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"Much Depends on Local Customs:"The WPA's New Deal for New Orleans, 1935-1940

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“Much Depends on Local Customs:” The WPA’s New Deal for New Orleans,
1935-1940

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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in
History

by

William A. Sorum

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Abstract

The Works Progress Administration came to New Orleans in 1935, a time of economic uncertainty and even fear. The implementation of the relief embodied in the WPA was influenced by local factors that reinforced the existing social order at first but that left a framework through which that order could be challenged. The business of providing WPA relief also was attended by scandal and criticism. In spite of these inherent weaknesses and certain incident, the WPA left behind an enviable physical legacy that is used and enjoyed today by the citizens of New Orleans.

This paper explores the roots of that legacy, some of the obstacles faced by the WPA, and how a local government, and its citizens, related and adjusted to an increasingly powerful and intrusive federal government.

Keywords: WPA, New Deal, New Orleans, 1930's, Great Depression

Introduction

Diagonal Drive is a seldom-used road in the northern half of New Orleans' City Park. It lies just north of the I-610 extension in the Mid-City section of New Orleans. The road connects Zachary Taylor Drive to Harrison Avenue and takes the traveler past run-down and unused softball fields. Before Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the fields were the main reason for anyone to travel down Diagonal Drive. Before the softball fields the driver crosses a lagoon by way of a concrete bridge. On each end of the bridge are a pair of reliefs, one on each side, which show two groups of men at work in the outdoors. On the left (if you are facing Harrison Avenue) the first group of men is hard at work. The men are shirtless and are digging up tree stumps, swinging axes at other trees, and digging ditches. Off to the right of this relief is one weary worker taking a long drink of water as he leans on a shovel. All of the men shown in this relief are African-American.

Crossing the roadway to the second relief, the visitor sees another group of men. These men, or most of them, appear to be white. They are all in shirtsleeves and are shown engaged in lighter outdoor work than the men on the other side of the road. The work being done appears to be a more decorative form of landscaping, with small trees being planted and wheelbarrows of soil being moved. At the far right of this relief, a white man in a hat is looking through a surveying instrument. He appears to be looking over the work in either a technical or supervisory role. On both ends of the bridge, and on both ends of most of the bridges in City Park, other marks are set into the concrete in a sort of Art Deco lettering that gives the year of construction: 1936. Carved into the relief

depicting the labor of African-American men is a sign which reads from top to bottom “USA,” “WORK,” “program” (in smaller letters), and “WPA,” which stands for Works Progress Administration, the authority responsible for the bridge and all of the work done around it.

The reliefs on the bridge at Diagonal Drive are compelling for what they show and for what they do not show. The reliefs show the nature of the work done in City Park in the 1930’s, most of which was hard manual labor done in the outdoors. They also demonstrate that the labor force in the park was divided by race and by occupation, with African-Americans doing the hardest work. A fairly wide variety of tasks are shown in the relief, and there is a clear absence of women. The sign carved into the relief announces the presence of the federal government as well as the *desire* of the federal government to announce its presence. These reliefs show a fusion of local social mores and the federal support that made the WPA possible. They tell a story of federal accommodation to local racial prejudice, but they also speak to the material legacies of New Deal projects that left their imprint on the local landscape, and employed thousands of New Orleanians in the process.

All of these were features of the work in City Park funded by the WPA. The WPA, known as the Works Progress Administration and later as the Works Projects Administration, was the principal work relief entity of the New Deal. During its existence from 1935 to 1943, the WPA “built 651,087 miles of highways, worked on 124,087 bridges, and constructed 125,110 public structures, 8,192 parks, and 853 airports.” When

the Administration's work was done, it "had employed more than 8,500,000 people on 1,410,000 projects, costing about \$11 billion dollars."¹

The impact of the WPA in New Orleans was considerable. According to a history of New Orleans' City Park more than 20,000 New Orleanians labored on the WPA's many park projects.² The park project was just a part of the WPA's impact. In the six years the Administration funded projects in New Orleans the areas involved included levee and street repair, expansion of Lakefront airport, construction of public buildings, parking areas, light manufacturing, education, record-keeping and national defense. As World War Two drew near and indeed after it started, this last function drew an increasing percentage of the WPA funds that reached the city. As for record-keeping, these efforts included the City Archives now available in the New Orleans Public Library. The work on the archives by the WPA ended with the transfer of civic record-keeping from City Hall to the Library. The positive effects of the WPA in New Orleans continue to be felt today and nationwide there is no doubt that similar projects of the time continue to benefit other citizens in their communities.

The WPA came to New Orleans as it came to any other city; to provide short-term work on projects designed to employ the largest number of persons for the longest possible time. The implementation of WPA relief was often attended by expressions of worry and fear over what would happen if projects were not approved and what would happen if the flow of relief were ever cut off. This fear bound the local citizens and local

¹ Katie Louchheim, *The Making of the New Deal: The Insiders Speak* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 177.

² Sally K. Evans Reeves and William D. Reeves, *Historic City Park of New Orleans* (New Orleans: Friends of City Park, 200), 75.

governments to the federal government and changed both sides of this relationship forever. In the words of one prominent New Deal historian, “for the first time for many Americans, the federal government became an institution that was directly experienced.”³ This “first time” was therefore a time of great anxiety and the desire was not only for relief but swift relief. The need for haste meant employing as many locals as possible as WPA administrators. That meant that WPA relief would reflect local values, for better or worse. The recipients of WPA relief included groups never before included in such a massive government project. In New Orleans this meant thousands of African-American families. These WPA relief workers often had the hardest jobs for the lowest pay. But their inclusion in the program gave them access to sources of appeal and redress undreamed of just a few years before. This access quickly aroused the suspicions of local conservatives and officials who often turned against the New Deal as a whole but who in the end were as dependent on federal aid (for different reasons) as the poorest citizens. Despite the fears, the need for hurry, and local prejudices, the WPA spread its relief more widely than any previous relief project and left behind an impressive physical legacy that is still used and enjoyed today.

This paper will tell the story of the WPA primarily through its eventful career in New Orleans. The sources come from the secondary literature of the New Deal and of the 1930’s and from microfilm of the records, correspondence, and reports of the Louisiana Division of the WPA which can be found in the New Orleans Public Library. The experience of the Administration in the city was varied enough to give a good idea of its

³ William E. Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and The New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 331.

overall merits and of its weaknesses. The WPA, for all its good intentions and its very positive legacy, was not a reform organization and did not in any sense address the causes of local problems in New Orleans, nor, so far as this writer can tell, those of any other locality. This is not to condemn the notion of the WPA. It is, rather, to divest evaluations of the Administration of any distracting and inaccurate sentimentality. This paper will focus on the period of the WPA from its earliest work in the state of Louisiana to the end of its most active period, around 1939. This focus omits most of the last three years of the WPA when it came to concentrate on National Defense projects. With the coming of the Second World War, the emergency of the Great Depression lessened and the anxieties of the country turned outward.

Historiographical discussion

In his largely historiographical analysis of the New Deal, written in 1989, author and historian Anthony Badger writes that there is an “absence of an overall account of the Works Progress Administration.”⁴ Badger’s observation of twenty years ago still holds true today. Almost all books on the New Deal will discuss and analyze the WPA at varying lengths but an academic, book-length appraisal of the program has yet to be written.

The historical gap over the WPA does not, of course, extend to the New Deal as a whole. The historical, economic, and political debate over the New Deal is vast and up-to-date and the debate is conducted with a vigor that has always reflected the times in

⁴ Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1989), 347.

which it is conducted. The introduction to one of many recent books critical of the New Deal and the Roosevelt Administration, Burton W. Folsom's *New Deal or Raw Deal?: How FDR's Economic Legacy has Damaged America*, which was published in 2008, criticized Democratic fixes for the economy as "'new' New Deal programs" that seemed "intentionally designed to torpedo the U.S. economy."⁵ The author of the introduction, an editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, saw fit to mention "Barak {sic} Obama" as an exponent of these new ideas before he was elected president, let alone sworn into office. Conservative analyses of the New Deal do not corner the market on politically partisan "timeliness" in this field. Robert McElvaine's *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (1984), compares Ronald Reagan's first term in the White House very unfavorably with that of Franklin Roosevelt.

