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HOPE, LABOR, AND A LASTING LEGACY: A PHOTO EXHIBIT OF THE WPA IN MARYLAND

Critical Reflections of a Practicum Project

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Brent A. McKee

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ABSTRACT OF THE PAPER

HOPE, LABOR, AND A LASTING LEGACY: A PHOTO EXHIBIT OF THE WPA IN MARYLAND

Critical Reflections of a Practicum Project

By

Brent A. McKee

American Public University, March 2014

Charles Town, West Virginia

Professor Anne Millbrooke, Practicum Professor

My practicum was an online photograph exhibit, designed primarily for a prospective labor history museum, displaying the accomplishments of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in Maryland, between the years 1935 and 1943. This project consisted of (a) the selection of 24 historic photographs from the University of Maryland College Park Archives (as well as some supplemental images from other sources), (b) a review of WPA literature and resources, (c) a review of exhibit label literature, (d) a review of some online exhibits from leading institutions, (e) the creation of exhibit labels, and (f) the creation of the actual online exhibit. My practicum totaled over 200 hours of research and exhibit work.
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APPENDIX: Exhibit Images and Labels
I. INTRODUCTION

My practicum involved the creation of an online photograph exhibit of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in Maryland, between the years 1935 and 1943. The exhibit was primarily designed for eventual display at a prospective labor history museum, but also might be displayed at other online and physical venues. The completed exhibit currently resides on my personal website, a website that has gained a fair amount of recognition from scholars (and others) across the country: http://www.wpatoday.org/Online_Exhibit.php.

Bill Barry is the retired director of Labor Studies at the Community College of Baltimore County. I have known Mr. Barry for several years, and in 2013 I learned of his desire to create a labor history museum in Maryland. Mr. Barry and I discussed the possibility of a WPA exhibit in his prospective museum, and this generated the idea that I would create an online exhibit that would eventually migrate into his museum as both a digital and physical display. Since the museum is still in the planning phase there is, of course, the possibility that it will not become a reality. Hence, to ensure the public value of my work, it was decided that the exhibit would reside on my personal website and that I could, in the meantime, “shop it around” for potential online and physical venues. Mr. Barry served as my mentor for the practicum.

My practicum consisted of over 200 hours of work, and involved (a) the selection of 24 historic photographs from the University of Maryland College Park Archives (as well as some supplemental images from other sources), (b) a review of WPA literature and resources, (c) a review of exhibit label literature, (d) a review of some online exhibits from leading institutions, (e) the creation of exhibit labels, and (f) the creation of the actual online exhibit.

My photograph exhibit has a number of important themes. The first theme is labor. In each historic photograph we see people working (although, in the photo for Baltimore City, the
worker is a little harder to see). The exhibit is not only about the physical accomplishments of the WPA, it is also about the WPA workers themselves. This theme is important since the exhibit is primarily designed for a prospective labor museum. To supplement this theme, I added five WPA posters to the exhibit that contain labor subject matter. A second theme is hope. I have kept politics to a minimum in my exhibit because I want the viewer to focus on the raw, or concrete, aspects of the WPA—specifically, I want the viewer to see formerly-unemployed people working on useful projects. I find that to be a hopeful message, amidst the human wreckage of the Great Depression, and I hope the viewer will too. A third theme is the lasting legacy of the WPA. For this, I have included five modern photos of still-existing WPA projects in Maryland. It is important that the exhibit patrons know that we still use WPA projects today—that there is a direct link between them and the history they are viewing.

Note that these first three themes are in the title of my exhibit, *Hope, Labor, and a Lasting Legacy*…

The fourth and final theme of my exhibit is volume and variety. The literature and sources on the WPA clearly indicate that the volume and variety of work performed by WPA laborers was gargantuan. As one researcher wrote in 1943, “An enumeration of all the projects undertaken and completed by the WPA during its lifetime would include almost every type of work imaginable…So vast have the WPA’s achievements been that attempts to present them in quantitative terms only stagger the imagination.”¹ This noted volume and variety of work had a large influence on my design choices. For example, I decided that one historic photograph from each Maryland jurisdiction (23 counties and Baltimore City), showing a wide variety of projects, for example roads, bridges, oyster planting, sewing, plus exhibit labels highlighting some of the

larger accomplishments of the WPA—both in Maryland and across the United States—would be an excellent way to impress upon the viewer this volume and variety of work.

I had three objectives for my practicum: To apply the lessons and principles I had learned from the American Public University (APU) history program; to provide useful and interesting information to the public; and to enhance my resume with the creation of an online exhibit.

There was no set work schedule. Instead, the practicum was completed in “fits and starts” due to the passing of my father and the additional responsibilities I had to assume due to that loss.

II. BACKGROUND

To provide context for my practicum experience, I will briefly describe the history of the WPA, my use of exhibit label literature, and my review of online exhibits. These are the three key areas that provided a foundation for my practicum project.

