

## Digging Out of the Great Depression



CCC Company 3475, Camp F-2 at Danville near the Alabama (now Bankhead) National Forest. Photograph courtesy Robert Pasquill Jr.

### Federal Programs at Work

This new photographic exhibit explores federal programs designed to cut relief rolls and to ameliorate the lives of residents of the greater Birmingham area during the 1930s. Diverse programs employed more than 24,000 persons and expended more than \$1 billion in today's dollars.

The Works Progress Administration (WPA), the nation's largest employer in this era, put more than 9,000 persons to work in Jefferson County on myriad projects. They sealed abandoned coal mines; improved streets, roads, and bridges; and built highways, airport runways, and sanitary sewers. They improved schools and greatly expanded recreational facilities at schools and at state and local parks, playgrounds, and athletic fields. They built health and TB clinics and public buildings. They operated sewing rooms to make clothing and house wares for needy families.

There were many other federal relief programs. The Public Works Administration (PWA), a bricks and mortar arm of the Department of the Interior, funded the Industrial Waterworks System through Inland Lake (an expenditure which includes WPA labor estimated at a \$94 million value in today's funds) and Jefferson Tower at today's UAB Medical Center (a \$34.5 million dollar project in today's funds). The PWA and the Housing Authority built Smithfield, Elyton, and other public housing projects totaling 2,566 units, representing possibly the largest of the local, federal expenditures. "Roosevelt's Tree Army," the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) worked at nearby Oak Mountain and Cheaha State Parks and built today's Moundville Archaeological Park. At a cost of \$53.3 million dollars in today's funds, the Resettlement Administration built four new communities at Greenwood, Mt. Olive, Palmerdale, and Trussville. With the National Park Service, the RA also built a Recreational Demonstration Area at Oak Mountain State Park. RA photographers, including Walker Evans, Thomas Hibben Jr., Carl Mydans, Arthur Rothstein, and Marion Post Wolcott, provided a superb record of federal initiatives here.

Clearly, Alabama's politicians and citizens were committed to bringing federal dollars to our community. The bankers, clergy, and businessmen who headed up the local Civil Works Administration (CWA) noted at their opening meeting that they "wanted to get all the federal funds they could." The pages from their final report scrapbook, *shown in the exhibit*, demonstrate what they accomplished, in just five months, with a federal infusion valued at \$39.3 million in today's dollars. The exhibit provides superb demonstration of lots of other federal programs at work.

### EVENTS AT THE LIBRARY

#### Digging Out of the Great Depression Federal Programs at Work

An Exhibition of more than 200 photographs  
from the 1930s and today

November 1-December 31, 2009. Library Gallery

The exhibition is sponsored by the  
Birmingham Historical Society and the  
Birmingham Public Library  
with the financial support of the Alabama Humanities  
Foundation—a State Program of the  
National Endowment for the Humanities  
and the Daniel Foundation of Alabama.

#### BPL Online Exhibit

[http://www.bplonline.org/Resources/Exhibits/New\\_deal/](http://www.bplonline.org/Resources/Exhibits/New_deal/)

#### Brown Bag Lunch Program

*Digging into the Depression* with exhibition curators

Katherine Tipton and Marjorie White

Wednesday, October 28, Noon, Arrington Auditorium.

#### Opening Lecture

*A Great and Lasting Good-The Civilian Conservation Corps  
in the Birmingham Area* with exhibition curators

Robert Pasquill Jr., CCC historian and U.S. Forest  
Service archeologist, and Brian Rushing, Director of  
Land Acquisition, Fresh Water Land Trust

Sunday, November 1, 2 p.m., Arrington Auditorium.

#### Exhibition Opening Reception & Book Signing

Robert Pasquill Jr., Sunday, November 1, 3-5 p.m.,  
Library Gallery and Board Room.

Pasquill will sign copies of his new book: *The Civilian  
Conservation Corps in Alabama, 1933-1942—A Great and  
Lasting Good*, recently published by the Alabama Press  
and available for sale for \$29.95 plus tax.

