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## **'Posed with the Greatest Care': Photographic Representations of Black Women Employed by the Work Progress Administration in New Orleans, 1936-1941**

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‘Posed with the Greatest Care’: Photographic Representations of Black Women Employed by the  
Works Progress Administration in New Orleans, 1936-1941

A Thesis

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

Master of Arts  
in  
History  
Public History

by

Kathryn A. O’Dwyer

B.A. American University, 2013

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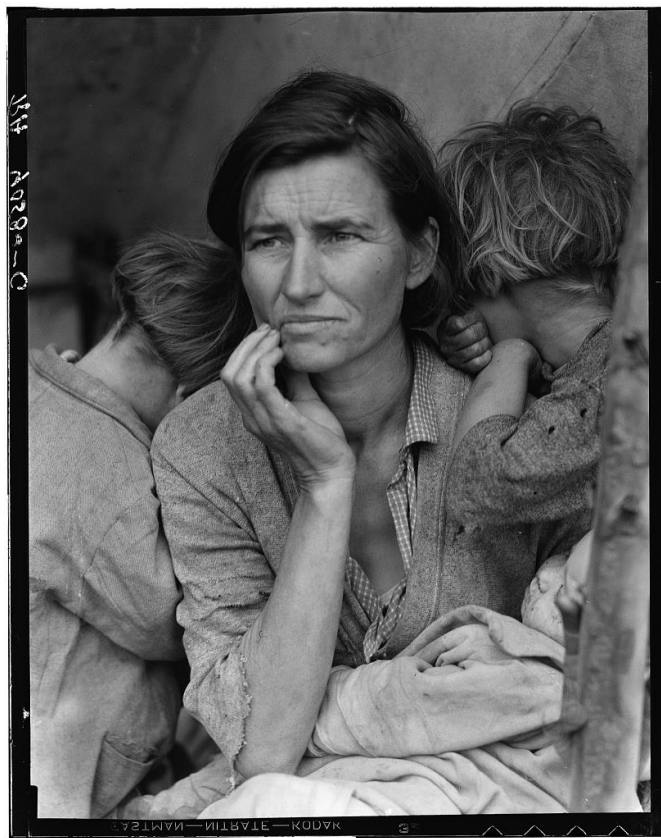
## **Abstract**

For decades, scholars have debated the significance of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), emphasizing its political, economic, and artistic impact. This historiography is dominated by the accomplishments of white men. In an effort to highlight the long-neglected legions of black women who contributed to WPA projects and navigated the agency's discriminatory practices, this paper will examine WPA operations in New Orleans where unemployment was the highest in the urban south, black women completed numerous large-scale projects, and white supremacist notions guided relief protocol. By analyzing the New Orleans WPA Photography collection, along with newspapers, government documents, and oral histories, a new perspective of the WPA emerges to illuminate the experiences of marginalized black women workers, illustrate how the legacies of slavery and effects of segregation impact black women's employment opportunities, and highlight how black women made substantive contributions to public projects in the face of societal constraints.

**Keywords:** Works Progress Administration; New Deal; Great Depression; New Orleans; women; race; African American; labor; documentary photography; white supremacy.

## Introduction

Documentary photography was a potent medium for capturing the experiences of Americans during the Great Depression. To garner the support of American voters, the federal government included photographers in many government agencies. The most enduring and iconic image to come out of this flood of federal photography is Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother." (Illustration 1) Lange's photograph created a powerful national narrative about women's experiences during the Depression that fostered public sympathy for white passing mothers suffering in rural poverty. This national narrative eclipsed the distinct experiences of black women in southern urban centers who faced explicit racism, sexism, and severe economic hardship.



**Illustration 1.** "Migrant Mother." Lange, Dorothea. *Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California.* February or March 1936, Farm Security Administration - Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017762891/>.



The New Orleans Works Progress Administration (WPA) photographed the labor of people employed by the work relief agency. Images of black women at work for the WPA in the city expose a new perspective on the diverse experiences of women during the Depression. While black women endeavored to improve their working conditions in the face of grave societal constraints, white households and government officials worked to devalue their labor. One photograph taken by the New Orleans WPA depicts two black women training for domestic positions. This photograph, taken just three years after “Migrant Mother,” paints a complex picture of racial and economic disparities of the Depression. (Illustration 2)



**Illustration 2.** Meal service during WPA Home Service Demonstration Project. January 31, 1939, Series 21.01.08. WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

In the photograph, one of the trainees serves a white woman seated in a silk upholstered chair at the head of the dining table. The white woman, sporting a festive hat, jewelry, and an indulgent grin, ladles a heaping spoonful of food onto her china plate, as cut-glass goblets and silver serving spoons glisten on the table. The two black women in this photograph wear crisp uniforms, denoting their status as domestic servants. Their eyes downcast, the photographer chose to portray the trainees' attention centered on the white woman's demands.

The Home Demonstration Project depicted here, like many of the projects in which New Orleans WPA administrators allowed black women to participate, actively portrayed federally employed black women as workers suited only for domestic service and gang labor, jobs traditionally associated with enslavement. Though black women effectively contributed to New Orleans WPA projects of tremendous public value, they still struggled to expand their employment options through the government agency due to the social and economic legacies of slavery and white supremacy. Through photography, New Orleans WPA officials minimized public perception of benefits derived from black women's labor and reduced the number of projects employing black women to meet racist demands of white government officials, business leaders, and women, who hoped to continue to exploit black women's labor.

### **Overview of the WPA and 1930s New Orleans**

As part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, the federal government funded and oversaw the organization of several so-called 'work relief' programs to boost employment throughout the nation. The largest and longest standing work program was the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Established in 1935, the WPA aimed to employ out-of-work Americans in projects that would contribute to the public good and either utilize skills already possessed by workers or teach them new marketable skills. Though women and people

of color were eager to obtain WPA positions, the program prioritized providing relief to white men. Black women faced disproportionate levels of financial and employment insecurity during the economic devastation of the Great Depression, but received the least assistance from New Deal relief programs like the WPA. In southern states, where white supremacist ideology dominated public discourse, black women experienced heightened levels of discrimination at the hands of WPA administrators.

For decades, scholars have discussed the significance of the WPA, emphasizing its political implications, economic impact, artistic expression, and, more recently, the long-lasting benefits derived from construction projects. This historiography is dominated by praise for the contributions of white men to the success of the WPA. In an effort to highlight the long-neglected legions of black women who contributed to WPA projects and encountered discriminatory practices prevalent within the agency, this paper will examine WPA operations in New Orleans where unemployment was the highest in the urban South, numerous large scale projects were completed by black women, and white supremacist notions guided local relief protocol.

New Orleans, a city that experienced the highest levels of urban unemployment among southern states during the Depression, is a place that has historically defied binary constructions of racial identity, making it a particularly interesting city to reflect on black women's employment opportunities within the WPA. In the 1930s, advocates for segregation worked to instate a strict binary racial divide between black and white residents. Between 1930 and 1940, roughly 30 percent of New Orleans's 523,000 residents were recorded as black, the third largest American black urban population after New York and Chicago.<sup>1</sup> However, this population count

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<sup>1</sup> *The Louisiana Weekly*, January 8, 1939. Reel 14, Microfilm, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

did not capture the cultural diversity that existed within the black community of New Orleans. Multiple racial categories and class divisions resulted in a black community with varied perspectives of acceptable forms of black women's work and New Orleans' WPA operations.<sup>2</sup> Wealthy black business owners welcomed the close of WPA operations in the late 1930s, calling for black residents to create and support black-owned businesses to solve the community's economic hardships, while others organized to demand the expansion of WPA projects employing black people.<sup>3</sup> These class divisions are visible among photographic depictions of black women at work for the New Orleans WPA.

Upon examining black women's employment within New Orleans WPA, as documented in photography, newspapers, and oral histories, it becomes clear that black women struggled to expand their employment options beyond traditional service work. White women, who employed black women as domestics, business owners, and labor unions publicly debated, and worked to dictate, acceptable forms of employment for black women. The possibility of black women earning wages on par with white men and women through the WPA, a practice ultimately thwarted by local WPA administrators at the insistence of local business owner and government officials, would have enabled black women to secure employment in the commercial sector or demand higher wages and greater autonomy within domestic positions. Such improvements to black women's employment opportunities were adamantly opposed by white households, who wished to continue to exploitatively employ black women as domestic servants, and white labor unions, whose members feared the prospect of competing with black women for employment.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more on black women, class, and social acceptability in New Orleans, see LaKisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> *The Louisiana Weekly*, September 2, 1939. Reel 14, Microfilm, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

In order to circumvent the gender and racial biases of the written archive, I approach this historical moment through visual analysis of photographs created under the direction of Louisiana WPA offices. These visual materials will be supplemented by oral histories conducted with black women who worked for the WPA, local black newspaper coverage, and government documents. The WPA directed the creation of this vast photography collection to document the progress of WPA projects throughout the city with the goal of publicizing the agency's work in print media to garner voter support for continued government funding. These images record the labor of thousands of WPA workers including a small number of black women. By placing visual analysis of these images in conversation with other written sources, a new perspective of the WPA emerges to illuminate the lived experiences of marginalized black women workers, illustrate how the legacies of slavery and effects of segregation manifest in black women's employment opportunities and media representation, and highlight how black women endeavored to make substantive contributions to these public projects in the face of those societal constraints. This research aims to explore the following questions: How did the WPA impact the larger political discourse regarding black women in the workforce? How were WPA-employed black women depicted and perceived by politicians, WPA administrators, the general public, white elites, and the black community? Through this research, I will illustrate how WPA employment and media representation of black women was directly shaped by the social and economic legacies of slavery and prevalence of white supremacy.

Only a small portion of the New Orleans WPA Photography Collection's 7,000 images portray the significant contributions of black women to the agency, even though they made up 55

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<sup>4</sup> For white business owners' complaints see Board Minutes, August 22, 1939, New Orleans Association of Commerce, (MSS 066-52). Chamber of Commerce of the New Orleans Area Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA. Hereafter referred to as NOAC. For union complaints see William A. Sorum, "'Much Depends on Local Customs': The WPA's New Deal for New Orleans, 1935-1940" (MA Thesis, University of New Orleans, 2010), 15, ScholarWorks.

percent of New Orleans WPA labor force. For example, a majority of black women worked for the New Orleans WPA sewing projects, but not a single photograph documents their work in the sewing rooms. Though this collection minimizes the presence of African Americans within the WPA, the proportionately small number of images that do portray black people, and black women in particular, vividly illustrate the discrimination they endured at the hands of this government entity. Most of the extant photographs of black women WPA workers in New Orleans suggest that there was a concerted effort to portray federally employed black women as gang workers and servants, roles historically forced upon enslaved women. Created by a white male photographer employed by the New Orleans WPA, these photographs work to reinforce idealized patriarchal gender roles, racist notions of white supremacy, and a romanticization of slave-based labor. However, a few of these images undermine racist notions of black women workers, illustrating that black women were knowledgeable workers with specialized skills who made significant contributions to New Orleans WPA projects. These images, paired with the complaints that white New Orleanians aired in local newspapers, prove that black women faced great discrimination at the hands of the white-dominated business community, local government, and federal government when participating in WPA projects.

