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Schenectady's New Deal: An Investigation of the WPA in the City of Schenectady

By
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Senior Project Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the requirements for Honors in the Department of History

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract (p. 3)

Chapter I: Literature Review (p. 5)

Chapter II: The Physical Legacy of the WPA in Schenectady (p. 22)

Chapter III: A Comparative Analysis of the Public's Perception of the WPA in Schenectady (p. 37)

Conclusion (p. 63)

Bibliography (p. 66)

ABSTRACT

Power, Scott F.

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When President Roosevelt assumed office in March of 1933, he faced an unemployment rate of twenty-five percent, homelessness, and the malaise of a nation stuck in a deepening state of poverty. His solution, aimed at alleviating the circumstances resulting from the Great Depression, was to institute a series of economic programs known as the "New Deal." Roosevelt proposed the creation of a variety of social welfare programs, including "work relief" that would provide government jobs for the unemployed. The best known program was the Works Progress Administration, or simply, the WPA, created in 1935. Through projects ranging from building roads and schools, constructing sewers and bridges, to the development of parks and playgrounds, the WPA provided much needed relief for the unemployed, and transformed the physical landscape of the nation.

While significant research has been done on the New Deal and WPA's impact on a national level, less has been done on the impact at the local level, and very little research has been conducted examining the WPA's role and influence in the City of Schenectady. This thesis addresses that gap, and argues that the type of work performed by the WPA in Schenectady corresponded with state and national trends. In addition, attitudes in Schenectady toward work relief corresponded with state trends but diverged from national trends: nationally, Republicans generally opposed the WPA, while local Republicans found it politically advantageous to endorse the program.

Primary sources, including the Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady, the *Schenectady Gazette*, *Union Star*, and articles published by the Schenectady Bureau of Municipal Research are used to document the physical impact of the WPA, as well as explore the public's attitude regarding work relief in general. Primary source documents including the *New York Times*, publications issued by the New York State WPA, as well as secondary literature examining the WPA on a state and national level are subsequently used to compare the attitudes and behaviors identified in Schenectady with trends identified in other communities across New York State.

Chapter I: Literature Review

“The city of Schenectady, site of the General Electric company and the Locomotive plant, wrote Lester Herzog, the director of the Works Progress Administration in Upstate New York, is known as, ‘The City that Lights and Hauls the World.’”¹ “In normal times, Schenectady’s great factories hum with activity, its mercantile establishments thrive and the community lives in the comfortable circumstances of prosperity. No so during much of the time the depression hung over the nation. It had not sufficient diversified industry to absorb the great numbers of unemployed of its major industries ... then came the Works Progress Administration.”²

Herzog’s above illustration of the WPA underscores the critical role it played during the Great Depression. My thesis is an examination of that role. I begin with a review of secondary literature on the topic. An examination of the WPA on the national, state, and municipal level is explored. I then document the physical impact of the WPA in Schenectady and proceed by investigating critics of the program from various members and sections of the community. Finally, I contextualize Schenectady’s experience with trends common in other cities across New York. My research found that the type of work performed by the WPA in Schenectady corresponded with state and national trends. Moreover, attitudes in Schenectady toward work relief were consistent with state trends. However, these attitudes diverged from national political trends.

¹ “WPA in the Capital District,” Lester W. Herzog *Works Progress Administration* (New York: 1936), 9.

² Herzog, 9.

Nationally, Republicans generally opposed the WPA, while local Republicans found it politically advantageous to endorse the program.

Several historians offer generalized analyses of the WPA on the national level. Most recently, in *American Made*, Nick Taylor provides his view of the WPA and its legacy. He writes, “The WPA lasted for eight years. Its accomplishments were enormous, yet during its lifetime it was the most excoriated program of the entire New Deal. Its workers were mocked as shiftless shovel leaners. Its projects gave rise to a mocking new work: ‘boondoggles.’” Red-baiting congressman called it a hotbed of Communists ... its very initials became a taunt; WPA, said its critics, stood for ‘We Piddle Around.’”³ Central to Taylor’s analysis of the WPA is his belief that the program was underappreciated at the time. He outlines the accomplishments of the WPA, providing statistics to reinforce his conviction. 650,000 miles of roads, 78,000 bridges, 125,000 civilian and military buildings, and 800 airports were built, improved, or enlarged by the WPA.⁴ Similarly, the WPA served over 900 million hot lunches to schoolchildren, operated 1,500 nursery schools, and produced 475,000 works of art and literature.⁵ In Taylor’s view, the WPA played a significant role in the modernization of the United States; culturally, educationally, and more specifically through the transformation of American infrastructure. It nevertheless attracted strong opposition politically, as well as among people who believed relief workers were unworthy of employment at the expense of their tax dollars. His text is therefore an attempt to show the WPA in a positive light by highlighting its ultimate value.

³ Nick Taylor, *American Made*, (New York: Bantam, 2008), 2.

⁴ Taylor, 524.

⁵ Taylor, 524.

Anthony Badger also defends the WPA in *the New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940*. Badger focuses on the development of the WPA and its predecessors in the work relief program of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). Like Taylor, he underscores the WPA's accomplishments and emphasizes the program's additional commitment to historically disadvantaged groups such as African-Americans and women. Despite its ability to mitigate many of the more severe effects of the Depression, Badger says that localism and fiscal conservatism limited the WPA from reaching its full potential. "The administration of the WPA at the local level," he writes, "sanctioned the politicization of relief while spending curbs prevented the WPA from achieving its goal of removing the stigma of charity or make-work from the assistance given the unemployed."⁶ Conservatives believed that, on the local level, Democrats ran the WPA like a political machine, subsequently limiting the impact of the Republican Party on the local level. As a result, Republicans in Congress argued that the New Deal was corrupting the political process.⁷ However, while Badger acknowledges that evidence suggests the WPA was used by city machines to exert illegal pressure on WPA workers to elect machine-supported candidates, he nevertheless argues that restrictions on government spending were a greater obstacle to adequate relief provision than Republican charges of local corruption.⁸

Badger's view of the WPA is comparable to his overall analysis of the New Deal. He argues that the New Deal's impact was circumscribed, often constrained by forces

⁶ Anthony Badger, *The New Deal: the Depression Years, 1933-1940*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 200.

⁷ Badger, 209.

⁸ Badger, 210-211.

over which the New Dealers had little control.⁹ “Congress wanted consistently to restrict the WPA,” Badger says, “to curb the overall spending levels, to make fewer workers eligible for assistance, to increase local sponsorship requirements, and to limit administrative costs. Conservative critics, increasingly powerful in Congress, simply did not want the WPA to provide employment comparable to the private sector for fear that workers would not seek available private jobs.”¹⁰ As a result, Badger blames the inadequate funding of the WPA on congressional conservatives.¹¹ Because it was inadequately funded, the WPA could never provide jobs for more than a third of those who needed work in the United States.

William Leuchtenburg reserves judgment of the WPA in *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*. Leuchtenburg says, “Perhaps Roosevelt’s decision was inevitable, but it was nonetheless regrettable. Since projects were chosen in which the cost of materials was negligible, housing was doomed. Since the Works Progress Administration, as Hopkins’ new agency was called, was not permitted to compete with private industry or to usurp regular governmental work, many WPA projects were make-work assignments of scant value.”¹² Leuchtenburg considers the type of work performed by the WPA make-work. That is, he believes the work relief projects cost more than they were worth. However, he acknowledges Harry Hopkins’ vision for the program and concludes that relief work corresponded with his overarching goal. Hopkins was appointed supervisor

⁹ Badger, 10.

¹⁰ Badger, 213.

¹¹ Badger, 212.

¹² William Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, (New York: Harper, 1963), 125.

of the WPA by President Roosevelt in 1935.¹³ His plan as federal relief administrator was essentially to put to work as many men as he could who were on relief.¹⁴

Hopkins focused the attention of the WPA on small scale projects designed to employ a greater number of people. Considering the desire of the Roosevelt Administration to promptly curb unemployment levels, Leuchtenburg acknowledges that Hopkins' approach had appeal because it put more men to work at a faster rate and thus corresponded with President Roosevelt's desire to give jobs to all those unable to find work.¹⁵ Although Leuchtenburg believes that WPA projects were costly, he nevertheless applauds the ingenuity of the WPA. "Yet given the problem Hopkins confronted," he says, "he displayed remarkable ingenuity in much that he did. The WPA built or improved more than 2,500 hospitals, 5,900 school buildings, 1,000 airport landing fields, and nearly 13,000 playgrounds. It restored the Dock Street Theater in Charleston; erected a magnificent ski lodge atop Oregon's Mount Hood; conducted art classes for the insane in a Cincinnati hospital; and ran a pack-horse library in the Kentucky hills."¹⁶ Thus, Leuchtenburg recognizes the WPA's impact on the national infrastructure. Although he believes the type of projects cost more than they were worth, Leuchtenburg understands Hopkins' desire to employ as many people as possible, and subsequently appreciates the WPA for its intrinsic value. However, like Badger, he underscores the inability of the WPA to employ all of those in need of a job. "By any standard, it was an impressive achievement. Yet it never came close to meeting Roosevelt's goal of giving jobs to all who could work. Of the some ten million jobless, the WPA cared for not much

¹³ Leuchtenburg, 124.

¹⁴ Leuchtenburg, 125.

¹⁵ Leuchtenburg, 125.

¹⁶ Leuchtenburg, 126.

more than three million.¹⁷ Regarding the President Roosevelt and Hopkins' goal for the unemployment rate, the WPA did not achieve its overarching goal because the organization was not able to provide all of those who needed work with a job.

Taylor, Badger, and Leuchtenburg's texts offer a perspective of the WPA from the national level. Conversely, historian Warren Moscow presents the view from New York State. In *Politics in the Empire State*, Moscow writes "...while in some parts of the country some of [Roosevelt's] reforms lost popularity; they never did in New York. In his home state, bank-deposit insurance, the home and work relief programs, the social-security legislation, the Home Owner' Loan Corporation, the establishment of a Securities and Exchange Commission, all were good for votes as long as he continued running for office."¹⁸ As a result, while cities like Syracuse and Rochester maintained Republican political machines throughout the 1930s, their electorate nevertheless continued to support New Deal initiatives.¹⁹ This particular trend is important to consider when evaluating trends in Schenectady because it suggests that an ideological distinction between conservative and liberal voters with regard to New Deal policy was not apparent among the body politic. With the exception of 1932 and 1933, Schenectady was also controlled by a Republican political machine during the Depression. The Schenectady Republican machine did not begin to crack until the late 1940s, finally giving way in a 1953 with the election of the Democratic mayor Samuel S. Stratton.²⁰ The unique characteristic of New York's body politic regarding nonpartisan support for

¹⁷ Leuchtenburg, 130.

¹⁸ Warren Moscow, *Politics in the Empire State*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948). 18.

¹⁹ Moscow, 42.

²⁰ James A. Riedel, "Boss and Faction," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 353 (1964): 15.

New Deal initiatives is significant because it suggests that both parties ran on a platform essentially endorsing the New Deal.

Central to Moscow's analysis of the New Deal in New York is the existence of nonpartisan political support for New Deal initiative. This trend seems to pre-date the WPA. In *Work Relief in New York State*, Alexander Radomski echoes a similar argument in his analysis of the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA). Radomski's text describes the development of work relief in New York State prior to the WPA. The TERA, established by Governor Roosevelt as a temporary relief measure in 1931, combined emergency home relief with work relief. TERA executed work relief projects comparable to those executed by Roosevelt's later New Deal programs. Echoing Moscow's interpretation of the public's perception of New Deal initiatives in New York, Radomski says, "Both political parties appeared to be afraid to oppose work relief because of its general popularity at least at the height of the depression."²¹ Both authors seem to suggest that New Yorkers and their political representatives viewed work relief measures in positively. Radomski's analysis suggests that popularity in work relief was strongest at the beginning of the depression, but then gradually decreased. Moscow implies that public support for work relief programs was constant throughout the New Deal era. Nevertheless, both would agree that both political parties generally endorsed Roosevelt's initiatives.