Not surprisingly, all of the recently published conservative critiques of the New Deal, including Folsom's book, Amity Shlaes' *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression*, and Jim Powell's *FDR's Folly: How Roosevelt and His New Deal Prolonged the Great Depression*, count the bold experimentation of the Roosevelt Administration as a flat failure. Folsom is the most radical of the three; his critique focuses on defects in Roosevelt's character and in the perpetuation of the "Roosevelt myth" by academic historians. Powell is more measured overall than Folsom; he aims his critiques at those academic historians that, in his view, have an insufficient grounding in economics. He quotes Arthur Schlesinger, an acknowledged giant among academic

⁵ Burton W. Folsom, *New Deal or Raw Deal?: How FDR's Economic Legacy Has Damaged America* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2008), xv.

historians of the New Deal as saying he “was not much interested in economics.”⁶ The New Dealer subjects of Powell’s book, some of them, anyway, “were outright Socialists, and they had their day.”⁷ The results of “their day” was an “economic weakness” that “furnished encouragement” to European fascists and may have brought on World War Two.⁸ Amity Shlaes is a bit more generous to FDR. His temperament was a positive boon in calming America down and his “calls for courage...were intensely important.”⁹ But Shlaes condemns what she sees as the defeatism of the New Deal. Roosevelt’s “insistence on sharing- rationing, almost- betrayed a conviction that the country had entered a permanent era of scarcity.”¹⁰

What is interesting is that despite the aggressiveness with which Shlaes, Powell, and Folsom attack the New Deal, they acknowledge that academic historians for decades have not argued that the New Deal “ended” the Great Depression. Indeed, the conservative critics have no choice but to make the acknowledgement. Historian Robert S. McElvaine writes that “the New Deal never succeeded in its primary goal.”¹¹ Five years later, Anthony Badger wrote that “the deficiencies of the New Deal were glaring.”

⁶ Jim Powell, *FDR’s Folly: How Roosevelt and his New Deal Prolonged the Great Depression* (New York: Crown Forum, 2003), xv-xvi.

⁷ Powell, *FDR’s Folly*, 1.

⁸ Powell, *FDR’s Folly*, 267.

⁹ Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 5.

¹⁰ Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man*, 6.

¹¹ Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941*(New York: Three Rivers Press, 1984), 337.

Both Badger and McElvaine argue that the New Deal did not go far enough with Badger writing that “the commitment to deficit spending was belated and half-hearted.”¹²

A reading of William E. Leuchtenberg, one of the prominent New Deal scholars of the previous generation, shows that acknowledging the limitations of the New Deal was not a recent invention. In 1963’s *Franklin D. Roosevelt and The New Deal, 1932-1940*, Leuchtenberg wrote that “The New Deal left many problems unsolved, and even created some perplexing new ones.”¹³ Like McElvaine, he located the cause of the Great Depression in the maldistribution of wealth. He quoted one of FDR’s chief advisers as saying that without a more equitable distribution of income “there were not enough customers to keep the plants going.”¹⁴ His analysis does confirm one contention of the modern conservative critics of the New Deal. Leuchtenberg acknowledged that the New Dealers paid little heed to economic laws when he wrote that they “were convinced that the depression was the result not simply of an economic breakdown but of a political collapse.”¹⁵ But Leuchtenberg denied that the New Dealers were mere utopians. “They did not seek to ‘uplift’ the people they were helping,” he wrote, “but only to improve their economic position (p. 338-339).”¹⁶

On the subject of the WPA itself the most strident of the recent New Deal critics, Powell and Folsom, focus on the WPA as a massive political patronage tool, Powell

¹² Badger, *The New Deal*, 299.

¹³ William E. Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and The New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper& Row, 1963), 346.

¹⁴ Leuchtenberg, *FDR and The New Deal*, 338.

¹⁵ Leuchtenberg, *FDR and The New Deal*, 333.

¹⁶ Leuchtenberg, *FDR and The New Deal*, 338-339.

quoting one economic historian to the effect that “WPA employment reached peaks in the fall of election years.”¹⁷ Folsom makes much use of a “Political Coercion” file found in the National Archives on WPA activities in New Jersey. Shlaes mentions the WPA much less but does write that the deficit spending of the New Deal “emphasized consumers, who were also voters.”¹⁸ All three critics, as well as Badger and McElvaine, acknowledge that the scale of the project made its physical legacy almost an inevitability. When Badger and McElvaine recite statistics that relate the unprecedented commitment of funds to relief, they do so approvingly, relating the size of the program to the emergency that inspired it. Folsom emphasizes the road not taken when he quotes 1930’s economist Henry Hazlitt who chided people for their myopia in lauding the physical accomplishments of the WPA. Those who can see beyond the merely tangible - Hazlitt uses a bridge as an example of a WPA project - can see “the unbuilt homes, them unmade cars and washing machines, the unmade dresses and coats, perhaps the ungrown and unsold foodstuffs.”¹⁹

The volumes written about the State of Louisiana during the Great Depression, such as Harnett Kane’s *Louisiana Hayride* (1940) and T. Harry Williams’ famous *Huey Long* (1969), tend to focus on the career of the Huey Long rather than on specific New Deal programs such as the WPA. The New Deal in these books is more of a political football than a significant event. The career of Huey Long and the advent of Longism in the state is considered to be the story of Louisiana politics in the 1930’s. outweighing

¹⁷ Powell, *FDR’s Folly*, 101.

¹⁸ Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man*, 11.

¹⁹ Folsom, *New Deal or Raw Deal?*, 85.

FDR and the New Deal. This is not mere parochialism; Long's populism brought social welfare programs to Louisiana before Great Crash of 1929, let alone the inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt. Regional studies of the period, such as historian Patricia Sullivan's *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (1996), focus on the effect of New Deal programs like the WPA on "the stagnant economic and political relationships that had persisted in the South."²⁰

The WPA

The Works Progress Administration, later known as the Works Projects Administration, was brought into being when President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order #7034 on May 5, 1935.²¹ The WPA was part of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act which replaced the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), an earlier New Deal program.²² When it was passed, the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act, with its \$4.88 billion price tag, was "the largest single appropriation in history."²³ The largest share of this unprecedented federal outlay, \$1.39 billion, went to the WPA.²⁴ At the time, the unemployment rate nationally was 21.3%.²⁵ The idea behind the WPA

²⁰ Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3.

²¹ Jim Powell, *FDR's Folly: How Roosevelt and His New Deal Prolonged The Great Depression* (New York: Crown Forum, 96.

²² Louchheim, *The Making of the New Deal*, 171.

²³ McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 254-255.

²⁴ McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 265.

²⁵ Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man*, 247.

was “to get the federal government out of giving relief and into providing jobs for the unemployed.”²⁶ The WPA differed from other New Deal public works programs such as the Public Works Administration (or PWA), with which the WPA is often understandably confused, in that the PWA required local governments to “put up 45 percent of the cost.”²⁷ This large percentage of money required of local governments was primarily for the purchase of material for a given project. The WPA also required that local governments and other project sponsors provide the plans for the work which were then subject to WPA approval.

The WPA was not the New Deal’s first foray into work-relief. Indeed the WPA had a trial run in the first year of FDR’s presidency. In early November of 1933, the Roosevelt Administration brought the Civil Works Administration into being. The CWA, like its younger sibling, was a product of the strong desire on the part of the administration to avoid direct relief. The CWA employed workers on a “breadth of projects” that “foreshadowed the later Works Progress Administration.”²⁸ The most remarkable thing about the CWA was the speed with which it was brought into being and the speed with which it was wound up. Approved in November, by January 18, 1934, “the workforce totaled 4.2 million.”²⁹ The infusion of cash into local economies, even at the low level of work-relief wages made the CWA “immensely popular - with merchants,

²⁶ George McJimsey, *Harry Hopkins: Ally of the Poor and Defender of Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 76.

²⁷ McJimsey, *Harry Hopkins*, 84.

²⁸ Badger, *The New Deal*, 198.

²⁹ Badger, *The New Deal*, 197.

with local officials, and with workers.³⁰ By the spring of 1934, the CWA was no more. The idea had been “to tide the unemployed over the winter,” but the costs of the project worried Roosevelt.³¹ The worries over losing even work-relief employment attended the winding-up of the CWA. In Minneapolis, “riots broke out when the CWA ceased operations” and other, lesser episodes of unrest were recorded.³² Worries of unrest and fears of the loss of relief work would attend the much longer-lived WPA.