The WPA

The WPA was created by executive order on May 6, 1935, in response to the mass unemployment created by the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression.² It was designed to offer job opportunities to millions of jobless Americans on projects designed, and partially funded, at the local level.³ President Franklin Roosevelt had been given authority to create this type of public works program via the Emergency Relief Act of 1935.⁴ During the WPA’s existence (1935-1943) it employed about 8.5 million different Americans (i.e., not including rehires of the same individuals).⁵

³ Ibid., 9.
⁴ Ibid., 7.
⁵ Ibid., III.
The WPA is mostly remembered for its infrastructure work, for example roads and bridges. However, the types of projects that WPA workers engaged in was far broader than that. As a researcher noted in 1943: “These projects have ranged from the construction of highways to the extermination of rats; from the building of stadiums to the stuffing of birds; from the improvement of airplane landing fields to the making of Braille books; from the building of over a million of the now famous privies to the playing of the world’s great symphonies.”

During the course of its existence, the WPA produced over 380 million articles of clothing; served over 1.2 billion school lunches; constructed, repaired, or improved 650,000 miles of roadway; repaired or improved tens of thousands of schools; installed 16,000 miles of new water lines; engaged in a multitude of national defense projects; and much more. Though there was discussion amongst New Deal policymakers about making the WPA (or something similar) permanent, the WPA was liquidated on June 30, 1943, as unemployment was virtually eliminated by the activities related to World War II.

In creating my exhibit, the WPA sources I primarily relied upon were *The Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-43*, by the Federal Works Agency; *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy*, by Donald S. Howard; *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956*, by Jason Scott Smith; *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA; When FDR Put the Nation to Work*, by Nick Taylor; and *Long-Range Public Investment: The...*
Forgotten Legacy of the New Deal by Robert D. Leighninger, Jr. 14 These, and many other valuable sources I consulted, can be found in the references section of this paper.

The literature on the WPA frequently runs along the lines of (a) the WPA’s enormity of scope and accomplishment, and (b) the WPA’s successes and shortcomings. These academic and researcher observations were instrumental in my decision to include a theme of volume and variety in my exhibit.

Leighninger argues that the accomplishments of the WPA are still all around us but largely or completely forgotten. He also states that the “story of the conception, launch, operation, defense, and demise of the Works Progress Administration is complex and convoluted. Perhaps that is why no one has undertaken to tell it in recent times.” 15 A year later, Nick Taylor did tell it, in his well-researched and well-documented book American-Made. This lengthy work alternates between the story of the WPA on the national level, and the story of the WPA at the worker level (derived through oral history interviews). Taylor does not shy away from pointing out the shortcomings of the WPA (e.g., communist agitation and political shenanigans) but ends with a forceful tribute to WPA workers: “Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins believed that people given a job to do would do it well, and the fact that their paychecks were issued by the government would make not a whit of difference. They were right. The workers of the WPA shone. They excelled. They created works that even without restoration have lasted for more than seventy years and still stand strong…” 16 Though a substantial part of the selection of photographs for my exhibit was based on intuition, Taylor’s concluding observation contributed to my decision to select photographs showing WPA workers, rather than

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15 Ibid., 57.
photographs showing only WPA creations, of which there are many (e.g., a photograph showing a completed bridge but not the workers).

Smith contends that historians have not done enough to focus on the public works aspect of the New Deal work and construction programs: “Historians, I propose, ought to do more than just ‘touch upon’ public works programs when they think about the New Deal. While liberal historians presented the public works programs as well-intentioned welfare programs that failed to end unemployment, and subsequent critics dismissed them as underfunded measures that served only to prop up the existing order…both sides neglect the fact that public works programs were the New Deal’s central enterprise.”17 In my exhibit labels, I make special effort to emphasize the public works accomplishments of the WPA.

Leighninger suggests that the best treatment on the WPA is Macmahon, Millet, and Ogden’s *The Administration of Federal Work Relief*.18 Though I have consulted this work, I believe the best history of the WPA is actually Howard’s *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy*. Howard’s research on the WPA’s handling of disabled workers, racial integration, and other matters, was very helpful to my exhibit label writing. Howard is quite critical of the WPA’s shortcomings—for example, its failure to employ more unemployed workers—but ultimately he comes to the same conclusion as subsequent authors: That the accomplishments of the WPA are impressive and worthy of admiration.

The most useful of all WPA sources, in terms of statistics and data, is the Federal Works Agency’s *Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-1943*. Various tables, figures, lists, and numbers are dispersed throughout the publication. In a letter of transmittal that precedes the formal report, the deputy commissioner of the Federal Works Agency, George H. Field, writes:

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“This report has been prepared with a view to making the record of the WPA experience available to Government officials and other interested individuals, and to presenting for future guidance the problems encountered during the existence of the program and the manner in which they were solved.”19 And, indeed, the report is absolutely invaluable to the modern researcher.