What is the benefit of revisiting the challenges faced by black working women in the Great Depression? Economic inequality stemming from deep-seated racist and patriarchal ideologies persists today. Historian Jacqueline Jones noted in 2010 that the “plight of impoverished women has not changed much” in the course of the past two hundred years. Black Americans continue to make a fraction of the income of white Americans and are twice as likely to face unemployment.<sup>5</sup> By studying the hardships endured by black women under this bygone

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<sup>5</sup> “Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, last modified January 4, 2019, [https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpsee\\_e16.htm](https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpsee_e16.htm).

federal employment project, we can gain greater insight into the national and local forces that shaped, and continue to shape and foster inequality among the employment opportunities of all American workers.

## **Literature Review**

Many historians have assessed the economic and political repercussions of New Deal relief policies from a national perspective, such as Anthony Badger in *The New Deal*, and the regional southern perspective, and Douglas Smith in *New Deal in the Urban South* and John Robert Moor's "The New Deal in Louisiana." These studies center on the actions of white male political leaders, and emphasize tensions between conservative southern Democrats committed to notions of white supremacy, and the populist approach of northern liberal Democrats. Through the examination of political papers, these works provide an essential understanding of the political machinations of federal and state-level politicians regarding New Deal relief agencies, but the impact of unemployed people on these politicians' decisions, and the impact of politicians' decisions on unemployed people have largely been ignored.

The political implications of citizen interactions with New Deal politicians and relief agencies is addressed in Lizabeth Cohen's *Making a New Deal* and Patricia Sullivan's *Days of Hope*. Cohen traces the successful rise of political participation and unionization of Chicago's industrial workers in the 1930s, arguing that workers themselves fostered an environment for collective political action both in and out of the workplace as their self-image, previously defined by ethnic and racial associations, gave way to mass culture and a unified working class identity. Cohen's argument is compelling, but her reliance on archival materials created by politicians and labor unions minimizes the impact of race and gender on the experiences of people's interaction

with New Deal agencies and policies. By focusing on industrial workers in Chicago, Cohen also erects a northern urban bias that neglects the great majority of black Americans who lived in the South where their social and political activities were largely restricted by the rule of white supremacists.

In *Days of Hope*, Sullivan studies the actions of women and men from a broad range of regional, racial, and political boundaries as they worked to erode racial segregation and prejudice in American society from the 1920s through World War II. Sullivan argues that these various political and social advocates ultimately shaped numerous aspects of the New Deal, altered relations between the South, the Democratic Party, and the federal government, and paved the way for the 1950s civil rights movement in the face of rampant and persistent racial prejudice and segregation. Sullivan's focus on New Deal engagement with racial inequality highlights how Cohen's portrayal of the New Deal's working class roots minimizes the role racialized identity and inequality played in the lives of black Americans during the Great Depression, particularly those in southern states. Sullivan elevates the importance of high-profile civil rights activists, but the experiences of everyday Americans under the New Deal are left unexplored.

As a major component of New Deal welfare initiatives, the WPA receives scholarly attention from numerous perspectives. Nick Taylor provides a narrative history of the WPA for a general reading audience, championing its often forgotten impact on the recovery of the US economy following the Great Depression in his 2008 book *American Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA, When FDR Put the Nation to Work*. This book provides a chronological history highlighting the major social, political, and economic impact of the administration. Taylor details critiques that the WPA received from the media and politicians during its operation but emphasizes the lasting positive impact that it had on United States economy,



morale, and infrastructure. By punctuating this narrative with personal stories of individual WPA employees, Taylor brings much needed attention to the experiences of people employed by the relief agency. However, Taylor's inclusion of women WPA workers is limited, and the experiences of black women are even less present.

When historians do discuss the work of women in the WPA, their research tends to focus on high-ranking female officials within the administration, assistance of elite women's charity organizations, controversy surrounding women's employment, and colorful projects that employed white women in the arts and libraries. In the 2010 article "The Sewing-Room Projects of the Works Progress Administration," Sara B. Marcketti examines the procedures and controversies of the WPA sewing projects, with a focus on criticisms the project received from newspapers and the private garment industry. Marcketti asserts that sewing room projects were the backbone of the women's division of the WPA, and that they accomplished two main goals: providing work to large numbers of women and the provision of clothing and bedding to the needy. Marcketti proves the importance of the project, but neglects the role that racial identity played in the operation of WPA sewing rooms.

Another aspect of women's involvement in the WPA that has received a bit of scholarly attention is the contributions of women's charity organizations to the creation, appraisal, and funding of women's WPA projects. Martha H. Swain's 1997 essay "A New Deal for Southern Women: Gender and Race in Women's Work Relief" argues that gender and race of needy individuals limited access to WPA work relief and women's charity organizations intensified racial segregation of women in WPA workplaces. Swain argues that while women, and, to a greater extent, black women, did not receive their due share of relief work, the work that they did accomplish had lasting results that have gone unrecognized.

In her 2003 article, “The Lowest Form of Work Relief: Authority, Gender, and the State in Atlanta’s WPA Sewing Rooms,” Georgina Hickey examines letters exchanged between the Georgia Woman’s Democratic Club (GWDC) and WPA administrators concerning the working conditions of Atlanta’s WPA sewing rooms. Hickey concludes that this charity organization evolved into a labor activist group advocating for improved working conditions. Hickey relies almost solely on the letters written by Estelle Stevenson, president of the GWDC ultimately emphasizing the empowered voice of wealthy, white charity workers and subduing voices of women actually employed by the WPA.

In *Women of the Depression: Caste and Culture in San Antonio, 1929-1939*, Julia Kirk Blackwelder exposes how federal, state and private relief agencies heightened the segregation of women in the workplace with a case study of Black, White, and Chicana working women of San Antonio during the Great Depression. Blackwelder examines census records, oral histories, court records, and charitable organization reports to detail how public and private relief agencies attempted to assist women find employment. Blackwelder explains that women’s employment and home life was often determined by relief agencies that typically assisted women of various economic statuses, but rarely assisted women from different ethnic backgrounds. Blackwelder shows how the discrimination present New Deal relief work established long-lasting divisions between women workers of different ethnicities in clerical, factory and domestic work.

Several scholars have assessed the impact of WPA operations in Louisiana and New Orleans specifically. Two M.A. theses written in the 1970s, Betty Marie Field’s *The Politics of the New Deal in Louisiana, 1933-1939*, and Pamela Grasel Bordelon’s *The Works Progress Administration in Louisiana*, explore the political turmoil that existed between federal politicians and state. These texts mirror arguments found in the aforementioned national narratives of

Anthony Badger and Douglas Smith and similarly neglect the experiences of people employed by the WPA.

In an attempt to emphasize the enduring legacy of Louisiana relief workers themselves, Robert D. Leighninger details public construction projects completed by the WPA in his 2007 book *Building Louisiana: The Legacy of the Public Works Administration*. By listing the 175 public buildings erected by the administration, many of which are still in use, Leighninger aims to highlight the long-lasting impact of the WPA. Leighninger asserts that historians have failed to recognize the significance of the WPA's contribution to United States infrastructure. Because he focuses on construction projects dominated by the labor of men, the contributions made and challenges faced by women workers employed by the Louisiana WPA are ignored.

Narrowing the focus of WPA operations from the state to the local city level, William A. Sorum provides an overview of New Orleans's WPA operations in his 2010 M.A. thesis '*Much Depends on Local Customs*': *The WPA's New Deal for New Orleans, 1935-1940*. Sorum touches briefly on political scandals, criticisms, corruption, racial segregation and labor organizing surrounding the administration. Ultimately Sorum concludes that New Orleans' WPA functioned under the existing social order of racial oppression. Sorum centers his discussion about racial segregation on New Orleans largest WPA project, the construction of City Park, a project dominated by the labor of men. One recent M.A. thesis produced by Megan Franich takes an in-depth look at the creations of a WPA-employed woman artist in "Works of Art, Arts for Work: Caroline Wogan Durieux, the Works Progress Administration, and the U.S. State Department." This research provides some insight to the experience of one white woman in the WPA, ultimately reflecting a larger trend in WPA literature which celebrates the accomplishments women workers as they contribute to the agency's artistic projects. The few scholarly works that

study New Orleans WPA activity focus on political scandals, infrastructure, and the arts. These works prioritize the words and experiences of WPA administrators and Louisiana politicians. The experiences of New Orleans' citizens employed by the WPA, and particularly those of black women, are obscured.

In order to gain greater context for the general working conditions black women faced under the WPA, it is useful to consider how gender and race impacted all work opportunities across the nation. In *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995*, Julia Kirk Blackwelder traces the expanding presence of women in the workforce and diversification of work deemed acceptable for women. While Blackwelder provides an essential outline of some women's participation in the labor force, she focuses on the experiences of white women, leaving the challenges encountered by black working women underexplored.

In *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, Jacqueline Jones explores the enduring impact of slavery on the opportunities available to black working women from 1830 to the present, arguing that black women work not only as members of the labor force but as leaders of their households and communities. She argues that while black women garner respect while working in their own homes and communities, they are dehumanized and subordinated in the labor market. This paper will provide further support for Jones's argument that the federal government has never adequately addressed black women's need for jobs in a systematic way and ultimately prevented any meaningful improvements to black women's employment opportunities.

As black women worked for the WPA in New Orleans, they had to navigate a society that often demeaned them through racism and sexualization. In *Crescent City Girls*, LaKisha Michelle Simmons explores how this double bind of sexualization and racism shaped notions of black womanhood, restricting the actions of black women in order to comply with notions of

middle-class respectability. Like Simmons, this paper will employ diverse source material, including photographs and oral histories, to give black women agency and a voice in defining how societal pressures shaped their identity.

This paper will argue that in order to gain a greater understanding of black women workers' experiences within the WPA, researchers should seek out primary sources beyond the written source material of politicians, labor unions, and notable civil right activists, and look to visual representations of the New Deal as captured in photography. The following section of the literary review explores how historians have written about government-funded documentary photography in the New Deal era. Extant literature engaging with New Deal photography ignores the valuable information held in state-level WPA documentary photography. A majority of the literature discussing New Deal photography focuses on aesthetically enthralling images created under the direction of the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Several images produced by the FSA, including Dorothea Lange's familiar "Migrant Mother," achieved widespread acclaim and ample scholarly attention. These scholarly works illustrate the influence of government photography on public opinion and typically contest their value as documentary evidence or works of art. Scholars tend to neglect the larger body of New-Deal-era photography kept in local archives throughout the United States, such as the New Orleans WPA Photography Collection examined here. These state-level WPA archives, however, better expose the experiences of WPA employees and further illustrate the prejudices that dictated day-to-day operations.

William Stott's 1973 publication *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* provides a literary analysis and cultural history of United States documentary material created during the 1930s. Stott argues that in the early 1930s, documentary work was used to upset the status quo and embarrass the government but by the mid-1930s reform politicians institutionalized

documentary efforts to garner support for New Deal efforts. Stott examines the work of FSA employees Evan Walker and James Agee to exemplify how the government used photography to make demands for social change in line with New Deal politics. Stott emphasizes the photographer's mediating role, altering images content and meaning through the manipulation of angles, lighting, posing, and cropping. The New Orleans WPA photography collection examined in this paper is certainly fraught with these same biases, manipulations, and omissions.