Copies of the *WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama* will also be  
for sale for \$24.95 plus tax as well as the Society's 2009  
publications: *Mountain Brook Village-Then & Now* and  
*D.O. Whilldin-Alabama Architect*.

# The Alphabet Agencies

During the 1930s, Acts of Congress and Presidential Executive Orders established so many new agencies that they became known by their initials. “Digging Out of the Great Depression” illustrates the local work of the following agencies:

**April 1933-1942, Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)** established a work relief program for more than 3 million men from unemployed families who planted trees, built structures, and fought fires in the nation’s forests and parks. *The CCC’s closest projects to Birmingham were at Oak Mountain and Cheaha State Parks and at today’s Moundville Archaeological Park near Tuscaloosa.*

**June 1933, National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA)** authorized the President to regulate industry and permit cartels and monopolies. The act also guaranteed labor the right to organize and bargain collectively. *An amendment sponsored by Alabama Senator John Bankhead created the Subsistence Homestead program.*

**June 1933-1943, Public Works Administration (PWA)** spent \$4 billion on federal, state, and local construction projects, funding educational buildings, courthouses, public art, sewage-disposal plants, waterworks and public health facilities, and streets and roads. *The major Birmingham projects were the Industrial Waterworks System at Inland Lake; the Jefferson Hospital, now part of UAB; and public housing projects, the first at Smithfield and Elyton.*

## What New Deal landmarks remain?

- Bessemer City Hall
- Fairfield City Hall
- Fish hatchery, lodge, and picnic shelters at today’s Birmingham Zoo
- Greenwood, Mt. Olive, Palmerdale, and Cahaba Village at Trussville
- Industrial waterworks system, now part of the Birmingham Waterworks system
- McAdory High School
- Moundville Archaeological Park
- Oak Mountain and Cheaha State Park improvements
- Rosedale School, now the Islamic Academy of Alabama
- Scores of additions to Birmingham and county schools, especially auditorium, class- and lunch room wings, and recreational amenities.
- Slossfield Negro Youth Training Center
- Smithfield Court, Elyton Village, and Southtown housing projects
- State Training School for Girls, Chalkville
- Stone structures in local and state parks
- TB Sanatorium, now Lakeshore Foundation
- Vulcan Monument and Park



PWA: Jefferson Hospital, now Jefferson Tower and a part of the UAB Medical Center since 1945. Courtesy BPL Archives.



CWA: Sewer Work, Third Avenue. Courtesy Alabama Dept. of Archives and History.

**October 1933-March 31, 1934, Civil Works Administration (CWA)**, a five-month program, employed 4 million people in the construction of roads, schools, playgrounds, airports, and sewers. *The program spent over a billion dollars nationally. The CWA employed 15,000 persons in Jefferson County in public works projects.*

**1933-present, Historic American Building Survey (HABS)** began a make-work program for unemployed architects to develop measured drawings of pre-1860 architecture. *HABS documented the Walker, Worthington, and Mudd Plantation houses in Birmingham.*

**April 1935-1943, Works Progress Association-Administration (WPA)**, name changed to Works Project Administration in 1939, employed more than 8.5 million persons in communities across the nation to work on 19 types of potentially fundable activities, including improving streets, roads, and schools and building highways, bridges, airports, water systems, and parks. *The WPA employed 9,000 persons in Jefferson County on public works projects valued at \$690 million in today’s dollars. A partial list of local projects follows.*

**April 1935-present, Resettlement Administration (RA), later Farm Security Administration (FSA), now Farmers Home Administration** attempted to improve the lifestyle of sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and the rural poor by resettling them on large government-owned farms that used modern



WPA: TB Sanatorium, now Lakeshore Foundation. Courtesy BPL Archives.