Criticism of the TERA, Radomski argues, came from conservative businessmen and welfare organizations. He says, "The chief criticisms against work relief were on the score of high costs and mediocre output. The principal critics were members of the

²¹ Radomski, 318.

conservative business and welfare organizations.”²² Moreover, he says that people generally considered the TERA a temporary measure. “In any evaluation of pre-WPA work relief it is necessary to remember the essentially temporary and emergency character of the measures and the limitations imposed upon them by the general culture.”²³ Thus, the people of New York understood the temporary necessity for emergency relief measure during times of economic crisis. In times of relative economic stability, New Yorkers thought individuals had an obligation to find work for themselves. Consequently, once economy recovery was evident, the people believed work relief programs were no longer required.

The emphasis on a short-term relief measure seems to percolate throughout several of the texts. It is identified by Radomski, and is further underscored by Barbara Blumberg in her local analysis of the WPA in New York City. Hence, it is a trend worth noting when evaluating Schenectady’s response to the WPA.

In *The New Deal and the Unemployed*, a study of the Works Progress Administration in New York City, Blumberg outlines the history of work relief in New York City. She is appreciative of the WPA, yet, like Taylor, feels that it did not receive the proper recognition it deserved. While she begins by detailing the establishment of TERA, her focus is primarily on the WPA and its contributions to New York City. She writes, “Despite the roads, schools, and airports it built, the contributions it made to the arts, and the white-collar services it performed in New York and elsewhere, the WPA never won overwhelming public approval.”²⁴ Much like Radomski, Blumberg argues that

²² Radomski, 318.

²³ Radomski, 318.

²⁴ Blumberg, 221.

Americans were willing to accept the organization simply as a short-term emergency measure. The WPA worried citizens who saw it as an expensive way to support depression victims, one that would inevitably lead to deficit spending. As a result, the public viewed the WPA as an emergency relief measure intended to mitigate the hardships prevalent during the depression's inception. Once the economy began to recover, the public emphasized fiscal responsibility and believed a continuation of the WPA was no longer necessary.²⁵

Blumberg argues that the public was only willing to provisional endorsement of the WPA. While New Yorkers believed the program was necessary for alleviating the initial effects of the economic downturn, they maintained a faith in American individualism that, out of personal conviction, restricted them from endorsing a permanent jobs program. She says, "Although the depression probably weakened somewhat the traditional belief that the United States is a land of opportunity where anyone who really tries can find work, it far from killed that notion."²⁶ Many Americans tended to hold the unemployed at least partially responsible for their joblessness.²⁷ The public maintained traditional notions of opportunity and were reluctant to accept the idea that government had an obligation to hire the unemployed.²⁸ Thus, the public associated unfavorable characteristics, such as laziness and incompetence, with the WPA and its employees. Critics of the WPA in New York City also emphasized the program's inefficiency. Blumberg attributes this claim to the WPA's lack of coordination during its earlier stages. She says, "Many urban residents, therefore, concluded that the WPA was

²⁵ Blumberg, 221.

²⁶ Blumberg, 223.

²⁷ Blumberg, 223.

²⁸ Blumberg, 224.

hopelessly inefficient and that shovel leaning was the favorite pastime of its employees.”²⁹ As a result, early organizational inefficiencies also contributed to an unfavorable image of the WPA; an image that sustained despite the program’s later effectiveness.³⁰

Blumberg additionally focuses on local opposition from business contractors and skilled labor unions. Stemming essentially from fear of economic competition, business contractors and skilled labor unions believed that the WPA was putting their organizations at a competitive disadvantage. Unions in particular feared that the WPA trained relief laborers in fields such as carpentry, masonry, and other crafts.³¹

Blumberg concludes her text, however, by blaming for the ineffectiveness of the WPA in New York City on conservatives in Washington. Although Republican Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia was considered a “friend of the New Deal,”³² most Republicans in Washington disagreed with the ideology of President Roosevelt and New Deal programs such as the WPA. Conversely, LaGuardia welcomed federal funding and believed that work relief projects would improve the quality of life in the city.³³ Accordingly, Harold Ickes wrote in 1934 when LaGuardia was elected mayor that, “[LaGuardia] had real ability and high courage ... he will ... give New York a great administration.”³⁴ LaGuardia’s vision for New York corresponded with the view of New Dealers in Washington. He presented Washington with proposals for work relief projects that

²⁹ Blumberg, 225.

³⁰ Blumberg, 225.

³¹ Blumberg, 226.

³² Thomas Keeler, “Fiorello H. LaGuardia,” *The History Teacher* Vol. 26, No.2 (Feb. 1993), 154.

³³ Keeler, 154.

³⁴ Keeler, 154.

included subways, bridges, airports, slum clearance, street repair, and public housing.”³⁵

Thus, echoing Badger’s analysis of the WPA, Blumberg argues that conservatives in Congress from other parts of the country inhibited the New York City WPA through legislative restrictions. Lack of funding, according to Blumberg, prevented the WPA from performing effectively because urban finances were already strained.³⁶ In her opinion, due to inadequate appropriation of funding, Republicans in Washington obstructed the WPA in New York and, as a result, prevented the organization from benefiting the city more substantively.

In *High Hopes: the Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York*, Mark Goldman illustrates trends similar to those identified by Blumberg. Two particularly prevalent themes include the public’s opinion of WPA employees, and also the overall effectiveness of the organization in Buffalo. Goldman’s essential argument is that the New Deal did not bring prosperity to Buffalo, nor did it bring an end to unemployment.³⁷ Paradoxically, Goldman recognizes a discrepancy between relief spending and its overall benefit. He says, “The WPA was spending money at a rate of \$60,000 per day, and yet it could employ only one-half of the able-bodied workers on the city’s relief roles.”³⁸ Hence, he points out that although relief spending seemed high, the amount being spent by the federal government was still not eliminating the unemployment crisis in Buffalo. Nevertheless, Goldman recognizes the effort taken by the federal government to provide work for those who needed it.³⁹ He is critical of the WPA, but appreciative. In his

³⁵ Keeler, 154.

³⁶ Blumberg, 250.

³⁷ Mark Goldman, *The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York*, (Albany, SUNY Press, 1983), 226.

³⁸ Goldman, 227.

³⁹ Goldman, 227.

opinion, the WPA mitigated some of the effects of the depression, but was too limited in scope. Like Blumberg, believes the program could have accomplished more.

Public criticism of those on relief was comparable in Buffalo and New York. Those who were not on work relief had a negative attitude toward those who were. Goldman writes, “Articles, letter to the editor, and editorials in all of the papers began to warn about the dangers of increased public welfare, of the ‘opiate of relief and relief employment,’ of ‘relief and the impairment of human values,’ and of ‘welfare chiselers.’”⁴⁰ The idea of a “welfare chiseler;” a disingenuous person who lied to the government about their financial situation in order to qualify for relief, is prevalent among the body politic in both cities. Blumberg says, “Since more than fifty percent ... did not experience joblessness first hand, many of these fortunate individuals tended to hold the men and women on the breadlines responsible, at least in part, for their own plight. The unemployed reliefer, they suspected, was a bit of a chiseler who preferred being a parasite on the public to going out and earning his own way.”⁴¹ As a result, criticism concerning the personal responsibilities of the poor became a subject of public conversation. The notion that the relief worker were in some way deceiving the public welfare system by being dishonest about his or her financial situation was a common public consensus among residents in both cities.

Rochester’s reaction to the New Deal was in many ways unique, mainly because the city maintained confidence in its business community throughout the 1930s.⁴² McKelvey demonstrates in *Rochester: An Emerging Metropolis* that this trend was

⁴⁰ Goldman, 227.

⁴¹ Blumberg, 223.

⁴² Blake McKelvey, *Rochester: an Emerging Metropolis*, (Rochester, Christopher Press, 1961), 91.

largely due to the relative strength of local businesses. Alpo Clothing Company, the Pfaudler Company, Eastman Kodak, and the Rochester Division of General Motors continued to expand in during the depression, thus creating hundreds of new jobs in Rochester.⁴³ However, McKelvey points out that Rochester supported New Deal social welfare programs.⁴⁴ Thus, there existed a healthy relationship between the private and public sector in Rochester. President of the Rochester Council of Social Agencies Marion Folsom illustrated this cooperative relationship when he said that he “had full confidence in the nation’s ability not only to achieve economic recovery but also to guard against calamities by cooperating between business and government.”⁴⁵ The friendly relationship between Rochester’s private and public sector is worth noting, however, because neither Blumberg nor Goldman comments on the relationship between business and government in either New York or Buffalo.

McKelvey acknowledges the WPA’s contributions in Rochester. By highlighting several parks, playgrounds, outdoor skating rinks, and public swimming pools developed by the WPA, McKelvey recognizes the organization’s recreational contributions to the civic and social life of the community.⁴⁶ However, similar to the people of Buffalo and New York City, the citizens of Rochester viewed that the WPA as a temporary emergency relief measure intended only to mitigate the initial effects of the depression.⁴⁷

A review of secondary literature provides a relatively comprehensive analysis of the WPA in New York State. Criticism of the WPA focused primarily the cost efficiency

⁴³ McKelvey, 90.

⁴⁴ McKelvey, 90.

⁴⁵ McKelvey, 79.

⁴⁶ McKelvey, 69.

⁴⁷ McKelvey, 85.

and abuse of the system by relief workers. On a national level, the WPA was viewed as an impressive governmental program that employed many people who needed jobs. Although it did not achieve its goal of employing all those able to work, its projects contributed positively to the physical landscape of local towns and municipalities. One concern echoed by Badger and Blumberg was that the WPA would have been more effective had it been properly funded. Thus, Blumberg's analysis of the WPA's fiscal constraints in New York corresponds with Badger's argument that conservative economic policies in Washington inhibited the overall execution of the WPA.

With regard to business contractors and labor unions, both viewed relief workers as unskilled chiselers with an unfair economic advantage. They accused the WPA of competing both with private industry and organized skilled labor. State politicians on both sides of the aisle, however, were supportive of the WPA. Several scholars argue that nonpartisan approval of the New Deal existed throughout New York State. According to Blumberg and Badger, conservative critics in Washington inhibited the potential impact of the WPA through restrictive legislation in Congress. Thus, while criticism stemmed from the business and labor communities, the people of New York State, for the most part, supported President Roosevelt's New Deal measures.

My thesis subsequently examines these trends in the City of Schenectady. Outside a few other theses and projects at Union College, nobody has explored this chapter of Schenectady's history. One colleague of mine wrote about the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) in Schenectady. In her thesis *The Guide That Never Was: The Federal Writers' Project in Schenectady*, New York, Sara Callahan explored the unpublished essays and articles from Schenectady's division of the Federal Writers'

Project (FWP). She argued that writers employed by the FWP in Schenectady wrote about instances where the city made it through difficult times in the past.⁴⁸ This diverged from the common writers' theme of Americanism which was both positive and patriotic.⁴⁹ Another colleague, Rebecca Broadwin, compiled a database of WPA project which I have incorporated into my thesis. Her work has been instrumental in helping shape my second chapter, which documents the physical impact of the WPA in the City of Schenectady.

