



A New Deal for California

Recovering a history hidden in plain sight

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Hubris doesn't begin to describe what we proposed to do: document every last physical trace of the Depression-era federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) in California. All of it—every plaque, school, fountain, tennis court, park, and ranger station built by the WPA as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal for America. What was I thinking? It helped that I didn't really know what I was in for. The markers left by the WPA on sidewalks, public restrooms, and Berkeley's beloved Municipal Rose Garden had long intrigued me, but I had never gone out of my way to hunt them down. And I knew nothing of agencies like the PWA, CWA, FERA, REA, or the RA, but I knew that the Three Cs, Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), had built rustic structures and trails in the East Bay Regional Parks. But in 2004, the Columbia Foundation gave photographer Robert Dawson and me a grant to kick off the project, so we got to work.

I assumed that the New Deal was centralized in Washington, D.C., so surely I would find the records of its accomplishments neatly filed and accessible at the Library of Congress or the National Archives. A few trips to the nation's capital were sufficient to convince me that I was wrong. WPA filing cards are not very informative, and they were preserved on some of the worst microfilm I've ever encountered. Public Works Administration (PWA) reports were also microfilmed, but they were stored in a dauntingly complex filing system and are so voluminous that no one but a young, tenured professor contemplating a life's project could hope to come to grips with them. If the CCC records for the work done at thousands of camps existed anywhere, they would be similarly intimidating. Unfortunately, many of those records have been lost or destroyed over the decades since the effort to gear up for World War II abruptly killed the New Deal public works programs. As Harold Ickes, the head of the PWA, said in 1939 as he broke ground for Friant Dam in California: "Even those of us in Washington who are responsible for carrying out orders sometimes lack comprehension of the mighty sweep of this program."

The range of projects built under the auspices of the New Deal defies easy description. No city, town, or rural area in the country was left untouched. Tens of thousands of roads, schools, theaters, libraries, hospitals, post offices, courthouses, airports, parks, forests, gardens, and works of art were built or improved in a single decade by those of our parents and grandparents who worked for the New Deal agencies or the companies they contracted. The result was a rich landscape of public works across the nation, often of outstanding beauty, utility, and craftsmanship. Early on, one of our sources told me, "Growing up in the 1930s, in retrospect, seemed like a renaissance period with so many useful and handsome public facilities and buildings being built I am sure that there was much economic distress during the period, but to me, the many civic projects brought a feeling of well-being and optimism, which I have not experienced since." I have heard many such testimonials since then from people who lived through the Roosevelt years.

Among the many WPA initiatives I discovered in my early research were archaeological digs and historical re-creations, and they gave me the idea for an analogous effort: to create an ever-expanding excavation to reveal a buried and lost civilization. This was not, however, a civilization engulfed by the jungles of Guatemala or the sands of Egypt. It was our own history and a monument to an era a mere seventy-five years old but almost

entirely forgotten by what Gore Vidal called the “United States of Amnesia.”

The National Archives preserved many boxes of roughly organized archival photographs of New Deal public works. I scanned hundreds of images that began to reveal the magnitude of what we had undertaken by trying to document the WPA’s work in California—and photographs bear witness to only a fraction of the work that was done by the WPA and other New Deal public works agencies.

Fortunately, in his indispensable book *Long-Range Public Investment: The Forgotten Legacy of the New Deal* (University of South Carolina Press, 2007), Robert Leighninger, Jr. describes all of the New Deal public works agencies and explains how they changed during their brief years of existence in response to the whipsaw of political and budgetary pressures exerted on the Roosevelt administration. The book is as inspiring as it is informative. But even after twelve years of research, Leighninger didn’t come close to documenting every New Deal work. He revealed only the tip of an enormous iceberg.[1]

I only intended to catalog the remnants of the WPA in California, but even that task began to seem impossible for a two-man operation. So I began to gather together a group of like-minded folks to help with the effort. We launched California’s Living New Deal Project in 2005. (The word “living” reflects that most of the public works of the 1930s remain in daily use today by countless people who take them for granted.) I soon realized that we needed a more professional operation, and that’s when I asked Dick Walker to help us with his organizing experience and sources of support at the University of California, Berkeley. We began to build a database of projects and display them on a Google map, each dot opening to reveal documentary data and, wherever possible, contemporary and archival photos.[2]

We also joined forces with the California History Society and, with another grant from the Columbia Foundation, hired Lisa Ericksen to work as project ringmaster. Lisa invited historians, archivists, and others from around the state to attend workshops in Berkeley and San Francisco. Those attendees constituted our first network of informants feeding information to our graduate-student research assistants, who fact-checked for accuracy and entered information into the database and map.[3] Because much of the evidence for New Deal public works is not

available at the National Archives but in local histories, newspapers, municipal records, and scrapbooks, knowledgeable informants are crucial to the whole project, making it a Living New Deal in a double sense. By 2010 we had gathered enough data to map our first 1,000 sites.