techniques and expert supervisors. *One activity set up 34 subsistence homestead communities under the guidance of government experts, four of them in the Birmingham area at Greenwood, Mt. Olive, Palmydale, and Trussville. Federal photographers documented these communities.*

**June 1935-1943, National Youth Administration (NYA)**, a part of the WPA, provided vocational educational programs for adult learners and work to keep other students in school. Aubrey Williams from Alabama headed the program. *The NYA was active at the Slossfield Clinic in North Birmingham and the Snow Rodgers and other community centers.*

**1930s and 1940s, Recreational Demonstration Area (RDA)** program was a National Park Service program that built and staffed 46 public parks in 24 states, chiefly near urban areas. *Oak Mountain State Park included an original Recreational Demonstration Area with a group camp in the area about the lake that was created at this time.*



NYA/WPA: Slossfield Community Center. Courtesy BPL Archives.

**1937, United States Housing Authority (USHA)** was designed to lend funds to states or communities for the low-cost construction of public housing. The Housing Act of 1937 provided for the establishment, through state law, of local public housing authorities to build, own, and operate housing. *In 1938, Smithfield Court became the first Birmingham project and was followed by Elyton Village in 1940. These were built with PWA funds. By April 1943, additional housing projects at Central City, Southtown, and Eastwood provided Birmingham 2,566 total public housing units, valued at \$213 million in today's dollars.*

Five-room house, Southern colonial style, at Palmydale Homesteads near Birmingham, Alabama. Photograph by Carl Mydans, June 1936. Courtesy Library of Congress Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection.



FSA-RA: "Steelmills near Birmingham, Alabama." Photograph and caption by Walker Evans. Courtesy Library of Congress Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photograph Collection..

# A List of Major WPA Projects, 1935-1941

## City Streets

\$6.8 million

- Improve streets in Birmingham, Bessemer, Cahaba Village at Trussville, Fairfield, Homewood, Leeds, Lipscomb, Irondale, Tarrant, and Warrior.
- Improve streets including grading, surfacing, constructing sidewalks, curbs, gutters and necessary drainage work. *Surfacing materials include tar, tar and slag, slag, bit., concrete, and brick.*
- Repair brick pavement, taking up paving and relaying brick on sand cushions.
- Produce slag for base material, bit., and concrete material for use on WPA project, operating "borrow" pits and chert pits.
- Resurface alleys.
- Beautify public drives.
- Set street markers at intersections on city-owned property. *The Birmingham city engineer provided the specifications and supervised the project.*

## Federal Allocations for WPA Projects in Jefferson County, 1935-1941

Discovering what happened at the local level is a challenge. WPA funds were given to counties and their departments of public health and public welfare, but also to cities, school boards, park boards, as well as the state highway department, archives, department of health, and geological survey for work in individual counties. Total federal allocations were tracked by state.

WPA funds were for wages only. Local funds provided materials and a match if required. In today's dollars, a local worker paid \$6.00 a day on a road building project would earn the equivalent weekly salary of \$470. WPA jobs were not full-time jobs, nor were they permanent jobs. They did pay well.

WPA projects for Jefferson County are identified on index cards preserved on microfilm in the Birmingham Public Library Archives. From transcription of the microfilm, the following list of major projects and total expenditures has been compiled. While the index cards do not always identify individual projects, they do present the fullest picture available of the WPA's employment relief efforts here.

## WPA Allocations in Jefferson County

Categories	Millions of Dollars
City Streets	6.8
County Roads	5.2
Public Welfare	4.9
Public Buildings/Administration	4.9
Schools	4.5
Parks	3.7
Industrial Waterworks	3.4
Drainage/Sanitary Sewers	2.9
Public Health	1.9
State and Federal Highways	1.0
Military	.7
Aviation	.6
<b>Total Allocation</b>	<b>\$44.3 million*</b>

\* \$690 million in today's dollars

## County Roads

\$5.2 million

- Improve roads, grading, draining, surfacing, straightening, widening, constructing, and reconstructing bridges and culverts on county and privately owned property. Work on private property includes detours, drainage ditches, and cleaning roadsides.
- Bridge construction and repair.

