The Federal Writers’ Project:
A guide to materials held at the British Library

Compiled by Jean Petrovic
Eccles Centre for American Studies
2013
The Federal Writers’ Project: 
A guide to materials held at the British Library

CONTENTS:

Introduction

American Guide Series

Other Publications
The Federal Writers’ Project: a bibliography

Introduction

The Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) was established by President Franklin D Roosevelt on 27 July 1935 as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). As with so many of the New Deal programmes, the remit of the FWP – and its sister projects in art, music and theatre, known collectively as Federal One – was totally unprecedented. Prior to Federal One, the so-called ‘Alphabet Agencies’ of Roosevelt’s Administration had focused their relief upon the provision of jobs to blue-collar workers in large-scale public works projects, primarily in construction and conservation. Yet, white-collar workers were not immune to the devastating impact of the Depression. In early 1935 the Writers Union and the Unemployed Writers Association demanded government action. Six months later, the four relief projects for those qualified in the fields of writing, art, music and drama were announced.

Whilst the FWP was primarily created to provide economic relief, its highly ambitious first Director, Henry Alsberg, also regarded it as a means by which to vividly document America’s rapidly changing cultural landscape. Alongside the permanent staff in Washington DC, each state employed an editorial team responsible for hiring local field workers able to prove that they were on relief; at its peak, the Project employed more than 7,500 people. These local workers – many of whom were teachers, librarians, editors or historians, as well as writers – were then charged with capturing in print the great social, economic and geographic diversity of the United States. With the spectre of fascism looming over Europe, Alsberg’s vision was not devoid of political imperative.

Within months, the project’s first clear objective became the creation of the American Guide Series – a set of travel guides for the 48 states, plus Alaska territory, Puerto Rico and Washington, DC. Unlike traditional guides, these works included not only driving tours documenting what travellers would find at every stop, but long photographic essays detailing the scenic, cultural, economic and historical resources of each state. In addition to these state guides – most of which were between 550-800 pages long – a large number of regional, county, city and town guides were also produced.

Although some states opposed the production of these guides and kept the publication of copies to an absolute minimum, the guides were highly praised by literary critics throughout the nation’s press. Commenting in the Saturday Review of Literature on the first guide – to Idaho – which had been edited by novelist Vardis Fisher, Bernard De Voto wrote: “whatever the difficulties caused by the extemporised and necessarily haphazard method of producing the guide, working with an untrained personnel, without precedent and handicapped by constantly changing regulations, the final result is an almost unalloyed triumph”. If the rest of the guides were up to this standard, suggested De Voto, they would: “…not only vindicate the Writers’ Project but will heighten our national self-consciousness, preserve invaluable antiquarian material that might have perished, and facilitate our knowledge of ourselves.”

In addition to the *Guides*, the FWP also produced ethnic studies, urban and rural folklore collections and nature studies. Today, it is particularly well-known for the compilation of narratives of former slaves. Extending the scope of research initiated by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), the Project’s first folklore editor, John A. Lomax issued field workers with a set of ‘detailed and homely questions’ designed to ‘get the Negro thinking and talking about the days of slavery’⁵. In total, more than 2,300 interviews were conducted with former slaves in seventeen states. The quality of these narratives varies greatly, and their historical value and accuracy – given the age of the former slaves – has also been questioned. Yet, on balance these interviews offer a unique insight into the world of the slave. Some of the narratives were published in the Project’s *These Are Our Lives* (1940), and others in Benjamin Botkin’s *Lay My Burden Down* (1945). Yet, most were not published until the 1970s³.

The Project’s investigation into folklore was similarly rooted in FERA. Almost as soon as it began, Alsberg recognised the Project’s unprecedented capacity to gather such material and field offices were explicitly instructed on how to report local lore and customs. In some, the request to gather information on issues such as the blessing of crops and rivers, and the healing properties of local landmarks, was met with derision. Yet, in others it was met with extraordinary zeal. Indeed, for many field workers the search for lore, more than any other official Project undertaking, provided an opportunity to exercise their own literary creativity and curiosity as they investigated and reported upon the lives of often marginalised Americans including turpentine workers in Florida, clam diggers in Maine, Nebraska hobos, and the railroad workers, bricklayers and steelworkers of Chicago.