This expansion of the federal government into the business of providing relief, whether direct or work relief, made the WPA and its sibling projects targets for political attacks. Some characteristic attacks on the New Deal called it a “combination of fuzzy idealism, impractical experimentation, Russian Bolshevism, and corrupt, cynical calculation.” Critics further charged that relief programs such as the WPA were “expensively mismanaged and politically manipulated.”³³ Criticism of the WPA even expanded the English language with the “mocking new word: ‘boondoggles.’”³⁴ To defend the WPA from charges of political manipulation it should be said that the task of providing the most relief as soon as possible compelled the concentration of work relief in cities and the cooperation with urban political leadership.

³⁰ Leuchtenberg, *FDR and The New Deal*, 122.

³¹ McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 153.

³² McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 154.

³³ McJimsey, *Harry Hopkins*, 72.

³⁴ Nick Taylor, *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA - When FDR Put the Nation to Work* (New York: Bantam Books, 2008), 2. A “boondoggle,” from The New Century Dictionary, had a 1935 origin and was defined as “any relief work of little practical value; any work or projects of little or no real value finance by government funds: any useless work.”

Criticisms of the intentions and the methods of the WPA were not confined to conservative critics of the Roosevelt Administration. The WPA also drew fire from the political left in America. Two articles from the liberal weekly magazine *The Nation* attack the idea of the WPA as well as the implementation of the programs. The first article, “The Price of the Hopkins Victory,” compares the WPA unfavorably with the PWA precisely because of the preponderance of federal funding of the former program. The PWA called on localities to put up a majority of the funding for any public works project. As a result, the locality had a much greater incentive to submit plans worked out to the last detail. The WPA computed man hours according to what *The Nation* called “the long-division method,” where doubling the size of the work force would “cut the man-year cost in half.”³⁵ It would not matter if the extra workers would “clutter up the job and produce hopeless inefficiency” if they made “it possible for Mr. Hopkins to spend the money and ‘purge’ the rolls” of the unemployed.³⁶

The second article, “Face Saving in WPA,” charged the higher ups in the Administration with covering up its tracks in the arrest of ten striking WPA workers in April of 1936. *The Nation* charged the WPA with using its powers “to break strikes or otherwise curtail the collective-bargaining rights” of its employees.³⁷ Other charges in the article accuse the WPA of colluding in the firing “of two WPA foremen in Beaver County Pennsylvania.” The men were officers in a steelworkers union and their activities drew the ire of the operators of a local steel plant. The article charges that the WPA was more

³⁵ Paul W. Ward, “Face-Saving in WPA,” *The Nation*, May 6, 1936.

³⁶ Raymond Gram Swing, “The Price of the Hopkins Victory,” *The Nation*, October 2, 1935.

³⁷ Ward, “Face-Saving in WPA,” *The Nation*, May 6, 1936.

interested in playing politics with connected businessmen (the steel plant operators were big political donors) and in saving face.

Organized labor, an important part of the new political coalition being built by the Roosevelt Administration, was concerned with the potential threat represented by the WPA. In their eyes, the millions of relief workers posed a threat to labor's ability to give its constituents a decent wage. The American Federation of Labor, the preeminent labor organization of its day feared that the wage paid to WPA workers "would undercut union scales."³⁸ The new labor force, which shifted from task to task as these were completed, could also be seen as a potential vast pool of strike-breakers.

Other concerns about WPA labor were related to the accusations written about in *The Nation's* "Face Saving in WPA." Were WPA workers free to organize themselves for self-protection from local employers, local government, even the federal government which created their jobs? Pressure on this account led WPA Labor Relations Director Nels Anderson to notify James Crutcher that "project workers on WPA have a right to join any organization they wish." This right extended to supervisory personnel and even to WPA administrators though Anderson noted that the rules of some, if not most unions, barred membership "to administrative officials who have the power to hire and fire." This "liberalization" on the part of Washington did not extend to recognition of the right of organized relief workers to "strike and picket." However, Anderson considered such activity "unnecessary and meaningless."³⁹ The letter from Anderson to Crutcher ends

³⁸ Leuchtenberg, *FDR and The New Deal*, 124.

³⁹ Letter from Nels Anderson to James H. Crutcher, July 24, 1937. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

with the former writing that the WPA Washington branch union will soon be affiliated with the CIO.

Affiliation with a labor federation did not end suspicions of the WPA on the part of organized labor. The Washington office of the WPA received a series of complaints in May, 1938 from the representative of a bookbinders union in New Orleans. The complaint on behalf of the bookbinders is instructive in detailing the frictions that could arise between government work relief and unions. James J. Hailey, the “Southern Representative” of the International Brotherhood of Bookbinders, writing on behalf of one of his New Orleans affiliates, alleged that the Louisiana WPA siphoned business from local bookbinders. Hailey, based in Nashville, visited a WPA bookbinding operation in New Orleans and found “unskilled slow persons doing work. Five of them possibly doing what one skilled worker could do.” In other, earlier visits to WPA bookbinding projects in other states, Hailey objected to the use of “totally inexperienced women” and “no men at all.” Hailey did not indicate in his letter if the “slow persons” he saw in New Orleans were male or female. Hailey asked the Washington branch to observe rules giving “preference to skilled workers first,” and to “take no work formerly contracted for with existing concerns.” The union official concluded his message with a warning that he would “continue to push this matter...no matter who I have to oppose in doing so.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Letter from James J. Hailey to Ellen S. Woodward, May 18, 1938. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

The WPA Comes to Louisiana

The relief embodied in the WPA was late in coming to the state of Louisiana due to a feud between President Roosevelt and Louisiana Senator and political boss Huey P. Long. Roosevelt sought to channel money and jobs to political enemies of Long and to develop a Louisiana power base independent of the Kingfish. According to Long biographer T. Harry Williams, FDR “consulted only anti-Long leaders...and appointed antis almost exclusively to the jobs.”⁴¹ Long, anxious to keep federal patronage and federal dollars out of the hands of his enemies, had legislation passed in Baton Rouge leaving final acceptance of “funds or credits obtained from the Federal government” in his hands.⁴² On the local level, Long’s desire to keep the Roosevelt Administration out of the state is seen in a letter from Frank H. Peterman, the first state Administrator of the WPA in Louisiana, to the WPA’s national Administrator, Harry Hopkins. In August, 1935, Peterman wrote Hopkins that “the governing bodies of the parish have been very slow in getting up data for projects. I am inclined to believe that they have been told to do nothing and not to cooperate with us.”⁴³

This political stalemate ended with the assassination of Huey Long in September, 1935. His political successors in Louisiana were only too eager to tap into the funds available from Washington and the Roosevelt administration was only too happy to build new political ties in the state. According to Harnett Kane’s *Louisiana Hayride*, “an

⁴¹ T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 670.

⁴² Harnett Kane, *Louisiana Hayride: The American Rehearsal for Dictatorship, 1928-1940* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1941), 127.

⁴³ Letter from Frank H. Peterman to Harry Hopkins, August 10, 1935. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

estimated \$100,000,000 washed down out of Washington” to Louisiana “in a little more than three years.”⁴⁴ The federal largesse built “buildings, bridges, hospitals, grade crossings, zoos, swimming pools, playgrounds” in the state.⁴⁵

The largest and most expensive WPA project in New Orleans was the renovation, enhancement, and expansion of City Park. Indeed, the work on City Park, according to a federal engineering report, involved “the largest jobs, from the standpoint of the number of men employed, in the South.”⁴⁶ The work on the park provides an instructive example of how WPA projects were chosen, the sort of work done on those projects, the sort of people who performed the labor, and the breadth of tasks overseen by the WPA.

City Park was an attractive project to the national WPA for two main reasons. First, the Board of Park Commissioners of City Park, the local sponsor of the project, had plans in hand to show the WPA. These plans, drawn up in the 1920’s, called for a significant upgrade to the park and were approved by New Orleans voters, but were shelved for a lack of funds.⁴⁷ The lack of ready money for the project also ruled out making City Park a PWA project, but was no obstacle to attracting WPA sponsorship. Second, the heavy landscape work was attractive to the WPA. The earth moving required was “suitable because they could profitably employ a large amount of hand labor.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Kane, *Louisiana Hayride*, 201.

⁴⁵ Kane, *Louisiana Hayride*, 201.

⁴⁶ “Report on projects for General Improvement and Beautification of City Park, New Orleans.” By P.H. Timothy, Regional Engineer, February 19, 1936. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367. This claim is also made as part of an article from the *Sunday New Orleans Item/Tribune* from May 24th of the same year.