## Public Welfare

\$4.9 million

- Sewing Rooms. Provide employment for needy persons in the maintenance and operation of sewing rooms. Products will be distributed free of charge to charitable institutions, or to the needy. Approximately 20 hours per month will be spent in training in methods of childcare and household management, total allocations to Birmingham and Jefferson County, \$3 million.
- Make mattresses by hand from government surplus cotton and ticking, distribute to needy families.
- Weave rugs and other household items for free distribution to charitable institutions.
- Renovate donated furniture to be donated to needy families free.
- Repair, renovate clothing, mattresses, tents, cots, shoes, household supplies, and goods donated by federal government and local public institutions.
- Make toys and gifts from purchased materials, \$675,000, 1/36; make and repair cloth, wooden, and composition toys for free distribution in the City of Birmingham, 11/39, \$343,404.
- County-wide. Furnish free home assistance in housework and care of children in the houses of the needy where the homemaker is totally or partially incapacitated because of ill health or confinement, or in case of temporary emergency, 8/38, \$112,498.

## Public Buildings/ Administration

\$4.9 million

### Public Buildings and Grounds, \$2 million

- Bessemer City Hall Addition and Auditorium.
- Completion of the Birmingham Municipal Auditorium.
- Improvements at Cedar Hill and Oak Hill Cemeteries.
- Slossfield Negro Youth Training Center; Administration, Clinic, Education, and Recreational Buildings (*North Birmingham*).
- Snow Rogers Community Center (*near Gardendale*).
- Birmingham City Street and Garbage Department Stable and Garage, 1940.
- Additions to Birmingham's Southside Jail.
- A community house and auditorium at East Lake.
- Municipal Building, Fairfield, 1940.
- Brick and stone jail, welfare building, fire station building, Leeds.
- Street decorations, permanent float chassis, costumes, and parade equipment to be used by sponsor (the City of Birmingham) in the decoration of streets and parks.

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## Public Administration, \$2.9 million

- Conduct studies for the Housing Authority of the Birmingham District: 1. a **real property survey of the metropolitan area** of Birmingham, land use, land coverage and type, construction, condition, facilities, rental value, # of persons per room of dwelling units and structures. Data on family income within a limited area also collated and tabulated. Results will provide up-to-date information on substandard housing, vacancies, doubling up income levels, and other matters necessary for developing plans for low-rent housing and slum clearance as well as other types of zoning. 2. A **study of the demand for low rent housing** in Birmingham, Bessemer, Brighton, Fairfield, Homewood, Irondale, Tarrant, and Jefferson County for the Housing Authority of the Birmingham District cost, \$850,000.
- Inventory, catalog, index, and transcribe archival materials.
- Prepare maps of sanitary sewers, tunnels, water mains, service lines, manholes and catch basins.
- Provide employment for needy professionals, educational and clerical persons who will assist in organizing library services for the Birmingham Public Library, indexing, typing cards, and copying records and reports.
- Prepare a study of juvenile delinquency.
- Index Jefferson County Circuit Court records, Sheriff's execution dockets, case records of the Court of Domestic Relations and Juvenile Court, and a record of prisoners received and discharged from the county jail, 1895-1935.
- For the county, prepare report on expenditures, 1921-1935; install a new record and procedure for taking and maintaining an inventory of equipment and supplies owned by the county.
- For the county, install a new record and procedure for real property evaluation for tax assessment purposes by preparing and revising records of real property, etc. 41% sponsor funds. *Today these **tax assessor records**, located at BPL Archives, provide researchers valuable documentation on historic properties, including photographs from the late 1930s.*