By 1938, the Project had also published numerous commercially successful ethnic studies, including *The Italians of New York*, *The Armenians of Massachusetts* and *The Swedes and Finns of New Jersey*. Emboldened by this success, and determined to improve the quality of these works, Alsberg appointed Morton W Royse – who held two doctoral degrees from Columbia University – as national consultant for social ethnic studies. In an initial letter to the state directors, Royse expressed his hope that they would willingly contribute to a new work – provisionally entitled *Composite America* – that would outline how immigrants to the United States had, without eliminating the cultural differences between them, created a truly unique civilization and an ever-expanding democracy. During the first year of his tenure, Boyse launched an extraordinary number of labor and ethnic projects. His demands were met with varying degrees of enthusiasm in the field offices across the country and he was frequently at odds with Alsberg about both the content and the focus of these projects. Yet, it was ultimately the demise of the Project itself that meant that most of these ethnic studies were never published.

From its very inception, the Federal Writers’ Project had faced criticism from political conservatives. With the appointment in May 1938 of Congressman Martin Dies of Texas as chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, these attacks gained a momentum that would prove to be unstoppable. At the end of July, Committee member

---

² *ibid*, p.263

J. Parnell Thomas demanded that the Writers’ and the Theatre projects be investigated as a result of evidence suggesting that both were hotbeds of Communism. Aware that not only the press, but much of the American public believed these projects to be a waste of time and money, the Dies Committee clearly hoped this opening salvo would provide the necessary ammunition to gradually discredit the New Deal in its entirety. In the summer of 1939, the Emergency Relief Act axed federal funding for the Theatre Project with immediate effect, while allowing the writers, art and music projects to continue under state sponsorship if sponsors could be found by 30 September to cover 25% of the cost of each state program. Despite a gallup poll in autumn 1939 showing that three out of four Americans approved of the Dies Committee’s investigation, the Writers’ Program (as it was now called) found enough sponsors – including state departments of Education, state Conservation Commissions, or state library associations – to maintain operations in all but two states – Idaho and North Dakota. Extraordinarily, given the obstacles that it continued to face, not least of which was the nation’s entry into World War II, it was not until 1943 that WPA administrators finally ended the Writers’ Project. The legacy of this Project – cultural, political and historical – is still being explored today.
AMERICAN GUIDE SERIES

ALABAMA


ALASKA


ARIZONA


ARKANSAS


CALIFORNIA


COLORADO


CONNECTICUT

*The Berkshire Hills.* Compiled and written by members of the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration for Massachusetts. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1939, 368pp. (10413.n.9)


*History of Milford, Connecticut, 1639-1939.* Compiled and Written by the Federal Writers’ Project of the Work Projects Administration of the State of Connecticut. [Milford], 1939. (10413.k.34)

DELAWARE


FLORIDA


GEORGIA

*Atlanta: City of the Modern South.* Georgia Writers’ Project. Compiled by workers of the Writers Program of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Georgia. New York: Smith and Durrell, 1942, 266pp. (10413.ppp.29)

*Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes.* Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1940, 247pp. (010007.h.70).

These Are Our Lives, As Told By the People and Written by Members of the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia. Federal Writers' Project. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939, 421pp. (012643.p.34)

IDAHO

The Idaho Encyclopedia. Compiled by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. Caldwell: Caxton Printers, 1938, 452pp. (Mic.A.9213)

Idaho Lore. Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1939, 256pp. (010007.h.69)


ILLINOIS

Cavalcade of the American Negro. Chicago: Diamond Jubilee Exposition Authority, 1940. (DSC W28/8754)


INDIANA

IOWA


KANSAS


KENTUCKY


LOUISIANA


MAINE


*Maine’s Capitol.* Compiled and written by the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Maine. Augusta, ME: Kennebec Journal Print Shop, 1939, 60pp. (Mic.F.715)
MARYLAND

MASSACHUSETTS


The Berkshire Hills. Compiled and written by members of the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration for Massachusetts. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1939, 368pp. (10413.n.9)


MICHIGAN
Knowing the Thunder Bay Region. Federal Writers’ Program Michigan. [1941]. (Mic.A.11054)


