹⁹ The ERAA of 1939 not only greatly reduced federal disbursements for relief, it provided \$1,298,825,000 less than the 1938's appropriation, but the act presented major changes for the administration.¹⁰⁰ First and foremost, the act, along with April legislation providing for the reorganization of relief, eliminated the WPA as an independent agency.¹⁰¹ The Works Progress Administration was rebranded the Work Projects Administration, and placed under the auspices of the newly formed "Federal Works Agency."¹⁰² While this move had little real effect on the WPA's day-to-day functions, the act eliminated the PWA and placed more of an emphasis on the WPA as opposed to Harold Ickes' Interior Department.¹⁰³ More important for upstate operations, however were substantive changes made to the basic fabric of the WPA. The ERAA eliminated the Federal Theater Project, abolished the prevailing wage scale, and required all WPA employees to sign an affidavit stating their loyalty to the United States.¹⁰⁴ The act also placed heavy restrictions on the participation of aliens in the country from participating in the program

⁹⁸ Taylor, *American-Made*, 396.

⁹⁹ Acts in the spring of 1939 included an outright ban on all political activities for all WPA employees on March 9th. Ibid. 473-474.

¹⁰⁰ "Signs Relief Bill," *Canandaigua Daily Messenger*. July 1, 1939.

¹⁰¹ Taylor, *American-Made*, 436.

¹⁰² "2 Work Agencies Are Put Under Single Head," *Buffalo NY Courier Express*, July 2nd 1939.

¹⁰³ Taylor, *American-Made*, 436.

¹⁰⁴ Taylor, *American Made*, 473-478.

or taking work on any WPA site. While the FTP was never a large presence in the upstate region and by 1940 not a single Nazi or Communist was found among upstate WPA rolls, the provision providing for the abolition of the prevailing wage scale stirred dissent amongst WPA workers across the country.¹⁰⁵

For most skilled workers, and even some unskilled workers, the prevailing wage system in place since 1935 enabled laborers to earn the equivalent of a month's pay (at relief wages) in little over a week of WPA work. In replacing the prevailing wage system with a firm security wage, the ERAA created a situation whereby the weekly work hours of the vast majority of WPA workers increased dramatically, with some individuals finding their hours doubling or even tripling.¹⁰⁶ As a result, in mid-July work stoppages froze projects across the entire nation, with approximately 100,000 workers leaving work sites nationwide.¹⁰⁷ New York workers were no exception to the walk-out trend. Across the state, an approximate total of 4,000 WPA employees participated in walk-out demonstrations.¹⁰⁸ In Binghamton, 330 workers were suspended and 94 given dismissal notices following mass walk-outs on the city's own WPA projects.¹⁰⁹ Workers carried signs protesting the cuts to wages and general appropriations offered by the ERAA. "We Want Work, Not Relief!" "We Demand the right to work!" "Down With The Woodrum Bill!"¹¹⁰ In Rochester, 1,000 workers walked off job sites and signed a petition directed

¹⁰⁵ Select FTP work did occur in the upstate region, however, only notably in urban centers. In Syracuse the program staged a total of 26 plays, but was only active during the summer of 1936. "Area WPA Fails To Find Avowed Nazis or Reds." *Utica Daily Press*, July 17, 1940; "Hallie Flanigan's 'Arena' Recalls Days of Federal Theater in Syracuse," *Syracuse Herald-American*, January 26th, 1941, page 19.

¹⁰⁶ Taylor, *American-Made*, 474.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ "WPA Dismisses 94 Within 20 Hours After Workers Demonstrate in City," *The Binghamton Press*. July 21st, 1939.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ "The Woodrum Bill" is another name for the ERAA, referring to Clifton A. Woodrum of Virginia, a strong proponent and sponsor of the bill. Ibid.