Tile mural & sculpture at San Francisco Aquatic Park, created by the WPA

The Living New Deal project grew timelier as California's economic condition deteriorated into what press and pundits routinely dubbed the Great Recession, the worst crisis since the 1930s and similarly the product of rampant corruption that sprang from deregulation. Unfortunately for present-day California, the state's modern leadership was doing precisely the opposite of what Roosevelt's New Deal did to kick the economy out of the doldrums. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, for example, closed state parks and stunted on their maintenance in a futile effort to balance the state budget, despite the lessons that might have been drawn from the fact that California's once exemplary state park system was largely the product of CCC labor in its early years. The same

is true of the East Bay Regional Parks and most national park and forest campgrounds, trails, amphitheaters, and buildings. WPA workers improved every public park in San Francisco and planted thousands of street trees in other cities now in their maturity. They built San Francisco and Berkeley's Aquatic Parks, along with recreational marinas throughout the state. Thousands of streets, sidewalks, and bridges were constructed by laborers whose wages in turn cycled into the economy, refloating it from the bottom rather than waiting for cash to trickle down from on high to those most urgently in need.

New Deal agencies similarly came to the aid of public education from kindergarten to the university level. Scarcely a town in California lacks a school built or improved by the WPA or the PWA. Many of these new schools replaced ramshackle, crowded, and inadequate structures with modern fire- and earthquake-resistant facilities that boasted science labs, libraries, cafeterias, kitchens, athletic facilities, and multiuse auditoriums that quickly became community centers. A panel of architects tasked by



The Sunshine School in San Francisco, built by the PWA. President

Roosevelt to select the best PWA projects in the country flatly stated, “Some of the best architecturally outstanding buildings in all types may be found in California,” and singled out the state’s public schools for special praise.

After hearing about the Living New Deal project, a seventy-seven-year-old man wrote me to say that his Watsonville elementary school “had features we would never have enjoyed if the local taxpayers had to foot the bill.” The redwood basketball arena at Watsonville High, he said, “was the pride of all who attended” the school. He recalled the joy of hearing live classical music played by a WPA Symphony Orchestra in that auditorium, so I sent him a photograph that I’d scanned at the National Archives of school children enjoying a concert. He responded, “I’m sure I’m somewhere in that crowd.”



Mosaic on the old university art gallery at UC Berkeley, created by the WPA.

In less than six years, WPA labor and PWA funding built entire campuses such as the community colleges at Santa Rosa, Long Beach, San Francisco, Pasadena, Santa Barbara, Fullerton, and Los Angeles. The PWA built a state-of-the-art orthopedic school for crippled and malnourished children in San Francisco's Mission District. Not only did the Sunshine School feature ramps and elevators now mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act, it was richly embellished with elaborate Spanish tiles, stenciled ceilings, and Moorish light fixtures. Such aesthetic considerations were no accident. "Everything possible has been done to create the most cheerful possible atmosphere in order to encourage the children to forget as far as possible their disabilities," noted the authors of a report on the best PWA projects.

The National Youth Administration (NYA) provided work-study jobs so that students could complete their education, as well as vocational training. CCC "boys," who were mostly young, uneducated, and unskilled, reconstructed Mission La Purissima Concepcion in Lompoc from the ruins left by an earthquake, while WPA workers restored General Vallejo's home in Sonoma, although they left no marker to remind the future they had done so. The New Deal agencies did not just employ unskilled workers such as those in the CCC and the Civil Works Administration (CWA), the precursor of the WPA; the New Deal also put to work thousands of teachers, educational aides, librarians, nutritionists, bookbinders, conservators, translators, and recreational supervisors—and it put them to work in newly built public libraries, museums, zoos, and park visitors' centers.