⁴⁷ Sally K. Evans Reeves and William D. Reeves, *Historic City Park of New Orleans* (New Orleans: Friends of City Park, 2000), 75.

⁴⁸ Reeves and Reeves, *Historic City Park*, 79.

The WPA work on City Park was divided into nine separate projects. The largest of these, commanding eighty percent of all funds, was project 65-64-971, which called for “general grading and landscaping of walks, drives, lagoons, and yacht basins.”⁴⁹ Much of this work was done in the area north of what is now the I-610 corridor in the Lakeview area of New Orleans. In 1936, this area “was completely covered with cypress stumps.” Clearing this land was “accomplished with hand labor...wheelbarrows, runboards, and shovels are the main items of equipment used”⁵⁰ Money for equipment was furnished by the project sponsor at a rate far below the threshold of forty-five percent required for PWA projects.

WPA Workforce

The WPA divided its labor force into four categories and all four categories were represented in the 9,552 men (all men, according to the report) who worked on the City Park projects at the time of the report.⁵¹ The four categories of labor were Unskilled, Intermediate, Skilled, and Engineering and Supervisory. Unskilled workers, all of whom were classified as “relief workers,” made up 8,526 of the total.⁵² If unskilled workers were mostly digging up cypress stumps, then skilled workers, 497 of the total (seventy-four of these were “non-relief” workers) could be found working on projects like the

⁴⁹ P.H. Timothy, “Report on City Park”

⁵⁰ P.H. Timothy, “Report on City Park”

⁵¹ P.H. Timothy, “Report on City Park”

⁵² P.H. Timothy, “Report on City Park”

construction of City Park Stadium (still in use and now known as Tad Gormley Stadium).⁵³

The process by which an unemployed person became a WPA worker was described in a 1940 letter from State Administrator James Crutcher to Sam Jones, at the time the governor-elect of Louisiana. In a lengthy communication that touches on many subjects concerning the WPA in the state, Crutcher writes that the process of becoming certified began at the parish level when “a person applies at a parish office of the Intake and Certification Bureau.” If the applicant was approved at this level, his or her application was forwarded to the district level office of the same bureau. If the applicant cleared this hurdle, he or she would be referred to WPA District Employment Office who could also grant or withhold eligibility. At that point, the applicant would be placed in the “awaiting assignment file” where his or her eventual work assignment would be “under the sole control of the WPA.”⁵⁴

The record of the WPA in combating unemployment among women was spotty. On the national level women never made up more than twenty percent of the employment roles of the WPA.⁵⁵ This lack of achievement is partly a reflection of the times in which the Administration existed. With the onset of tough times, the presence of women in the workforce was seen by some as depriving male “breadwinners” of needed jobs. As a result, according to historian Robert McElvaine, “discrimination against women in

⁵³ P.H. Timothy, “Report on City Park”

⁵⁴ James H. Crutcher to Sam H. Jones, March 11, 1940. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

⁵⁵ McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 268.

employment became worse with the Depression.”⁵⁶ The WPA did not rise up to challenge these changed attitudes. As a relief organization, the WPA was concerned that its benefits be extended as broadly as possible which meant (ideally) that only one family member could work on its projects. The *Workers’ Handbook* states that “generally, only one” person per family could work for WPA. The statistics bear this out. The *Workers’ Handbook*, published in July 1936, stated that of the 3.5 million people employed at that time by the WPA, 400,000 were women.⁵⁷ In the Louisiana WPA, women workers made up thirteen percent of the total of 51,379 in 1939.⁵⁸ Female householders were concentrated in WPA sewing projects. In 1940, state administrator Crutcher wrote that “the sewing project employ(s) approximately 2,800 women, or 81% of (female) WPA breadwinners.”⁵⁹ These percentages lagged well behind the proportion of women in the workforce in 1930 (22 percent), but the performance of the WPA in this regard was no worse than that of any other relief program at the time.⁶⁰ Even when women were employed by the WPA, their status could be questioned, as was seen above in the matter of the official of the bookbinders’ union.

WPA workers were paid what was called a “security wage.” According to a *Workers’ Handbook* distributed by the WPA, the monthly “security wage” was “figured at

⁵⁶ McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 182.

⁵⁷ “Workers’ Handbook,” pg. 2.

⁵⁸ “Summarization and Analysis of WPA Activities in Louisiana,” February 6, 1939. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

⁵⁹ Letter from James H. Crutcher to Sam H. Jones, March 11, 1940. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

⁶⁰ Taylor, *American-Made*, 47.

the hourly rate of pay prevailing” in the worker’s hometown.⁶¹ The differences between various “hometowns” were accounted for in the *Handbook*: “workers who live in big cities generally get more than those who live in small towns and in the country because it costs more to live in big cities.” The “security wage” was also carefully calibrated so as to provide workers with enough to live on but not so much as to threaten the Roosevelt Administration’s political alliances with organized labor.⁶² As will be seen below, this disparity between urban and rural wages left room for sharp and discriminatory practices by employers and WPA officials.

The workforce at City Park was broken down not only by classification of labor but by race. According to the February, 1936 report written by Regional Engineer P.H. Timothy, the force of “common labor” at work in the park was “all colored.”⁶³ This sounds depressingly familiar, but according to Engineer Timothy, the segregation was made “because great difficulty was experienced in handling the white laborers.” At first, white and black workers labored on the same project in City Park in racially segregated shifts, with white workers handling the morning shift and African-American workers handling the afternoon shift.⁶⁴ Upon reaching the job site, the black workers “observed the white men not working...they also began to show indifference.”⁶⁵ Eventually, the problem was solved by sending all the white workers to the Lake Front project (project #

⁶¹ “Workers’ Handbook, WPA.” p. 4. <http://newdeal.feri.org/misc/faq/faq1.htm>

⁶² “Workers’ Handbook”, p. 4.

⁶³ P.H. Timothy, “Report on City Park”

⁶⁴ P.H. Timothy, “Report on City Park”

⁶⁵ P.H. Timothy, “Report on City Park”

65-64-987, by far the second largest WPA endeavor in New Orleans) where their poor work habits were cured with new and better management.

This transfer of problematic white labor left the backbreaking “common labor” in City Park in the hands of an entirely black contingent. This racial division of labor is visible today in the stunning reliefs carved into the bridge on Diagonal Drive. The *Workers’ Handbook* prepares the WPA laborer for any unpleasant surprises he may find on the job by telling him, “much depends on local customs.”⁶⁶ Such “local customs” were not hard to identify in the Jim Crow South. As will be seen below, in November of 1937, an abuse of power involving New Orleans-based black WPA labor showed an expression of “local customs” only slightly less concrete than the impressive reliefs on the bridge at Diagonal Drive.

Politics and Propaganda

In May, 1936, Assistant Administrator in Washington Lawrence Westbrook wrote state Administrator James Crutcher that the huge project at City Park was “one which ought to lend itself well to some good photographs.”⁶⁷ The request from Washington shows one of the most prominent components of the day-to-day operations of the WPA at work: public relations. Throughout the eight-year existence of the WPA, its every move was recorded for its value in promoting the organization and the presidential administration that brought it into being. Indeed, in a dizzying bit of circularity, WPA

⁶⁶ “Workers’ Handbook,” p.5.

⁶⁷ Letter from Lawrence Westbrook to James H. Crutcher, May 7, 1936. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

public relations was itself a work-relief project. The public relations arm of the Administration, the Information Division, grew out of the WPA's Reporters' Project, a work relief program for journalists.⁶⁸

The WPA's Information Division had a dual task. First, it was to promote the work of the WPA; second, it was to help the Roosevelt Administration fight off its critics. The former task took many forms. Photographs, radio broadcasts, moving pictures, and public speakers were all brought forward to spread the good news of WPA employment and WPA projects. Another graphic medium of promotion came in the form of the signs found at almost every WPA work site. The signs were red, white and blue and printed with the words "USA" at the top, "WORKS PROGRAM" in the middle, and "WPA" on the bottom.⁶⁹ A variation of this sign can be seen today as part of the reliefs on the Diagonal Drive Bridge.