at Congress to return to the prevailing wage system.¹¹¹ Elsewhere in New York, one particularly violent group of protesters attempted to hang an effigy of Representative Taber, the Syracuse Republican Congressman who had an integral role in developing the 1939 legislation.¹¹² In addition to heated political speech from workers on the left, 1939 saw accusations of political manipulation arise from the right. On March 21st a Republican WPA official from Rochester reported to the *Rochester Leader-Republican* that he and one other administrative employee of the Rochester WPA had been fired from their positions because they refused to issue a blanket discharge of all Republican foremen on projects active in the city. In his statement, the administrator accused Robert G. Hoffman, Area WPA director for Rochester; Phillip Dailey, Secretary of the Monroe County Democratic Committee, and Lester Herzog of providing a list of all Republican foremen in the city and supplying orders to fire all still active on projects.¹¹³ While charges filed with the WPA Investigation Department in Washington from Rochester never culminated in any formal disciplinary action, when combined with the unrest inspired by the 1939 ERAA it is evident that the year of 1939 was tumultuous for the upstate WPA. Despite indications that most projects continued normally and evidence showing continued work on storm sewers, sewing rooms, road repair and historical indexing in 1939, the fact remains that the 1939 ERAA force upstate workers to a literal breaking point over issues of fundamental issues of pay and hours as a result of lowered relief spending appropriations.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Taylor, *American-Made*, 474.

¹¹² "Ruling Sought On WPA Wages," *The Knickerbocker News*, July 21st, 1939.

¹¹³ "WPA Official Charges He Lost Job for Not Playing Politics," *Rochester Leader-Republican*, March 21st, 1939.

¹¹⁴ Microfilm, "Works Progress Administration Central Office Starting Target, Reel 11, Reference Card Location Project File E.R.A. Acts 1935-1938," FDRL.

If 1939 was objectively the worst year for the WPA in upstate New York, 1940 and 1941 provided the rebound needed for the administration to regain its footing. On September 1st, 1939, Nazi forces invaded Poland, and thus began the first substantial phase of World War II. Over the next year Nazi troops blasted their way through Western Europe, annexing Austria and Czechoslovakia prior to Poland. By May 29th, Germany had secured the surrender of Belgium, by June 14th; France had fallen.¹¹⁵ As Britain became more and more Europe's last hope for survival, President Roosevelt began to think more and more about military spending.

Following Hitler's annexation of Austria in March of 1938, President Roosevelt sent Harry Hopkins and Los Angeles WPA administrator Lieutenant Colonel Donald H. Connolly on a secret mission to the West Coast of the United States to examine the capabilities of American aircraft manufacturers.¹¹⁶ Unnerved by observed inadequacy in the United States aerial capacity, Roosevelt began planning at that early stage how to increase military readiness in the still overwhelmingly isolationist U.S. Limited by the Neutrality Acts of 1935 and 1937, as well as by provisions written into the WPA's founding legislation that "no part of the appropriations... shall be used for munitions, warships, or military or naval material," Roosevelt's quest to utilize the WPA for military readiness was an uphill battle from the beginning.¹¹⁷ In the President's 1938/1939 budget, he requested funds for a "two-ocean navy" so to defend both coasts of the United States. The Congress acquiesced, but refused to add 8,000 warplanes to the order, seeing the request as a purely aggressive move.¹¹⁸ After the German invasion of Poland in 1939,

¹¹⁵ Taylor, *American-Made*, 490.

¹¹⁶ Taylor, *American-Made*, 452.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 450.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 452, 453.

Roosevelt began holding regular communication with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. According to Churchill, by late 1939 the situation in Europe grew direr by the day. The British, should they stand a chance in fighting off the Nazi blitzkrieg, especially the Luftwaffe, would require aid in the form of “ships, planes, and anti-aircraft guns and ammunition.”¹¹⁹ By the time Germany had subdued Belgium, President Roosevelt secured from Congress \$1.75 billion for the creation of a standing military including 50,000 planes, with a production of 50,000 more every year as well as a vast increase in U.S. factory output to “turn out quickly infinitely greater supplies.”¹²⁰ And while restrictions existed against using the WPA to specifically buy or manufacture armaments, no restrictions existed to prevent the organization from building military facilities under the sponsorship of the armed services. In fact, by June 20th of 1935, the Army’s Quartermaster Corps had received \$1,215,722 dollars for WPA work on its bases across the nation.¹²¹ For Roosevelt, the WPA was the perfect means to boost military production.

For upstate communities, the rise in war production meant a great change in the character of the WPA and a new boost in specific relief projects. For instance, on July 30th of 1940 the Buffalo Municipal Airport improvement project was placed on the U.S. War Department’s “priority list” ranking and positioning projects considered to be of high importance to national security. As a city, Buffalo was in dire straits financially as a result of unsustainable sponsor costs imposed by late-stage federal relief appropriation arrangements. In April of 1940, a drastic curtailment of the city’s WPA activities was ordered for the 1940-1941 fiscal year, whereby five proposed projects were rejected due

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 488.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 489.

