New Deal Programs and Race, Class, and Ethnicity: A Resource Guide

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Introduction

Historically, the state of the American economy during a presidential term has played a crucial role in whether or not a standing president wins re-election. As a result, economic crises that are not quickly and effectively dealt with can catastrophically impact the popularity of the sitting President. Such was the case with President Herbert Hoover whose lackluster response to the economic devastation of the Great Depression resulted in a devastating loss to the Democratic candidate, Franklin D. Roosevelt. During the presidential campaign of 1932, Roosevelt pledged a “new deal” for the American people in order to deal with the widespread economic problems caused by the Great Depression. After winning the presidential election of 1932, President Roosevelt quickly introduced a wide range of New Deal programs in 1933.

The Roosevelt administration designed these programs to address three main aspects of the Great Depression. First, these programs were meant to provide relief to unemployed and poverty-stricken Americans. Second, the New Deal programs aimed to reinvigorate the economy. Finally, these programs were meant to reform banking practices in the hopes of preventing another devastating stock market crash in the future. This tripartite approach proved to be both popular and modestly successful. However, the administration struggled to provide equal access to these opportunities across racial, ethnic, and gendered lines and many New Deal initiatives were disposed of or had funding revoked upon the United States’ entry into World War II as priorities shifted away from relief programs and toward a focus on mobilization.

This resource guide examines five New Deal programs introduced to address issues of employment and infrastructure during the Great Depression. The guide will provide students an overview of these programs as well as highlighting resources on race and ethnicity that they can use in their own research. ProQuest has a vast repository of New Deal documentation from the Roosevelt administration that follows New Deal agencies from their conception to their retirement. In addition, ProQuest’s archive of Congressional hearings gives students a unique window into the changing political attitudes toward these programs as they are continuously put up for renewal votes in Congress. These resources highlight the racial and gendered tensions surrounding New Deal program implementation and problems concerning equitable access to land ownership, access to relief programs, and educating the public about who was eligible for relief and how to apply. These resources also demonstrate the ways that New Deal programs were integrated into American society and reflect the larger cultural contextual changes that occurred from the Great Depression through World War II. Through these resources, students will be introduced to the consequences of the sharecropping system and the disadvantages Black farmers faced in their attempts to
make use of New Deal programs. Students will also learn about the Farm Security Administration’s role in Japanese American internment and property re-distribution. This exploration of progressive policymaking and the New Deal era reveals important trends in American history that can benefit students interested in the history of race, ethnicity, gender, and Great Depression and World War II era America. Additionally, students can utilize the resources in this guide to examine the United States government’s history of responding to economic crises. How popular or effective have indirect relief programs been in the United States? What kinds of equity problems have historically existed in relief programs in the United States? How do economic crises continue to shape the relationship between the federal government and its citizens long after the crisis has passed?

**Topic 1:**

**Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)**

The CCC was created by the Roosevelt administration in 1933 to address the rampant unemployment in the United States during the Great Depression. CCC workers were contracted to perform manual labor directed toward the conservation of natural resources on state and federal properties. Many communities across the United States benefited from the program and the improvements made to state and federal parks and recreation areas are still evident today, especially in southern and western United States. These camps enrolled Black men, but often housed them in segregated camps. The CCC provided workers room and board as well as a monthly salary of roughly $30, a portion of which was sent home to family. This program was intended for young men (18-25) and around 3 million young men had participated by 1942. The CCC was disbanded in 1942 when opponents worried that the CCC might inhibit enlistment for World War II.

**Secondary Sources:**

**Books:**


  - This book uses oral interviews in addition to written sources to link the CCC to the Midwest and forestry. The author also details the land prior to CCC ‘improvements’ as a method of showing CCC changes to the land.


  - The New Deal program can easily be traced from region to region in the US. This book addresses the work the CCC did in Alabama and includes a chapter on the WPA project, the Tennessee Valley Authority.