The aggressively patriotic WPA signs were considered by the political enemies of the Roosevelt Administration to be typical New Deal propaganda. The latter task of the Information Division came into play in defending the WPA and its sponsors from oft-stated charges of corruption. The aforementioned new word "boondoggle" was brought into being to characterize WPA (and, by extension, Roosevelt) wastefulness. The Information Division fought these allegations by keeping "a state-by-state file of boondoggling charges and issued detailed refutations that went out under the heading 'The Facts Are.'"⁷⁰ A rather odd bit of stating "the facts" occurred in the Louisiana

⁶⁸ Taylor, *American-Made*, 292.

⁶⁹ Taylor, *American-Made*, 214.

⁷⁰ Taylor, *American-Made*, 218.

Division of the WPA in 1940. In June of that year, the Information Division in Louisiana took advantage of a clean bill of health given the state WPA by a Justice Department investigation, putting out a huge spread of every regional newspaper headline announcing the findings. The presentation overwhelms the beholder with a score of headlines proclaiming “WPA in Louisiana cleared of allegations,” “No Criminal Conduct,” “Probe Fails to Show Criminal Action,” and so on. Whether the memory of the “clean bill of health” survives the memory of the allegations is open to question.⁷¹

The projects at City Park and on the Lakefront employed thousands of New Orleanians at a time. The peak of WPA employment in New Orleans came in October, 1938, when 25,395 men and women were at work on relief projects.⁷² This amount of labor satisfied the desire of the Roosevelt Administration to employ the maximum number of Americans for the longest possible time. The amount of money flooding in satisfied the desire of local governments to use the generosity of the New Deal to get as much needed work done as possible. These two desires were not always satisfied together. Often, there were tensions between Washington and New Orleans as to which of the desires were more important. Early on in the career of the Louisiana WPA, Washington implored the first state Administrator, Frank H. Peterman, to get his statewide operation up and going as soon as possible. In one telegram from Washington D.C., National Administrator Harry Hopkins tells Peterman

⁷¹ “WPA Cleared of Allegations Made in Report,” from June, 1940. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

⁷² “WPA Employment by Louisiana Congressional Districts,” undated. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

you are expected to put not less than thirty thousand persons to work by November eleventh <Stop> Full quota of forty-one thousand nine hundred persons must be employed by November twenty-fifth <Stop> Responsibility for carrying out these objectives through providing work on approved projects rests squarely upon you <Stop>.⁷³

Peterman responded immediately by telegram claiming he could meet his employment quotas “provided early approval is given City Park and Lake Front projects for New Orleans...Sixty percent of relief load (in Louisiana) is in New Orleans.”⁷⁴

Peterman was using the desire of Washington for maximum early employment in work relief to get speedy approval of the largest projects in his department. When Hopkins replied by post November 2nd he mentioned that “it may be necessary later on... to increase or *decrease*...the amount of money made available to you.”⁷⁵ In this telegram, Hopkins used his ability to turn the Washington money spigot on or off to light a fire under Peterman and the Louisiana WPA.

Of course, the local parties most interested in federal money were the politicians who influenced its distribution. A good example of the WPA priorities of elected officials in New Orleans is provided by Mayor Robert S. Maestri, whose request for a higher minimum allotment for his city has survived. In this document, a letter from Maestri to WPA Regional Field Representative Malcolm Miller, the mayor hopes to nearly double New Orleans’ minimum monthly allotment from \$165,250 to \$315,690. This increase in the allotment is not for an expansion of WPA activity in New Orleans but rather “in order

⁷³ Harry L. Hopkins telegram to Frank H. Peterman, October 27, 1935. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

⁷⁴ Peterman telegram to Hopkins, Oct. 28, 1935. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

⁷⁵ Letter from Hopkins to Peterman, November 2, 1935. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367. Emphasis added.

to carry on the type of construction work which is under way.” Failing the steep increase in the New Orleans’ allotment, the city “would have to withdraw from further participation in these projects, leaving the WPA to care for the very heavy unemployment load.” Maestri went on to mention understandings reached with Hopkins (Miller’s boss) that the mayor considers binding. Of course, Miller could hardly fail to see the notation at the bottom of the letter that indicated that Maestri’s office was sending a copy to Hopkins in Washington.⁷⁶

Maestri’s letter is one example of the sort of official pressure that could be brought to bear on state and regional WPA officials. Another sort of pressure, this time exerted on Harry Hopkins, shows that officials at all levels of government had very specific fears about what could happen if relief programs like the WPA failed to deliver what they were supposed to deliver. In an October 3rd, 1935 telegram to Hopkins in Washington, sent at the same time Hopkins and Peterman were sending telegrams to each other over getting the WPA going in the state, four members of Louisiana’s congressional delegation pressed Hopkins for approval of the City Park and Lake Front projects. The delay in project approval had the congressmen worried “that there will be further reductions in amount of direct relief for October which is causing great hardship and *unrest* here.”⁷⁷ The telegram was signed by John N. Sandlin, J.Y. Sanders, Cleveland Dear, and Numa F. Montet. Each man ended his name with MC, for Member of Congress.

⁷⁶ Letter from Robert Maestri to Malcolm Miller, March 25, 1937. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

⁷⁷ Telegram from Louisiana congressmen to Harry Hopkins, October 3, 1935, National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367. Emphasis added.

Whether or not the four congressmen actually thought the use of the term “unrest” was hyperbolic is beside the point. The fact is that they may have thought they could get what they wanted by using it and that says something about the times Louisiana and the country were going through. The attitude of the Roosevelt Administration toward the transient poor is another telling indicator of just how the government saw the civil situation at that time. Rather than care for transients wherever they were found, the WPA announced that these unfortunates “are to be returned to their homes. *Under oath*, each has fixed the location of his home and will be instructed to report to the District Works Progress Director of the WPA District in which he lives.”⁷⁸ Another example of this anxiety is found in the reminiscences of Elizabeth Wickenden, a WPA official. Early in the New Deal, Wickenden worked with a great many economic refugees who left their homes to find work. When word of Wickenden’s work reached her superiors, they “put out an order that we were not to take care of any migrant workers.”⁷⁹ Later on, Wickenden says of the transients, “we tried very hard to get them back home.”⁸⁰

Supporting the New Deal

Worries over what might happen if the federal work relief spigot were ever turned off persisted into 1940, after the peak of WPA employment in the city, the state, and nationwide. In 1940, the fallout from a messy political scandal in Baton Rouge caused a new series of fears that the WPA might to shut down its operations in New Orleans and

⁷⁸ Letter from Hopkins to Peterman, November 22, 1935, National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367. Emphasis added.

⁷⁹ Louchheim, *The Making of the New Deal*, 178.

⁸⁰ Louchheim, *The Making of the New Deal*, 179.

throughout the state. This fallout came in the form of a statewide election in April 1940 in which a state sales tax was put to an up-or-down vote by the electorate. In the city, a parish-wide two-cent gasoline tax had expired and a constitutional amendment on the ballot would outlaw such a tax in the future. Both amendments, if approved would deprive the state of millions of dollars in revenue used to pay sponsor's fees for many WPA projects and would threaten the ability of both city and state to contribute those fees. The prospect of both amendments being passed in the April election sparked a feverish effort by New Orleans political and community leaders and WPA officials to save the sources of revenue.

This effort began with a March 23rd letter from state WPA administrator Crutcher to F.C. Harrington, WPA commissioner in Washington, DC. Crutcher wrote that the passage of the two amendments would "reduce the general fund of the city to such an extent that I do not see how the ordinary services of government can be maintained." Crutcher also wrote that "there is little hope that the proposed amendments will not be approved." Crutcher also informed Harrington that he had sent multiple letters to Louisiana Governor-elect Sam Jones and New Orleans mayor Robert Maestri about the impending crisis.⁸¹

Another part of the effort in New Orleans to defeat the amendments appeared in the form of newspaper stories and editorials in the *New Orleans Item*. Crutcher refers to this in his letter to Harrington and names the editor of the paper as a concerned citizen. Crutcher also mentions the head of the New Orleans Council of Social Agencies as

⁸¹ Letter from James H. Crutcher to F.C. Harrington, March 23, 1940. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

another sympathetic private citizen with whom he has been in contact. Interestingly, Crutcher concluded his letter about his contacts and communications with elected officials by stating “naturally, I am not taking part in any of this activity.”⁸²

Crutcher’s letter of the same date to Governor-elect Jones informs him of the impending funding crisis and that the passage of the amendments “will have a drastic effect on our program throughout the state, and especially in the City of New Orleans.” Crutcher ends the letter with a warning about “the development of a serious situation” affecting “the needy people of Louisiana.” This warning sounds somewhat similar to those voiced in 1935 when the WPA was just beginning its work in the state.⁸³

Crutcher’s letter to Maestri is interesting due to an omission on Crutcher’s part. The letter is a lengthy communication that dwells mostly with the necessity of boosting local sponsor’s fees to the level of 25% in line with the standards of the new Emergency Recovery Act of 1939. In his letter to the Governor-elect, Crutcher dwelled on the emergency facing the state and New Orleans in particular yet he did not take this tone in his long, statistics-laden, communication with Maestri. Although it is certain that Crutcher knew Maestri was well aware of the coming crisis, it is also possible that the omission was due to the fact that they were already working together to defeat the proposed amendments, regardless of what Crutcher wrote in his letter to Harrington.⁸⁴

⁸² Letter from Crutcher to Harrington, March 23, 1940.

