

# WPA: Resources for Your Genealogy

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The Works Progress Administration (later renamed the Works Projects Administration) was one of the programs that made up President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" in 1933. This was a time of high unemployment and the hopelessness that comes with the despair that unemployment brings. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) employed out of work Americans in various trades to do diverse work projects. Only in existence for 8 years, the WPA employed approximately 8.5 million workers.

The WPA was responsible for a multitude of projects including building roads, bridges, and other infrastructures. Humanities projects were also part of the WPA, hiring artists and writers. The WPA documented and cataloged resources vital to American history. One such project was the indexing of the 1920 U. S. Federal Census. Other indexes inventories compiled by the WPA, include cemetery interments, church records, military records, vital statistics, and newspapers.

Genealogists benefit from these WPA indexes without even realizing it. Microfilmed records and some online transcriptions originate from the work of WPA employees. According to Steve Paul Johnson's article on the WPA, entitled, *WPA Historical Records Surveys* at [http://www.interment.net/column/records/wpa/wpa\\_history.htm](http://www.interment.net/column/records/wpa/wpa_history.htm), the US Genweb Census Project is a result of volunteers utilizing WPA census indexes. This census project can be found at <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~census/>.

To look for WPA interviews and records, consult state and university libraries, state archives, and historical societies. Also search the FamilySearch Catalog and Google.

A keyword search on the term "WPA" in the FamilySearch Catalog provides a list of 488 titles of records that are the result of the WPA and its indexing projects. These records include indexes to cemeteries, historical records surveys, court records, and marriage indexes. One interesting entry is that of the Kentucky Medical History, a WPA project that includes health professional's biographies, information on medical schools, and the development of medical services in Kentucky since the Civil War. This is listed as "Kentucky medical history, WPA research project records, 1801-1940" in the online catalog. This resource does not circulate to FamilySearch Centers; it must be used at the Library in Salt Lake City.

In Arizona, and other places, the WPA interviewed “pioneers” of the state. Arizona pioneer interviews are available through the Arizona State Library Archives and Public Records.

Another place to search for interviews is on the Library of Congress website, *American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writer’s Project 1936-1940*,

<http://www.loc.gov/collection/federal-writers-project/about-this-collection/>. These stories are listed by state, and then indexed by first name. There is also a search engine available. States included in this database are Alabama, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Wisconsin and Washington. The number of interviews per state varies greatly in this collection.

The Library of Virginia also has an online search engine to search through 1,350 life histories and 50 interviews with former slaves done by the WPA on their web page *Legacies of the New Deal in Virginia* <http://www.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/newdeal/>.

Other websites that include WPA interviews include *American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology* at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/wpa/wpahome.html> which includes a handful of interviews done with former slaves and includes a picture of many of those interviewed. This website has a bibliography that would be helpful in researching American slave narratives. The Special Collections section of the University of Arkansas Library has uploaded PDF files of transcripts of WPA interview forms for interviews done with 17 African Americans at <http://libinfo.uark.edu/SpecialCollections/wpa/#Individual>. There are also books that provide information on WPA former slave interviews.

One source for records of employees of the WPA in Los Angeles, is found through the University of Southern California (USC) Digital Archives at <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15799coll8>.

## Resources

### Libraries, Archives, Manuscript Collections, Digitized Books

WorldCat  
[www.worldcat.org](http://www.worldcat.org)

ArchiveGrid  
<http://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid>

JSTOR  
<http://www.jstor.org>

Digital Public Library of America  
<http://dp.la/>

Google Books  
<http://books.google.com>

Google Scholar  
<http://scholar.google.com>

Internet Archive  
<https://archive.org>

Periodical Source Index (PERSI) (Available through FindMyPast )

### Books

Baker, T L, and Julie P. Baker. *The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996.

Bold, Christine. *The WPA Guides: Mapping America*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999.

Glasco, Laurence A. *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004.

Hefner, Loretta L. *The WPA Historical Records Survey: A Guide to the Unpublished Inventories, Indexes, and Transcripts*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980.

Hobson, Archie. *Remembering America: A Sampler of the WPA American Guide Series*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

Kurlansky, Mark. *The Food of a Younger Land: A Portrait of American Food : Before the National Highway System, Before Chain Restaurants, and Before Frozen Food, When the Nation's Food Was Seasonal, Regional, and Traditional : from the Lost WPA Files*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2009.

La, Vere D. *Life Among the Texas Indians: The WPA Narratives*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998.

Noun, Louise R. *Iowa Women in the WPA*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1999.

Simon, F K. *The WPA Guide to Kentucky*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996.

Taylor, David A. *Soul of a People: The WPA Writer's Project Uncovers Depression America*. Hoboken, N.J: Wiley, 2009

Taylor, Nick. *American-made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA : When FDR Put the Nation to Work*. New York: Bantam Book, 2008.

Weisberger, Bernard A. *The WPA Guide to America: The Best of 1930s America As Seen by the Federal Writers' Project*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.

Willard, Pat. *America Eats!: On the Road with the WPA : the Fish Fries, Box Supper Socials, and Chitlin Feasts That Define Real American Food*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2008.

## **Websites**

WPA Era & Its Impact on Genealogical Research by Bryan L. Mulcahy  
[http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~flmgs/articles/WPA\\_Era\\_BM.pdf](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~flmgs/articles/WPA_Era_BM.pdf)