

The WPA Files

By Mark Fritz

Among the many resources at the CCHGS office/library is an unassuming drawer in an unassuming drab-colored (tan?) filing cabinet. It is easy to miss, and over the years, many passersby have passed it by. Sporting only three capital letters to identify it, this drawer is home to an untapped goldmine of historical information. It holds our WPA files, and it is a treasure trove.



The Federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created in 1935 as part of Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal” efforts to combat The Great Depression. It was a make-work program intended to create jobs for unemployed Americans from all walks of life, including artists and writers. One subset of the WPA was the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), which provided income to many of the era’s struggling writers, including some who would go on to fame—Conrad Aiken, Nelson Algren, Saul Bellow, John Cheever, Studs Terkel, Loren Eiseley, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright, to name a few.

But the Federal Writers’ Project was not just for professional writers but also for fledgling writers (ordinary citizens with an itch to express themselves), and it included more writers of nonfiction (such as history) than fiction. It was intended to be a grass roots program. Local writers were encouraged to look to their local communities, to their roots, for inspiration and material.

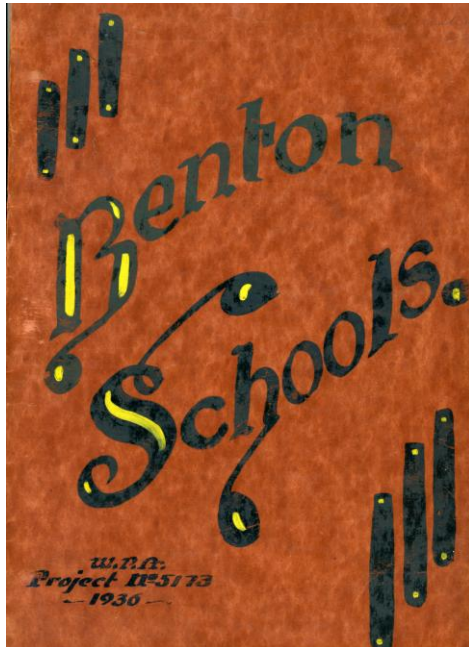
Henry Alsberg, whom FDR appointed to head the program, said he wanted WPA/FWP writers to create a “self portrait of America” state by state, community by community. Part of this effort was the American Guide series, which were essentially promotional travel guides, one per state. (Some of larger cities also got a separate guide.)

Other subset programs within the FWP were the Life History and Folklore projects and the Slave Narrative Collection. Much of what we today know about the history of slavery in America comes from interviews conducted with former slaves in the rural South. Oral histories were captured north, south, east and west, and among all classes and ethnic groups. And this effort came just in the nick of time, as many of the interviewees were quite old, and if the FWP interviewers hadn’t gotten to them when they did, all of that oral history would have been forever lost.

Thankfully, much history was saved and written down, and many of those FWP manuscripts are today housed in the Library of Congress. (<https://www.loc.gov>) but not all of it – most of the really important historical manuscripts (my opinion) are housed in our file drawers at CCHGS. Local efforts have remained local.

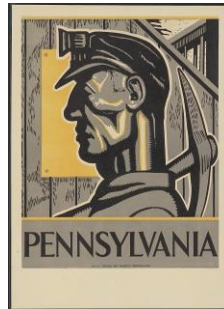
Well, there’s no better time than now to dig out these too long-ignored WPA/FWP manuscripts, to expose them to the light of day (the new light of new generations) and announce them to the world (well, at least to you, our members). Here’s a brief rundown (not a detailed, comprehensive list) of what is in our good-old WPA file drawer:

- Army Notes
- Biography of Nathan Beach
- Benton Schools



- Berwick Pennamites, Indian Attacks
- Old History and Industries of Bloomsburg
- History Sketches – Bloomsburg Rotary
- *Bloomsburg Daily* anniversary (1902)
- Senator Buckalew
- Columbia County Bench & Bar
- Columbia County 1813
- Columbia County 1874
- Columbia County Indian Life
- Columbia County Judges & Gov't. Officials
- Columbia County Iron Industry
- Catawissa Items
- Doan Brothers of Bucks County
- Danville – Early Days
- Espytown History
- Floods of Montour County
- Invasion of Columbia County (Fishing Creek Confederacy)
- Nob Mountain Meeting (Fishing Creek Confederacy)
- Indian History of Columbia County by Kenneth Yocum
- Interesting News Items
- Kitchen's Creek Federal Park
- Molly Maguires – Alexander Rea Homicide
- Pennsylvania Caves
- Old Schools of Bloomsburg
- Charles Reese Biography
- Seven Proud Women

- Snake Stories – Bill McCollum
- Tewksbury Documents



If any of the above topics ring your bell or strike your chimes, come in and take a closer look. Fun guaranteed.

A Gift of More Ore

Recently, more bullion has arrived, through the generosity of Lydia and the Bloomsburg Public Library, who has gifted us with several boxes of WPA manuscripts that had been stored downstairs in the library's Pennsylvania Room. We received at least two file boxes of manuscripts. Now we have nearly three times the WPA material we had before!

The CCHGS Library Committee has already set to work going through these boxes, cataloging the new stuff and transferring the files to our filing cabinets, so that all of our WPA files will be in one place.

The Committee could use some help with this work and other library-related work, so anyone who's interested in digging into our fascinating resources, please contact Committee Chair Bill Baillie or our Executive Director Carol Woolridge. The ultimate goal here will be to get the printed indexes of the WPA collection typed into a database, which will eventually be put on the website, so even more volunteerism will be needed down the road as this project proceeds.

In the next newsletter look for more detailed information about some of the topics listed above. Also, look for a list of what's in the new boxes. Can't wait until the next newsletter? Then come into the Society office and check this stuff out for yourself. There's gold in dem dar files. All serious prospectors welcomed.



WORKS PROGRESS
ADMINISTRATION
PROJECT

• 1937 •