In her text, Blumberg makes a case for using local history to highlight national trends about the New Deal, She says, "... by examining a single program closely we may enhance our understanding of the New Deal as a whole. A discussion of specifics on the municipal level should serve to illustrate generalizations about national developments."⁵⁰ My thesis applies Blumberg's emphasis on local examination to an investigation of the WPA in Schenectady. Primary sources, including the Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady, the *Schenectady Gazette*, *Union Star*, and articles published by the Schenectady Bureau of Municipal Research and Broadwin's research, are used to document the physical impact of the WPA, as well as look at the public's attitude regarding work relief. WPA projects proposed in the Common Council Proceedings detailed the approximate cost, location, and type of work of each work relief measure. Broadwin's research was subsequently used to determine if the projects proposed by the Common Council were in fact executed. These two sources provided a significant

⁴⁸ Sara E. Callahan, "The Guide That Never Was: The Federal Writers' Project in Schenectady, New York," (Senior Thesis, Union College Department of History, March 2009), 84.

⁴⁹ Callahan, 84.

⁵⁰ Barbara Blumberg, *The New Deal and the Unemployed*, (Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 1979), 10.

amount of information about the type, cost, and location of specific work relief projects in Schenectady. Thus, they were particularly useful in this thesis.

Common Council proceedings, articles published in the *Schenectady Gazette* and the *Union Star*, and articles published by the Schenectady Bureau of Municipal research, a local governmental watchdog organization, were used to explore the public's attitude about work relief. These sources provided perspectives from Schenectady residents, business contractors, and labor unions, and were, therefore, used to gain a more comprehensive analysis of the public's perception by taking into consideration different groups and interests of the community. My conclusions drawn from the newspaper analysis, however, are tentative. I looked at articles published during the time period of the WPA (1935-1942), but did not look at every single paper published. Thus, my conclusions are based off of the research and material that I did find.

Primary source documents including the *New York Times*, publications issued by the New York State WPA, as well as secondary literature examining the WPA on a state and national level, were subsequently used to compare the attitudes and behaviors identified in Schenectady with trends identified in other communities across New York State. My sampling strategy for the *New York Times* was similar to my strategy regarding the *Schenectady Gazette* and *Union Star*. Because I did not look at every issue published during the period, my conclusions about public opinion are tentative and based on my own personal research.

Public opinion of the WPA in Schenectady seemed to correspond with the attitudes and behaviors I identified on the state and national level. However, Republican politicians in Schenectady and New York State found it politically advantageous to

endorse the WPA, while on the national level; Republicans generally opposed the WPA and the New Deal. Moreover, the type of projects performed by the WPA in Schenectady also corresponded with state and national trends. Most of the projects in Schenectady were blue collar in nature and focused on constructing and maintaining the city's infrastructure. This was a common trend across the entire United States.

Chapter II: The Physical Legacy of the WPA in Schenectady

One of the most significant political developments during the Great Depression was the expansion of governmental provisions for the economically insecure. In *Work Relief in New York State*, historian Alexander Radomski outlines two general phases in the development of this expansion: “the conduct of temporary emergency programs of unemployed relief between 1930 and 1935, and the beginning of the so-called permanent program of ‘security, work, and relief’ in the succeeding years.”¹ Between 1931 and 1935, temporary state agencies assumed the responsibility of distributing unemployment relief. Many of these organizations received federal loans to operate their relief programs. These loans were first issued through the Emergency Relief Association (ERA) established in 1932 by President Hoover, and then through its successor the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). The Civil Works Administration (CWA), which created employed though work relief jobs focused on building and bridge construction, was subsequently established under FERA from 1933 to 1934. However, although the federal government participated in, and partially financed relief, efforts under these programs, states and localities assumed much of the responsibility distributing funding for work relief projects and supervising the actual work.

¹ Alexander Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State*, (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1948), vii.

During the pre-WPA period, New York administered its work relief funding through the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA), created by Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt in the fall of 1931. TERA provided local channels for relief distribution.² Radomski argues that Roosevelt used TERA as a model while developing a federal emergency relief program. He says, “New York’s program is particularly significant, not only because it was the first state emergency relief administration to get under way, but because it set standards of relief and personnel; established principles, policies and procedures, and adopted far-sighted imaginative methods of administration which were later carried over into the federal program.”³ TERA combined home relief (general welfare assistance payments) with work relief and conducted work relief under three consecutive programs.⁴ Central to Radomski’s analysis of the role of TERA is his belief in the state agency was the forerunner to Roosevelt’s subsequent federal relief program. Radomski emphasizes the fact that TERA gave “wide scope to local administration and interest,”⁵ a trend he recognizes in FERA and WPA policy. Localities were given a degree of autonomy over determining the implementation of federal and state work relief programs.

Local administration of work relief occurred through the short-lived Civil Works Administration (CWA), and the City’s Emergency Relief Bureau (ERB).⁶ By the end of June 1935, the average number of people on relief in the City of Schenectady was 1,650.⁷ Radomski ranked Schenectady ninth in the state for highest wages per inhabitant devoted

² Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State*, viii.

³ Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State*, 73.

⁴ Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State*, 73.

⁵ Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State*, 319.

⁶ Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State*, 88.

⁷ Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State*, 269.

to work relief wages during November 1931 through December 1935.⁸ Relative to other counties in New York State, work relief in Schenectady was quite prominent.⁹

Additionally, picture records of ERB projects in Schenectady during 1934 indicate that early work relief projects focused on improving the city's infrastructure through street and sewer repair.¹⁰ However, the city also constructed a municipal golf course beginning in the winter of 1933-1934.¹¹ The work performed on golf course was particularly labor intensive. Photos of the excavation are dominated by wheelbarrows rather than mechanical excavators.¹² Moreover, city relief officials employed over 1,400 people at one time or another during the project.¹³ Jobs ranged from plowing and grading soil to designing sprinklers and making plasticine models of the greens.¹⁴ The CWA's primary function was to provide employment. Thus, the expansion of the municipal golf course created approximately 1,400 jobs in Schenectady during the early stages of the Great Depression.¹⁵

The *Schenectady Gazette* reported on the municipal golf course in July 1933. The articles said that project employed over a 1,000 men and cost approximately \$200,000.¹⁶ A subsequent article went more into detail about specific costs. It outlined, "225 acres at \$405 an acre; the cost of the golf course would total \$130,000, land reserved for golf

⁸ Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State*, 283.

⁹ Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State*, 283.

¹⁰ Serge G. Philippoff, *Picture Records of the Schenectady ERB Projects During 1934* [1934], copy in possession of Professor Andrew Morris.

¹¹ Andrew Morris, "The Great Depression and Schenectady's New Deal Golf Course," Department of History, Union College, June 2010.

¹² Andrew Morris, "The Great Depression and Schenectady's New Deal Golf Course," Department of History, Union College, June 2010, 7.

¹³ Morris, 7.

¹⁴ Morris, 7.

¹⁵ Morris, 7.

¹⁶ "Municipal golf course relief work planned – consider Balltown road area for project to provide employment for over 1,000 men" *Schenectady Gazette*, Jul. 8, 1933, 8.

course \$70,000, materials for golf course including golf house, pipe, hose, machinery, and miscellaneous materials, \$60,000.”¹⁷ Central to the article was the notion that the project would “pay for itself” because if the municipal golf course would collect revenue once opened. As a result, the municipal golf course project was viewed as a long term investment that would continue to contribute to welfare of the community.

Work relief projects executed under TERA focused on improving the city’s infrastructure. In 1935, the interiors and exteriors of Lincoln School, Seward School, Yates School, Halsey School, Brandywine School, Horace Mann School, Nott Street School, and Nott Terrace High School were cleaned and painted by TERA employees. Relief workers scraped and varnished nine thousand school desks, improved each school’s outdoor playground facility, renovated and installed up-to-date toilet fixtures in Lincoln, McKinley, Howe, Hamilton, and Nott Terrace High School, subsequently installing window shades for all buildings and creating appropriate storage cubbies for the children enrolled in each respected school.¹⁸ Surface water sewers with manholes and catch basins were constructed on Regan Avenue between Simon Kill and Lancaster Street to stop the flow of surface water along Regan and Belmont Avenue thereby helping reduce potential property damage in the area.¹⁹ Through the acquisition of land, the state government with the help of TERA employees extended Gasner Avenue from Albany Street to State Street by a width of sixty feet. Workers cleared, graded, and surfaced the

¹⁷ “Four Chief Arguments for Golf Links Project Stated By Allen – Plan Promises Return to City on Investment and Insures No Costs to Taxpayer” *Schenectady Gazette*, Aug. 18, 1933, 5.

¹⁸ Ordinance No. 7858, *1935 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 17.

¹⁹ Ordinance No. 7867, *1935 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 27.

road with gravel, subsequently completing the project which cost the city approximately \$1,500.00.²⁰

While building renovation and street repair projects were common tasks embarked on by TERA, workers also assumed less conventional roles. Odd jobs such as repairing shoes and clothes for the needy, removing snow, creating baseball diamonds and tennis courts, janitorial work, and the development of a municipal golf course was performed by TERA employees.²¹

By the end of 1935, however, TERA's role in New York State came to an end when the federal government assumed major responsibility for the unemployed through the creation of the Works Progress Administration (WPA).²² The WPA absorbed most of TERA's responsibilities. Federal funding for work relief projects were distributed to local WPA agencies throughout the state. However, most work relief projects executed under New York State's division of the WPA were comparable to those executed during the legacy of TERA. WPA work relief projects in Schenectady resembled those conducted by TERA in that they were primarily blue collar in nature and focused on improve the city's infrastructure.

Most WPA projects focused on improving Schenectady's infrastructure. Consequently, work relief projects enacted under the WPA corresponded with the previous accomplishments of TERA in Schenectady. TERA and WPA workers built schools, highways, and parks. They constructed pressure outlets and dams, and built swimming pools and outdoor ice skating rinks. The Common Council of Schenectady

²⁰ Ordinance No. 7878, *1935 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 34.

²¹ Ordinance No. 7884, *1935 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 42.

²² Alexander Radomski, *Work Relief in New York State*, (New York: King's Crown Press, 1948), 74.

proposed the city's first WPA project in late 1935. Subsequent documentation of the projects is categorized by project type. Blue collar projects, focused on improving the city's infrastructure through street, sewer, and building repair are documented first, followed by a list of park and recreational improvements and white collar job creation initiatives.

The majority of relief work performed by the WPA was also dedicated to improving the city's infrastructure. These projects included building, street, and sewer repair. Titled "an ordinance authorizing and directing as an emergency work relief measure, the undertaking of certain municipal improvement work," the first WPA initiative in Schenectady called for the reconstruction of the Schenectady County Welfare Home, known as the "old Almshouse," into a Vocational School for local students.²³ The project required WPA workers were to clean and paint; reconstruct and rebuild walls and ceilings, as well as install heating equipment, electrical wiring, flooring, windows, and screens. Additionally, workers were to construct a gymnasium, and perform any other tasks necessary to complete the improvement.²⁴ That December, employees installed 1.5 inch curbing along both sides of Lafayette Street, specifically between Hamilton Street and Union Street.²⁵ To complete the job effectively, they were required to remove trees from the new curb line, build sidewalks, construct radius curbs at various intersecting streets, as well as relocate water curb boxes and perform any other work necessary to properly complete the improvement.²⁶ According to one city alderman, the project was

²³ Ordinance No. 8036, *1935 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 205.

²⁴ Ordinance No. 8044, *1935 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 215.

²⁵ Ordinance No. 8085, *1935 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 286.

²⁶ Ordinance No. 8085, 286.

done at, “no cost to the city.”²⁷ Thus, the alderman underscored the federal government’s ability to subsidize work relief projects and relieve New York from any additional financial burden. This was an obvious attraction for local politicians.

Two additional projects in 1935 also dealt with improving the city’s infrastructure. WPA workers graded and surfaced, with run of bank gravel, Fourteenth Street, Fifteenth Street, and Sixteen Street; all located within the city’s Tenth Ward (now the neighborhood of Bellevue).²⁸ To improve traffic conditions, the WPA also filled and widened the intersection at Duane Street and Altamont Avenue, thereby alleviating congestion.²⁹ 1935 thus established a pattern of municipal improvement work that included street repair and building construction. Building renovation, street repair, and recreational improvements essentially characterized the majority of WPA projects in Schenectady between 1935 and 1941.