Several authors have explored the meaning of New Deal photography specifically in the southern United States. David Madden points out in "The Cruel Radiance of What Is" that famous FSA photographs taken in the South were all produced by what he calls "Yankee intruders" for a national audience. Madden asserts that southerners look at photographs differently than northerners. Depression-era photographs produced by FSA photographers are depicted by Madden as a shameful slap in the face that displayed the South in a stereotypical inactive and rural manner. Madden concludes that northerners are more apt to photograph the South because they "lack awareness of or sensitivity to" the South's historical and current issues. According to Madden, Southern artists, so attuned to the complex issues affecting their region, favor writing because, unlike photographers, they are able to mitigate the South's complicated existence into a vision of controlled beauty. The photographs reviewed in this paper, however, contradict many of Madden's assertions as the New Orleans WPA photography collection was created by a long-time New Orleans resident.

The following two titles by Cara A. Finnegan and Nicholas Natanson both work to expose underrepresented content within the FSA photography collection and provide examples of methodological approaches to examining the distribution of New Deal photography. Finnegan offers an evaluation of the circulation of FSA photographs in mass media in *Picturing Poverty*:

*Print Culture and FSA Photographs*. Finnegan asserts that by viewing FSA photographs within the context of pictorial magazines, greater appreciation may be gained for how the public interacted with and attributed meaning to the images that the government produced. Finnegan illustrates how each FSA image could be manipulated by publishers, giving every image the possibility of multiple meanings.

Nicholas Natanson's *The Black Image in the New Deal* reexamines the FSA archival file to determine how the federal agency depicted the lives of Black Americans during the Great Depression. Natanson criticizes previous studies of FSA photography for praising the most popular images, relying on subjective visual analysis, and studying too wide of a time span, resulting in the avoidance of racial analysis of the collection. To find Black Americans in the FSA files and understand their importance in the entire collection, Natanson conducts a statistical analysis of the collection, examines FSA's lesser-known images that include black subjects, and assesses the impact of editorial decisions on black visual representation to the public.

While FSA photography has been the sole focus of historians' examination of New Deal documentary photography in the aforementioned texts, *Official Images: New Deal Photography*, by Pete Daniel, Merry A. Foresta, Maren Stange, and Sally Stein, explore lesser-known government funded photography. The authors provide case studies of photography collections produced by other agencies including the Department of Agriculture, National Youth Association, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the WPA. However, their exploration of WPA photography only examines images produced as artwork under the banner of the agency's Art Project, ignoring the copious photographic documentation of WPA projects in progress. Once again, the work of black female WPA workers is obscured in the historiography in favor of emphasizing the agency's artistic endeavors. Taken together, these scholarly works about

documentary photography make it clear that much is to be discovered by plying through the prolific, but neglected, photography collections of the New Deal's various agencies at the state level.

This literary review has detailed how historians have discussed New Deal politics from a regional, national and local perspective, the impact of race and gender on labor and New Deal relief agencies, WPA operations in Louisiana, and New Orleans specifically, and New Deal documentary photography. What becomes apparent is that the labor of WPA employees has rarely been addressed from the perspective of the workers themselves, and the contributions of black women in particular are ignored. These works fail to engage with the rich visual documentation of WPA laborers, instead prioritizing the written word of New Deal politicians and WPA administrators. By analyzing the New Orleans WPA Photography Collection, this paper brings the long neglected experiences of black women WPA workers to the forefront and argues that black women struggled to expand their employment options in the face of white supremacy prevalent in white household and government entities.

### **WPA Operations: Gender, Race, and Region**

The WPA was the first New Deal work relief program to make an earnest effort to offer jobs to unemployed women. Throughout the 1930s, women made up less than 20 percent of the WPA's labor force nationwide, a number roughly on par with the rate of women's employment prior to the Great Depression.<sup>6</sup> A majority of WPA employment for women was overseen by the Women's and Professional Projects Division. In 1939, the division was combined with the Division of Recreation Projects and The Division of Education Projects to form the Division of

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<sup>6</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010), 182.



Professional and Service Projects.<sup>7</sup> Though the federal government appointed an entire division to provide women with jobs, women faced significant hardship when attempting to secure and maintain employment through the WPA. According to Donald Harold's 1943 report on WPA operations, women were often barred from receiving WPA positions "because they lack[ed] appropriate work experience, [were] not regarded as being 'in the labor market,' or [were] unavailable for steady employment because of responsibility for the care of children or invalids."<sup>8</sup> Additionally, federal rules stipulated that WPA employees must be the economic head of a household, a position legally reserved for any employable man.<sup>9</sup> These criteria placed unemployed women at a great disadvantage when applying for WPA work.

Women who successfully secured employment through the WPA usually served as seamstresses, and to a lesser extent nurses, teachers, secretaries, and artists. These jobs often required knowledge of the domestic skills that society expected women to possess. The limited types of employment offered to women under the banner of the WPA were informed by the social mores of the period that saw the introduction of women to the formal workforce as an affront to traditional family structures and gender roles. The WPA spent just 12 percent of its budget on women's projects and ultimately employed 372,000 of the country's three million unemployed women.<sup>10</sup> Numerous women's charities advocated for improved working conditions

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<sup>7</sup> Victoria O'Reilly, "Women's Participation in the Federal Music Project and Work Projects Administration Music Program" (M.A. thesis, George Washington University, 1990), 38, ScholarWorks.

<sup>8</sup> Donald S. Howard, *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1943), 238.

<sup>9</sup> Howard, *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy*, 237.

<sup>10</sup> "Hope, Recovery, Reform: Women and the New Deal," FDR4freedoms, accessed May 14, 2018, <https://fdr4freedoms.org/hope-recovery-reform/>.

for WPA-employed women, though this advocacy typically addressed the needs of white women exclusively.<sup>11</sup> Gender was not the only obstacle to obtaining employment through the WPA.

Racial identity greatly hindered an applicant's prospects of WPA employment. Southern New Deal Democrats ensured that relief agencies like the WPA retained local administrative power while receiving federal funds. This concentration of power at the local level ultimately allowed white supremacist ideologies of southern business owners to ensure the proliferation of discriminatory hiring practices within the WPA. For example, several of New Orleans's WPA projects, such as the property survey project, explicitly excluded black workers' participation. According to *The Louisiana Weekly*, New Orleans's African American newspaper, WPA officials defended these practices by arguing that the inclusion of black workers would only result in "violence or accus[ations] of legal violations" against them, and that the "time was not ripe to test racial attitudes, declar[ing] that it was the purpose of the WPA to furnish work relief and not solve such problems."<sup>12</sup> Other New Deal reforms that expanded worker's rights and security outside of the WPA's efforts, including the creation of a minimum wage, maximum weekly hours, unemployment compensation, and Social Security, were not extended to agricultural laborers or domestic servants, positions dominated by black Americans. These reforms effectively excluded the vast majority of black laborers from securing essential workers' benefits. While black men faced discrimination from the WPA in terms of the projects

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<sup>11</sup> See Georgina Hickey, "'The Lowest Form of Work Relief': Authority, Gender, and the State in Atlanta's WPA Sewing Rooms," in *The New Deal and Beyond: Social Welfare in the South Since 1930*, ed. Elina C. Green (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2003), 3-29; and Marth H. Swain, "A New Deal for Southern Women: Gender and Race in Women's Work Relief," in *Women of the American South: A Multicultural Reader*, ed. Christie Farnham (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1997), 241-257.

<sup>12</sup> "WPA Head 'Explains' Why Negroes Are Not Put On Property Survey Project," *The Louisiana Weekly*, February 11, 1939. Reel 14, Microfilm, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

administrators assigned them and levels of compensation they received, the discrimination black women faced through the WPA was compounded by both their gender and racial identity.

Federal and local governments grudgingly included black women in WPA projects, erecting numerous hurdles to prevent or limit black women's participation. According Francis Mary Albrier, a notable black rights activist and one time California WPA employee, mothers from the black community "were not getting the things that they deserved, or the jobs they deserved, or getting on the projects they deserved; making the money that they deserved" from the WPA.<sup>13</sup> Nationwide, black women made up only three percent of WPA workers, even though they made up a much larger percentage of household heads in need of government assistance.<sup>14</sup> Black women received the least assistance from New Deal relief programs, even though they suffered disproportionately during the economic downturn of the Great Depression.<sup>15</sup>

Working opportunities and conditions encountered by WPA employees varied from state to state and city to city. In northern states, where black people's right to vote was less commonly denied through voting restrictions guided by white supremacist ideologies, black women and men, according to Jacqueline Jones, "received their approximate fair share of jobs and relief."<sup>16</sup> In an effort to secure their own political power, Northern Democrats encouraged the support of black voters by removing some barriers to federal relief employment. Southern politicians denied black Americans the right to vote through poll taxes, property requirements, and literacy exams. As such, southern politicians and government officials neutered the ability of black people to

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<sup>13</sup> Francis Mary Albrier, OH-31, transcript of an oral history conducted in 1977, in Black Women Oral History Project. Interviews, 1976-1981, Radcliffe College. Cambridge, MA Schlesinger Library, 89.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, 182.

<sup>15</sup> FDR4freedoms, "Hope, Recovery, Reform: Women and the New Deal."

<sup>16</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, 165.

apply political pressure to reform prejudicial operations of the WPA and other government relief. In southern states, the WPA employed black women at significantly lower rates than their white counterparts. The WPA in southern states often assigned black women to positions that reinforced the notion that they were only suited for domestic servants or manual laborers.<sup>17</sup> In the South the WPA designated a majority of black women to be employed as unskilled workers, in some instances, however, black women's WPA positions defied these traditional roles.

Some efforts were made at the federal level to prevent racial discrimination within WPA operations. Progressive politicians blocked the inclusion of official wage differentials based on racial identity for New Deal work relief programs at the federal level.<sup>18</sup> However, these efforts were often thwarted on a local level through varied types of subterfuge on the part of southern politicians and administrators. Each WPA district in the South took different approaches to limit the benefits black people, and to a greater extent black women, could earn through the WPA. To learn how and why local WPA administrators enabled gender and racial discriminatory practices to persist and how the black community responded to this discrimination, it is essential to take a closer look at individual WPA offices. New Orleans is one such city where several distinctive barriers were put in place to undermine the economic development of black women through the WPA. When viewed from a nationwide perspective, the WPA clearly denied black men and women their fair share of relief employment and functioned to perpetuate notions of white supremacy and patriarchy. By focusing in on WPA operations in one city we can gain a greater idea of how white supremacy actually manifested and directly influenced daily WPA operations and how workers made new employment opportunities for themselves that defied white supremacist notions that had defined their employment opportunities for that last 200 years.

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<sup>17</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, 184.

<sup>18</sup> Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 55.

## WPA Operations in New Orleans

When operations began in 1936, the WPA was the first statewide, government-supported welfare program in Louisiana. On average, thirty percent of Louisiana's unemployed found work through the WPA. A majority of Louisiana's WPA projects took place in New Orleans, where unemployment rates were the highest in the state. New Orleans provides a strong case study to explore manifestations of patriarchy and white supremacy because of the city's large black population, prevalent practice of segregation and black voter suppression, and the availability of documentary material, including photographs, thorough administrative records, and black-owned newspapers.