**Primary Sources:**

**Magazine and Newspaper Articles:**


  - This is a news article published in 1935 that spells out the future of the CCC, given that it was set to expire in April. The emphasis on the CCC as a youth organization is high and the author positively compares the CCC to youth organizations in Russia, Germany, and Italy.
° This article is a kind of advertisement targeting Black youth to apply to the CCC. It specifically mentions that prior Black CCC members gained weight and received special job training.

° This article makes the assertion that the CCC strike in New Jersey, which began as backlash against poor camp conditions, was funded by ‘external sources’ in the form of money orders. The article supposes that communist ‘Reds’ were to blame and states that the agitators have been removed from camp.

° In addition to work projects, the CCC often had voluntary recreational activities for participants. Oftentimes, these leagues meant playing against local ball clubs and organizations and thereby integrating the CCC with the community it served. This article details one such game where CCC members refused to play against a woman pitcher. New Deal programs were fraught with gendered conceptions of respectability and sex divisions were taken very seriously.

° This is a Canadian newspaper snippet about the hearing in the United States Congress over whether to continue the CCC beyond its original allotment. Senator Kenneth McKellar worries that the CCC is “making mollycoddles” out of young men and helping them avoid war work.
Hearings in ProQuest Congressional:

  
  This Senate hearing considers the question of whether or not to make the CCC a permanent institution. The hearing includes information on enrollment numbers in the CCC.

  
  CCC work was often very difficult and could be dangerous. Because of this, enrollees were often injured. This hearing addressed how to compensate these injuries and deaths because this loss was felt not only in grief, but in the pocketbook of already impoverished American families.

  
  This hearing focused on concerns that young men should be doing war work and not CCC/NYA projects. The CCC was discontinued in 1942 to divert funds and manpower back to war effort.

Primary Source Collections in ProQuest History Vault:

  
  This folder of CCC press releases includes a release from June 29, 1939 that summarizes the CCC's work accomplishments during its first six years through April 1, 1939. In the release, CCC Director Robert Fechner noted these rather impressive statistics: "Included among the many projects completed by the Corps were the planting of 1,741,000,000 trees, the construction of 104,000 miles of truck trails or minor roads, the erection of 71,692 miles of telephone lines, the construction of 40,000 bridges, the construction of more than 45,000 buildings, the reduction of fire hazards over about 2,000,000 acres, the building of 4,700,000 check dams in gullies, the construction of approximately 16,000,000 rods of fence, the improvement of 3,312,498 acres of forest lands, the construction of 5,390 impounding and large diversion dams, the development of 20,084 springs, wells, waterholes, and reservoirs, and the expenditure of about 9,000,000 man days fighting forest fires and on fire prevention and fire suppression activities."

  
  There are examples of Black individuals seeking job appointments in the CCC camps. This is interesting because it gets at race amidst job insecurity issues. Specifically, there is an attempt to find a doctor for the Black parts of segregated CCC camps. From the collection, New Deal Agencies and Black America.

  
  These NAACP records that show an effort on the organization's part to check up on CCC enlistment of Black workers and ensure that discrimination was minimized. One document from Cleveland, Ohio, dated April 21 discussed the suspicion of some Black youth that this program was a way to send them back south. Related files in History Vault can be found by searching on the Civilian Conservation Corps and NAACP.
Topic 2:
Works Progress Administration (WPA)

Introduced in 1935, the WPA was another program targeted at reducing the number of unemployed men. This agency employed both men and women and grew to include the National Youth Administration. Unlike the CCC, the WPA improved and constructed infrastructure all across the United States. The WPA constructed schools, hospitals, sewage lines, bridges and paved roads before its dissolution in 1943. Perhaps the most well-known WPA project is the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Primary Sources:

WPA Guide Books:

  - This book contains road maps to Depression era California along with personal accounts and writings to draw from.

  - This guide is one of the many guides to states written by workers in the WPA.

  - This details the stories of women in the WPA files.