## Schools

**\$4.5 million**

- **Birmingham schools**, painting and repairs to all elementary and high schools; new construction of the Snow Rogers School and a community house; additions to Industrial High (Parker), Ramsey High (auditorium, cafeteria, classrooms), and West End High School (auditorium, cafeteria, and home economics wing); conversion of existing buildings for Tuggle, Lincoln, and South Highland Schools; additions to Barrett, Belview Heights, Council, Curry, Gibson (amphitheatre seats), Graymont, Minnie Holman, Inglenook, Lakeview, Lincoln, 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue, 30<sup>th</sup> Street, Tuggle, Wilson, and Woodlawn Schools; WPA-NYA additions to Public School Buildings; facilities improvement at Alley, Baker, Council, Gate City, Gorgas, and West End Schools; school lunch program, \$2 million.
- **Jefferson County schools**, repairs to more than 135 schools: new schools at McAdory and Gardendale; additions to Riley, Gardendale, Huffman, and Hooper City Schools; improvements to grounds and athletic facilities, including landscaping, draining, constructing driveways, walkways, walls, steps, and curbs; cleaning, grubbing, excavating, installing drainage facilities, sodding, planting grass and shrubs; school lunch program, \$1.7 million.
- **Fairfield**, repairs, additions to several schools, a new high school at 59th Street; athletic fields, stadium, bleacher seats at Fairfield High School.

- **Homewood**, construct Rosedale School.
- **Tarrant High School**, addition.
- **Warrior**, school auditorium, landscape grounds.
- **Alabama Boy's Industrial School at Roebuck**, additions to existing campus, \$184,000.
- **Alabama Training School for Girls at Chalkville**, construction of a new campus, \$506,631.
- Draining, grading, and **landscaping school grounds** at city and county schools.
- Improvements to **school playgrounds and athletic facilities**, including constructing bleacher seats, walks, landscaping, steps, backstops, tennis courts, and drives and operating **quarries** to produce materials for use on this project.
- **School lunch** program for needy students in Jefferson County, 1937-38, \$54,435.
- Support to school administrative personnel.
- Bind, rebind, and repair books; make and repair window shades, renovate bus cushions, clean, scrape, sand, and varnish school furniture and equipment, plant shrubbery and trim trees on school grounds, repaint interior and replaster schools.

## Parks

**\$3.7 million**

- **Oak Mountain State Park**, \$.8 million (*for the Recreational Demonstrational area, not including the CCC improvements, these allocations to Jefferson and Shelby Counties, \$.8 million.*)
- **Birmingham Parks**, \$1.7 million, improvements to Avondale, East Lake, Lane, McLendon, Woodrow Wilson and 24 other parks, build 4 swimming pools, improve playgrounds, build 20 roller skating rinks, construct a community center in Central Park, improve Municipal Stadium (*Legion Field*).
- Improve drainage and build masonry dams on the Roebuck Springs Golf Course (*Hawkins Park*).
- Improve **parks throughout the city**, work includes construction of recreation facilities, shelter buildings, walks, bleacher seats, and baseball diamonds, surfacing tennis courts, opening quarries to produce materials for use in the project.
- Construct **fish hatchery basins** in Lane Park (*today's zoo ponds*).
- Construct a **concrete shaft** and move and **erect Vulcan statue** in Park on Red Mountain, near Birmingham (*today's Vulcan Park*).
- Fairfield, a **colored playground**, \$60,000.
- To Birmingham, Bessemer, Homewood, Leeds, and Jefferson County funds for **park and playground staff**.

## Waterwork

**\$3.5 million**

- **The Industrial Waterworks System** Construct a Distribution Reservoir and Distribution Line for the Birmingham Industrial Water Supply System located in Jefferson County, near Mt. Pinson, and the opening and operating of a limestone quarry, stone crushers, and screens for furnishing stone and [illegible] for impounding the Dam for the above system located in Blount Co., near Inland. Quarry is a public quarry, work on public property in addition to projects specifically approved. No local match. Funded 12/35, 10/36, 4/37, 2/38.
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WATERWORKS (continued)

- Construct water system for Pleasant Grove.
- Construct waterline to children's fresh air camp, located 7 miles south of Birmingham on Shades Mt.