¹²¹ Taylor, *American-Made*, 455.

to the city's inability to produce sponsor's shares even for projects that were at that point ongoing.¹²² But as a result of the city's financial situation and due in part to the program's position on the War Department Priority List, by September Buffalo had received an outright grant of \$320,951 for the improvement of the airport's Northeast/Southwest runway, the only municipality to be granted such a grant in the U.S.¹²³ In mid-September the U.S. announced the prioritization of airport improvement nationwide as a national defense initiative, and in November of 1940 the WPA announced a measure of blanket priority for all projects designated by the Army or Navy as "vital to national defense." This so-called "blanket priority" enabled relaxed requirements on sponsor contributions, work hours, monthly wages, and use of WPA funds; removed the requirement of individual applications for national defense projects; and applied to projects including airports, roads to military posts, national guard facilities, reserve officer camps, National Strategic Warehousing, and health/sanitation work surrounding camps.¹²⁴ As national defense spending increased and WPA projects intertwined with national defense escalated in number and size, spending on other WPA projects, less attractive due to higher sponsor costs, decreased substantially. In Buffalo, following the full funding of the Buffalo City Municipal Airport project, the city cancelled nine projects lined up for the next fiscal year, choosing to rein in spending and focus on the reduction of current debts.¹²⁵ Like Buffalo, upstate industrial towns dotting the rural and urban areas of the state found themselves perfect fits for new industrial WPA jobs. Racked with debt from changes in WPA spending and funding policies over

¹²² The city could only provide a maximum of \$750,000 for sponsor costs in the coming year. "WPA Program For Buffalo Faces Drastic Curtailment," *Buffalo Courier Express*, April 20th, 1940.

¹²³ "U.S. Funds to Finance Airport Improvements," *Buffalo Courier Express*, September 13, 1940.

¹²⁴ "Defense Jobs Get Priority on WPA lists," *Buffalo Courier Express*, November 1st, 1940.

¹²⁵ "WPA Activity In City Faces Curtailment," *Buffalo Courier-Express*, November 9th, 1940.

the preceding two years, upstate communities seized on the opportunity for new work relief projects with a vastly reduced price tag as compared to standard WPA pursuits.

1941 witnessed the simultaneous rebirth of the WPA as a vital piece of the war industry puzzle and slow decline of the program overall as war production eventually supplanted it. At year's beginning, many individuals within New York State doubted that defense work would ever completely end the WPA. In a March 25th editorial in the *Times Herald* of Olean, New York entitled "Beautiful Dream of Defense Boom ending WPA—Just a Dream," local commentator Peter Edison asserted that while huge defense spending did indeed help unemployment, the spending was far too concentrated in areas without high WPA employment to ever make a serious dent in the size of overall WPA enrollment. With 80% of workers on the WPA living in areas receiving 20% of government defense contracts in 1941, it is easy to see Mr. Edison's point.¹²⁶ However, what Edison overlooked was how eager unemployed persons would be to travel to jobs not in their immediate areas. By mid-year upstate New York had become one of the exceptional regions of production that Edison had discussed. However, in addition to upstate workers, unemployed individuals from regions like New York City and Long Island traveled and found steady in factories throughout the upstate region.¹²⁷ All across New York, relief contracts in industrial centers created massive employment opportunities for individuals of all training levels. For example, in 1940 Savage Arms of Utica pledged 4,000 new hires within a year after receiving a \$27,166,283 government contract for the manufacture of machine guns and small arms, \$17,600,000 of which was

¹²⁶ "Beautiful Dream of Defense Boom ending WPA-Just a Dream," *Olean Times-Herald*, March 25th, 1941.

¹²⁷ Klein, *The Empire State*, 602.

furnished by the U.S. government.¹²⁸ By June 9th Edison had changed his tune. In a new editorial entitled “WPA Dollars Are Now Rolling For Defense,” he celebrated the potential of defense spending to greatly reduce WPA rolls across the state.¹²⁹