Magazine Articles:

  - This published anonymous account of WPA work discusses the ways that the WPA strips choice away in terms of career in a way that feels counter to the American way of life-according to the author. This is an interesting piece on gender because he discusses his marriage and his wife in the context of WPA work.
Hearings in ProQuest Congressional:
  - This hearing deals with concerns that some enrollees of the WPA are not in enough need of relief to be profiting from the program amongst other concerns about funds and usage.

Primary Sources Collections in ProQuest History Vault:
  - This item documents accusations of discrimination within local relief organizations by Lawrence A. Oxley.

Topic 3:
National Youth Administration (NYA)

The NYA was a New Deal Program beginning in 1935 intended to address continued unemployment among America’s youth (16-25) and prevent students from dropping out of high school or college. This program was notable because, unlike the CCC, it allowed women to participate. The NYA paid participants to engage in work study projects in their communities, generally in education systems, which would allow them to continue their studies despite the economic downturn.

Secondary Sources:
  - This book details the work and impact of Mary McLeod Bethune including her role in New Deal programs. She was the head of “negro affairs” in the NYA.

Primary Sources:
Trade Journals:
  - The NYA helped youth receive training or continue training in specialized trades despite the dramatic economic downturn. This article in a trade journal discusses the NYA’s key role in training shipyard workers. The article states that “Young people from all parts of the south who had previously been stranded on
The National Youth Administration is one of the programs that have begun to reach the unneeded by industry are now getting the opportunity to acquire practical experience and training." This explores the urbanization epidemic and connects to issues of poverty amongst Blacks in the segregated south.

**Hearings in ProQuest Congressional:**

  - This hearing addresses the sums appropriated for the NYA. It also includes evidence and testimony about the kinds of programs that youth apply to the NYA, including the arts and entertainment.

**Primary Source Collections in ProQuest History Vault:**

  - Mary McLeod Bethune was the daughter of former enslaved persons and went on to become an education and civil rights leader. Her friendship with the Roosevelt's led her to become the leader of his unofficial "Black cabinet." Her scrapbook contains articles written about the NYA and her role in guiding the organization.

  - This folder, also from the Mary McLeod Bethune Papers, reveals how individuals in the Black Americans community felt that the NYA and New Deal Programs benefited them.

  - This item, from the collection New Deal Agencies and Black America, includes correspondence with Mary McLeod Bethune regarding Alva Tabor's desire to expand NYA training programs to include things that benefit rural youth ("farm youths"). The documents contain information about the direction relief programs in the NYA took for Black youth and how people sought to help Black youth through these New Deal programs.

  Another document from New Deal Agencies and Black America, this item addresses the ways that Black youth were disproportionately impacted by the Great Depression because there were very few training opportunities for them to acquire skills. It details the ways that leaders in the “negro affairs” department of the NYA saw these and addressed them through these programs.

**Topic 4:**

**Rural Electrification Administration (REA)**

President Roosevelt signed the REA into existence in 1935. The REA and the Rural Electrification Act (1936) were meant to improve or create access to electricity in rural areas especially in the southern and western United States. This infrastructure project specifically aimed to increase the number of American farms with access to electricity in order to improve quality of life and production capabilities. This was one of the most successful New Deal Programs and lasted until 1994 when it was absorbed into the Rural Utilities Service (RUS).

**Primary Sources:**

**Trade Journals:**


  This is a later discussion of utilities in general in the United States, but its main contention is a fear of socialized resources. It’s reference to the REA reveals the fear that New Deal Programs promoted communism/socialism.