In 1936, the WPA extended Watt Street between Altamont Avenue and Michigan Avenue in the Schenectady’s eighth ward. The city acquired the necessary land from property owners for the improvement, then graded, excavated, and paved the road to allow for the subsequent extension.³⁰ The Central Fire Station on Erie Boulevard and Fire Station No. 7 on located on Fourth Avenue were renovated, repaired, cleaned, and painted by relief workers who subsequently installed proper electrical work throughout both buildings.³¹

²⁷ Ordinance No. 8085, 286.

²⁸ Ordinance No. 8090, *1935 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 292.

²⁹ Ordinance No. 8092, *1935 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 293.

³⁰ Ordinance No. 8117, *1936 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 16.

³¹ Ordinance No. 8183, *1936 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 70; Ordinance No. 8167, *1936 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 55.

In July 1936, the Council did appropriate \$7,500.00 for the construction of several sewer outlets, mainly located near Fuller Pond. Workers deepened and cleaned the creek situated at the Pleasant Valley Park and Fuller Pond draining outlet (currently situated between Park Road and Interstate 890 in the neighborhood of Hamilton Hills).³² The project also called for the Fuller Pond outlet sewer pipe, as well as the sewer pipes located on Van Guysling Avenue and Broadway.³³ Similar improvement work was done on Ocean Street between Campbell Avenue and the city line. The construction included the building of catch basins, culverts, as well as the laying of sewer drains and gravel.³⁴ Although the project's costs were not given, the Common Council appropriated an additional \$50,000.00 in November to cover the purchase of materials, supplies, and equipment for city works projects undertaken by the WPA.³⁵

In January 1937, the Common Council appropriated \$500.00 to repair the top floor of the Old Central Fire Station. Workers were asked to repaint, plaster, and rewire the fire station, as well as install necessary plumbing.³⁶ Similarly, sanitary sewers and appurtenances were to be constructed on streets throughout the Fourteenth Ward (in the vicinity of Jay Street).³⁷ The City Manager outlined on February 18 the sponsor's share of approved WPA projects, which he estimated \$266,240.39. Those that were approved by both the city and the federal government totaled \$206,773.11, leaving an estimated cost to the city of \$173,881.89, \$19,003.00 of which would be covered by the city and the

³² Ordinance No. 8300, *1936 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 189.

³³ Ordinance No. 8300, 189.

³⁴ Ordinance No. 8345, *1936 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 256.

³⁵ Ordinance No. 8390, *1936 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 341.

³⁶ Ordinance No. 8418, *1937 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 27.

³⁷ Ordinance No. 845, *1937 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 33.

remainder with funds from an additional \$100,000.00 bond.³⁸ This covered the Old Central Fire Station upgrading, sanitary work throughout the downtown Schenectady, as well as various other municipal improvement projects of similar character.

In 1937, Elliot Street to State Street was graded, curbed, and surfaced with run of bank gravel, along with Marshall Avenue from State Street and Wagner Avenue between Albany Street and Watt Street.³⁹ Similar work was done on Weaver Street in the vicinity of the railroad underpass. Sewers and catch basins were added to the street to facilitate adequate drainage along the lower elevation points of Weaver under the railroad.⁴⁰ Concrete curbs and sidewalks were constructed along Ferry Street between State Street and Union Street to allow for adequate pedestrian traffic.⁴¹ Fire hydrants, catch basins, and telephone poles were subsequently installed along Ferry Street.⁴² Proper fill and grading facilitated the extension of Cheltingham Avenue to Osterlitz Avenue near the intersection of Osterlitz and Poplar. Poplar Street was then graded between Broad Street and Osterlitz, followed by the installation of a one hundred and fifty foot reinforced concrete culvert, bituminous macadam, and storm sewers to facilitate the flow of rain and river water.⁴³

One particular project worth noting in 1938 was the Cowhorn Creek sewer project. The Cowhorn Creek high pressure storm sewer system, costing approximately \$1,000,000.00, attracted constructive debate within the community and local press. *Your City Government*, a yearly pamphlet published by the Schenectady City Council, outlines

³⁸ Communication from the City Manager, *1937 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 49.

³⁹ Ordinance No. 8449, *1937 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 70.

⁴⁰ Ordinance No. 8450, *1937 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 71.

⁴¹ Ordinance No. 8493, *1937 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 126.

⁴² Ordinance No. 8493, 126.

⁴³ Ordinance No. 8538, *1937 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 215.

the benefits of the project. The pamphlet points out that the Cowhorn Creek sewer project would prevent frequent flooding in the lower part of the city and consequently increase property values within the vicinity. Although expensive, the WPA covered over half the cost – the city contributed \$400,000.00.⁴⁴ Logistically, the sewer was to intercept the Cowhorn Creek water shed at Vale Cemetery and lead it down Liberty Street thus discharging it into the river.⁴⁵ Despite concerns from a local citizen that the intended route would be too expensive, and damage valuable cemetery plots,⁴⁶ the Council appropriated an additional \$18,006.25 and maintained the project's initial site.⁴⁷ The Cowhorn Creek sewer project was of particularly welcomed by the community because the creek had a tendency to overflow.

Relief projects throughout 1938 maintained the WPA's focus on blue collar municipal improvement work. A 6" water main was installed under Eastholm Road between State Street and Consaul Road, followed by the necessary curbing, paving, and grading required for its proper installation.⁴⁸ Additionally, the WPA demolished the Second Police Precinct located on Third Avenue and erected a new building complete with plumbing, heating, and electrical work.⁴⁹

Although projects focused on improving the city's infrastructure seemed to be the most prevalent, the WPA also built or refurbished park and recreational facilities throughout Schenectady. Five outdoor ice skating rinks were constructed throughout the

⁴⁴ *1939 Your City Government*, 42

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ "City Seeking Water for \$1,000,000 Storm Sewer," *Schenectady Gazette*, Jun. 12, 1940

⁴⁷ *1939 Proceedings of the Common Council*, 276

⁴⁸ Ordinance No. 8863, *1938 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 239

⁴⁹ Ordinance No. 8870, *1938 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 249.

city in 1936.⁵⁰ Located in Central Park, Hillhurst Park, Riverside Park, Second Ward Park, and Willet Street playground, these ice skating rinks provided an outdoor recreation option for local residents and families. In an article written following the projects' completion, the *Schenectady Gazette* reported "excellent skating conditions at Central Park."⁵¹

Similarly in 1936, the pool located in Riverside Park was renovated. Workers installed showers, constructed a spring board, and built a bath house complete with restrooms and changing facilities.⁵² Improvements were also performed on the original TERA funded municipal golf course project, where the WPA refurbished the Club House. While the Common Council did not provide specify allotted funds for these endeavors, a one hundred and fifty thousand dollar bond was issued by the Council to cover the cost of city public works projects carried out by the WPA during the fiscal quarter.⁵³

In 1937, the playground at Howe School was reconstructed. WPA workers installed new equipment, steps, fencings, and proper drainage to allow for youth recreational activity within the Baker Avenue neighborhood.⁵⁴ In addition, the WPA created hot beds and potting houses in Central Park and Pleasant Valley Park, therefore contributing to the beautification of Schenectady's parks and recreational facilities.⁵⁵

The WPA continued to execute public works projects focused on recreation throughout the next year. In 1938, the Common Council proposed installing a public swimming pool in Central Park, complete with a filtering system and bath house. The

⁵⁰ Ordinance No. 8118, *1936 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 16.

⁵¹ "Open Hillhurst Park Skating Rink Today," *Schenectady Gazette*, Jan 17, 1936, 11.

⁵² Ordinance No. 8291, *1936 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 173.

⁵³ Ordinance No. 8269, *1936 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 147.

⁵⁴ Ordinance No. 8453, *1937 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 72.

⁵⁵ Ordinance No. 8451, *1937 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 71

total cost of the project was established at \$152,000.00, \$51,000.00 of which would be covered by the WPA and \$101,000.00 by the city.⁵⁶ Specific costs for each project were as followed: \$60,000.00 for the pool, \$25,000.00 of which was covered by the WPA and \$35,000.00 billed to the city, \$27,000.00 for the filtering system, \$0.00 of which would be covered by the WPA and \$27,000.00 billed to the city, and \$65,000.00 for the bath house, \$51,000.00 of which was covered by the WPA and \$101,000.00 billed to the city.⁵⁷ Controversy surrounding the project centered primarily on the filtration system because its cost was not covered by the WPA. However, one alderman suggested a filtration system would be convenient, given the increased burden of changing the water every twenty-four hours, and the subsequent high cost of pumping millions of gallons of water each day.⁵⁸ Although the swimming pool project never materialized, the proposal nevertheless demonstrates the ambition of the council members. It also shows that council members were hesitant to execute projects that would have put the city into debt.

The city also employed WPA personnel to supervise youth recreational activities throughout Schenectady. In April, 1938, workers helped coordinate leisure activities that included the establishment of several athletic leagues; specifically, a basketball, hockey, and soccer league, as well as boxing, wrestling, and handball association.⁵⁹ Thus, the WPA contributed to the development of local recreation. Work relief projects focused on recreation were less controversial because they did not compete with private enterprise. Moreover, they did not attract a substantial amount of criticism from the local business community.

⁵⁶ *1938 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 33

⁵⁷ *1938 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 33

⁵⁸ *1938 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 33

⁵⁹ Ordinance No. 8786, *1938 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 143

Although the majority of WPA projects were blue collar in nature and focused on either improving the city's infrastructure or constructing parks and recreational facilities, the WPA also stimulated white collar employment in Schenectady. To provide white collar employment relief, WPA office assistants and supervisors performed an ongoing project for the city by indexing Common Council records or current and past proceedings.⁶⁰ Moreover, the WPA stimulated public sector employment with the creation of clerical jobs within the state government offices. The city created the position of mechanical supervision within the Schenectady County WPA office at a pay rate of \$35 dollars a week.⁶¹ The task of the mechanical supervision was to oversee the purchase of materials for WPA projects throughout the county.⁶²

Broadwin's research indicates that very few WPA projects were focused on white collar job creation. In her report summarizing the WPA's activities in Schenectady for 1938, she underscores, "Out of the forty eight projects created, eight of them were not blue collar construction in nature. Six of those eight projects provided white collar jobs. One of the projects provided white collar jobs working in the forensics lab of the police department, the other five projects created jobs working for the Bureau of Traffic and City Planning creating street and traffic surveys. In all only 89 of the 3270 jobs provide in 1938 were white collar."⁶³ Broadwin research also indicates that several manufacturing jobs were created to provide clothing and shoes for the needy. WPA employees repaired old clothing and shoes for distribution to welfare cases. These were

⁶⁰ Ordinance No. 8807, *1938 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 167.

⁶¹ Ordinance No. 8132, *1936 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 25.

⁶² Ordinance No. 8132, 25.

⁶³ Rebecca Broadwin, "The Effects of the WPA on Schenectady County," (Summer Research Final Report, Union College, August 2007), 5.

clients of the County Relief Bureau.⁶⁴ Sara Callahan's thesis *The Guide That Never Was: The Federal Writers' Project in Schenectady, New York* highlights the existence of a Federal Writers Project in Schenectady as well. Although the FWP only employed a few writers, Callahan's research illustrates the diversity of the WPA in Schenectady. While the majority of projects were blue collar construction jobs, clerical workers, manufacturers, and writers were also employed by the local WPA.

