

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WPA AND ITS IMPACT ON THE BAY AREA

By

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The Works Progress Administration (WPA) had its philosophical origins in various public employment programs in New York City and New York State, when Franklin Roosevelt was governor. In 1935, it had its legal and budgetary origins in the Federal Emergency Relief Appropriation Act, and had its actual beginnings at an informal weekend conference at Hyde Park, where Harry Hopkins and Harold Ickes (Secretary of the Interior) together with their respective staffs presented competing proposals to FDR. The fundamental concept was to put people to work on publicly funded projects. Harold Ickes wanted to concentrate on large capital projects through the existing Public Works Administration (PWA) supervised by himself and the Department of the Interior. Harry Hopkins wanted smaller and more numerous projects, that would put more people immediately to work throughout the country. The result was an executive order from FDR formally creating the WPA, issued on May 6, 1935 with Harry Hopkins as its first administrator.



To satisfy critics of his executive order, Roosevelt included a provision that limited WPA projects to \$25,000. Larger projects that exceeded this limit would be under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior. The executive order gave Hopkins and the WPA the authority, “... to recommend and carry out small useful projects designed to assure a maximum of employment at all localities.” Harry Hopkins took this authorization and ran with it on a continental scale never allowing the budgetary per-project limitation stop him. For instance, Hopkins simply divided large-scale jobs such as the building of the La Guardia and Newark airports into a number of \$25,000 segments, thus taking over jobs originally scheduled for the

PWA at the Department of the Interior.

The WPA became the nation’s largest employer, putting more than three million people to work in its first year, and eventually employing more than eight million people between 1935 and 1943, though not all at the same time. During its lifetime, the WPA built 5,900 schools, 2,500 hospitals, 8,000 parks, 13,000 playgrounds, and 572,000 miles of highways. Many communities, mostly in rural areas, still have sidewalks bearing the indented imprint “WPA.”



Secretary Ickes was proud of the large PWA allocations toward hard materials for projects such as the Bonneville Dam. On the other hand, Harry Hopkins bragged about how little the WPA spent on materials and how much went into the pockets of workers. When asked at a Congressional committee hearing whether, in the long run, money spent on capital projects wasn’t better for the economy, Hopkins replied, “People don’t eat in the long run, they eat every day.”

Some of WPA’s endeavors that are more notable include the following:

- Atlanta sewage system
- Restoration of the Dock Street Theater, Charleston, S.C.
- The ski lodge atop Mt. Hood, Oregon
- Art classes for the insane at Watertown, MA.
- Running a pack-horse library in Kansas

Many of the WPA projects generated criticism from social conservatives and Republicans, particularly when Hopkins put thousands of artists, musicians, actors and writers to work on public projects, saying, "Hell, they've got to eat just like other people." These controversial programs included:



The Federal Art Project, which employed painters and sculptors to teach their crafts in rural schools. Many post offices were decorated with murals depicting local historic scenes.

The Federal Music Project, which sponsored dozens of symphony orchestra and jazz groups. Fifteen thousand musicians gave 225,000 performances, including free concerts in New York City's Central Park.

The Federal Theater Project, which brought plays, vaudeville and marionette shows to many small towns.

The Federal Writer's Project, which put writers to work on the popular American Guild Series, a series of guidebooks on each state showing major cities and interstate highways. Teams of writers also searched out surviving ex-slaves to collect and preserve their oral histories, eventually publishing these accounts in *These Are Our Lives* (1939).

The National Youth Administration (NYA), which enabled millions of youngsters to receive an education via federal education grants, in return for pledged work on WPA-NYA projects; it also provided millions with vocational training.

The WPA had a unique and sometimes clandestine relationship with the U.S. Army. At its inception, Gen Lucius Clay brought Gen Edward Markham (Chief of Engineers) to help Harry Hopkins get organized supplying a competent engineering officer and a chief clerk for each region of the country to assist in setting and disbursing public funds. With this cooperative effort, the WPA gave the Army Corps of Engineers a fresh lease on life in its battle with Secretary Ickes for control of the nation's rivers and harbors.

The WPA's budget was cut in 1937, as part of FDR's effort to present a balanced budget to the Congress and satisfy some of his more vocal critics. With Social Security siphoning off \$2 billion in purchasing power and the Federal Reserve Board raising its reserve requirements for member banks, many economists later deemed these measures as largely responsible for the recession of 1937-38, or as some called it, the "depression within the depression."

Harry Hopkins resigned from the WPA on December 23, 1938 to become Secretary of Commerce, but he kept close contact with the WPA and had influence on many of its projects. Early in 1939, a long series of conferences between Hopkins and Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall led to a secret transfer of WPA funds from existing projects to start ups to develop machine tools for the manufacture of small arms and ammunition. This put the country's subsequent war effort at least one year ahead of schedule.

A few of the more notable WPA projects that had a lasting impact on the San Francisco Bay Area include:



- A joint project between WPA and PWA to build Treasure Island and the Oakland Bay Bridge
- Construction of the San Francisco Airport
- Building of the Berkeley Rose Garden
- Building of Woodminister Amphitheater
- Building of the Berkeley Aquatic Park
- Painting of the wall murals at Coit Tower and the Beach Chalet, in San Francisco



Since its funding and patronage came directly from the Federal Government, the WPA weakened city and state political machines. The agency helped raise wages and corresponding purchasing power in chronically underpaid sectors of the country, since its private contractors had to match the WPA wage scale. It made significant dents in “Jim Crowism” mandating an integrated work force with equal pay for blacks and whites. Ultimately, and for the first time, black workers throughout the country were visible in non-demeaning jobs.

Due to rising employment with the United States’ entry into World War II, the WPA received an “honorable discharge” in April of 1943

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