According to a New Orleans WPA administrator, at times only eleven percent of the women who received WPA jobs in the city were black.<sup>19</sup> Evidence from other parts of the country suggest that unemployed black women were instructed by WPA officials to seek out domestic servant positions in private homes rather than WPA jobs, even though these positions paid well below the WPA wage.<sup>20</sup> The same may have been true for New Orleans. Black women preferred public jobs such as the WPA because of the higher levels of compensation and shorter working hours when compared to private employment. Private white employers were not willing to compete with WPA wage rates, which were set particularly low to discourage participation in the program.<sup>21</sup> Though the WPA had barred the implementation of racialized differentials in

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<sup>19</sup> Letter from Cornelia Edge to Mr. Howard W. Sinclair, December 17, 1941, Reel 7, Selected Documents from the Louisiana Section of the Works Progress Administration, General Correspondence File ("State Series"), 1935-1943, (M1367), ed. National Archives, Washington, DC, 1983. Microfilm. Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA. Hereafter referred to as Louisiana WPA Files.

<sup>20</sup> Alice Allison Dunnigan, OH-31, transcript of an oral history conducted in 1977, in Black Women Oral History Project. Interviews, 1976-1981, Radcliffe College. Cambridge, MA Schlesinger Library, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, 181.

wage rates at the federal level, the New Orleans WPA implemented several protocols to ensure black women did not receive full compensation. The New Orleans WPA designated the overwhelming majority of black women despite their work experience as “unskilled, untrained and uneducated” workers, relegating them to the lowest levels of WPA employment and compensation.<sup>22</sup>

Already relegated to the lowest levels of WPA compensation, black women were often barred from working full-time for the WPA, further slashing their earnings. New Orleans WPA administrators often staggered WPA employees’ hours to match the prevailing wage rate in the private sector.<sup>23</sup> The New Orleans WPA split shifts between black women WPA workers so that they would only work half time and receive half the compensation of a full-time WPA employee. James A. Crutcher, Director of the Louisiana WPA, justified staggering practices by asserting that more individual black women would receive the benefits of WPA employment, even if it was only half-time.<sup>24</sup> While this practice did afford some paid relief work to a greater number of women, it also endorsed racialized wage differentials and drastically undermined black women’s earning potential.

While wage staggering operated to the detriment of black women’s income, it was manipulated to the benefit of other, typically white male, WPA employees. Crutcher provided the following illustration of how this staggering system functioned to benefit some WPA workers “...a bricklayer in New Orleans who received \$1.25 an hour worked only 59 hours a

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<sup>22</sup> Board Minutes, August 22, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>23</sup> Board Minutes, August 22, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>24</sup> Board Minutes, August 22, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

month to earn his security wage of \$74.10, while a carpenter whose prevailing wage was \$1.00 an hour worked 74 hours to receive the same wage."<sup>25</sup> This allowed the WPA to pay some workers their monthly maximum relief income while working well under the stipulated 130 hours a month. Staggering the work of black women effectively prevented them from receiving the full benefits of WPA employment and ensured that their wages would not come close to the level at which white men and women were compensated by the WPA.

The practice of staggering black women's WPA wages was not limited to New Orleans. Alice Allison Dunnigan, who would go on to become notable black journalist and civil rights activist, described the challenges she faced attempting to secure employment through the Kentucky WPA:

[I] ask[ed] the man in charge of the project (who was a local politician) why they [the WPA] employed no blacks, since this was a federal project. He told me quite confidentially that the reason they didn't hire black women was due to protest raised by the white women of the town. They claimed that because the WPA was paying a dollar a day for workers, it would attract all of the household help from their kitchens. They, the housewives, just couldn't compete with the federal government. As administrator of the program, he was unofficially trying to comply with the white women's requests. He said, "If you don't tell anybody this, I'll put you on the project, but we are not giving anybody [black] a whole week's work. We're only giving [black] people one day's employment a week." He further promised to put on some other black women. "Now, if you don't say anything, I'll give you two days' work a week." He employed a few blacks according to promise. He gave me two days' work, while the other [black] women were getting only one day per week.<sup>26</sup>

According to historian Jacqueline Jones, even though WPA officials in southern states "routinely engaged in 'clever manipulations' to reduce the wages to which black women were entitled," and "used their power to help whites at the expense of blacks," the restricted wages black women

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<sup>25</sup> Board Minutes, August 22, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>26</sup> Alice Allison Dunnigan, OH-31, transcript of an oral history conducted in 1977, in Black Women Oral History Project. Interviews, 1976-1981, Radcliffe College. Cambridge, MA Schlesinger Library, 22.

could receive through the WPA, even with wage staggering, greatly outweighed what they could receive in the private sector.<sup>27</sup>

### **Photographic Documentation of New Orleans WPA**

Written primary sources about New Orleans WPA is dominated by the correspondence of state and federal WPA administrators. In an attempt to shed greater light on the experiences of black women employed by the administration, this paper will also consider WPA workers as captured in photographs. The WPA Photography Collection held at the New Orleans Public Library documents these programs with 7,000 negatives taken by photographers employed by the New Orleans WPA.<sup>28</sup> These images were created to document WPA projects throughout the city in various stages of progress and, consequently, capture the labor of many WPA workers. This rich and visually stunning photography collection, like similar collections held throughout the nation at the state and local level, has been ignored by scholarly researchers. The collection of images produced by New Orleans WPA are arranged in the archive as they were first organized by the WPA, by project type.<sup>29</sup> Existing research regarding New Orleans WPA only employs these photographs to illustrate specific high-ranking WPA individuals, artwork, or construction projects.

New Orleans WPA photography efforts were organized by the agency's Information Services Department with the goal of publicizing the agency's work to garner public support for the agency's continuation. In 1936, the Louisiana WPA Information Services Department hired

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<sup>27</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, 181-3.

<sup>28</sup> WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA. <http://nutrias.org/photos/wpa/wpaphotos.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Personal correspondence with NOPL staff, April 17, 2018.



its first photographer, Hardy Sims Williams. Williams, a 34-year-old white man described by WPA Administrator Donovan D. Weldon as “a very competent news photographer,” was charged with the task of documenting WPA projects throughout the state.<sup>30</sup> Born in Oklahoma in 1902 and a New Orleans resident from 1920 onward, Williams studied and taught chemistry at Tulane University prior to serving as the chief photographer for New Orleans WPA offices.<sup>31</sup> While none of the images in the New Orleans WPA Photography Collection are attributed to any specific photographer, it seems likely that Williams was responsible for capturing a great majority of them. No other photographer is mentioned by name in the Information Services correspondence between the WPA’s New Orleans and federal offices.<sup>32</sup>

New Orleans WPA Information Services regularly received requests for photographs of specific WPA projects from both WPA administrators for government propaganda publications and editors of private publications including *Life Magazine*, *Scribner's Magazine*, *Landscape Architecture*, and *The Horticulturist*, among others.<sup>33</sup> One such photograph request made by

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<sup>30</sup> Letter from Donovan D. Weldon to David K. Niles, July 31, 1936, Reel 2, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA; “117 Draw More Than \$150 Monthly in State WPA List,” *Times-Picayune*, July 10, 1939. America’s Historical Newspapers.

<sup>31</sup> Williams was employed by the New Orleans WPA until at least July 1939. “117 Draw More Than \$150 Monthly in State WPA List,” *Times-Picayune*, July 10, 1939. America’s Historical Newspapers; “Deaths,” *Times-Picayune*, November 19, 1979. America’s Historical Newspapers; Tulane University, *Jambalaya*, (New Orleans, Louisiana, 1923), 299, Tulane University Digital Library, <https://digitallibrary.tulane.edu/islandora/object/tulane%3A16936>, accessed October 28, 2018; Federally directed New Deal photography projects were captured almost exclusively by photographers from northern states. Some historians and art critics have argued that images many federally produced images taken of the Deep South are tinged with this outsider’s perspective. Though Hardy Sims Williams was not born in New Orleans, he was a longtime resident, this makes William’s photographic perspective unusual in comparison to some of the better known Farm Security Administration photographers. See David Madden, “The Cruel Radiance of What Is,” in *Southern Eye, Southern Mind: A Photographic Inquiry*, ed. Jack Hurley and Nancy Hurley (Memphis, Tennessee: The Memphis Academy of Arts, 1981).

<sup>32</sup> The Louisiana WPA Writers’ Project hired photographers as well, these images document daily life in Louisiana and not the labor of WPA employees. These images can be found at the Louisiana State Library in Baton Rouge.

<sup>33</sup> Information Services correspondence, Reel 2, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

WPA federal administrator Roscoe Wright stated that photographs of WPA projects “should not only be clear, but they should be informal and give the appearance of not being posed although actually they are posed with the greatest care. [Show the] worker as she actually is in the middle of a hard day's work- not all dressed up for the picture but in the actual process of her normal activity.”<sup>34</sup> WPA administrators were aware that in order for photographs of WPA work to be included in national publications, the employment of professionally trained photographers was necessary “...to pass the high requirements of such a publication.”<sup>35</sup> By producing high quality photographs in house, the New Orleans WPA ensured their projects achieved greater visibility among the general public. Photographs from this collection are frequently found in *The Times-Picayune*, the city’s most circulated newspaper; however, the images it published rarely featured any black WPA employees. *The Louisiana Weekly* infrequently included images of WPA projects, but when it did, it used photographs created by one of *Weekly*’s in-house photographer.

Local New Orleans newspapers regularly featured stories about local WPA projects. The New Orleans WPA regularly sent news articles and photographs to local newspapers to promote the WPA’s positive impact on the city. In 1936, Donovan D. Weldon, Louisiana WPA Director of Information Services, reported that “better than eighty percent” of the articles written by Louisiana’s WPA Information Services had them published in local newspapers.<sup>36</sup> The state WPA Information Services offices also published and distributed *WORK*, a monthly magazine

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<sup>34</sup> Letter from Roscoe Wright to James H. Crutcher, January 6, 1938, Reel 2, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Roscoe Wright to James H. Crutcher, January 6, 1938, Reel 2, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Donovan D. Weldon to David K. Niles, August 10, 1936, Reel 2, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

publicizing the accomplishments of the administration.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, WPA photographs were put on display in exhibitions held at state fairs, universities, and conferences.<sup>38</sup>

While these photographs provide a great resource to build a better understanding of the experiences of WPA workers, they are also fraught with biases and omissions. Though we know the name and basic biography of the individual creator of these images, we do not know much about his personal beliefs and prejudices. The subjects captured in these images are depicted anonymously and likely without the explicit consent of the workers. Finally, these images were created under the direction of the WPA with the explicit purpose of garnering public support for the continuation of the program. One federal WPA administrator, recognizing the potent editorial power of government photography, noted that the photographs taken by and of the WPA should depict only “projects that will lend themselves to picturization in interesting and dramatic ways.”<sup>39</sup> As such, the images are selective about what aspects of WPA working conditions that they display.