Broadwin's research shows that WPA expenditures decreased after 1939. During the 1939 fiscal year, the city spent \$1,260,640.00 on work relief projects; \$579,796 the following year; \$447,532.00 in 1941; and \$91,415.00 in 1942.⁶⁵ There is no data for 1943. Few project proposals were found in the 1942 Common Council Proceedings. However, Broadwin calculated a total of \$91,415.00 spent on work relief projects during the 1942 fiscal year.⁶⁶ Broadwin's data ends at 1942 and there is no mention of work relief projects or expenditures during in the 1943 Common Council Proceedings. Thus, it is accurate to assume that WPA ceased significant operation in Schenectady sometime during 1943. President Roosevelt liquidated the WPA in June 1943, so this is a rather accurate assumption.

The physical legacy of the WPA, however, is evident in Schenectady's infrastructure. Roads, bridges, and sewer facilities were built by the WPA; fire stations, schools, and parks were constructed to benefit the interests of the community. As the research indicates, a substantial amount of work relief initiatives were directed toward blue

⁶⁴ Broadwin, WPA roll 44, slides 54-56.

⁶⁵ Rebecca Broadwin, "The Effects of the WPA on Schenectady County," (Summer Research Project, Union College, August 2007), *1941 Your City Government*, 41.

⁶⁶ Broadwin, "The Effects of the WPA on Schenectady County" (Summer Research Project, Union College, August 2007).

collar projects. This corresponds with national trends. Both Leuchtenburg and Taylor emphasize that most WPA projects were dedicated to improving roads, schools, civilian buildings, and playgrounds.⁶⁷ As indicated by my and Broadwin's research, most work relief projects in Schenectady focused on improving the city's infrastructure. Projects focused on constructing parks and recreational facilities were also common, but not as prevalent as infrastructure projects. In comparison, very few projects simulated white collar job creation. Nevertheless, there existed a small arts program in Schenectady, and the WPA created several clerical, manufacturing, and other miscellaneous jobs, such as the execution of a traffic study for the Bureau of Traffic and City Planning.⁶⁸ With regard to Broadwin's data, one important detail to note is that her research found more WPA projects listed on file than proposed by the Common Council. This could suggest that the Common Council only proposed and debated on a portion of the projects executed. Regardless, based on data obtained by Broadwin's research and the Common Council Proceedings, the type of work performed by the WPA in Schenectady seems to correspond with the broader trends highlighted by Taylor and Leuchtenburg of the program nationally. WPA relief workers in Schenectady refurbished local educational facilities, renovated buildings, developed parks and recreational facilities, widened intersections and graded road surfaces, and constructed sewer and pressure outlets. While white collar jobs were created in local WPA and other governmental offices, the thrust of WPA work relief projects in Schenectady were blue collar and labor intensive.

⁶⁷ Taylor, 523; Leuchtenburg, 126

⁶⁸ Broadwin, 5; Michael T. Mancini "The New Deal and Relief in the Capital District," (Thesis, Union College, March 2006), 42.

Chapter III: A Comparative Analysis of the Public's Perception of the WPA in Schenectady

Perhaps the best way to achieve a relatively comprehensive understanding of the public's perception of the WPA is by examining local articles in the *Schenectady Gazette* and the *Union Star*, the Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady, and reports issued by the Schenectady Bureau of Municipal Research. While searching through the *Schenectady Gazette* and the *Union Star*, I looked for articles and opinion pieces either commenting or addressing local WPA activity. Specifically, I was looking for articles published around the same date that the Common Council debated specific proposals. If the article merely reported on the WPA, I evaluated the author's tone. The Common Council addresses the concerns of all members of the local community, so any issues raised with regard to the WPA would presumably be documented in the Council's proceedings. The Schenectady Bureau of Municipal Research, a non-profit research organization dedicated to enduring the government act on behalf of the public interest, published several reports critiquing WPA policies. Therefore, the Bureau would have been critical of any government policy they believed contradicted the public's best interest. I chose these four sources because I believed they would reflect the opinions of both residents and members of the business and labor communities. As a result, these sources were likely to produce differing assessments of the WPA from more than one perspective. My goal was to essentially obtain the most representative sample possible. I wanted my research to incorporate an impartial analysis of all viewpoints, thus reflecting the opinions of the community as a whole.

I also investigated letters and newspaper articles written by people in other communities, as well as publications issued by the New York State Division of the WPA. The goal here was to achieve a more comprehensive analysis of public perception by surveying primary source documents incorporating viewpoints from across New York State. Letters written to William B. Daley, the WPA District Director of the Capital Region, and reprinted in the booklet published by the New York State Division of the WPA, were chosen because they emphasized the public's feelings toward various work relief projects executed in their communities. These letters were overwhelmingly positive and paralleled petitions sent to the Common Council in tone and nature. Citizens wrote to Mr. Daley expressing their appreciation for the contributions of the WPA in their local neighborhoods.

Letters written to the editor of the *New York Times*, however, reflected a different attitude. One letter was overtly critical of the WPA. A New York City resident argued that the WPA maintained an unfair economic advantage over private industry, and accused the program of wasteful and inefficient government spending. These attitudes were expressed by members of Schenectady's business and labor communities. Although the New York State Division of the WPA offered an opposing opinion, the perspectives reflected by these three sources thus provided context to the public's perception of the WPA in Schenectady because viewpoints from across the state ultimately corresponded with opinions in Schenectady.

Evident in the proceedings is an apparent appreciation for the WPA by residents of Schenectady, as well as strong criticism by local business contractors and labor unions. While the public expressed its appreciation by petitioning the Council and requesting work relief projects in their respected neighborhoods, criticism centered primarily on economic competition created by the WPA and issues such as public debt and the program's ultimate

necessity. The Schenectady Bureau of Municipal Research, a non-profit research organization dedicated to enduring the government act on behalf of the public interest, published several reports critiquing WPA policies. These reports, coupled with local opinions expressed in the Common Council proceedings, suggest that while Schenectady residents welcomed WPA work in their communities, local contractors and labor unions grew increasingly hostile to the WPA while the Bureau of Municipal Research was more concerned with the debt accumulated by the program.

State employees and local residents were particularly appreciative of the WPA. Earl Devendorf, the Associate Director of Sanitation for New York State, expressed in writing his view of the WPA to the Common Council of Schenectady in March of 1938. Devendorf wrote, “Without the federal aid made available through the Works Progress Administration, it would have been impossible to secure construction of many of these projects, particularly during depression years when people have been hard pressed to make ends meet.”¹ Devendorf’s respect for the WPA ultimately stems from his understanding of state and federal relief policy. He says that many necessary sanitary projects would have been deferred for years had federal aid not been available. Consequently, Devendorf expresses gratitude for the federal funding provided through the Works Progress Administration. In his opinion, the WPA relieves Schenectady of any significant financial burden that would inhibit the city from making required improvements to its infrastructure.

Unlike Mr. Devendorf, who valued the WPA mainly because of the program’s commitment to alleviating the financial burden of states and municipalities, Schenectady residents praised the WPA simply because they wanted work relief projects conducted in their

¹ “Miscellaneous Communications,” *1938 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 95.

communities. Ronald B. Steeves and forty-one other local residents petitioned the Common Council in March 1939 hoping to obtain a WPA project in their neighborhood.² The residents wanted the sidewalks paved on Albany Street, beginning at the intersection of School Street and continuing to the Woodlawn School on Albany Street.³ They wrote the Council, “The children who go to the Woodlawn School over this territory are obliged to use the roadway which is a dangerous condition and has resulted in several accidents.”⁴ Ultimately, the residents were concerned for the children and considered the street improvement an ideal task for the WPA. Joseph A Haley and twenty other residents petitioned the Council in 1940 asking the city to improve the sewers on Alexander Street because of frequent flooding of the adjacent creek. “This creek starts at the Second Ward Park located at Lenox Road and continues down through Van Vranken Avenue along Alexander Street into the Mohawk River,” they wrote. Adding, “This would make a worthy WPA project ... [we] suggest a pipe be laid to overcome these unsatisfactory conditions.”⁵ In wake of the Cowhorn Creek project, many streams along the Mohawk River flooded.

A subsequent petition was sent by John Notari and two other residents asking the WPA to pave Seventh Avenue between Congress Street and Cutler Street.”⁶ Local citizens thus recognized the potential of the WPA and viewed the program as a way to achieve desired improvements in their communities. They wanted their roads and sewers repaired and petitioned the Council to carry out the improvements through the WPA.

² “Presentation and Reference Petitions and Remonstrance,” *1939 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 66.

³ “Presentation and Reference Petitions and Remonstrance,” *1939 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 66.

⁴ “Presentation and Reference Petitions and Remonstrance,” *1939 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 66.

⁵ *1940 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 143.

⁶ *1940 Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 323.

This trend was common across the state. Several residents from towns across upstate wrote letters of appreciation to local WPA representatives in their area for projects executed in their communities. On June 1, 1936, W.H. Perking from Cohoes wrote Hon. Frank S. Ablett, a member of City Hall, commenting on the success of a recent WPA project. Perking wrote:

Dear Sir:

I am writing you in reference to our recent telephone conversation concerning the work that has been done by the WPA workers on the highway adjacent to our plant property.

I personally feel that this work has been well done, and that a great deal of credit should be given to those who have personally supervised this project. This project has not only created employment for the relief workers, but it has also improved one of the main arteries into our city.

I do not believe at this writing that this work has been entirely completed, but when it has been I feel that it will represent money that has been spent in the right direction.⁷

Perking applauds the WPA for its ability to stimulate job creation and its efficient use of taxpayer money. He also recognizes the improvements made to the city's infrastructure. Thus, Perking's letter to Mr. Ablett is one of sincere gratitude. He appreciates the WPA's contributions to the community and suggests that any future projects would likely produce similar rewarding results.

Vina Lafferty, a resident of Troy, also praised the WPA in a letter to Mr. John Armstrong, WPA Superintendent in District No. 2. On June 16, 1936, Lafferty wrote:

Dear Sir:

As a resident of Ford Avenue I wish to express you and your fellow workers my sincere gratitude and appreciation for your splendid supervision and workmanship in the matter of paving Ford Avenue.

I am well aware it was not an easy assignment and you had many difficulties to overcome but you worked thru hazardous and

⁷ W.H. Perking, reprinted in Lester W. Herzog's "WPA in the Capital District," (New York: 1936), 13.

inclement weather ... we [now] have a Street of which we are justly proud.

I particularly wish to commend you on the removal of the great mass of jagged rock at the inter-section of Ford Avenue which has been a menace to the city for the past decade.⁸

Lafferty commends Mr. Armstrong for the work performed on Ford Avenue under his supervision. She applauds his workmanship and considers the improvements done by the WPA a significant benefit to the community. Similar appreciation is expressed by R. L. Townsend of the Green County Highway Department. He wrote Mr. Daley in 1936:

Dear Mr. Daley:

We are taking the liberty of conveying to you our appreciation of the assistance that Greene County has received from the WPA and for the many courtesies extended to us by the individuals of that organization.

We certainly appreciate the employment that the WPA has furnished in our County and the improvements which have been made possible by the aid of that organization.⁹

Townsend's letter focuses more on the overall contributions of the WPA in Greene County. Unlike Mr. Perking and Ms. Lafferty, Townsend does not specify one particular project but rather commends the WPA for its assistance regarding all highway projects. Nevertheless, Perking, Lafferty, and Townsend applaud the WPA for its involvement in their neighborhoods. The general tone of all three letters is positive and gratifying. All three individuals view the WPA as a positive and welcomed asset.

Perking, Lafferty, and Townsend's letters suggest that their communities reacted positively to the WPA. The appreciation expressed by Perking, Lafferty, and Townsend was also illustrated in the Proceedings of the Common Council. Citizens in Schenectady who petitioned the Council for work relief projects in their community shared a similar

⁸ Vina Lafferty, reprinted in Lester W. Herzog's "WPA in the Capital District," (New York: 1936), 13.

⁹ R. L. Townsend, reprinted in Lester W. Herzog's "WPA in the Capital District," (New York: 1936), 13.

appreciation for the work of the WPA. Thus, it is evident that among the general population, there were members of the community who commended the work of WPA, and welcomed projects into their towns and neighborhoods.