With the Lend-Lease Act signed into law in March of 1941, U.S. production of military materials skyrocketed. In upstate New York, war production in Syracuse expanded to include over 22 factories, each operating at over 43% the production level of the previous year, and each pledging to produce even more than they had already done while dedicating of 50 to 100% of their facilities to defense work.¹³⁰ In July the New York WPA began to offer paid training courses in lieu of project work for skills badly needed in defense industries.¹³¹ Administrator Lester Herzog estimated that in the year the WPA would provide training for 20,000 men and women in New York, paying a whopping \$20 weekly for the training.¹³² Simultaneous to this surge in employment opportunities, the WPA dialed down its activities throughout the state. In June the national relief budget was slashed again, this time to \$885,905,000.¹³³ In Syracuse, 10 administrative officers were cut from WPA payrolls, and the total administrative force statewide was cut from 25,000 in 1936 to a mere 13,000 on June 18th.¹³⁴ Later that month, the state’s quota of workers was cut from 103,233 to 77,000.¹³⁵

On December 7th, 1941, the United States Naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii was attacked by a detachment of Japanese bombers and fighter planes. At 2:30 PM Eastern time on December 8th, Japan declared war on the United States. At 4:00 PM, the

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ “WPA Dollars Are Now Rolling For Defense,” *Times Herald*, July 9th, 1941.

¹³⁰ “City Getting Into Stride For Defense,” *Syracuse Journal*, December 9th, 1941.

¹³¹ “WPA Will Aid Training For Defense Work,” *Syracuse Journal*, July 18th, 1941.

¹³² “WPA Bureau To Train for Defense Jobs,” *Syracuse Journal*, August 13th, 1941.

¹³³ “Slashed Relief Fund Approved by Committee,” *Buffalo Courier Express*, June 10th, 1941.

¹³⁴ “10 Lose Jobs In Drastic State WPA Slash,” *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, June 18th, 1941.

¹³⁵ “WPA Staff Waits Final Status Order,” *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, June 21st, 1941.

responded with a declaration of war of its own, launching the U.S into full-scale conflict Japan.¹³⁶ Several days later, Germany joined in Japan's declaration of war against the United States, prompting a retaliatory declaration from President Roosevelt.¹³⁷ With recruitment centers remaining open 24 hours a day in order to accommodate an anticipated influx of volunteers, across upstate New York young men flocked to enlist for military service.¹³⁸

Swelling participation in the armed forces was not the only change to occur following the U.S. declaration of war on Japan and the Axis powers. The United States' official entrance into World War II also resulted in a dramatic surge in production. Many of upstate New York's largest arms producers reported by mid-June of 1942 that in the seven months since Pearl Harbor production had increased as much as 50%.¹³⁹ Likewise, U.S involvement in the war boosted WPA operations far beyond what had been seen just prior to December of 1941. By the spring of 1942, work in New York State defense factories accelerated to a pace so quick that women in WPA training programs were placed in factory jobs prior to their graduation from their respective programs.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, in Syracuse and other cities, all non-defense WPA projects were halted at their current levels of completion, weekly hours were raised from 30 to 48, and war production became the only concern of the WPA in New York State.¹⁴¹

By 1942, select upstate Republicans, tired of the WPA's continued existence, lobbied on the national level for the complete abolition of the WPA not just in New York State,

¹³⁶ "Onondaga's Defense Units Mobilized," *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, December 8th, 1941.

¹³⁷ "U.S. Declares War on The Axis," *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, December 11th, 1941. Pg 1.

¹³⁸ "City Replies To Japs With Enlistments," *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, December 8th, 1941.

¹³⁹ "Savage Workers Pledge to Smash Production Marks," *Utica Daily Press*, June 16th, 1942.

¹⁴⁰ "WPA Will Move Women To War Tasks," *Syracuse Journal*, March 22nd, 1942.

¹⁴¹ "All on WPA to Go On Defense Projects," *Syracuse Journal*, April 7, 1942.

but also across the entire country. Republicans and conservative Democrats contended that the administration was created as an instrument of relief, catalyzed by economic depression and designed to ease the stress of exceptional unemployment resulting from the collapse of business enterprises nationwide. As such, those opposed to the program's continuation argued that wartime industries had all but erased any remaining employment deficit that might have existed when the WPA began in 1935. Returning as a chief critic of the WPA's continuation among upstate representatives, Syracuse Republican Congressman John Taber sat that year as a ranking minority member on the House Appropriations Committee during deliberations over the 1942 appropriation for the Administration. Rep. Taber, seeking to "wipe out" a proposed \$280,000,000 appropriation for the administration for the coming fiscal year, claimed his district had neither depression nor a severe unemployment problem.¹⁴² Speaking at length on the issue, Taber asked the House of Representatives if they were supportive of "further reduction or the possible elimination of the Works Projects Administration eventually," why should they object to doing so immediately. Speaking of the economic situation in 1942, Taber remarked that "farmers are crying aloud for help, demand for labor in the factories is going up by leaps and bounds... millions of our boys are being taken for the armed forces of our country... and every dollar of credit that the United States has is needed for the carrying out of the war program to bring this country to Victory."¹⁴³ Extending the conditions of New York's 36th to the nation as a whole, Taber contended

¹⁴² "House Girds For Row on WPA Outlay," *The Syracuse Journal*, June 10th, 1942.