While these images have biases, they do provide insight into black women’s experiences with the WPA. Nowhere else in the archival record of the New Orleans WPA can we gain an understanding for the physical spaces in which black women labored, the clothing they wore, their proximity to project managers, or how their skilled labor benefited the public. In an attempt to address these photographs’ inherent biases, and to ensure black women themselves shape the narrative about their experiences working for the WPA, the photographic analysis is paired here

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<sup>37</sup> Only one partial copy of *WORK* is available. Information Services correspondence, Reel 2, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>38</sup> Exhibits and Education Series, WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>39</sup> Letter from David K. Niles to James A. Crutcher, March 19, 1938, Reel 3, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

with oral histories of black women employed by the WPA throughout the nation and media coverage in *The Louisiana Weekly*.

### **Black Women in New Orleans WPA Projects**

The following will consider WPA projects known to employ black women and closely examine images from the collection that feature black women employed by the New Orleans WPA. These projects include sewing, home service demonstrations, education, bookbinding, and public health. By examining these projects, their photographs, media coverage, and public response to black women's WPA employment, greater insight may be gained into the experiences of black women as they worked for the WPA.

#### ***Sewing Projects***

Sewing projects employed the largest number of WPA women workers nationwide. Sewing rooms operated in 55 parishes across Louisiana and by 1940 employed some 2,880 women. According to the New Orleans's WPA weekly newsletter, the sewing projects endeavored to produce "warm, well-made clothing for the state's needy."<sup>40</sup> The sewing projects were prolific in their output, with over 2,805,000 garments produced statewide by 1940. A majority of WPA sewing rooms throughout the state were small, typically employing seven to 25 women at a time. These small sewing rooms, called "crossroads" sewing rooms, and often lacked industrial-quality sewing equipment.<sup>41</sup> The New Orleans unit, however, was huge in comparison

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<sup>40</sup> Weekly News Letter, WPA of Louisiana, September 10, 1940, Reel 22, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>41</sup> Weekly News Letter, WPA of Louisiana, September 10, 1940, Reel 22, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

to most Louisiana units because of the demand for government welfare work from unemployed women in the densely populated city.

At its height, New Orleans WPA sewing projects employed 1,755 women. Sponsored by the New Orleans Department of Public Welfare, each of the city's sewing projects employed several hundred women and were, according to WPA publications, "...equipped with the most modern of power machinery."<sup>42</sup> Clothing produced by New Orleans's WPA sewing project were available to New Orleanians in need at WPA distribution centers alongside food, mattresses, and other essentials. According to Francis Mary Albrier, goods produced in the WPA sewing rooms "were issued out through the social workers, the social department. People would apply or request clothing, blankets, quilts, sheets, et cetera. If a mother needed two or three dresses for girls, ten or twelve, that requisition was sent in and they got those types of things."<sup>43</sup>

According to James Crutcher, "the WPA sewing projects [...] accomplished more in the field of public welfare than perhaps any other single activity." Crutcher attributed the great impact of the sewing projects to the fact that it employed "a class of workers that private industry has ignored - the untrained, middle-aged women who have had little or no work experience except in the homes." A majority of black women, often described by WPA officials as "unskilled, untrained and uneducated," were assigned to sewing projects.<sup>44</sup> The high level of black participation in New Orleans sewing room projects seems unusual, as many WPA offices in other parts of the country administered "so-called sewing-room 'tests'... to reduce the number

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<sup>42</sup> Weekly News Letter, WPA of Louisiana, September 10, 1940, Reel 22, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>43</sup> Francis Mary Albrier, OH-31, transcript of an oral history conducted in 1977, in Black Women Oral History Project. Interviews, 1976-1981, Radcliffe College. Cambridge, MA Schlesinger Library, 91.

<sup>44</sup> Board of Directors and Executive Committee Minutes, August 22, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

of eligible black women applicants.”<sup>45</sup> In 1936, when the New Orleans WPA was first setting up the city sewing projects, the administration sought to locate a facility to accommodate 2,700 black women workers.<sup>46</sup> According to Walter F. Craddock, Director of Training and Reemployment for the Louisiana WPA, “negro women [...] prefer[ed] sewing” assignments over other WPA projects.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the fact that sewing projects accounted for a huge majority of women’s employment by the New Orleans WPA, no images of this project are held in the New Orleans WPA Photography Collection. The lack of documentation of this project may have been a political choice on the part of WPA administrators to avoid backlash from white women and business owners who did not want to see the federal government providing competitive wages to black women who traditionally worked for paltry wages as domestic servants in their homes. There are, however, a few negatives depicting the mattress-making project, a project associated with the sewing project. Seven negatives depict the labor of white women. Working in pairs or groups of three and using specialized equipment, white women workers measure and mark fabric to finish the exterior of box springs. Only one negative depicts the labor of black women. (Illustration 3) This image shows 25 black women seated in a warehouse around a table laden with cotton used to stuff the mattresses. The women, all wearing head wraps and some fitted with face masks, work to pull the materials apart and sort it into large bins around them.

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<sup>45</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, 183.

<sup>46</sup> “No Order Given to Cut WPA Roll,” *Times-Picayune*, March 5, 1936. America’s Historical Newspapers.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Cornelia Edge on behalf of Walter F. Craddock to Mr. Howard W. Sinclair, December 17, 1941, Reel 7, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.



**Illustration 3.** Women sort cotton for New Orleans WPA Mattress Project. March 11, 1940, Series 27.01.07, Mattresses Making Project, WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

This photograph creates a visual narrative that directly ties the work of federally employed black women of the 1930s to romanticized notions of cotton plantation gang labor. Compare this WPA photograph to an 1869 illustration describing the history of cotton sorting on a South Carolina plantation. (Illustration 4)



**Illustration 4.** Sketch of cotton sorting at South Carolina plantation. Taylor, James E. *Sorting Cotton* in *History of Sea Island Cotton* /from sketches by James E. Taylor. Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, April 17, 1869. Prints and Photographs Online Catalogue, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Accessed March 15, 2019, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/96513203/>.

The photographer captured both images from the perspective of a removed observer, placing the viewer at the vantage point of an overseer. Both images prioritize the depiction of the large scale of production taking place. Workers faces are mostly obscured; no attempt is made to illustrate a workers' individual skills or contributions to the project at hand. Both the clothing worn by WPA workers and the rustic warehouse housing the WPA project look remarkably similar to that of the 1869 plantation sketch. The sketch paints a romanticized picture of the labor of women on a plantation, evoking tropes of paternalistic slavery; there are no signs of violence, force, or mistreatment. The WPA photograph extends this exploitative and romanticized notion of black



women's labor into the Great Depression Era, inviting viewers of this photograph to make connections between modern black women workers and the labor of women enslaved on plantations.

### ***Home Aide and Home Service Demonstration Projects***

Throughout the correspondence of WPA administrators, politicians, and (white) community leaders, there are lamentations over the fact that it is next to impossible to create WPA work projects for black women because they were supposedly not skilled enough to contribute to established projects. One area of labor for which white people considered black women suited in the Deep South was domestic labor. According to historian Susan Tucker, "...in the South the number of white domestics has been statistically so small and the number of black women who worked as domestics so high that 'black woman' and 'domestic worker' have been almost synonymous terms."<sup>48</sup>

Several WPA programs in Louisiana employed and trained women to provide domestic services in private homes. The Household Aide Project employed women as part-time caregivers in private homes of needy families. Aides conducted duties including cooking, cleaning, and laundry when the woman of the house was incapacitated by illness or childbirth. According to historian Donald S. Howard, the federal level the project intended to "have women serve families at roughly peer level, with race and religion usually matched," however, nationwide 93 percent of WPA aides were black, essentially guaranteeing that black women would be required to work in white homes.<sup>49</sup> Though aides were meant only to assist those certified by the state as 'in need,'

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<sup>48</sup> Susan Tucker, *Telling Memories Among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the Segregated South* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 155.

the project required what historian Phyllis Palmer termed “constant vigilance by federal officials to keep it from becoming a domestic servants project.”<sup>50</sup> While in New Orleans this project was likely completed in large part by black women, photographs of the Household Aide Project in New Orleans shows only a few shots of a white woman aiding a destitute white family.

While the WPA did not want WPA employees viewed as servants, they did train women between the ages of 18 and 35 for future service in private homes. The Home Demonstration Service intended to put WPA trainees at a “competitive advantage in the private job market.”<sup>51</sup> Trainees did not have to be eligible for WPA employment and were only compensated with lunch and uniforms, avoiding direct competition with white women for black women’s domestic labor.<sup>52</sup> The Home Service Demonstration project supposedly received enthusiastic support from the New Orleans community during its planning stages, though this support did not last long.<sup>53</sup> This project operated for just one year in New Orleans between 1939 and 1941.<sup>54</sup> Unlike similar WPA domestic training projects undertaken in other cities where black women were systematically excluded, the New Orleans project operated under the stipulations of WPA administrators that “75% to 80% of [the] program should be devoted to training colored girls.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Donald S. Howard, *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1943), 238.

<sup>50</sup> Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 104.

<sup>51</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, 183.

<sup>52</sup> Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt*, 105.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Edna M. Brenan to Ellen Woodward, April 10, 1936, Reel 26, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>54</sup> Letter from Cornelia Edge to Mr. Howard W. Sinclair, December 17, 194, Reel 7, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>55</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, 183; Letter from Edna M. Brenan to Ellen Woodward, April 10, 1936, Reel 26, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

The New Orleans WPA produced seven photographs of the Negro Home Service Demonstration Project.<sup>56</sup> These images were taken on January 31, 1939, in a privately owned home located in Uptown New Orleans at 1735 Josephine Street.<sup>57</sup> In these seven photographs, black women conduct domestic chores including ironing, dusting, cooking, making beds, and serving food. Unlike most other WPA projects that employed women, Home Demonstration project workers wore identical uniforms.

In every one of the images of the Home Demonstration Project, WPA-employed black women are overseen by or serving at least one white woman. Four images show a white woman, likely employed by the WPA, demonstrating or observing black women in some kind of official capacity as they complete domestic tasks. (Illustration 5) Three images show WPA-employed black women serving a formal meal to a group of white. (Illustration 2) These seated white women do not appear to be WPA employees. The images of the WPA-employed black women serving a meal to white women highlight the economic inequities of the Great Depression: while people in need appeal to the government for work, others have the luxury to hire private servants to wait on them. These images, along with many other photographs of WPA-employed black women, highlight the contradictory and competing impulses of the WPA to simultaneously break down and reinforce capitalist social hierarchy within the United States.

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<sup>56</sup> No photographs depict white women participating as trainees in the Home Demonstration Service. Home Demonstration, Series 21.01. WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>57</sup> This property was owned by Mary Alice Ludlow, who inherited the property from her father, a cotton factor. It is not clear if Ludlow charged the WPA to use this space. Personal correspondence with archivist at Notarial Archives Research Center, Office of the Clerk of Civil District Court for the Parish of Orleans.



**Illustration 5.** Bed making demonstration during WPA Home Service Project. March 11, 1940, Series 27.01.08, Mattresses Making Project, WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

In Depression-Era America, black women traditionally learned the domestic trade from other black women, often having work assignments passed down from friends and family.