Lester W. Herzog, the New York State Administrator for the WPA¹⁰, published a series of short informational articles about the WPA during the program's existence. His articles, predictably, emphasized the positive role played by the WPA in communities throughout New York State. In many ways, the petitions sent to the Common Council by the people of Schenectady, and letters of appreciation sent to the WPA offices in Albany, reinforce Herzog's assumption.

In *WPA in the Capital District*, Herzog outlines his, and ultimately, the federal government's view of the WPA. He begins by highlighting New York's historic role as an industrial powerhouse underscores Schenectady's contributions to the state to reinforce this notion. He writes:

In the hinterland [of New York State] are many industries known throughout the world. Greatest is the General Electric Company's plant in Schenectady, where genius is producing what might well be called miracles. Its products find their way into every nook and cranny of the globe. The American Locomotive Company, in the same city, supplied the iron horses which carried the United States boundaries to the Pacific coast and today are still pushing the borders of civilization forward in all parts of the world. There are great carpet industries, glove factories, paper mills, and textile industries which dot the area. These in normal times employ thousands upon thousands of workers. In addition, there are countless smaller industries, famous in their own field.¹¹

Herzog presents a celebratory view of Upstate New York. He premises this conclusion by reinforcing to the reader the state's prior accomplishments and subsequently suggesting that the

¹⁰ New York City had its own WPA administrator. Thus, the position of New York State Administrator does not include New York City.

¹¹ "WPA in the Capital District," Lester W. Herzog *Works Progress Administration* (New York: 1936), 5.

world and New York experience a mutual benefit when the state's industries are thriving. Indeed, the "genius" of the General Electric Company produces "miracle" electrical appliances that dominate the global market. Unfortunately many of the employees working in industries mentioned by Herzog became unemployed during the economic downturn.¹² However, he maintains that the WPA found jobs for these individuals comparable to their skill level.¹³ Herzog concludes that the WPA prevented the unemployed from "bearing the burden of home relief" and being "harassed by the community" as a result.¹⁴ Thus, Herzog considers the WPA's role to be one that (1) revitalizes industry, (2) employs those who lost their job, and (3) restores the moral value of work. According to Herzog, work relief achieves these three goals.

Herzog's view of the WPA corresponds with the overarching perspective of New Dealers on the national level. Harry Hopkins once said, "Give a man a dole and you save his body and destroy his spirit; give him a job and pay him an assured wage, and you save both the body and the spirit."¹⁵ However, Herzog's concern for the moral integrity of the unemployed worker is not surprising. His vision should reflect the fundamental philosophy of the New Deal considering he is employed by the WPA. His analysis therefore serves more as an indication of the government's overall view of work relief within the context of New York State.

This view is overwhelming positive. In New York, the WPA provided jobs for the unemployed through various work relief measures that not only restored the moral value of work, but also contributed to the general welfare of the community. Many work relief projects in cities such as Albany, Troy, and Cohoes are emphasized in Herzog's publication to underscore the legitimacy of the WPA highlight the accomplishments of work relief. Like

¹² Herzog, 5.

¹³ Herzog, 5.

¹⁴ Herzog, 5.

¹⁵ As quoted in Badger, *The New Deal*, 201.

work relief projects in Schenectady, these projects focused on improving the infrastructure of public and educational facilities, repairing streets and sewer systems, and constructing playgrounds and other youth recreational facilities.

Although the petitions sent to the Common Council were both positive and appreciative, Schenectady residents, nevertheless, expressed their concerns to the Council when they considered the WPA's performance unsatisfactory. In a letter to the Council, Elmer Basile and two hundred and fifty other residents underscored that improvements on the Yates School Playground and baseball field were started by the WPA but never completed. The petition highlighted that, "the whole playground is lying idle and the children have no place to play," subsequently urging the Council to investigate why the project was not completed.¹⁶ Their concern ultimately stemmed from an expectation that the WPA had an obligation to be efficient. While the citizens of Schenectady welcomed the WPA, they preferred projects that were executed resourcefully, and were critical of the WPA when they believed projects were not.

In late 1936, Leslie Eichel wrote an opinion piece in the *Schenectady Gazette* outlining her view of work relief on more abstract level from the perspective of a local citizen. Her response seems to be a response to WPA cutbacks. Although the thrust of the cutbacks did not occur until 1937, in late 1936, the average number of individuals on WPA relief per month declined from 2,548 in October to 2,243 in December.¹⁷ The following December a total of 1,594 people were employed by the WPA for that month.¹⁸ Eichel writes:

The year 1937 will be a severe headache over relief. The administration has finally made the worst possible mess of it.

¹⁶ 1938 *Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 180.

¹⁷ Donald S. Howard, *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1943), 854

¹⁸ Howard, 855.

Perhaps this is inevitable, for relief at best is like a drug to deaden the pain. It does not cure, does not get to the basic causes at all, and eventually becomes merely an added affliction to an already weakened body. The cruelty of the present method of casting thousands off relief has probably unmatched by any country. Those that remain on, or are taken back, are subjected to such torturous questions that they are almost driven mad; and to none are there relief from the gnawing fear that they may be starving next week. In this rapidly changing world, we may look back and wonder why we did not get to the fundamentals sooner to save ourselves so much misery.¹⁹

Eichel's tone is relatively sympathetic. She does not view the current system of work relief as a long term solution. By comparing work relief to a drug that "deadens pain" and "does not get to the basic causes but merely affliction to an already weakened body," Eichel argues that work relief does not get at the root of the unemployment problem, but rather masks or perhaps mitigates it. 1937 saw a reduction in federal spending in which subsequently reduced spending on work relief. In June 1937, President Roosevelt drastically cut WPA rolls in fear of potential inflation resulting from the government's deficit spending, and ultimately because he believed the economy was on the road to recovery.²⁰ Eichel believes that this reduction in relief spending will have negative consequences, particularly on relief workers. She also echoes Harry Hopkins in her concern about the often demoralizing process of applying for relief. Hopkins preferred work relief to charity because he realized the stigma of charity would damage the self-esteem of relief clients.²¹ However, Eichel does not propose an alternative solution to work relief. Thus, her article serves mainly as insight into the view of work relief from the perspective of another resident of Schenectady. She does not mention

¹⁹ "World at a Glance," *Schenectady Gazette*, Dec. 6, 1936, 10.

²⁰ William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, (New York: Harper, 1963), 244.

²¹ Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 201.

the WPA. Rather, her outlook is more all encompassing and pertains to the general idea of work relief rather than a specific governmental organization.

Local politicians noted the public's perception of the WPA and catered their message to a body politic concerned with efficiency but ultimately welcoming of the WPA. While running for reelection, Republican mayor Mills Ten Eyck outlined the accomplishments of his administration by underscoring the success of the Cowhorn Creek Pressure System project. In *We're Proud of Schenectady: Keep it Clean, Progressive, and Modern*, Eyck highlights the project in a list of several others to emphasize his administration fiscal responsibility. "Space does not permit a complete review of all improvements," declared Eyck, "but the taxpayers of the City of Schenectady are assured that their tax dollar has not only been spent wisely, sanely, and efficiently, but every possible effort has been made to curtail operating expenses."²²

While Eyck used the success of Cowhorn Creek to promote his reelection, his quote demonstrates a common voter concern – that their tax dollars be spent efficiently. In regards to the WPA, government spending and fiscal responsibility were thus not considered mutually exclusive by Schenectady's electorate. Voters wanted their tax dollars spent efficiently, and were attracted to politicians who delivered on this message.

Considering Mayor Eyck's campaign, as well as Ms. Eichel's article and the numerous petitions sent to the Common Council encouraging work relief projects, the general consensus of the local citizens in regards to government work relief programs seems to correspond with Warren Moscow's description in *Politics in the Empire State*. He argues that opposition to the WPA and New Deal existed in other states, New Yorkers, for the most part, supported New Deal policies, and politicians found it politically advantageous to endorse the program.

²² "We're Proud of Schenectady. Keep it Clean, Progressive, and Modern," *Schenectady Gazette*, Nov. 6 1939.

The research for this thesis found that, generally, little or no opposition to the WPA mounted in Schenectady from local citizens. While Ms. Eichel did not consider work relief to be a long term solution to the nation's situation, she realized the necessary role work relief played in the lives of those unemployed and subsequently deemed spending cuts detrimental to those employed through various relief programs. She did not outline deficiencies in any federal or state program and expressed a genuine empathy for those receiving aid. Residents who petitioned the Common Council for projects to be carried out in their neighborhoods ultimately demonstrated their support for the WPA or at least their desire to benefit from the federal and state stimulus funding. A similar opinion was demonstrated in Rochester. Blake McKelvey in *Rochester: an Emerging Metropolis* says that, "While few people mourned the passing of the WPA, which liquidated its last project in 1943 ... many communities greatly accepted grants for federal assistance."²³ As a result, Schenectady and Rochester had a similar public perception of the WPA in this regard. Few articles were found in the *Schenectady Gazette* mourning the passing of the WPA, while numerous petitions were documented in the *Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady* requesting work relief projects in communities throughout Schenectady County.

The people of Schenectady had a positive view of work relief. However, at times they seemed to distinguish between the people on relief from the projects themselves. The residents of Schenectady had a general consensus on the advantages of work relief projects in their respected neighborhoods. Citizens generally welcomed the rewards of work relief projects. However, their opinion of those on work relief is rather varied. While Ms. Eichel empathized with those on relief, other residents had a relatively pronounced negative

²³ Blake McKelvey, *Rochester: an Emerging Metropolis*, (Rochester, New York: Christopher Press, 1962), 85.

perception of those on relief. Ms. Singleys, a local resident, underscored her concerns about relief workers in an op-ed column. Titled *The Human Side of Relief*, Singleys writes that the WPA destroyed the ambition of her husband and two sons. “Not a trade in the group and no apparent desire to get out of the unskilled class,” wrote Ms. Singleys, “no apparent desire, at least.”²⁴ Ms. Singley ultimately believed those on relief simply lacked the motivation to find work and were thus disingenuous by accepting government assistance. Her criticism also focuses on her neighbors, whom she believes are hiding portions of their income to qualify for relief. This distrust of those on work relief is evident in Buffalo and New York City as well.

Mark Goldman writes in *High Hopes: the Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York*:

Articles, letters to the editor, and editorials in all of the papers began to warn about the dangers of increased public welfare, of the “opiate of relief and relief employment,” of “relief and the impairment of human values,” and of “welfare chiselers.” Soon politicians, newspaper writers, and community leaders, Democrats as well as Republican, began to talk seriously about “going back to private charity” in the hope of spurring thousands of workers into jobs in private industry. Only a return to private charity, the old system of outdoor relief, people argued, would, because it was so demeaning, force people back to work.²⁵

Criticism of those on relief seems much more pronounced in Goldman’s account of Buffalo. Ms. Singley’s suspicion of her neighbors reinforces Goldman’s argument that relief workers were often viewed as “welfare chiselers.” Singley considers her neighbors fraud. She believes they are hiding portions of their income to qualify for relief. This cynical view of human nature among the populous is identified by Goldman in Buffalo and Barbara Blumberg in New York City. In *The New Deal and the Unemployed*, Blumberg says, “Although the depression probably weakened somewhat the traditional American belief that the United

²⁴ “The Human Side of Relief” *Schenectady Gazette*, Aug. 12, 1936.

²⁵ Mark Goldman, *High Hopes: the Rise and Fall of Buffalo, New York*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), 227.