¹⁴³ Representative Taber (NY). "Work Projects Administration Appropriation." *Congressional Record* 88, (June 9, 1942) p. H5049-H5050.

that individuals then on WPA payrolls could, should they be of “a mind to,” easily find work in “war industries, on farms, or in plants producing essential civilian needs.”¹⁴⁴

For the overwhelming majority of upstate industrial centers, Representative Taber’s comments were not entirely off the mark. However, his calculations did not account for the fact that upstate New York’s production rate was exceptional. According to modern examinations of New York State contributions to industrial war production during World War II, the upstate region of New York represented a “needier production zone” to which labor from New York City, a region which did not “receive war work proportionate to the size of its market,” migrated in order to find employment.¹⁴⁵ This influx of workers from New York City demonstrated just how high the volume of available employment was in the upstate area in 1942. As such, the Congressman questioned the logic behind the continuation of a program set up to provide jobs for the unemployed when the job market was exploding with jobs as it never had before. With the relief load dropped 50% in the year preceding June of 1942, Taber argued that the only reason he could see that the Roosevelt administration would desire the continuation of the WPA was for the continued employment of program employees loyal to the president.¹⁴⁶ Taber’s statements in front of Congress on June 10th, 1942 were typical of those articulated by opponents to the WPA.

By 1943, sixty-five percent of U.S. War Finance Company subsidies earmarked for the state of New York were delivered to areas of the state outside of the New York metropolitan region, Suffolk and Nassau counties, with a whopping twenty-nine percent

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Klein, *The Empire State*, 601.

¹⁴⁶ *Congressional Record*, (June 10th 1942), pg. H5101.

landing in Niagara and Erie counties.¹⁴⁷ In Taber's own Syracuse, Mac-Law Tool & Aircraft parts and Bristol Laboratories (a large manufacturer of penicillin) established operations on the outskirts of the town. These operations attracted so many workers that by 1941 only eighteen percent of workers were employed within a half-mile of the city's downtown area.¹⁴⁸ A twenty-two percent shift from levels recorded in 1913, this statistic displays the power of the draw that war industries had in upstate New York.¹⁴⁹ By 1942 large plants within the city were desperate for new hires to "keep critical war production rolling."¹⁵⁰ By October 1942 large manufacturing enterprises ranging from Remington-Rand to Halcomb Steel placed ads in local papers seeking new hires for work in the "war production" sector. Workers both skilled and unskilled, male and female were asked to apply to a large number of job openings in the area.¹⁵¹ One 1942 ad offered positions for toolmakers, cutter grinders, turret lathe men, set up men, deep hole drillers, profilers, milling machine operators, drill press operators and surface grinders, while another right beside it listed work openings for "machinists, electricians, millwrights" and general laborers.¹⁵² Taber's remarks regarding his district were not exaggerated.

Beyond Syracuse, the entire upstate region found the war a boon for a large portion of its regional industries. A mere fifty-five miles east of Syracuse, the city of Utica transformed into a powerhouse of industrial output. Home to Savage Arms Company—manufacturer of Thompson submachine guns, Utica Cutlery—fabricator of bayonets and the Bossert Company—a large producer of artillery shells, Utica evolved into a high

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 603.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 604.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ "Crisis!" *The Syracuse Journal*. June 10th 1943.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² "Ad," *The Syracuse Journal*, May 1942.

output military industrial center.¹⁵³ By August of 1942 Savage Arms had earned “the joint Army-Navy production award” for “outstanding performance of war work.”