MINNESOTA
The Minnesota Arrowhead Country. Chicago, IL: A. Whitman, 1941, 231pp. (10413.ppp.23)

**MISSISSIPPI**


**MISSOURI**


**MONTANA**


**NEBRASKA**


Nebraska Folklore. 2 vols. Lincoln, NE: Woodruff Printing Company, 1939-40. (X.700/21082)

**NEVADA**


**NEW HAMPSHIRE**


**NEW JERSEY**


**NEW MEXICO**


**NEW YORK**


Rochester and Monroe County. Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of New York. Rochester, NY: Scrantom’s, 1937, 460pp. (10413.m.14)

**NORTH CAROLINA**


These Are Our Lives, As Told By the People and Written by Members of the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia. Federal Writers' Project. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939, 421pp. (012643.p.34)

**NORTH DAKOTA**


**OHIO**


**OKLAHOMA**


OREGON


Pennsylvania


Rhode Island
**SOUTH CAROLINA**

*A History of Spartanburg County*. Compiled by the Spartanburg Unit of the Writers’ Program of the Works Progress Administration in the State of South Carolina. Spartanburg, SC: Band and White, 1940, 304pp. Repr., 1976. (X.800/14715)

*Palmetto Place Names*. Compiled by workers of the Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration in the State of South Carolina. Spartanburg, SC: Reprint Company, 1975. (X.809/45371)


**SOUTH DAKOTA**


*Legends of the Mighty Sioux*. Compiled by Workers of the South Dakota Writers’ Project, Work Projects Administration; illustrated by Sioux Indian Artists. Chicago: A. Whitman, 1941. (Mic.A.19034)

*Life in Early Huron*. Compiled by Workers of the South Dakota Writers’ Project, Work Projects Administration. Huron, SD, 1942. (10412.i.22)


*Sodbusters: Tales of Southwestern South Dakota*. Written and illustrated by workers of the Federal Writers’ Project, Works Progress Administration, Mitchell, South Dakota. Alexandria, SD: Printed by the South Dakota Writers’ League, 1938. (Mic.A.18455)


**TENNESSEE**


*These Are Our Lives, As Told By the People and Written by Members of the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia*. Federal Writers’ Project. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939, 421pp. (012643.p.34)
TEXAS


Corpus Christi: A History and Guide. Compiled by the Workers of the Writers Program of the Works Project Administration in the State of Texas. Corpus Christi: Corpus Christi Caller-Times, 1942. (010410.dd.35)


UTAH


VERMONT


VIRGINIA


WASHINGTON

WASHINGTON, DC


WEST VIRGINIA

WISCONSIN


Wisconsin Indian Place Legends, by Dorothy Moulding Brown. Madison, WI: Folklore Section, Federal Writers Project, 1948. (X.709/10999)
Wyoming


Regional Guides

The Berkshire Hills. Compiled and written by the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1939. (10413.n.9)

Death Valley: A Guide. Illustrated…with maps. Compiled and written by the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration. Boston, 1939. (010410.a.33)


The Ocean Highway: New Brunswick, New Jersey to Jacksonville, Florida. Compiled and written by the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration. New York: Modern Age Books, 1938, 244pp. (10413.m.16)

The Oregon Trail: The Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean. Federal Writers’ Project. New York: Hastings House, 1939, 244pp. (010410.dd.3)

Puerto Rico. Compiled and Written by the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration in Cooperation with the Writers’ Program of the Work Projects Administration. Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, 1940. (X.809/27669); New York: University Society, 1940. (010481.cc.6)


OTHER PUBLICATIONS


Cavalcade of the American Negro. Chicago, IL: Diamond Jubilee Exposition Authority, 1940, 95pp. (W28/8754)

Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1940, 247pp. (010007.h.70)


Legends of the Mighty Sioux. Compiled by Workers of the South Dakota Writers’ Project, Work Projects Administration; illustrated by Sioux Indian Artists. Chicago: A. Whitman, 1941. (Mic.A.19034)

Nebraska Folklore. 2 vols. Lincoln, NE: Woodruff Printing Company, 1939-40. (X.700/21082)


These Are Our Lives, As Told By the People and Written by Members of the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia. Federal Writers Project. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939, 421pp. (012643.p.34)