⁸³ Letter from James H. Crutcher to Sam H. Jones, March 23, 1940. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

⁸⁴ Letter from James H. Crutcher to Robert S. Maestri, March 23, 1940. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

Mayor Maestri's efforts to inform the public included a March 26, 1940 message to the New Orleans Commission Council (a forerunner of the current City Council). In this message, the mayor predicted the likelihood of trouble, stating that "it appears to be certain now that the sales tax will be repealed."⁸⁵ His warning of what could happen upon passage of the two amendments was similar to that given in Crutcher's letter to Jones. The import of Maestri's message to the Council was picked by every daily newspaper in the city over the next few days. In a story that ran in the March 28th edition of the *New Orleans Tribune*, William J. Guste, chairman of the board of the city's public welfare department, was quoted as saying that "as many as 22,000 persons in New Orleans, now depending on the state sales tax for relief, will have to be thrown off the rolls if the tax is abolished." Guste went on to say, in words reminiscent of James Crutcher's claim of innocence to Harrington, "this is not a plea to retain the sales tax."⁸⁶

Not every media outlet in the city was as sympathetic as Crutcher claimed the *New Orleans Item* was. The day after the story of the financial crisis broke, both the *New Orleans Tribune* and the *Times-Picayune* carried nearly identical editorials casting doubt on Maestri's warning and calling for an independent audit of city finances. Both editorials criticized Maestri's waste of money in the previous gubernatorial election on behalf of Earl Long, Sam Jones' defeated opponent.⁸⁷ In another article in the *Tribune*, Jones levied the same charge at Maestri when he was quoted as saying "if Maestri had attended to the

⁸⁵ Message from Robert S. Maestri to the New Orleans Commission Council, March 26, 1940. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

⁸⁶ *New Orleans Tribune*, March 28, 1940. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

⁸⁷ "First Let's Have the Facts," *Times-Picayune*, March 29, 1940. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

affairs of New Orleans the way he should have done, instead of spending all that money to get Earl Long elected, he wouldn't have all this trouble." The coverage of the *Tribune* was hostile to the Maestri administration, but it is significant that they referred to the situation as a "crisis" in their headline.⁸⁸

All of this publicity and the behind the scenes efforts may well have contributed to a victory for the Maestri administration and the work relief effort in New Orleans. The day after the election, Crutcher wrote to Harrington in Washington that the sales-tax amendment "was overwhelmingly defeated." The election result, according to Crutcher, indicated "the importance attached to the continuation of the WPA program." Belying WPA protestations of neutrality, Crutcher credited Harrington with a key effort, writing that "prior to the publicity given to *your* letter to...Jones and...Maestri, there was almost no opposition to the passage of the amendment."⁸⁹ In a further letter to Harrington, Crutcher also happily noted the defeat of the gasoline tax amendment in Orleans Parish.⁹⁰

The 1940 crisis shows an important transformation in the relationship between local government, especially a local government in the South, and its Federal counterpart. In 1935, local officials including Mayor Maestri and members of the Louisiana Congressional delegation seemed to be on the outside when they implored Washington to approve WPA projects for the city. By 1940, state and national WPA officials worked with political and community leaders to continue work relief efforts in New Orleans

⁸⁸ "Jones, in Capital, Promises Solution of Relief, WPA Crisis," *New Orleans Tribune*, April 2, 1940. National Archives Microfilm Publ National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

⁸⁹ Letter from James H. Crutcher to F.C. Harrington. April 17, 1940. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

⁹⁰ Letter from James H. Crutcher to F.C. Harrington, April 18, 1940. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

when those efforts were threatened with financial starvation. This cooperation affected politics on a statewide level and it also showed how dependent localities such as New Orleans could be on the WPA. A common element between 1935 and 1940 is that in 1940 the use of fear as a political lever, whether that fear was hyperbolic or not, could still yield results. This use of that particular emotional appeal shows that the wounds inflicted by the Great Depression were still tender.

Local corruption

The need to give employment to the jobless, the need of localities to attract federal funds, and the worries over what might happen if these programs failed, combined with the unprecedented amount of dollars flowing down from Washington, created an atmosphere in which corruption could easily flourish. In Louisiana, the WPA's legacy includes some spectacular scandals. The most famous of these scandals forced the resignation of Louisiana governor Richard W. Leche and forced the president of Louisiana State University to flee the country.

The series of scandals included the abuse of WPA funds for labor and materials to construct private houses for Governor Leche and other, well-connected figures. Some of the construction took place on the L.S.U. campus inside the school's coliseum to shield the work from prying eyes before it was moved to private property.⁹¹ In the midst of these investigations, it was learned that the president of the university, who had countenanced

⁹¹ Kane, *Louisiana Hayride*, 271.

the abuses described above, had embezzled \$500,000 and left for Canada, where he eventually surrendered to the authorities.⁹²

A smaller, less serious example of cutting corners occurred in New Orleans in the early days of the WPA in Louisiana. In 1935, the aforementioned James Crutcher wrote a letter to Howard Hunter, Assistant Administrator under Hopkins in Washington. Crutcher, Frank Peterman's successor as state WPA Administrator, wrote of his termination of one Lucille Walmsley, who "was employed by my predecessor" and who "remained on the payroll of this Administration until recently." Miss Walmsley was the sister of T. Semmes Walmsley, Mayor of the City of New Orleans (Maestri's predecessor). Not only was Lucille Walmsley connected with City Hall, the Walmsleys "reside in a magnificent home and enjoy all the luxuries of a wealthy family." Mayor Walmsley was so incensed by Crutcher's decision that "he will do everything within his power to have the appointment (Crutcher's) nullified at the first opportunity."⁹³ The employment at a relief agency of a rich relative of the mayor is small time compared to the disgrace of the later scandals but can be seen as an eccentric expression of one of the "local customs" alluded to in the *Workers' Handbook*.

Racism as Localism

Another expression of local custom, this time occurring in late 1937, was far more serious. It showed how the WPA could be used to reinforce the social order of a locality.

⁹² Kane, Louisiana Hayride, 275, 282.

⁹³ Letter from James Crutcher to Howard Hunter, March 18, 1936. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

At the same time, it also showed the signs of an emerging political relationship that would threaten that social order. This event has historical roots in labor and race relations in post-Reconstruction Louisiana. Two events in Louisiana's sugar cane fields, fifty years apart and both brought on by the sudden onset of cold weather and the nervousness of landowning whites show how the WPA and the New Deal affected the environments where they worked.

The first of these events took place in November of 1887 in Terrebonne Parish, which is close, but not adjacent to, Orleans Parish. A sudden frost threatened a promising sugar cane crop and gave an infusion of power to a parish-wide strike of field workers. An appeal was made by the local planters and by the local authorities not for strike-breaking scab labor but for vigilantes to coerce the workers lest the crop be lost through the senseless...strike of the laborers." Parish authorities declared martial law and on November 22nd the vigilantes, local and otherwise, began massacring the strikers and other African-Americans in the town of Thibodaux and throughout the Parish. The official total of deaths exceeded thirty but one contemporary white observer wrote that "they say the half has not been published."⁹⁴ The massacre that ended the strike of sugar cane field workers in Terrebonne Parish was the worst of many such instances of labor suppression that fixed the conditions of agricultural work in the South until the onset of the Great Depression, the New Deal, and the WPA.