The WPA's Federal Art Project (FAP) commissioned artists to embellish existing and new schools with murals, sculpture, and easel paintings. Some of that artwork—such as Jacques Schnier's gigantic relief of Saint George slaying the dragon of ignorance at Berkeley High School—is accessible to the public. However, security concerns have rendered many New Deal works, such as a magnificent wood inlay panorama of Bakersfield at East Bakersfield High School, invisible. California's public schools represent a vast and largely unknown reservoir of art created during the Great Depression. The Living New Deal relies on teachers, principals, and custodians to alert and send us photos of paintings, sculptures, and even, as at San Jose's Hoover Middle School, stained glass windows hidden within their schools. Another federal agency—the Treasury Section of Fine Arts—was responsible for the thousands of murals and sculptures in post offices and other federal structures.



The Redlands Post Office, funded by the US Treasury.

The New Deal built few prisons but many schools, in the belief that it is far better and cheaper for the nation and communities to educate their young rather than to punish them. WPA bureaucrats were deeply concerned with juvenile delinquency at a time when job prospects for young men were even bleaker than now—and they foresaw the need for leisure activities once the economy improved—so they built public tennis courts, ball fields, golf courses, and swimming pools, most of which are still in heavy use. In San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, for example, the WPA built public stables, a model yacht clubhouse, and one of the finest fly-casting facilities in the country, thereby making available to everyone sports previously available only to the well-to-do. Near the summit of Mount Tamalpais State Park, CCC work crews moved lichen-encrusted boulders to create the open-air Mountain Theater, while in the Oakland hills WPA crews built the Woodminster amphitheater with a magnificent water cascade and fountains dedicated to California’s writers.



Long Beach Municipal Airport terminal building, built by the WPA.

An elderly woman involved in the Federal Theater Project told me that those few years constituted “the most creative period in American history.” FDR’s critics dismissed the New Deal’s public works projects as “boondoggles.” But far from being wasteful, New Deal projects were carefully monitored and remarkably free of scandal despite intense scrutiny from political opponents. The long-term payoff from this public investment helped propel American economic growth after World War II and much of it is still working for the American people today.

In 2010, we expanded the Living New Deal to the whole country in order to inventory, map, and publicize the achievements of the New Deal in all fifty states and US territories. We knew this expansion would require a rapid scaling up of the project, including its web presence, project team, and financing. First, the website was completely overhauled by new programmer Ben Hass. Second, the project team had to grow, so we

added a communications expert, Susan Ives, a fundraising consultant, Adam Kinsey, and oral historian and book review editor, Sam Redman, among others. Meanwhile, our research assistants, Shaina Potts and John Elrick, were adding to the database and map, mostly from published documents on the New Deal, ramping up to more than two thousand sites by the summer of 2012.[4]



A Yosemite restroom, built by the CCC.

The new fundraising team raised our income substantially, allowing us to leap to a much greater organizational capacity. We were able to hire a new project manager, Rachel Brahinsky, who lent a whole new dynamism to our team of stalwarts and who made a concerted outreach to locate researchers around the country to help us locate New Deal public-works sites.[5] As her efforts bore fruit, we created a national network of regional associates in Maryland, Virginia, Wisconsin, Tennessee, Texas, Mississippi, and Southern California. By mid-2013, the project had a dozen research associates around the country, and that number grew to a

total of thirty in more than half the states by 2014. Our search for research affiliates in all fifty states continues as more people discover the Living New Deal on the Web, Facebook, and Twitter, and as they contact us to volunteer.

In 2013, Barbara Bernstein agreed to merge her magnificent crowd-sourced website, The New Deal Art Registry, into the Living New Deal database. With that addition and a surge in new submissions from our associates' network, our database leapt to five thousand sites by late 2013. It was receiving around five thousand unique visits each week—a doubling of the archive and public access over the previous year. We are well on the way to doubling both totals again in 2014.



Relief sculpture on Berkeley High School, created by the WPA.

Because these public works are rarely marked, the New Deal's ongoing contribution to American life goes largely unseen. Millions of Americans use the New Deal's parks, libraries, and schools every day; for the most

part, they are completely unaware of where they came from and what they represent. Given the epic scale of what was achieved during the Roosevelt years, it seems inconceivable that no national register exists of what the New Deal agencies built.

We stand on the shoulders of giants who include not only Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and the ingenious and compassionate men and women they gathered around themselves, but also the millions of anonymous workers who transformed a nation facing economic calamity before they turned their energies to fighting World War II. The Living New Deal is making visible their enduring legacy.