In cases like those in Syracuse and Utica, high government subsidies to upstate industrial centers offered a war-spurred federal stimulus which in essence still provided such municipalities with government funded employment, just jobs that were officially part of the private sector (not Works Projects Administration) and which directly boosted industrial growth.¹⁵⁴ In communities like Canajoharie, located 42 miles west of Utica, empty manufacturing spaces were filled with new war industry operations. At Beech-Nut, a food packaging company active in the community since the late 19th century, 2,000 workers were employed making K-rations for consumption by troops in both the European and Pacific theaters.¹⁵⁵ In agricultural communities, food production all but erased the lag in demand for fairly priced fruits, vegetables and meats. In Steuben County, Prattsburg and Wheeler were said to not be able to produce potatoes quick enough to fill increased war-time demand. In counties like Erie and St. Lawrence as well as in towns like North Collins, Brant, and the Hudson Valley; wartime labor shortages required the hiring of 140,000 men and women to aid in the harvest and processing of poultry, berries, raspberries, apples, maple syrup, and all varieties of vegetables.¹⁵⁶

As the rate of war-production continued to increase in New York, the need for the WPA gradually declined. In December of 1942, President Roosevelt ordered the gradual liquidation of the entire WPA throughout the nation. In New York, the President’s order meant the dismissing of 7,500 project workers and 100 administrative employees across

¹⁵³ Klein, *The Empire State*, 603.

¹⁵⁴ “Savage Gets ‘E’ Flag and High Praise,” *The Utica Daily Observer*, August 19th, 1942.

¹⁵⁵ Michael DeMasi, “Empty Beech-Nut Factory In Upstate NY Under Contract,” *Albany Business Review* (online), October 17th, 2013.

¹⁵⁶ Klein, *The Empire State*, 611.

the upstate region.¹⁵⁷ Select projects, like war production and the last of the large sewage works, would carry on into 1943, but for the rest of New York's WPA employees, the President's order meant a permanent end to employment with the administration, including 455 in the Syracuse area alone.¹⁵⁸ No longer relevant and no longer justifiable to swelling conservative forces in Congress, on April 26th, 1943, the WPA closed its doors in New York for good. Little over two months before the nation did the same.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ "Order Removes 7,500 Laborers Upstate," *Syracuse Journal*, December 4th, 1942.

¹⁵⁸ "WPA Let Out 455 In Syracuse Area," *Syracuse Journal*, December 4th, 1942.

¹⁵⁹ "WPA to End Long Service In N.Y. State." *Syracuse Journal*, April 26th, 1943.

Conclusions

Extending back to the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration, work relief in upstate New York has a rich and complicated history. From 1931 through 1935 the state, and in later years with the help of the federal government, crafted a high functioning system of relief lauded and modeled by federal authorities. When the economic fortune of New York began to falter at the end of 1934 and through 1935, the Federal Works Progress Administration provided upstate New York with much needed relief from the crushing financial costs of shouldering both home and work relief expenditures. From 1935 to 1936 the WPA crafted a flexible organization capable of adhering to the unique needs of upstate's diverse population and competent at completing its task of lifting work relief costs off of the shoulders of municipalities. While problems did arise through 1936, 1937, and 1938, most were small issues inconsequential to the administration's accomplishment of broader economic goals. However, sustained cutbacks from 1937 to 1939 created a situation whereby gains made in 1936 were in some locations reversed by 1939, with relief costs back loaded onto local welfare structures once again. However, the rising tide of war production between 1939 and 1943 allowed for the revitalization of the WPA with new military subsidies, and allowed an entirely competent program crippled in ability by spending cuts to once again become viable. Through 1942 and 1943 still increasing wartime spending allowed the WPA to quietly fade out of existence in New York.

Despite this slow fade into obscurity, the physical and social rewards of the long term public investment of those projects begun in 1935 and developed through all the years of the WPA have reverberated throughout upstate New York in the almost 71 years

since the program's end. After 1943, a large number of the WPA's projects across the state remained active in the communities that sponsored them. Recreational facilities constructed under program direction have continued to offer easily accessible public spaces for the benefit of their localities. For example, in Fort Plain, the Municipal Bandstand erected by two WPA workers in 1936 (Figure 1), as of March of 2014, remained standing in the same location on which it was originally built (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Completed Fort Plain Bandstand, 1936. (Lester W Herzog. WPA In The Capital District. (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936)

Scarcely changed in appearance, the Bandstand has endured as a central fixture of town life. Each summer community organizations utilize the structure for fairs and town-wide celebrations. Each December, the village DPW dresses eaves of the stand with holiday lights, visible in Figure 2, that remain hanging until April.



Figure 2: Fort Plain Bandstand, March 10, 2014.