Almost fifty years to the day later, in 1937, an early frost threatened the state's sugar cane crop once again. The WPA often made plans with local government to provide

⁹⁴ William Ivy Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest: Louisiana Politics, 1877-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 183-184.

extra workers during harvest time, but this early frost presented a threat to the crop that called for a much quicker and larger response. The agricultural emergency made local and national news. A United Press International story dated November 23rd concerned itself with the actions of Louisiana Governor Richard W. Leche, who “tonight ordered the Louisiana National Guard to transport an estimated 5,000 colored WPA workers into the sugar bowl district to save \$6,000,000 worth of cane from cold weather.” Governor Leche’s actions, according to the report, included securing “suspension of all WPA work in the state.” As for the workers themselves, they were to “get \$1.50 daily, food and lodging, considerably more remuneration than their regular WPA work gives.”⁹⁵ Another news story, quoted James Crutcher as saying that “the WPA will not deal directly with growers during this emergency but will recognize only requests (for labor) cleared through the Louisiana State Employment Service (LSES).”⁹⁶ The story from the *States* also included the same figure of an emergency worker wage of \$1.50 a day plus food and shelter.

That this reaction might have been more than an emergency response to a possible economic disaster came out in the following days. The first indication came in a November 29 letter from Walter White, Executive Secretary for the NAACP, to Aubrey Williams of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in Washington. White wrote that “a member of our staff now in the South” had reported to them Gov. Leche’s action to close down WPA projects during the emergency to obtain black labor to save the crop.

⁹⁵ “Soldiers Rush WPA Labor to Save Cane Crop,” by the United Press, November 23, 1937. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

⁹⁶ “200 WPA Workers to Help Save Cane,” *New Orleans States*, November 24, 1937. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

“We are advised,” wrote White, “that the Governor’s request does not ask for whites to be dragooned in this fashion, but only Negroes.”⁹⁷ The story also made the headlines of African-American newspapers. A headline in the December 2nd edition of *The Pittsburgh Courier* proclaimed “New Orleans Police Round Up WPA Workers For Cane Fields.” The story puts a different spin on the “workers” salary of \$1.50 a day plus food and lodging. One worker was quoted as saying “they are paying us \$1.50 a day and charging us 90 cents per day for board.” The *Courier* story also mentions that “police of the city are conducting raids and making wholesale arrests” to obtain emergency labor.⁹⁸ The National Urban League filed its own protest when T. Arnold Hill wired Aubrey Williams on December 8th:

Is there any action WPA can take to prevent forced use of Negro WPA labor in Louisiana sugar fields? The wages forced upon these workers are far below any accepted standard of decency. This situation is a *recurrence of similar unwarranted action* and unless stopped forthwith may lead to more serious consequences.⁹⁹

The state WPA grudgingly acknowledged the facts as they came out. In a letter to the national head of the WPA’s Information Division, David K. Niles, Crutcher took “exception to Mr. White’s intimation that negro workers were ‘dragooned.’” Crutcher’s explanation focused on prior plans drawn up with LSES to provide labor to harvest the sugar cane. He did acknowledge that all labor drawn from New Orleans was African-American “since the planters themselves

⁹⁷ Letter from Walter White to Aubrey Williams, November 29, 1937. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367. “Dragooned,” in this context, means forcibly recruited by authority.

⁹⁸ “New Orleans Police Round Up WPA Workers For Cane Fields,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 2nd 1937. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

⁹⁹ Telegram from T. Arnold Hill to Aubrey Williams, December 8, 1937. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367. Emphasis added.

requested that type of labor.”¹⁰⁰ In an earlier letter to Niles, Crutcher wrote that “we are working entirely through the LSES offices.”¹⁰¹ He did acknowledge in several different letters that the WPA closed down its operations to free up potential workers on the understanding that their WPA jobs would be waiting for them once the emergency had passed. In a letter to Adjutant General Raymond Fleming at Jackson Barracks, Crutcher gave a different description of the local WPA’s “understanding” with African-American workers. After reiterating the terms of the understanding, Crutcher went on to write, “we also told them that unless the cane crop was saved, additional unemployment this winter would be the result.”¹⁰²

Nationally, some admission that conditions at the sugar plantations were poor and that the situation was regrettable was made by WPA Administrative Assistant Alfred E. Smith. Smith wrote to T. Arnold Hill of the National Urban League that the Louisiana Department of Health, “in at least one instance, withdrew workers from a plantation because of unsatisfactory shelter, there was undoubtedly some abuse in this respect on some of the smaller plantations.” Smith also confirms the story reported in the *Pittsburgh Courier* that some “workers were compelled to provide their own subsistence from the \$1.50 per day they received.”¹⁰³ Another bureaucratic reaction came in an earlier letter

¹⁰⁰ James Crutcher to David K. Niles, December 3, 1937. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

¹⁰¹ James Crutcher to David K. Niles, November 24, 1937. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

¹⁰² James Crutcher to Raymond H. Fleming, December 7, 1937. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

¹⁰³ Letter from Alfred E. Smith to T. Arnold Hill, December 15, 1937. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

from Aubrey Williams of FERA to Walter White of the NAACP. Williams, who had been contacted by both White and T. Arnold Hill, acknowledged some of the facts contained in White's letter of November 29. He concluded by saying "when the State Employment Service makes its requisitions in this manner, we are not in a position to exercise much discretion on the matter."¹⁰⁴

Governor Leche, the LSES, and the sugar planters could not have rounded up the labor without active WPA cooperation. Unemployed men had to register to become eligible to work on WPA projects which put their names at the disposal of the state WPA authorities. The state government itself acknowledged the possibility that the conscripted workers were exploited and abused by having the State Board of Health inspect the temporary living conditions of the "workers." Another indication of the conditions on the plantations was hinted by the planters' request for African-American labor only. The plans drawn up between the WPA and the LSES for providing labor in normal harvest conditions indicate some familiarity on the part of the state WPA with conditions on the sugar plantations. A brief editorial comment from the African American-owned *Louisiana Weekly* shows that conditions on sugar cane plantations were well known in New Orleans' black community. As early as January, 1937, the *Weekly* noted that poor white applicants for harvesting work "were not accepted by the state re-employment service because the housing facilities offered on the plantations were not considered adequate for

¹⁰⁴ Letter from Aubrey Williams to Walter White, December 4, 1937. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

white people.”¹⁰⁵ And, of course, if wages and conditions on the plantations were so good, why shut down all New Orleans WPA projects that employed African Americans?

Another area of WPA culpability in this affair is abuse of the WPA’s “security wage.” As mentioned above, the wage was adjusted according to where the worker lived. A worker in New Orleans made more than another worker in a rural parish. This discrepancy was often exploited by employers on WPA projects. In Alabama, the “rural-urban differential” allowed local WPA officials to send an urban worker “out to the rural areas at a lower wage.”¹⁰⁶ This technique of exploitation used in Alabama was probably not lost on the sugarcane growers of Louisiana.

The buck-passing evident in the affair of the sugarcane “workers” was unfortunately, not the only example of a lack of accountability on the part of WPA officials. In 1939, the WPA’s Lake Front project sparked a burst of activism on the part of New Orleans’ African-American community. The project, sponsored by the Orleans Parish Levee District, resulted in the removal of a Lake Front beach reserved for African-Americans. In response, the New Orleans branch of the Southern Negro Youth Congress sent a petition to the WPA in Washington and to President Roosevelt. In the letter to the WPA in Washington, Sheldon Mays, the Executive Secretary of the Southern Negro Youth Congress, wrote, “knowing that WPA grants made possible the lakefront development, we feel that you should know of the matter.”¹⁰⁷ Sheldon Mays also sent a

¹⁰⁵ “‘Are We Getting a Fair Proportion?’ Negroes Ask WPA,” *Louisiana Weekly*, January 19, 1937. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

¹⁰⁶ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists in the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), p. 152.

¹⁰⁷ Letter from Sheldon Mays to F.C. Harrington. August 1, 1939. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

letter to James Crutcher who, writing to a third party, claimed that he informed Mays that “the change in location of this beach is not within the jurisdiction of the Works Progress Administration.”¹⁰⁸ The *ad hoc* quality of the WPA too easily lent itself to this sort of official callousness.