California historian and former State Librarian Kevin Starr has likened the Living New Deal to a WPA project from the 1930s in its ambition and scope. Like the WPA, the national inventory is actively involving ordinary Americans in the fascinating detective work of assembling history from scratch, rediscovering and mapping a lost landscape of our own making. As a lifelong Californian, I'm proud to say that, like so much else, it started here in the Golden State.

Far from an antiquarian exercise, the Living New Deal aims to help preserve precious art and architecture from destruction or privatization, to see that New Deal sites are properly marked, and to help communities and families across the nation rediscover their heritage. Moreover, the New Deal legacy could be a model for the present. The economic crisis that began in 2008 invited many comparisons with the Great Depression of the 1930s, along with calls for similar government programs to revive the economy and relieve the severe unemployment and financial suffering of millions of Americans. The latest crisis was centered in California, and the Golden State felt the effects worse than any other part of the United States: the state's unemployment rate hovered near 10 percent, wages stagnated, deficits bankrupted local governments, home foreclosures were epidemic, and overall economic growth was anemic. Unlike the Great Depression, however, government programs shrank, infrastructure continued to decay, and the richest 1 percent gained a larger share of the state's wealth.[6]



San Bernardino Mission Assistencia, restored by the WPA.

A new New Deal, which many people hoped President Barack Obama might launch, could have helped enormously, but what we got was a weak imitation.[7] A common mistake, even among historians and economists, is to think that the Great Depression was ended only by the buildup to World War II. We now have clear evidence that the economy revived smartly from 1933 onward, despite a setback in 1937, with growth rates of 5 to 9 percent per year. By 1942, it was already back to the level it would have attained had there been no depression. This era also saw the greatest rise in the productivity rate in American history. World War II's main contribution to ending the Depression was to absorb the remaining unemployed labor. Prior to the crash of 1929, the United States was poised to become the world's dominant economy. The meme so often repeated during the Great Recession that FDR's New Deal was a well-meaning but ineffective (or worse) effort to revive the economy before the war smashed those of its competitors is simply wrong.[8]

The legacy of the New Deal has much to teach us about farsighted leadership and what can be achieved when our country rallies to serve the needs of ordinary people in troubled times. The New Deal not only pulled the country out of economic doldrums, it left a long-term foundation of physical and cultural infrastructure that underwrote a golden age of American prosperity after World War II. What is more, the New Deal provides an example of what positive government can achieve when it invests in public works and policies that serve the collective good. Government can, indeed, work for all the people by putting people to work and restoring meaning to their lives while building things of beauty, such as elegant buildings embellished with public art, that improve the lives of all who use them. It's our hope that the Living New Deal will continue to remind Americans of the tangible evidence of what this country once had and did, as well as to inspire us to build the parks, bridges, schools, libraries, and artistic endeavors that researchers eighty years hence will eagerly track down.

Notes

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First image by Flickr user Waltarrrrr; all others by the author.

1 A valuable companion work, which I discovered later, is Jason Scott Smith's *New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933–1956* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Smith is a former Berkeley history student.

2 This was the work of the excellent programmers, Elizabeth del Rocio Camacho and Heather Lynch, at the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment at UCB.

3 Lindsey Dillon and Shaina Potts, graduate students in geography at UCB, have earned my deepest gratitude for all they have done over the years. Without their intelligence and hard work, we would have floundered long ago.

4 The project and its server also moved to the Department of Geography, where it is still housed. We have recently gained nonprofit status to operate off-campus, as well.

5 Funded by a bequest by Ann Baumann of New Mexico (daughter of New Deal artist Gustave Baumann) through the National New Deal Preservation Association. Rachel's good work has been followed up by Alex Tarr, our current Project Manager.

6 On California's central role in the Great Recession, see Ashok Bardhan and Richard Walker, "California Shrugged: The Fountainhead of the Great Recession," *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 4:3 (2011): 303–22. Nevada and Arizona had higher rates of foreclosure and unemployment, but they have much smaller economies and their fortunes are closely tied to California.

7 Obama's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act actually did help, along with massive injections of money by the Federal Reserve Bank, which is why the United States has done better since 2009 than Europe under German-led austerity.

8 Christina Romer, "What Ended the Great Depression?" *Journal of Economic History* 52: 4 (1992): 757–84. Alexander Field, *A Great Leap Forward: The 1930s Depression and US Economic Growth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).