Similarly, the Amsterdam Municipal Golf Course constructed by the WPA between 1935 and 1938 in March of 2014 remains open and active. Citizens of Amsterdam recognize the project as an integral part of their community. In a Letter To The Editor in the *Amsterdam Recorder* on September 21, 2013, an anonymous city resident characterized the course as “an important part of our city’s past and part of its future,” a remark which testifies to the enduring value of similar projects.¹

Additionally, artwork crafted under the auspices of the WPA has also remained in the post-WPA era. In July of 1975, the town of LaFayette staged a production of the WPA New York State Plays Project work “The Cardiff Giant” as part of a yearlong Bicentennial celebration in the Community.² 1985, city officials in Pine Plains endeavored to obtain from private hands “two historic WPA paintings of Pine Plains” in

¹ “Letter To The Editor,” *Amsterdam Recorder* (online), September 21, 2013.

² “Cardiff Giant Pageant In LaFayette in July,” *The Tully Independent*, June 5, 1975, pg. 12.

order to bring them “back into public fold.” According to city officials, the works had been “erroneously... given to former school employees” of the Pine Planes Central School District some time after the end of the program. The city’s “Little Nine Partners Historical Society,” working for over a year, eventually secured the paintings for the public. In a report on the events, the Pine Plains *Register Herald* on November 14, 1985 claimed that the paintings were “historic bounty” that, for the community, “provided an excellent opportunity to make local history come alive” in the town.³

Less visibly, infrastructural updates made by the WPA remain in 2014 an integral part of many municipal systems. Bridges, sewers, water mains and roads constructed by the administration have since the program’s end provided a firm base for further improvements and updates to town and county infrastructures throughout the past 70 years. According to an unnamed Amsterdam city engineer, a “large percentage” of the city’s bridges, sewer systems and water systems are still in 2014 built on work initially conducted by Works Progress Administration employees.⁴ In Fort Plain, in some locations WPA stamps are still visible on retaining walls and sidewalks across the village (see Figure 3). These projects, along with the recreational facilities and works of art that exist alongside them, attest to the WPA’s legacy of successful long term public investment and to the initial quality and applicability of the projects when they were constructed between 1935 and 1943.

While this thesis provides ample evidence for the success of well-funded work programs in the upstate New York between 1931 and 1943, many questions still remain regarding the place of work relief in the upstate region. As of February of 2014 the

³ “Our Heritage,” *Pine Plains Register-Herald*, November 14, 1985, pg. 4.

⁴ City Engineer, Interview by Maxwell M. Prime, March 12, 2014.

national unemployment rate as reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics hovers at approximately 6.7%.⁵ While this number is nowhere near the national unemployment rate at the peak of the Great Depression, it still accounts for 10.5 million Americans who are out of work and largely unable to find steady employment. In order to better ascertain the potential benefit of a modern public work relief program in the upstate region, a comparison of economic conditions in 2014 against those that necessitated federal intervention in 1935. Fond memories of WPA work that persist in the upstate region have already tipped some segments of the public towards support for a WPA-like work program. In an editorial entitled “Making Use of The Unemployed” featured in the *Amsterdam Recorder* on April 20, 2010, an Amsterdam resident professed his belief that a program similar to the WPA “could provide a model for a similar effort relevant to today’s needs. Whether he is right is appropriate work for future studies on work relief in the area. This thesis, however, can only conclude that between 1931 and 1943, work relief endeavors in upstate New York, when well funded, were relatively successful in easing the financial burden placed on local government by relief, creating diverse employment opportunities appropriate for the varied character of the upstate workforce, and in executing projects of the utmost short-term and long-term use for the communities that sponsored them—a solid informational base for any future examinations.

⁵ Bureau of Labor Statistics, “The Employment Situation—February 2014,” March 7, 2014.



Figure 3: WPA Retaining Wall and Sidewalk in Fort Plain, NY

Appendix I:

- *The Syracuse Journal*: 1933, 1936-1937, 1941-1943.
- *The Times Record (Troy)*: 1935.
- *The Binghamton Press*: 1935-1936, 1939.
- *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*: 1935-1936.
- *Canandaigua Daily Messenger*: 1935-1939.
- *The Amsterdam Evening Recorder*: 1935.
- *The Schenectady Gazette*: 1935-36, 38.
- *The Otsego Farmer*: 1935.
- *The Rome Daily Sentinel*: 1935.
- *The Gloversville Morning Herald*: 1935.
- *Olean Times Herald*: 1941, 1943.
- *The Troy Record*: 1943.
- *The St. Johnsville Enterprise*: 1936-1937.
- *The New York Times*: 1936.
- *The Utica Observer Dispatch*: 1936-1937.
- *The Buffalo Courier Express*: 1936, 1940-1941.
- *Syracuse Herald-American*: 1941.
- *Saratoga Springs Saratogian*: 1938.
- *Albany Knickerbocker*: 1938.