When not being callous on the subject of race, Louisiana WPA officials could exhibit complacency on that score to the point of disingenuousness. In a letter to Alfred E. Smith, dated October 4, 1937, James Crutcher responded to complaints addressed to Smith from African-Americans about the Louisiana WPA’s treatment of that community. Crutcher professed surprise and wrote that not only did he feel “that race relations with regard to the WPA in Louisiana were rather satisfactory,” he had recently “conferred with a number of the Negro leaders in New Orleans.” Crutcher took some umbrage at the alleged state of affairs, declaring huffily, in a manner familiar to all students of Southern race relations, that “I feel very strongly that we should try to handle our own difficulties within the state.” Crutcher closed with a judgment that extended beyond his own duties in Louisiana when he declared his belief “that Louisiana has a particularly good record in the matter of race relations.”¹⁰⁹

In fairness, the activities of the WPA that touched on black/white labor issues could arouse conservative white ire as well as African-American resentment. In late 1941, the owner of Creedmore Plantation in St. Bernard Parish (adjacent to New Orleans), N. Watts Maddux complained in a letter to Washington that “long-drawn-out” WPA projects

¹⁰⁸ Letter from James Crutcher to Ernest L. Marbury, August 14, 1939. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

¹⁰⁹ Letter from James H. Crutcher to Alfred E. Smith, October 4, 1937. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

deprived local farm owners of needed labor. Planters such as himself were at a disadvantage in that WPA labor paid better and that “wage earners will go to those places where compensation are [sic] best.” There would, Maddux wrote, be plenty of labor “if the farm labor is permitted and encouraged to go *where it belongs*.” Frustrated, Maddux asked his correspondent to “try to get one of them (local WPA labor) to work on the farm.” There is no mention on Maddux’s part of any attempt to attract farm hands with increased wages.¹¹⁰

It was not stated in Maddux’s letter what was grown on Creedmore Plantation. But one year later, a similar complaint came from a Louisiana sugar planter. In October of 1942, W. D. Haas Jr. of Avoyelles Parish, wrote his Congressman that he needed “100 additional cane cutters.” Haas blamed the absence of a sufficient number of cane cutters on the fact that “a great number of negro laborers...are working at the camps.” As with Maddux, Haas made no mention of trying to increase wages on his farm, only saying that “we cannot compete with the wage scale at the camps.” The request for help in supplying workers ends with the information that if the need for labor is supplied, “the sugar crop here would be saved.”¹¹¹ The letter was forwarded to James Crutcher who told Congressman Allen that he had investigated Haas’ claim and found that the labor in question was outside the province of the WPA. It is perhaps significant that Haas thought

¹¹⁰ Letter from N. Watts Maddux to General Lewis B. Hershey, September 30, 1941. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367. Emphasis added.

¹¹¹ Letter from W.D. Haas, Jr. to A. Leonard Allen, October 21, 1942. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

any nearby federal construction project employing African-Americans and thereby keeping them out of the cane fields, *had* to be a WPA project.¹¹²

Programs like the WPA, which paid wages greater than those paid to southern farm tenant labor and with the involvement with the federal bureaucracy, “implicitly threatened the culture of dependency that had secured an abundant, cheap labor supply.”¹¹³ Conservative southern leaders reacted by reviving the rhetoric and imagery of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Redemption. In 1936, while still campaigning against the New Deal, Richard Leche of Louisiana charged that “not since Reconstruction days in the South has a national Administration....made such an attempt...to dictate the policies of a sovereign state.”¹¹⁴ In response to a speech given in his home state by President Roosevelt in 1938, Georgia Senator Walter George called the president’s rhetoric and the program it implied, “a second march through Georgia.”¹¹⁵

An obvious parallel can be drawn from the reaction of 1930’s Southern planters and politicians to the New Deal to how post-Reconstruction southerners reacted to a mobilization of a labor force they felt entitled to control. Not only the reaction but the rhetoric that clothed it were predictable. But drawing a parallel between the strikers of 1887 in Terrebonne Parish and the African-American WPA laborers of New Orleans is not as easy. The unfortunate workers of 1887 were isolated and vulnerable to coercion.

¹¹² Letter from James H. Crutcher to A. Leonard Allen, October 29, 1942. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

¹¹³ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 3.

¹¹⁴ John Robert Moore, “The New Deal in Louisiana,” in *The New Deal: The State and Local Levels*, John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, David Brody, eds. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), 151.

¹¹⁵ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 65.

The men and women on work relief projects half a century later were better off not only economically but in their affiliation with a federal bureaucracy that, however callous and unresponsive it could be, was vulnerable to pressure. Southern planters and politicians had welcomed the New Deal in its early days but it did not take them long to grasp all of its implications.¹¹⁶

The implications grasped by conservative southern whites was that the federal government, through the New Deal and its programs such as the WPA, had become a rival for the loyalties of people they only considered employees, if that. The old-style paternalism had a competitor with far deeper pockets and, most threateningly, unknowable long-term goals. Other southern leaders, urban leaders such as Robert Maestri, may have been conservative socially but they grasped eagerly at the funds made available by this new source of power. The dilemma for urban politicians was not the maintenance of a social order but the prompt delivery of jobs and services to thousands of constituents.

Conclusion

Contemporary critics of the New Deal, such as the southern planters and politicians or the economist Henry Hazlitt, and modern critics such as Folsom, Jim Powell, and Amity Shlaes, are complaining not about an economic failure or a social threat but about a political success. This success is not just the product of elections during

¹¹⁶ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, p. 3.

the 1930's and the work of liberal academic historians since then. The New Orleanian who drives over the bridges of City Park, plays on its golf courses, relaxes on Lakeshore Drive, or who conducts research in the records organized by the WPA, testifies to the continuing utility of the WPA and gives it an endorsement, consciously or unconsciously. Jim Powell quoted Henry Hazlitt's critique of people who focused on a WPA bridge instead of unbuilt homes and unmade cars, washing machines, clothes, and ungrown food to remind people of what could have been done with the money spent on the WPA. Those things cited by Hazlitt are no doubt valuable but it is significant that Hazlitt did not include bridges, roads, parks, public buildings in his catalogue of goods foregone. Nor did Hazlitt think about what was purchased through WPA wages, as modest as they were.

Other criticisms of WPA programs such as political graft and waste are accurate at times but miss the point. The WPA was created with the goal of employing the largest number of people as soon as possible. Meeting this goal meant working in and with cities and city governments. Not only were the people concentrated in the cities but also the bureaucracies capable of suggesting projects and generating plans. An examination of the records of the WPA in New Orleans as of the end of 1938 (the peak of WPA employment) shows the number and variety of city authorities - or authorities located in the city - that sponsored projects. Those authorities include the City of New Orleans itself (sponsor of most road-building projects), the Orleans Parish School Board, the Sewerage and Water Board, the Louisiana State Museum, the Audubon Park Commission, the City Park Commission, the Levee Board, the New Orleans Public Library, the Department of Public Welfare, and state and federal authorities such as the State Board of Engineers and the

U.S. Public Health Service.¹¹⁷ Large cities such as New Orleans were in an unbeatable position to benefit from this unprecedented federal generosity and urban leaders such as Robert Maestri naturally benefitted politically.

As for waste, reform and relief done in a hurry will result in some waste. Two examples, one from Washington and one from Louisiana, show the hurry and the ambiguous results of haste. When the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act that gave birth to the WPA was being considered in 1935, Harry Hopkins, who would go on to head the program, told his staff, “boys, this is our hour, We’ve got to get everything we want - a works program, social security, wages, and hours, everything - now or never.”¹¹⁸ Such haste in getting everything one wants done is not the way to build or run a sober and efficient government agency. Speed was of the essence and the men and women believed the stakes were high. In Louisiana, in a 1937 press release announcing the release of a report evaluating the accomplishments of the Works Progress Administration in its first year in the state, James H. Crutcher described himself as “gratified,” and said the report showed “the WPA in Louisiana and throughout the nation is doing its part to find work for the able-bodied unemployed who are in need, and at the same time is accomplishing worth-while things.”¹¹⁹ The last part of James Crutcher’s statement can make it seem that “accomplishing worth-while things” by employing “the able-bodied unemployed” was a happy coincidence. It wasn’t a coincidence, but the haste involved in implementing the

¹¹⁷ “Accumulated Report of WPA Project Activities, as of Dec. 31, 1938.” National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

¹¹⁸ McJimsey, *Harry Hopkins*, 77.

¹¹⁹ From a press release written by the Information Service of the Works Progress Administration of Louisiana, for statewide publication April 10-11, 1937. National Archives Microfilm Publications, series M-1367.

relief of the WPA sometimes made it look as if it was. It is that haste and the worry of the times that can make the legacy of the WPA, still enjoyed by so many of the citizens of New Orleans, seem like one of history's happier accidents.

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