Without union or government oversight, black women encountered terrible working conditions as domestic workers in white households. According to historian Susan Tucker, black women employed as domestics did not have “the emotional support of their own families or protection from unfair and even violent actions of employers, particularly male employers.”<sup>58</sup>

Compensation for black domestic workers was abysmal. In 1930s New Orleans, black women

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<sup>58</sup> Tucker, *Telling Memories among Southern Women*, 155.

domestic workers typically worked six days a week and received as little as \$3.50 per week.<sup>59</sup>

The federal government's involvement in the process of training black women in domestic work and subsequently placing them in positions at private white homes through the WPA was unprecedented. This proposed government intervention ultimately threatened the ability for wealthy white families to exploit the labor of black women and exposed white employers' ill treatment of domestic workers. As a result, this project was lambasted and quickly terminated.

When discussing black domestics and the WPA domestic training program, white business owners concerned with rising domestic payrolls expressed bitter resentment. Some stated that black women were suited for domestic work while refusing to acknowledge that government training and organization could improve or expand their skill set. Reflecting on the project after it was terminated, Walter F. Craddock, Director of Training and Reemployment of the Louisiana WPA, stated that the project "spoiled Negro women - made them think they were superior maids who could command big wages."<sup>60</sup> Alma Hammond, Director of Community Service Programs in Louisiana, described the Home Service Demonstration project as a "good morale-builder," but an ineffective method to propel WPA employees into private employment.<sup>61</sup> Federal WPA employee Cornelia Edge noted that Craddock "definitely did not like the project and would not think of operating one" again.<sup>62</sup> According to Craddock, the project was

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<sup>59</sup> Board Minutes, August 22, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>60</sup> Letter from Cornelia Edge on behalf of Walter F. Craddock to Mr. Howard W. Sinclair, December 17, 1941. Reel 7, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>61</sup> Letter from Cornelia Edge on behalf of Walter F. Craddock to Mr. Howard W. Sinclair, December 17, 1941. Reel 7, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>62</sup> Letter from Cornelia Edge on behalf of Walter F. Craddock to Mr. Howard W. Sinclair, December 17, 1941. Reel 7, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

ineffective because black women “could get household work without training if they wanted it but they do not want it... [and] prefer sewing or some other WPA project," reflecting the deteriorating conditions surrounding domestic work experienced by black women and their growing desire to form a greater separation between their personal and professional lives.<sup>63</sup>

While these white WPA administrators decried the project as a failure, these quotes may be read against the grain to see that black women who participated in this project experienced heightened levels of competence and confidence in the value of their skilled labor.

### ***Education Projects***

New Orleans WPA offered segregated educational programs to local residents. Classes included nursery schools, English literacy, Spanish language, art, braille, domestic science, “deaf and dumb” instruction, printing, radio, and first aid. Of the 190 photographs documenting the activities of New Orleans WPA educational programming, only 17 images capture activities either offered to black residents or staffed by black WPA employees. Of these 17 images, only seven represent black women employed by the WPA.<sup>64</sup> A majority of these images show black women working as nursery school teachers. The women oversee up to 20 children at a time as they play, eat, nap, and conduct personal hygiene. Descriptions accompanying these photographs

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<sup>63</sup> Letter from Cornelia Edge on behalf of Walter F. Craddock to Mr. Howard W. Sinclair, December 17, 1941. Reel 7, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA; Jones, *Labor of Love*, 173.

<sup>64</sup> Five of the seven images of black women employed by New Orleans WPA Educational Department. The other two photographs show black women employed by New Orleans WPA Education Department. One black woman is shown in the corner of a conference room attending the Conference of WPA Teachers along with two black male, seven white women, and twelve white male instructors. The other image shows a white woman instructing a group of well over 100 black men and women at the Teachers Planning Institute. Education Series, WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

describe black women employees as “nurses.” White women employed as WPA nursery school teachers, however, are always referred to as “specialists,” “supervisors,” or “teachers.”<sup>65</sup>

### ***Bookbinding Projects***

New Orleans WPA Bookbinding Projects, sponsored by the New Orleans Public Library, endeavored to recondition books owned by the city in local schools, libraries, and archives. According to Albrier, WPA Bookbinding Projects taught workers to “take a book that was falling all apart and put it together; then put a new binding on it and put it back in circulation.”<sup>66</sup> This work also included removing old covers, cleaning and repairing damaged pages, rebinding volumes, and attaching new covers. Reflecting on the bookbinding project, Albrier described it as “a good public service” that permitted the recirculation of “many books for schools.”<sup>67</sup>

The New Orleans WPA Bookbinding Project, like all other projects in the city, was segregated by race. Bookbinding projects are unusual because they were not strictly segregated by gender. While WPA-sponsored photographs of bookbinding workrooms are dominated by women workers, a few men can be spotted throughout, many of whom appear to be acting in a supervisory role.<sup>68</sup> Complaints surfaced about the project’s dependence on women laborers. In 1938, a representative of the International Brotherhood of Bookbinders wrote to Ellen S.

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<sup>65</sup> Education Series, WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>66</sup> Francis Mary Albrier, OH-31, transcript of an oral history conducted in 1977, in Black Women Oral History Project. Interviews, 1976-1981, Radcliffe College. Cambridge, MA Schlesinger Library, 80.

<sup>67</sup> Francis Mary Albrier, OH-31, transcript of an oral history conducted in 1977, in Black Women Oral History Project. Interviews, 1976-1981, Radcliffe College. Cambridge, MA Schlesinger Library, 80.

<sup>68</sup> Bookbinding Series, 09.01.02 and 09.02.02. WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

Woodward to object to the employment of “totally inexperienced women” at the expense of skilled members of the “Brotherhood.”<sup>69</sup>

Of the 68 negatives created to capture the New Orleans WPA bookbinding projects, only ten negatives document the efforts of black workers.<sup>70</sup> Of these ten images, only four show black women at work. These negatives show groups of six to 27 black women seated at long, thin tables, cleansing and rebinding books. In September 1938, when a majority of these photographs were taken, the New Orleans WPA employed 144 black people in the bookbinding project. The project operated out of McDonogh High School No. 24. Some of these 144 black bookbinders were stationed in repurposed classrooms, others in the basement.<sup>71</sup> Black women all wore dresses and have their hair styled; some wear jewelry as they complete their work. (Illustration 6) The appearance of the bookbinders differs greatly from the aforementioned uniformed home service workers and mattress workers.

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<sup>69</sup> Sorum, “Much Depends on Local Customs,” 15.

<sup>70</sup> Bookbinding Series. WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>71</sup> Bookbinding Series. WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.





**Illustration 6.** New Orleans WPA “Colored” Bookbinding Project workroom. January 25, 1937, Series 09.02.01, Bookbinding Statewide Bookbinding Project (Colored), WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

The WPA occasionally hosted Achievement Days, during which they invited the public to see the productivity of WPA projects. The remaining six negatives of what the WPA referred to as the “colored bookbinding project” depict the fruits of these black women’s labor: stacks of books gleaming with shiny new covers on display during an Achievement Day celebration. According to the WPA photographer documenting “The Colored Bookbinding Achievement Day,” “not even the presence of hundreds of visitors [...] caused them to cease work.”<sup>72</sup> One image from the black bookbinding Achievement Day shows two white women, possibly WPA

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<sup>72</sup> Bookbinding Series, 09.01, WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

project supervisors, congratulating themselves on a job well done, shaking hands vigorously over a pile of some of the 25,000 books reconditioned by black WPA workers over the previous year.<sup>73</sup> (Illustration 7) The photographer effectively removed skilled black women laborers from association with the productivity of the WPA by choosing to document only professional white women presiding over the project's end product.



**Illustration 7.** “Achievement Day” at the WPA “Colored” Bookbinding Project. Series 09.01.03, September 2, 1938, “Just a few of the 144 workers employed in reconditioning old volumes by the colored section of the WPA Bookbinding Project in the McDonogh High School #24, New Orleans, which recently celebrated Achievement Day, having cleansed and rebound more than 25,000 books during the last year, 2,880 of them during August. Not even the presence of hundreds of visitors during Achievement Day caused them to cease work.” WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

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<sup>73</sup> Bookbinding Series, 09.01, WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

Stark differences between the so-called “colored” and white bookbinding projects are captured in the remaining 58 negatives in the collection featuring white WPA bookbinding projects. Nineteen negatives show white women working in groups of two or more, while ten images feature individual portraits of white women at work or posing with books, ultimately conveying a heightened level of respect for the individual accomplishments of white female WPA employees. (Illustration 8) In a photograph of one of the achievement days, white bookbinders are referred to as “artists.”<sup>74</sup> Like the sewing and domestic service projects, not a single image was taken to capture the intricate work of an individual black woman worker.



**Illustration 8.** Woman trims paper for WPA Bookbinding Project. March 13, 1940, Series 09.09.03.WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

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<sup>74</sup> Bookbinding Series, 09.07.02. WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

White bookbinding projects and Achievement Days were held at the New Orleans Public Library and the Civil District Courthouse Building. White Achievement Day photographs feature reconditioned state documents, including massive nineteenth century notarial records, alongside more run-of-the-mill library books.<sup>75</sup> Black workers are never shown working with important legal and archival materials, suggesting that the WPA administrators reserved high profile restoration work for white WPA employees. Similarly to the photograph of black women employed in the aforementioned sewing project (Illustration 3), images of WPA bookbinding projects also reinforce racist perceptions of black women workers unskilled laborers relegated to gang labor.

### ***Public Health Projects***

The New Orleans WPA established numerous projects that would employ the needy while aiding in the improvement of the general population's health. Projects conducted under the banner of the New Orleans WPA Public Health initiatives included maternity clinics, rodent, mosquito, and ragweed extermination, venereal disease control, nurse home visits, and hospital clerical assistance. Black women can be found at work as nurses, technicians, clerks, and maids in photographs documenting the "Nursing Project (Colored)," the "Statewide Public Health Project (Negro)," and the "Nursing Project (White)."<sup>76</sup>

Images of the "colored" projects show black women executing various duties as they care for black patients. Some 128 images document the work of WPA public health efforts in New Orleans, 20 of which capture services provided to black New Orleanians or rendered by black

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<sup>75</sup> Bookbinding Series, 09.11.01. WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>76</sup> Public Health Series. WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

WPA employees.<sup>77</sup> Several images show nurses in crisp, white uniforms conducting home visits or receiving patients at clinics as they administer shots, distribute paperwork to patients, wash babies, write and type notes, and file paperwork. (Illustrations 9 and 10) These black women are depicted as knowledgeable, skilled, literate, and professional as they come to the aid of other black New Orleanians. However, when black women are depicted assisting white patients, they are portrayed in a startlingly different light.



**Illustration 9.** Woman employed by WPA administers shot to patient. March 5, 1941, Series 35.61.02, Public Health, Statewide Public Health Project (Negro), WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

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<sup>77</sup> Public Health Series. WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.