- *The Knickerbocker News*: 1939.
- *Rochester Leader-Republican*: 1939.
- *The Syracuse Herald Journal*: 1941.
- *Utica Daily Press*: 1942.

Appendix II

- The extent of the Farm-To-Market roadwork in upstate New York in 1936 was greater than described above. Montgomery County had extensive farm-to-market road work, generating 15 miles of roads including work on Country Roads and gravel roads in Minden. Schenectady County implemented the “Schenectady County Roads Project.” Designed to aid farmers and dairymen the project forged roads through Glenville, Niskayuna, Princetown and Duanesburg. In Cohoes/Watervliet, Colombia Street was extended directly across rural “open country” to connect with the Albany-Saratoga Trunk Line in order to make the route safer to travel. In Colombia County, 40 to 50 miles of Farm-To Market roads were built or repaired through Hillsdale, Claverack, Kinderhook, Stockport, Stuyvesant, Ghent, Ancram, Chatham, and Germantown. The town of Pitcher in Chenango County, Roseboom in Otsego County, Delaware in Sullivan County, and Sidney in Delaware County all increased their farm-to-market road mileage through incremental works developing as little as 1,0000 feet of road at a time.
 - Microfilm, “Works Progress Administration Central Office Starting Target, Reel 10, Reference Card Location Project File E.R.A. Acts 1935-1938,” Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York

- Lester Herzog, *WPA In The Capital District*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936);
- Lester Herzog, *WPA In The Susquehanna Country*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936).

Appendix III

- Literacy Courses—182 centers, 2,360 monthly attendees.
- “Bread and Butter” Courses—600 centers, 16,200 monthly attendees.
- Vocational Courses—867 centers, 18,000 monthly attendees
- Emergency Collegiate Centers—21 cities, 245 teachers, 2,356 enrollees
- Recreational Classes: 628 centers, 745 teachers, 4,900 classes, 350,000 individuals reached statewide.
 - Lester Herzog, *Women's and Professional Projects*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936).

Appendix IV:

- “State Education Department Nursery Schools”- 1,200 children of relief families from the ages of 2 to 5 clothed, fed, examined by nurses, and provided pre-school education. A large number of relief children were afflicted by debilitating diseases like anemia, scurvy, and rickets, thus WPA teachers and nurses bathed students, disbursed a pint and a half of milk each day, eggs three times per week, noontime lunch, snack twice a day, gave daily health inspections, fed children a

spoon of cod-liver oil, multiple portions of food if requested, and even sent home child-specific health information to students' parents.

- Lester Herzog, *Women's and Professional Projects*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936).
- “Historical Records Survey”- A federally sponsored project employing 400 researchers statewide in the examination of state, county, and local archives as well as historical manuscripts from private libraries, churches, and businesses. This program continued in many areas work already begun under the TERA, as is seen in Montgomery County, where a project creating “The Department of History and Archives of Montgomery County” was established in 1934. The Montgomery County Project was taken over by the WPA on November 19th, 1935, and continued through August 1938. In its work, the project “compiled and bound many volumes of town, village, church and miscellaneous records; rebound books in the County Law Library and hundreds of volumes of other records in the Department on the Third floor; indexed and filed thousands of documents pertaining to the early records of Montgomery county as well as a great many maps and surveys of lands within the present boundaries of the County.”
 - Letter, Edward J. Sheehan County Archivist to Board Of Supervisors of Montgomery County, Dec. 1, 1938. HF126, A-32. Montgomery County Historical Archives, Fonda, New York.

- “Federal Music Program”- A program to provide work for musicians on relief and with which to entertain the general public. Music performed ranged from the work of classical composers to contemporary dance numbers, and was played at engagements including public concerts in Albany, Rensselaer and Schenectady counties, hospital performances, and private arrangements in orphanages and tubercular sanatoria. In mid-1936, Albany’s orchestra employed 25 musicians from relief rolls.
 - Lester Herzog, *Women's and Professional Projects*, (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1936)

Appendix V:



WPA Plaque on Municipal Bandstand, Fort Plain, NY, March 10, 2014.



Amsterdam Municipal Golf Course, March 12, 2014.

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