**Primary Source Collections in ProQuest History Vault:**


  This item, from the Documentary History of the Roosevelt Presidency, discusses the unhappiness of those involved with REA since its merging with the Department of Agriculture in 1940. The article mentions the resignation of one REA director over fears of the REA becoming a “political machine.” Lots of interesting research routes connected to labor and fair practices.
Topic 5: 
Farm Security Administration (FSA)

The FSA was created in 1937 in an effort to reduce rural poverty. FSA initiatives included photographing rural America and resettlement programs to remove farmers on substandard land and resettle them in groups to farm better land in communities. The FSA was often scrutinized for its actions involving Black enrollees attempting to improve land in order to one day own it through FSA programs. Inquiries about discrimination and racial enrollee disparities were not uncommon. The FSA also participated in the removal and reallocation of land owned by Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Secondary Sources:

  ▪ This book contains some of the photographs and personal reflections of John Vachon, a photographer involved with the FSA.

  ▪ This book discusses the ways that Black Americans were doubly impacted by the economic consequences of the Great Depression and the trials and successes they had in connection to New Deal Programs.

  ▪ This book contains photographs taken for the FSA as well as the WPA. The photographs tell a story of urbanization and the reaction against it as these photos were meant to capture and preserve an essence of rural America.

Primary Sources:

Primary Source Collections in ProQuest History Vault:

  ▪ This is a series of letters from the NAACP discussing the FSA ‘Transylvania’ project and removal of Black families from that program with no clear reason for removal.

• Farm Security Administration Correspondence and memoranda, January 1940-December 1983. [https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001730-005-0236&accountid=14667](https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001730-005-0236&accountid=14667)
Once the war began, the FSA was given authority to redistribute lands taken from ‘Japanese Enemy Aliens’ by the American government. These files outline this authority and the plans for continued agricultural use. ‘Confiscated’ lands were rarely returned after release from internment.


Final report on Japanese American relocation detailing the role the FSA played in these relocations and what happened to land ‘forfeited’ by enemy aliens.

Hearings in ProQuest Congressional:


This is a congressional hearing covering the FSA in 1943. This hearing questions why families who improved the land in Norfolk VA moved after having done significant work. Apparently, these families moved because they were told that they would have to become sharecroppers for the land rather than cash renters. This was not the deal they felt they had taken when beginning the process and so moved. Overall, this sharecropping was exploitative and made it incredibly hard for farmers to make enough to apply for a tenant loan to buy the land. This is the key controversy at play with access and Black farmers and the FSA.


This is the bill in 1939 that was passed to allow federal land to be leased and improved (using FSA funds). The first statement is that this is one of 5 “non-controversial” bills to come before the Congress for that day. This implies that this was popular and unlikely to arouse debate. It’s an interesting contrast to how people respond to spending and New Deal programs once World War II begins.


This is part 3 (Jan 1944) of the FSA hearings and inquiries into the fairness of the FSA policies.
Conclusion

As with many economic recovery plans, the New Deal has a mixed legacy of successes and failures. The FSA aided in the implementation of a racist internment scheme that traumatized and impoverished Asian-American citizens. Many New Deal programs struggled to provide equal assistance to Americans of all races, ethnicities, and classes. But pioneers like Mary Bethune made great strides in advocating for involvement of Black Americans and control over New Deal programs in ways that substantially improved many Black American lives. In the wake of absolute economic devastation, the New Deal provided desperately needed relief for some citizens and unfortunately failed to meet the varied and diverse needs of all equally. An examination of these documents and the successes and failures they represent will help researchers of all stripes to play a role in advocating for a more just relief scheme when the next economic crisis strikes.

The books and primary source documents referenced in this resource guide are a small sampling of the materials available in ProQuest databases on the topic of New Deal programs. Searching the databases covered in this resource guide on the names of the New Deal agencies will lead to a wide range of other materials that will allow professors, researchers, and students to study how the federal government responded to one of the greatest economic crises in American History.

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Databases covered:

- American Periodicals
- ProQuest Congressional
- ProQuest Ebook Central
- ProQuest Central
- ProQuest History Vault
  - Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century: Organizational Records and Personal Papers, Part 1
  - NAACP Papers
  - New Deal and World War II: President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Office Files and Records of Federal Agencies
  - World War II: U.S. Documents on Planning, Operations, Intelligence, Axis War Crimes, and Refugees

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