**Illustration 10.** WPA employee registers mother and baby at clinic. September 14, 1936, Series 35.05.01, Public Health, Nursing Project (Colored), WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

Black women photographed while working on nursing projects aimed to benefit white New Orleanians are portrayed as subservient “maids” and “helpers.”<sup>78</sup> (Illustrations 11 and 12) The imagery of black women assisting white women as they birth and raise white children evokes racist tropes of the Mammy, a contented, maternalistic black domestic worker. One image from the “Nursing Project (White)” WPA project shows a white WPA nurse alongside a black female worker described as a maid. (Illustration 11) It is not clear if this black woman is a WPA employee, but if she is then it is possible that black and white women employees were

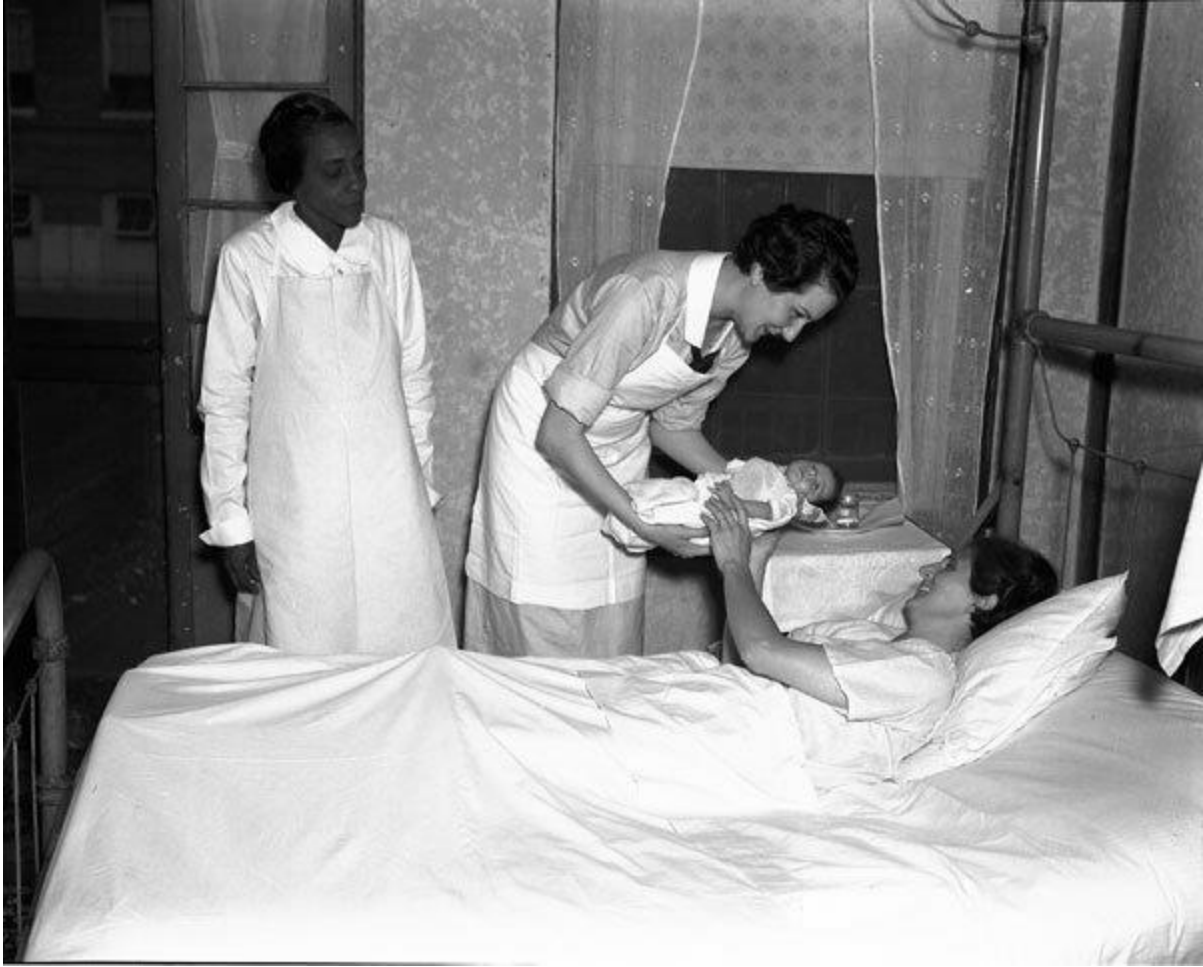
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<sup>78</sup> Public Health Series, 35.14.01 and 35.08.01. WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

working in the same environment, in contrast to the New Orleans WPA strict racial segregation policy.



**Illustration 11.** WPA Nursing Project employee assists woman in bed. “Colored helper from nursing unit. Interior.” September 14, 1936, 35.08.01. Public Health, Nursing Project (Colored), WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.



**Illustration 12.** WPA employees assist mother and newborn. “Nurse handing new-born baby to mother with negro maid looking on. Interior.” September 14, 1936, 35.14.01, Public Health, Nursing Project (White), WPA Photograph Collection, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

What can we learn from these photographs of black women at work for the WPA in New Orleans? The great majority of the images discussed here make a concerted effort to portray black women workers as gang workers and servants, roles traditionally forced upon enslaved women. Created at the hand of a white male photographer, this imagery works to reinforce idealized patriarchal gender roles and racist notions of white supremacy and a romanticization of slave-based labor. However, a few of these images undermine these racist notions of black women workers. Select photographs from the Public Health and Bookbinding projects instead suggest that black women were knowledgeable workers with specialized skills that demanded



respect and gratitude. All of the pictures discussed here suggest that black women employed by the federal government under the WPA made significant contributions to projects that would greatly benefit the people of New Orleans. These images also demonstrate that black women faced significant discrimination at the hand of the federal and local government when participating in WPA projects. Even though African Americans, at times, made up the majority of New Orleans WPA workers, their significant contributions were often undocumented and therefore hidden from public view.

### **Public Response to Black Women's WPA Employment**

One can gauge the response of white, wealthy, politically connected New Orleanians to federal employment of black women by examining the complaints aired to the New Orleans WPA officials during public gatherings. Complaints about black women's employment reached their peak in 1939 when the federal government made significant cuts to WPA funding, jeopardizing the number of people who would gain employment within the New Orleans WPA. The complaints registered by the white, male, business-owning class following the threat of the new relief act restrictions center on two contradictory concerns: (1) the threat to white male WPA employment and their subsequent inability to buy consumer goods and (2) black people's, but particularly black women's, ability to receive full WPA benefits on par with white WPA employees.

Congress passed the 1939 Emergency Relief Appropriations Act in June of that year, cutting the operating budget of the WPA by one third. The act placed an 18-month limit on the amount of time a person could be employed by the WPA, after which time administrators

removed workers from the program for 30 days.<sup>79</sup> Congress hoped that by removing long-term WPA employees from the government payrolls, relief recipients would have greater financial incentive to find employment in the private sector and curtail the perceived efforts of relief recipients “to make WPA their career.”<sup>80</sup> The new financial cuts and so called “18-month rule” threatened the relief jobs of millions of Americans.

Louisiana employment cuts resulting from the new Relief Act were first made in rural areas where unemployment rates were substantially lower than urban centers and upcoming summertime demands for seasonal agricultural workers would supply recently fired WPA employees with ample, though poorly compensated, employment opportunities.<sup>81</sup> It was not until a month after Congress passed the Relief Act that WPA offices in New Orleans began to publicly weigh the impact of the new cutbacks in the city, where unemployment was higher than anywhere else in the urban South.<sup>82</sup> New Orleans WPA projects faced the withdrawal of \$500,000 in federal funding per month. Between financial cuts and implementation of the “18-month rule,” 10,164 New Orleanians were slated to permanently lose their WPA jobs.<sup>83</sup>

Faced with the prospect of losing millions of dollars in federal funding and a sudden, significant increase in the city’s unemployment, white, wealthy New Orleanians began to publicly express their disapproval of the new Congressional Relief Act. Between May 16, 1939, and September 12, 1939, the New Orleans Association of Commerce (NOAC) met on five

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<sup>79</sup> Prior to this act there was no time limit to a person’s employment with the WPA.

<sup>80</sup> Board minutes, August 22, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>81</sup> Board minutes, August 22, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>82</sup> Board minutes, August 22, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>83</sup> Board minutes, August 22, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

occasions to discuss the “WPA Situation in Louisiana.”<sup>84</sup> Formed in 1913, NOAC was an organization comprised of local business owners who meet regularly to discuss and promote New Orleans industry. NOAC surmised that the “business community here feels that operation of W.P.A. in New Orleans has been eminently successful.”<sup>85</sup> NOAC took a significant interest in the looming cuts to federal funding of New Orleans WPA, emphasizing that loss of “monthly payroll of approximately one half million dollars” would “be felt in all channels of local business activity.”<sup>86</sup> NOAC’s concerns about WPA funding cuts were fueled by association members’ fears that their bottom lines would be negatively impacted, little concern was expressed regarding the financial suffering of laid-off WPA employees.

James A. Crutcher, Director of the Louisiana WPA, was invited to address NOAC on the impact of the federal cuts on New Orleans WPA in greater detail. Crutcher provided an overview of how the New Orleans WPA operated, explaining how people applied for jobs and who funded the projects. When detailing the procedure for hiring relief workers, Crutcher was quoted to say that the administration had no “black list” to prevent anyone from receiving employment. The WPA was required to “give employment to needy persons who are unemployed, regardless of race or creed.”<sup>87</sup> Crutcher emphasized that the New Orleans WPA employed “people who have

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<sup>84</sup> Contents, 1939 Board Minutes. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>85</sup> Board Minutes, May 16, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>86</sup> Board Minutes, August 28, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>87</sup> Board Minutes, August 22, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

served time in the penitentiary, persons they know are addicted to dope, as well as persons who have committed murder and have paid their debt to society.”<sup>88</sup>

While attendees at public meetings aired complaints regarding the threat to white men’s removal from WPA rolls and their ability to buy consumer goods, the same voices simultaneously registered concerns regarding black people’s ability to receive *any* of the benefits of WPA employment. NOAC members were particularly interested to know just how much the WPA was assisting black New Orleanians. NOAC President G. G. Staubitz, exposing the racist underpinnings of his objections to WPA operations, asked Crutcher to report “what percentage of WPA labor was colored.”<sup>89</sup> Upon learning that 55% of New Orleans WPA positions were occupied by black people, Richard Foster, Director of the New Orleans Department of Public Welfare, subsequently informed NOAC that cuts to federal funding could lead “unemployed” and “unemployables” to participate in “riots, marches on the City Hall, and other violent demands.”<sup>90</sup> While WPA and public welfare officials were clearly aware that NOAC, a group of rich white business owners, would not likely be sympathetic to the WPA majority black workers, they may have purposefully played on the members’ racialized fears to garner support for continued federal funding of New Orleans WPA.

In addition to federal funding cuts and implementation of the 18-month rule, the 1939 Congressional Relief Act altered WPA wages. Prior to the act, WPA wages were based on standard of living, the prevailing wage rate that an individual was determined to earn where previously employed. By using standard of living to determine wages, black people earned

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<sup>88</sup> Board Minutes, August 22, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>89</sup> Board Minutes, September 1, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>90</sup> Board Minutes, September 1, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

significantly lower compensation than white people as it was assumed that they were accustomed to small wages and a less affluent lifestyle. Following the new relief act, however WPA wages were based on the cost of living, a nationwide standardized pay rate determined by a worker's designated skill level. While black people were overwhelmingly designated by the WPA as unskilled, this new method of determining compensation ultimately increased WPA wages for all WPA positions in New Orleans and throughout the South.