States is a land of opportunity where anyone who really tried can find work, it far from killed that notion. Since more than fifty percent of those who lived through the 1930s did not experience joblessness firsthand, many of these fortunate individuals tended to hold the men and women on the breadline responsible, at least in part, for their own plight. The unemployed reliefer, they suspected, was a bit of a chiseler who preferred being a parasite on the public to going out and earning his own way.”²⁶ Blumberg subsequently quotes a survey conducted in 1936 that indicated twenty-five percent of the population believed welfare clients would have an “easy time” finding work if they were removed from relief roles. By August 1937, fifty-five percent of those polled stated that, “many persons on WPA ... could get jobs if they tried.”²⁷ Many people in New York not on relief thus shared a similar view to Ms. Singley. That is, those on work relief could find employment if they tried, and were perhaps disingenuous by accepting assistance. Consequently, there is an apparent consensus among those people not on relief in Schenectady, Buffalo, and New York. Although the people of Schenectady seem to distinguish between the concept of work relief and those employed on relief roles, many of the citizens of Schenectady, Buffalo, and New York were frustrated by relief workers and believed laziness contributed in part to their inability to find employment.

No discussion about “going back to private charity” by either Democratic or Republican politicians has been documented in the *Schenectady Gazette*. In fact, Mayor Eyck’s political campaign suggests that politicians responded well to work relief in Schenectady. Eyck, a Republican, believed that outlining the accomplishments of the WPA under his administration would have a positive effect on his campaign and help him win reelection. Indeed, the mayor

²⁶ Barbara Blumberg, *The New Deal and the Unemployed*, (London: Associated University Presses, 1979), 223.

²⁷ Blumberg, *The New Deal and the Unemployed*, 224.

won reelection in 1939 and remained in office until 1948.²⁸ Thus, the WPA and its various work relief measures was viewed positively by the Schenectady electorate and most likely helped usher Eyck to victory. Accordingly, Buffalo and Schenectady politicians differed in their perception of work relief. The views expressed by politicians are usually a reflection of public opinion. Most politicians will articulate views they believe will resonate among potential voters. Given the apparent discrepancy evident in Buffalo and Schenectady, it can be concluded that public opinion of work relief probably differed.

Another factor Goldman believes contributed to the negative perceptions of relief workers in Buffalo was the gradual improvement of the economy.²⁹ This trend was also evident in Schenectady. By 1937, criticism of the WPA began to surface in the *Proceedings of the Common Council*. Opposition to work relief stemmed from Schenectady's local business and labor communities. Central to their concerns was the notion that competition from WPA labor was putting businesses contractors at an unfair disadvantage. Raymond J. Sparks, Secretary of the Painting and Decorating Contractors of America, petitioned the Common Council in 1938 urging the city to refrain from using WPA labor so painting contractors can find employment.³⁰ An unfair economic advantage was also cited by Fred A. Soellner of the Schenectady Building Trades Association. Soellner presents the Council with a detailed list of grievances. He argues that building construction by the WPA was, "costly, extravagant, insufficient, and a shameful waste of public money."³¹ Further, he maintains that, "... the work done on these projects is performed by incompetent mechanics who are at best no more than

²⁸ Officials of the City of Schenectady, <http://www.schenectadyhistory.org/schenectady/officials.html>

²⁹ Goldman, *High Hopes*, 227.

³⁰ 1938 *Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 179.

³¹ 1939 *Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 22.

handy men with no skill in any particular branch.”³² Soellner was concerned about the economic security of skilled mechanics. He feared that the WPA will eventually be a detriment to the skilled labor force because the WPA will, “create a large force of handy men that will be found in competition with the building industry and through their lack of knowledge be forced to work at a lower price.”³³ Consequently, Soellner concluded that the unskilled WPA labor force undercuts the capabilities of trade industry and puts skilled mechanics and contractors at an unfair economic disadvantage. He implored the Common Council to oppose any further building projects proposed under WPA auspices.³⁴

Local Union No. 62 of the Painters, Decorators, and Paper-hangers of America presented the Council with a petition echoing similar concerns expressed by Mr. Soellner. The petition read, “It is the order of Painters Local No. 62 that a protest in regards to the Mt. Pleasant School be sent to your honorable body. We are asking that you use your influence in giving that painting job to some Union contractor or through the city whereby some union men may have employment, instead of through the WPA.”³⁵ Out of concern for economic security of its members, the painters local urged the Council to give the painting project at Mt. Pleasant School to union painters. Thus, the painters local feared they would lose employment to WPA labor. Concern regarding economic competition was also expressed by Schenectady’s body of the American Federation of Labor. The AFL underscored in a communication received by the Council on February 5, 1940 that building trades mechanics were “on relief or doing unskilled work while non-skilled workers were doing work in the

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid..

³⁴ 1939 *Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 23.

³⁵ 1939 *Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 119.

WPA for which skilled workers were far better qualified.”³⁶ Central to the anxieties of local business contractors and labor unions was a deep-rooted concern about economic competition and the dilution of their industry.

Opposition from building and labor contractors was also common in New York City. In an opinion piece published in the *New York Times* in November 1936, David A. Clarkson, a resident of New York City, challenged the state administrator’s belief that relief funding was being spent efficiently.³⁷ In “Harm Seen in WPA Activity,” Clarkson responds to the administrator’s accusation that his statements made in reference to the WPA are without foundation. He says:

... my public criticisms not only have a foundation but that foundation supports an ever-rising structure of indictment for inefficiency, waste, and mounting expenditures incompatible with the proclaimed object of recovery ... I will state that my motives are neither political nor pecuniary. They are based on the unfaltering conviction that economic constriction cannot be liquidated by glacial achievement of “made work” and the use of taxpayers’ velocity dollars; that through competition in the unskilled labor market they are and have been a definite obstruction to recovery; that through paternalistic philanthropy, the imbecility of inertia threatens to break down the national morale; that WPA and similar activities, as at present conducted, are an obstruction to recovery³⁸

Clarkson’s concerns echo the concerns of the business and labor communities in Schenectady. Ultimately, he charges the WPA of inefficiency and unwarranted economic competition. Labor unions and business contractors in Schenectady were particularly upset about the WPA’s unfair economic advantage over private industry and union workers. This was evident through several petitions sent to the Common Council requesting an end to WPA projects that had unskilled

³⁶ 1940 *Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady*, 57.

³⁷ David Clarkson “Harm Seen in WPA Activity,” *New York Times*, Nov. 2, 1936, 20.

³⁸ David Clarkson “Harm Seen in WPA Activity,” *New York Times*, Nov. 2, 1936, 20.

workers perform jobs that could be carried out by skilled tradesmen. Clarkson's reference to "make work" underscores his conviction that the WPA projects lacked practicality and were ultimately a waste of federal dollars. As a result, his argument centers on the notion that the WPA is in fact inhibiting economic growth. Inefficient work relief projects, wasteful government spending and competition from unskilled labor, he argues, constricts private industry and thus hurts the economy.

Charges of inefficiency were thus central to many critics' arguments against the WPA. Schenectady's labor and business communities underscored this in their petitions to the Common Council. Clarkson also accused the WPA of inefficiency in his *New York Times* opinion piece. Ralph M. Easley, chairman of the National Civic Federation's executive council, provided two examples in a *New York Times* editorial demonstrating this inefficiency. In "WPA Critic Charges Waste on Projects," Easley underscores two projects of particular concern in a letter to President Roosevelt. The *New York Times* reported on the details of the letter:

[Mr. Easley] told of the modernization by WPA of a one-story public bathhouse, which could have been built new for \$19,800, according to Mr. Easley's interpretation of figures released by the Home Owner's Loan Corporation. The preliminary WPA estimate for required repairs was \$13,000, Mr. Easley said, but \$40,000 already has been spent on the project, with the end 'not anywhere in sight.'³⁹

Easley ultimately criticizes the WPA for wasteful government spending. He believes the public bathhouse could have been built a lot faster, and cheaper, had it not been assumed as a WPA project. Moreover, he implies that private industry would have executed the project more efficiently because private contractors work much harder than WPA workers. This is underscored by a subsequent illustration. The *New York Times* reported, "The letter also said a

³⁹ Ralph M. Easley, "WPA Critic Charges Waste on Projects," *New York Times* Jun. 21, 1937, 6.

WPA bricklayer was expected to lay 200 bricks a day, whereas in private construction work he would have been required to lay between 1,000 and 1,500 bricks.”⁴⁰ Thus, Easley’s argument attacks both the structure of the WPA and the quality of the work force. He charges the WPA of inefficiency, and concludes that lack of work ethic expressed by relief workers ultimately results in prolonged and expensive projects.

Easley’s criticisms reflect a national perspective. The article is ambiguous, though, because it does not mention Easley’s profession or where he is from. While he references details provided by the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation, the location of the projects he mentions is unclear. Nevertheless, his concerns correspond with criticisms echoed in Schenectady. Charges of inefficiency, pertaining to the execution of work relief projects, but also the character of the workers, were common themes espoused by those who opposed the WPA. Blumberg writes, “The more construction the [WPA] finished, the louder became the objections of building contractors, who feared government competition, and the unions of skilled workers worried that the WPA might be training common laborers in carpentry, masonry, and other crafts.”⁴¹

Blumberg argues that in New York particularly, fear of economic competition stemmed from the relative efficient execution of work relief projects. She describes that in 1939 when merchants and property owners on Austin Street in Forest Hills, Queens, heard that the business thoroughfare was going to be widened by relief workers, many thought the job would be delayed and cause a major traffic inconvenience. However, many residents were surprised by the quick and efficient execution of the project.⁴² In fact, the president of the

⁴⁰ Easley, 6.

⁴¹ Blumberg, *The New Deal and the Unemployed*, 226.

⁴² Blumberg, *The New Deal and the Unemployed*, 226.

Austin Street Association remarked, “The work progressed so rapidly that merchants ... asked me who the contractor was. They did not believe it could be a WPA project. Men have to rest sometimes, but I haven’t seen a man lean on a shovel since the whole thing started.”⁴³

The project challenged the stereotype of work relief employees as lazy and inefficient “shovel leaners,” an unfavorable image that gained widespread popularity throughout the United States. The International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union in New York and the New York Building Trades Employers Association echoed a similar message when they feared competition from needle-trades workers and subsequently accused the WPA of inefficiency.⁴⁴ Moreover, Mayor Eyck’s political piece in the *Schenectady Gazette* underscored numerous projects throughout the county that was executed efficiently as well. While few opinion pieces were found written by local citizens challenging the “shovel leaner” stereotype or commenting on the good organization of relief projects, the effectiveness noted by Eyck could have contributed to the fears of local business contractors. Although, the possibility of embellishment must also be considered when evaluating the mayor’s message, particularly in regards to his political motives. Nevertheless, the petitions sent to the Common Council on behalf of the Schenectady Building Trades Association, Local Union No. 62, and the local body of the American Federation of Labor suggests that economic competition was a concern shared by many employees in the business and labor communities of Schenectady County.

The business and labor communities’ perception of relief workers corresponded with the general conservative stereotype of those on relief. In *The New Deal and the Unemployed*, Badger argues that, “[the WPA] was unable successfully to refute the conservative stereotype

⁴³ Blumberg, *The New Deal and the Unemployed*, 226.

⁴⁴ Blumberg, *The New Deal and the Unemployed*, 235.

that WPA workers were lazy, incompetent, and inefficient.”⁴⁵ Evidently business and labor organizations in Schenectady perpetuated a similar myth by focusing their criticism on the indolence of the work relief worker in combination with their lack of skill and the economic competition created by their employment. However, the example highlighted by Blumberg in Forest Hills, Queens underscores one instance where this stereotype was successfully challenged by relief workers and recognized by the community. Few residents in Schenectady, with the exception of Ms. Singley, commented on the laziness of relief workers. Thus, the image was perpetuated more by the business and labor communities, but Ms. Singley’s opinion piece indicates that it did exist within Schenectady’s body politic as well. Although, perhaps not as pronounced.