**Drainage/Sanitary Sewers**

**\$2.9 million**

- Citywide **storm water drainage and sanitary sewer construction** projects in Birmingham, Bessemer, Homewood, Leeds, and Tarrant City. Typical project included excavating, cleaning, grussing, constructing manholes, drainage ditches, culverts, and retaining walls; deepening, widening and straightening banks and shaping canals and ditches. Grade, clean, slope banks and rip-rap masonry for ditches.
- Projects mentioned by name:
  - Cahaba River at Leeds, deepened, widened, straightened.
  - Greenwood Homestead, drainage canals and ditches straightened and shaped.
  - Village Creek Canal, widened and straightened.
  - Sanitary sewers in Enon Ridge, Ensley, Hollywood sections of Homewood, Hyde Park Settlement, Milner Heights, Mountain Brook Estates, near Powderly, Titusville, Trotwood district, and Wylam.

**Public Health**

**\$1.9 million**

- Abandoned coal mines were sealed to prevent spillage into area water supplies.
- Hillman Hospital Clinic for needy patients was constructed and staffed by needy physicians and nurses. \$400,000. *Until the completion of the Jefferson Hospital (now Tower) in 1940 (funded by the Public Works Administration-PWA), Hillman was the principal hospital providing services to indigent persons.*
- **TB Clinics and the Sanatorium Building** (the latter at today's Lakeshore Foundation in Homewood) were constructed and staffed by needy nurses and doctors.
- Conduct a **public health education program**, lecturing before civic groups; promoting and organizing local study groups; preparing, delivering, and distributing copies of a series of radio health talks; preparing and distributing health pamphlets, posters, recordings for phonographs and radio use, and preparing and displaying health exhibits.
- Clean and spray vacant lots to **prevent mosquito and rodent breeding.**

- Prepare an inventory and **record of dogs** in Jefferson County, showing the names and addresses of owners, number and breed, sex and age, and date of immunization or inoculation against rabies. To aid in controlling and preventing rabies.
- Transcribe **birth and death records.**
- **Survey blighted areas** to determine cost of necessary sewers and health improvements.
- Investigate coagulation of sewage using salt.

**State and Federal Highways**

**\$1.0 million**

- Improve US 31 including surfacing and shoulders.
- Grade, drain, and improve US 31 from North Birmingham to Lewisburg, 1936.
- **Improve US 31** from Homewood to top of Shades Mountain, **operate borrow pits.**
- **Improve US 11** on First Avenue from 85<sup>th</sup> Street to Cozy Corner.
- **Improve Third Avenue.**
- **Improve state highway from Avondale to Irondale**, operate borrow pits to produce materials.
- Improve county-owned road from Shades Tavern to Walkers Gap and from Green Springs to Avenue G in Birmingham.

**Military**

**\$.7 million**

- **National Guard armories** were built at McLendon Park (the **Graymont Armory**) and Lewisburg. At the Municipal Airport, an administrative building, taxiways, and a hanger were built. Armory additions, truck sheds, and rifle ranges were also built at locations not identified.

**Aviation**

**\$.6 million**

- **Roberts Field** was improved and a hanger, shop, garage, groundwork, runways and lighting were built at the **Birmingham Municipal Airport.** Airports were built at Bessemer and Warrior.

*Special thanks to the following for their help with the exhibit:*  
 Robert Pasquill Jr., Brian Rushing, Katherine Tipton, and Marjorie White. Exhibit Designer is Scott Fuller. BPL On-line Exhibition Curator is Elizabeth Swift. Special Assistance: Renee Blaylock, Director, Birmingham Public Library, and Library staff including Don Veasey, Jim Baggett, Kelsey Bates, Frank Golden, Gigi Gowdy, Sandi Lee, Ben Petersen, Melina Shelton, Yolanda Valentin, and Linda Wilson.

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