New wage changes also required the same scale of compensation for men and women and, more significantly, required that all WPA relief employees work 130 hours each month.<sup>91</sup> This new measure would prevent New Orleans WPA officials from splitting full-time assignments between two black women workers and guarantee that each worker received a minimum of \$46.80 a month for a six-hour day and five-day week, more than double the amount black women could typically earn as a domestic in private homes.<sup>92</sup> According to WPA administrator Alma S. Hammond, Richard R. Foster, Director of the Orleans Parish Department of Public Welfare, the sponsor of numerous WPA projects “emphatic[ally] voic[ed] his disapproval of the ‘unskilled’ rate and 130-hour month in relation to the employment of unskilled negro women.”<sup>93</sup> Even though the new relief act stipulated that WPA compensation was no longer based on prevailing wages found in private industry, Foster lamented that it was “entirely contrary to the purpose of the whole relief program to establish relief wage rates which

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<sup>91</sup> Board Minutes, August 22, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>92</sup> Letter from Alma S. Hammond on behalf of Richard R. Foster to Florence Kerr, September 12, 1939. Reel 12, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>93</sup> Letter from Alma S. Hammond on behalf of Richard R. Foster to Florence Kerr, September 12, 1939. Reel 12, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

were more than twice the amount the workers had ever earned in the past, or could ever hope to earn in the future in private employment.”<sup>94</sup>

To stifle the prospect of paying black women fair and just wages through the WPA and ensure the availability of cheap domestic labor for white people, local project sponsors, including the aforementioned Department of Public Welfare, first demanded to receive an exemption from the new relief act policies to allow the New Orleans WPA “either to lower the wage rate or to permit these [black] women to work one-half time and earn one-half the monthly rate.” In an attempt to sway the federal government's response, New Orleans WPA sponsors emphasized the mounting “bitter comment from the public” in response to black women’s wage increases.<sup>95</sup> Federal WPA administrators did not cooperate with these demands, noting that it was “not considered advisable... to effect adjustments in the schedule of monthly earnings for particular groups of workers.”<sup>96</sup> As a result, New Orleans WPA project sponsors threatened to discontinue funding to projects that employed black women. Even though project sponsors recognized what they called the “tremendous value” of WPA projects employing black women, they continued to demand “the immediate curtailment of projects [...] which employ large groups of unskilled negro women,” stipulating “that they operate with minimal personnel and on a one-shift basis, with every saving possible made in operating costs.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Letter from Alma S. Hammond to Florence Kerr, September 12, 1939. Reel 12, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>95</sup> Letter from Alma S. Hammond to Florence Kerr, September 12, 1939. Reel 12, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>96</sup> Letter from Florence Kerr to James A. Crutcher, November 9, 1939. Reel 12, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>97</sup> Letter from Alma S. Hammond to Florence Kerr, September 12, 1939. Reel 12, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

Beyond preventing black women from receiving full WPA compensation, NOAC and some WPA administrators were acutely concerned with the prospect of paying black women more than they could earn as servants in private homes. While addressing NOAC, Crutcher mentioned that he “understood the average wage for colored women servants was about \$25.00 per month.” NOAC member Mr. Williams noted that the new relief act requirement to employ all WPA workers full time at the maximum monthly compensation rate would “create an even greater disturbance than in the past, particularly in the South, pointing out that good servants would be even harder to find inasmuch as everyone possible would want to take advantage of the higher wage scale working for the WPA.”<sup>98</sup> WPA administrators and New Orleans business owners were only interested in encouraging the continued funding of the WPA if it would not inflate the paltry wages they paid their domestic servants.

Working conditions endured by black women in domestic service were deteriorating significantly during the Great Depression as increased competition for employment, wages plummeted. New Deal labor reforms, such as minimum wage, maximum hours, and social security, were not applied to domestic workers.<sup>99</sup> In an attempt to distance themselves from negative work environments and afford themselves more time with their own families, black women refused to live in the homes of their white employers. Walter F. Craddock, Director of Training and Reemployment for the Louisiana WPA, blamed black women for their own financial hardships, stating that black women “do not save money or manage well” and expressed utter confusion at his maid’s preference for “paying rent in a colored section to living

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<sup>98</sup> Board Minutes, August 22, 1939. NOAC, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>99</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, 173.

in good comfortable quarters at his home.”<sup>100</sup> Historian Jacqueline Jones has suggested that white people viewed their employment of black women as a “humanitarian gesture.”<sup>101</sup> Though Haddock viewed black women’s refusal to live in white employers’ homes as financial mismanagement, it is clear that these women were in fact asserting greater autonomy over their living and working conditions and making a collective and concerted effort to redefine how white supremacy would impact their day-to-day lives as domestic workers.<sup>102</sup>

As white people weighed how the WPA cuts would impact their own bottom line, black New Orleanians banded together to assess the impact of looming funding cuts on WPA employees, a majority of whom were black. When news of the impending 18-month rule and budget cuts surfaced *The Louisiana Weekly* reported on the black community’s response. The paper often aired the sentiment that black New Orleanians would be at a greater risk of losing their WPA jobs than their white counterparts. This sentiment is exemplified in the following editorial printed shortly after the cuts went into effect:

“it looks like the old adage ‘the Negro is the last hired and the first fired’ is going to make a comeback, for the ex-WPA white men who have ‘connections’ will more than likely supplant hundreds of Negroes who have been faithful and trustworthy to their employers. It will happen for so ‘strange reason’ if we don’t organize to fight for our jobs.”<sup>103</sup>

While *The Louisiana Weekly* makes it clear that the black community felt they were going to face the brunt of the WPA cuts, the community was not uniform in its approach to combating the

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<sup>100</sup> Letter from Cornelia Edge on behalf of Walter F. Craddock to Mr. Howard W. Sinclair, December 17, 1941. Reel 7, Louisiana WPA Files, Microfilm, Historic New Orleans Collection, Williams Research Center, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>101</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, 172.

<sup>102</sup> For more on African American collective resistance and agency see Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 113-24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3790316>.

<sup>103</sup> “We Need More Work,” *The Louisiana Weekly*, September 2, 1939. Reel 14, Microfilm, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.



loss of jobs. Some people organized to advocate for the plight of laid off black WPA employees, while others expressed that WPA cuts provided an opportunity for black New Orleanians to support black-owned businesses and create new jobs for African Americans.<sup>104</sup>

Black New Orleanians took an active role in organizing to protest cuts to the WPA, though it seems that white attendees and organizers limited black people's participation at some political gatherings. White civic leaders organized several so-called mass meetings to address WPA cuts. One such meeting was held at the Municipal Auditorium to protest any reduction in WPA appropriations or change in the Federal Theater project. According to *The Louisiana Weekly*, "The occasion was supposed to be a mass meeting. The Negroes were invited but were not permitted to say a word or sit where the cool air of the auditorium could hit them."<sup>105</sup> Other mass meetings advertised that "All [would] be privileged to express what their treatment on their treatment on the job is like, also to ask questions on what steps might be taken to better their condition."<sup>106</sup> However, one article in *The Louisiana Weekly* reported that "the white press failed to publish the principles of our mass meeting," including demands for increased WPA funding, equal access to positions for African Americans in all WPA projects, and assistance in reapplying for work assistance following the implementation of the 18-month rule.<sup>107</sup>

In response to these segregated public meetings, *The Louisiana Weekly* and the Workers Alliance, a political group that advocated for workers' rights and funding for WPA projects,

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<sup>104</sup> *The Louisiana Weekly*, September 2, 1939. Reel 14, Microfilm, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>105</sup> "15 Negroes Attend WPA Mass Meeting; Have to Sit Auditorium' Attic," *The Louisiana Weekly*, July 1, 1939. Reel 14, Microfilm, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>106</sup> "Workers' Alliance Holds Important Meeting," *The Louisiana Weekly*, November 18, 1939. Reel 14, Microfilm, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>107</sup> "WPA workers hold City-Wide Mass Meeting," *The Louisiana Weekly*, November 11, 1939. Reel 14, Microfilm, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

organized assemblies of their own. *The Louisiana Weekly* organized a weekly meeting at the Sylvanie F. Williams Community Center for WPA employees who either lost or anticipated to lose their position. The first of these meetings drew 3,000 WPA employees and representatives from the newspaper and the WPA.<sup>108</sup> The goal of these meetings was to assist black WPA employees to reapply for WPA positions. The Workers Alliance held a meeting in which their chair, Reverend D. Norwood, citing the “pitiful plight of Negroes in New Orleans” pled “that Negroes who have been laid off the WPA, organize and send resolutions to the President of the United States, asking that something be done immediately.”<sup>109</sup>

Though *The Louisiana Weekly* shows us that many black people were advocating to combat the ill effects of WPA cuts, others saw the cuts as an opportunity to critique the flawed relief system and support black-owned businesses. One editorial stated “Let’s not brood on anybody’s shoulder we have been cut from WPA. It had to come sooner or later. It is better for us to think about what jobs we can do, to think about creating jobs and increasing our efficiency.” Another editorial went so far as to condemn any complaints from WPA employees regarding cuts:

“... the complaining WPA workers [...] are assuming that the relief work given is work, not relief. If that were true, their position would be reasonable. But it is not true. It is no shame to the unemployed that they are victims of circumstances. For that reason they can ask federal aid with good grace. Having helped to create a government, they have a right to look to it in their hour of need. But there is a vast difference from going to it as a friend, and making demands upon it...”

These editorials make it clear that black New Orleanians had varied opinions regarding WPA operations and budget. It seems likely that class divisions within the black community itself

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<sup>108</sup> “3,000 WPA Workers Attend La. Weekly Community Meet,” *The Louisiana Weekly*, July 29, 1939. Reel 14, Microfilm, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>109</sup> “400 Attend Workers Alliance Meeting,” *The Louisiana Weekly*, October 28, 1939. Reel 14, Microfilm, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

fostered these diverse opinions. While *The Louisiana Weekly's* coverage of WPA funding cuts is essential to understanding the experiences of black New Orleans employed by the WPA, it minimizes the particular hardships that black women encountered while working for the government agency.

## **Conclusion**

By analyzing visual documentation held in The New Orleans WPA Photography Collection in addition to newspaper coverage, oral histories, and public response to New Orleans WPA black women workers and funding cuts, this research has illustrated how WPA employment of black women was shaped by the social and economic legacies of slavery and white supremacy. The great majority of photographs of WPA workers in New Orleans examined here suggest that there was a concerted effort to portray federally employed black women as gang workers and servants, roles historically forced upon enslaved women. This imagery reinforced idealized patriarchal gender roles, racist notions of white supremacy, and a romanticization of slave-based labor held by local white people and government officials. These images also suggest that black women faced great discrimination at the hand of the New Orleans business community and the federal and local government when participating in WPA projects. However, a few of these images undermine these racist notions of black women workers, arguing that black women were knowledgeable workers with specialized skills who made significant contributions to New Orleans WPA projects.

The possibility of black women earning wages on par with white people through the WPA was actively thwarted by local WPA administrators to appease the demands of local white people and government officials, who wished to continue to exploitatively employ black women

as domestic servants. WPA officials used photography and media coverage to minimize public perception of benefits derived from black women's labor and reduced the number of projects employing black women to meet these racist demands. As black women struggled to achieve fair and just benefits of WPA employment in the face of racial and gender discrimination, they effectively contributed to New Orleans WPA projects of tremendous public value while attempting to expand their employment opportunities and work conditions.

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## Vita

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