However, notions of fiscal conservatism, particularly focused on government spending, resonated within the Schenectady Bureau of Municipal Research. The concerns of the Schenectady Bureau of Municipal Research, a local watchdog organization focused on monitoring the economic development of Schenectady County, were more centered on questions of efficiency and economic practicality. Several articles published by the bureau toward the end of the WPA raised these issues with the public. In “Bureau Advises Careful Check of WPA Plans,” the bureau of municipal research encourages Schenectady residents to consider the costs and benefits of the WPA.⁴⁶ Central to the article is an emphasis on the fact that the WPA is financed by borrowing. Ultimately the Bureau of Municipal Research considers the WPA produces an unnecessary accumulation of debt. “Let us look in the mouth of the gift horse,” a subsequent article maintains, “it is possible for a gift horse to prove a

⁴⁵ Badger, *The New Deal*, 214.

⁴⁶ Bureau Advises Careful Check of WPA Plans, [Box 5 Newspaper Clippings 1937-1944 – Schenectady Bureau of Municipal Research Records. Special Collections, Schaffer Library, Union College] Nov. 20, 1940.

liability instead of an asset.”⁴⁷ According to the bureau, although the WPA may appear to have been alleviating unemployment and benefiting the community’s infrastructure, the financial debt accumulated by the program will have adverse effects on Schenectady’s finances. A creation of a committee of “public minded citizens” is suggested to evaluate the effectiveness of the WPA. The article thus serves as a caveat to the general public. Public officials will continue accepting federal money as long as it’s offered, the article warns.⁴⁸ Consequently, the bureau encourages the citizens of Schenectady to analyze the WPA pragmatically. They were mainly concerned about the city’s temptation to go into debt.

The Schenectady Bureau of Municipal Research’s concern about federal relief spending was echoed nationally by conservatives in Congress. In 1944, the Bureau published an article titled, “Concerted Action Urged to Offset Unemployment,” which emphasized the Schenectady Federation of Labor’s opposition to the reestablishment of a relief program following World War II. Central to the concern of local union representative H.M. Merrill was the desire to eliminate conditions that made the community vulnerable to unemployment. He believes economic competition from relief workers contributed to the unemployment of skilled tradesmen and therefore wants to ensure the WPA is not reestablished.⁴⁹ Merrill’s emphasis on the temporary nature of the WPA is shared by the community. While he merely wants to eliminate the prospect of economic competition brought on by the WPA’s potential resurrection, most people in New York State did not wish the federal government to maintain a permanent jobs program.

⁴⁷ An Appraisal of WPA Proposed, [Box 5 Newspaper Clippings 1937-1944 – Schenectady Bureau of Municipal Research Records. Special Collections, Schaffer Library, Union College] Nov. 20, 1940.

⁴⁸ An Appraisal of the WPA Proposed, [Box 5 Newspaper Clippings 1937-1944 – Schenectady Bureau of Municipal Research Records. Special Collections, Schaffer Library, Union College] Nov. 20, 1940.

⁴⁹ Concerted Action Urged to Offset Unemployment, [Box 5 Newspaper Clippings 1937-1944 Schenectady Bureau of Municipal Research Records. Special Collections, Schaffer Library, Union College] Mar. 16, 1944.

In a *Union Star* editorial titled “Permanent Relief Plan,” a local Schenectady resident advocates for the immediate liquidation of the WPA. He or she says that the WPA did a very good job mitigating the initial response of the depression but is now no longer needed.

“Federal relief should not be needed in normal times, but the framework should be ready for national action in case of an emergency.”⁵⁰ Although the article was written in 1936 and thus does not forecast the effects of the 1937 recession, the main point of the editorialist’s opinion is that the WPA should be temporary; and used only during economic downturns.

Most Americans believed the WPA was a necessary agency serving a temporary purpose. “When it began in 1935,” Blumberg writes, “the majority of Americans seemed ready to accept it as a short term emergency measure ... The WPA worried many citizens because they saw it as an extremely expensive way to support depression victims and one that led inevitably to deficit spending and unbalanced budgets ... Americans in the 1930s ... still believed in frugal government that lived within its means. This was demonstrated by the results of the 1939 Roper poll in which Americans with different incomes were asked if they favored reducing federal spending to the point where the budget was balanced. Sixty-one percent indicated that they did.”⁵¹ She adds, “To be sure, the well to do exhibited more enthusiasm for retrenchment than the poor, but in every class, including the unemployed, the majority supported a balanced budget.”⁵² The results of the Roper poll thus indicate that most Americans wanted federal spending reduced. They believed that the WPA was a particularly

⁵⁰ “Permanent Relief Plan,” *Union Star*, Aug. 17, 1936.

⁵¹ Blumberg, *The New Deal and the Unemployed*, 222.

⁵² Blumberg, *The New Deal and the Unemployed*, 222.

expensive governmental organization and believed that reducing work relief funding was an appropriate consideration.⁵³

In 1937, Marion Folsom, president of the Rochester Chamber of Commerce, urged Rochester to adopt an 8-point plan to balance the city budget. However, the people of Rochester were generally supportive of social welfare programs.⁵⁴ Interest in WPA projects faded after jobs became more abundant in the private sector. Rochester's relatively healthy business community throughout the depression allowed the people of Rochester to maintain a level of confidence in its industrialists.⁵⁵ Thus, public perception in Rochester was unique in this regard because the people were generally supportive of work relief and private business. They did not exhibit antagonism toward either. Criticism of relief spending stemmed chiefly from the Chamber of Commerce, which reaffirmed more rigid control over the city's financial spending in 1938.⁵⁶ The parallel that exists between Rochester and Schenectady's response to the WPA is ultimately underscored by each city's ambivalent reaction to the program's dismantling. The people of Rochester "did not mourn the passing of the WPA."⁵⁷ Similarly, Schenectady residents did not lament in either the *Schenectady Gazette* or the *Union Star*. However, the people of Buffalo were particularly bothered by the possibility of a "permanent and dependent class of workers forever unable to support themselves."⁵⁸

The public's perception of the WPA in Schenectady was, as a result, multifaceted. Residents welcomed the WPA and petitioned the city to carry out projects in their neighborhoods. Considering the letters written to Mr. Daley, the District Director of the WPA

⁵³ Blumberg, *The New Deal and the Unemployed*, 222.

⁵⁴ McKelvey, *An Emerging Metropolis*, 90.

⁵⁵ McKelvey, *An Emerging Metropolis*, 90.

⁵⁶ McKelvey, *An Emerging Metropolis*, 90.

⁵⁷ McKelvey, *An Emerging Metropolis*, 90.

⁵⁸ Goldman, *High Hopes*, 228.

in Albany, this trend was particularly evident across New York State. Although Schenectady residents were critical of perceived idleness, they seemed to appreciate having access to the work relief program. However, they did not seem disappointed when Roosevelt liquidated the work relief program in 1943.

With the exception of Ms. Singley and the *Union Star* editorial, criticism ultimately stemmed from business and labor organizations. Focused primarily on economic competition, business contractors and unions feared unskilled relief workers would devalue the skill of their employees and have a negative consequence on their industry and personal finances. Moreover, competition with private industry was cited by Mr. Clarkson and Schenectady's business community as a serious deterrent to economic growth.

Efficiency with regard to federal spending and project execution was also a major concern of critics. The concern of the Schenectady Bureau of Municipal Research centered on financial debt accumulated by federal relief spending and on the necessity for certain relief projects they deemed wasteful.

As a result, public opinion of the WPA in Schenectady was influenced by the positive or negative externalities of relief work. Those who either benefited or were unaffected by the WPA were generally supportive or ambivalent toward relief work, while those who did not suffer in the labor and business communities were reasonably critical. Parallels between the public's perception of the WPA in Buffalo and New York City are evident, particularly in regards to the reaction from the private sector. However, while there existed a general consensus in the United States that the WPA should be a temporary organization dedicated to mitigating the initial effects of the depression, the residents of Schenectady were not overtly

critical of work relief's purpose, at least not on an abstract level. Some residents did, however, echo the national criticism and pass judgment on those employed by the WPA.

Additionally, Schenectady's perception of the WPA generally corresponded with the rest of the state. Although some citizens were critical of the WPA, many residents appreciated the contributions of the WPA and work relief projects into their communities. Similarly, critics, largely from the business and labor sectors, focused on the WPA's inefficiencies. Economic competition, wasteful government spending, and the work ethic of WPA workers, were cited and three main inhibitors to economic growth.

CONCLUSION

This thesis was an investigation of the WPA in Schenectady. I began with a review of secondary literature in Chapter I. I then documented the physical impact of the WPA in Schenectady and proceeded by investigating critics of the program from various members and sections of the community. Finally, I contextualized Schenectady's experience with trends common in other cities across New York.

In Chapter II, I used the Proceedings of the Common Council of Schenectady to identify the physical location of various WPA projects in the city. Common Council minutes provided a detailed analysis of all proposed work relief projects and their specific locations in Schenectady. I then used research compiled by Rebecca Broadwin to confirm in fact certain proposed projects were executed. Her data recorded all work relief projects executed in Schenectady according to WPA files. Moreover, her work confirmed many of the projects recorded by the Common Council. However, her records also refuted one particular project - the proposed installation of a public swimming pool in Central Park. In addition, her records indicated that more WPA projects were in fact executed in Schenectady than mentioned by the Common Council in their proceedings. Nevertheless, Broadwin's research and the Proceedings of the Common Council did indicate that the majority of the WPA projects in Schenectady focused on blue collar work relief. Although there were a few instances of white collar job creation in Schenectady, as well as local division of the Federal Writers' Project, most WPA projects in Schenectady were blue collar in nature and focused on improving the city's infrastructure. This was done through the construction of streets, sewers, public buildings, and recreational facilities. The type of work performed in Schenectady thus corresponded with state and national trends.

In Chapter III, I evaluated the public's perception of the WPA. My research focused on articles published in the *Schenectady Gazette* and the *Union Star* and Common Council records. Petitions sent to the Council by local citizens indicated that residents appreciated the work of the WPA in their communities, and encouraged the Council to execute additional work relief projects in their localities. However, editorials in the *Schenectady Gazette* and the *Union Star* indicated that some residents viewed relief workers as chiselers and, moreover, considered the WPA a temporary measure needed only to mitigate the initiate effects of the depression. As a result, the people of Schenectady considered the WPA temporary, but welcomed its work. Politicians on both sides of the aisle in Schenectady endorsed work relief measures as well. This corresponded with political trends on the state level but diverged from trends on the national level.

Common Council proceedings also indicated that Schenectady's business and labor communities were particularly antagonistic toward the WPA and relief workers. Their criticism stemmed from concerns with regard to the economic competition created by the WPA, and the poor work ethic of relief workers. Schenectady's Bureau of Municipal Research was primarily concerned with wasteful government spending and the city's temptation to go into debt.

In an attempt to contextualize the public's perception of the WPA in Schenectady, I further looked at letters and newspaper articles written by residents of other communities essentially discussing the WPA. The goal here was to achieve a more comprehensive analysis of public perception by surveying primary source documents that incorporated viewpoints from across New York State. I discovered that the opinions felt by the people of Schenectady were shared by citizens across the states. Local residents were generally appreciative of the WPA and expressed their praise in letters to the WPA's district director in Albany. Moreover, critics

focused on issues concerning fiscal responsibility, efficiency, and the competency of relief workers.

Thus, the type of work performed by the WPA in Schenectady corresponded with state and national trends. Moreover, attitudes in Schenectady toward work relief corresponded with state trends but diverged from national trends: nationally, Republicans generally opposed the WPA, while local Republicans found it politically advantageous to endorse the program. It is evident, though, that the WPA has left a lasting impact on the infrastructure of the city. Through the construction of parks, playgrounds, roadways, and sewer systems, in conjunction with the creation of recreational and educational facilities, the WPA, indeed, contributed significantly to the general welfare of community, and ultimately helped mitigate the consequences of economic depression in Schenectady.

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