I think it is important to note here that my practicum project was not intended as a challenge or addition to the literature. Instead, it was a public history project intended to present the large amount of WPA data and information to the viewer in a more easy-to-digest, visually appealing manner. And such condensation and display is an important aspect of the public history field. This is not to say that a history exhibit cannot possibly challenge the existing record, only that that was not part of my exhibit plan.

**Exhibit Label Literature**

Prior to this practicum, I had little formal training or education regarding exhibit labels. I had written many labels on my personal website, but these were based on intuition and general life experience only. I was also exposed to some basic information about exhibit labels in the APU course “Museum and Exhibition Culture” (HIST 635). This limited experience and exposure made it necessary to review scholarly literature, and other comments by professional historians, to get a better grasp of what makes exhibit labels interesting and inviting. I found that, while exhibit labels can be something of an art form, there are some best practices that a designer should take into consideration. For example, research and experience indicates that exhibit labels that are kept at around an 8th grade reading level, and less than 100 words, are more likely to be read and understood by exhibit patrons.20

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The two works I found most helpful for improving my exhibit labels were Serrell’s *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*,\(^{21}\) and Perry’s *What Makes Learning Fun? Principles for the Design of Intrinsically Motivating Museum Exhibits*\(^{22}\) - the former for its comprehensive treatment and the latter for its modern summary of research findings.

Serrell’s 1996 work appears to be the most comprehensive and cited work on exhibit labels. Of particular use is her chapter 20 “Ten Deadly Sins and 14 Helpful Research Findings.” For example, Serrell notes as a “sin,” “Labels that are not related to a big idea, that ramble on without focus or objectives.”\(^{23}\) I believe I did a good job of this in my online exhibit. On the other hand, Serrell also argues that a lack of provocation in exhibit labels is another sin.\(^{24}\) In reflecting on my practicum project, I believe I could have crafted exhibit labels that were a little more provocative. One of Serrell’s 14 *research findings* is “More visitors read shorter labels, and read them more thoroughly than longer labels.”\(^{25}\) This is noted by many other researchers and commentators, and so it is a best practice that I thought was wise to adopt. I made an effort to keep my exhibit labels in the 3-4 sentence range.

I found Serrell’s work comforting in its observation that human thought, creativity, and trial and error—not just research findings—play a role in exhibit design. For example, with respect to using questions in labels, Serrell contends that “Being able to anticipate what visitors want to know and in what order they want to know it…can be achieved through a combination of experience, intuition, common sense, and trying it out and fixing it if it doesn’t work right the first time.”\(^{26}\)

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\(^{24}\) Ibid.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., 235.
\(^{26}\) Ibid., 107.
Perry’s work, while not exclusively devoted to exhibit labels, spends a fair bit of time on what types of labels are inviting and engaging. For example, Perry advises “Use clear, straightforward, and easy to read text,” especially when dealing with “complex and often abstract ideas.” I endeavored to make my exhibit labels easy-to-understand. (Recall Leighninger’s observation that the history of the WPA is “complex and convoluted.”)

Like the WPA literature, my intent was not to challenge or add to the literature (although I do have a recommendation for future practice below), but to utilize best practices where possible.

Review of Online Exhibits

Ideally, it would have been helpful to thoroughly examine academic literature on the trends and modern practices of creating online exhibits. And though I did consult a few sources, especially Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web, I did not have time during the practicum for a full review of the pertinent literature. Instead, I relied upon my previous web design work and an evaluation of a few online exhibits from leading institutions.

The five online exhibits that I most closely examined were “A New Deal for the Arts,” on the website of National Archives and Records Administration; “With an Even Hand: Brown v. Board at Fifty,” on the website of the Library of Congress; “Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero

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Program 1942-1964,” on the website of the National Museum of American History;31 “A New Deal for Carbon Hill, Alabama,” on the website of the New Deal Network;32 and “Some Were Neighbors: Collaboration & Complicity in the Holocaust” on the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (hereafter, “Some Were Neighbors”).33 Some of these exhibits started “life” as physical exhibits and then transformed into online exhibits.

Like the literature on exhibit labels, these five online exhibits showed that there are many styles and approaches utilized in designing an exhibit—some are very basic, like “A New Deal for the Arts,” and others are very elaborate, like “Some Were Neighbors.” Indeed, “Some Were Neighbors” is both inspiring and intimidating. It is inspiring because it is a fearless exhibit, even questioning if a child using a public pool that excluded Jews might have some culpability for the Holocaust.34 And it is intimidating because the level of technical skill required to create such a visually dynamic exhibit seems very high. Fortunately, not all online exhibits are as sophisticated as “Some Were Neighbors,” and there is room on the Internet for various levels of technical skill.

Adding these viewing experiences to the label literature, I came to the conclusion that there is a healthy tension between best practices and creative freedom. As one commentator wrote about exhibit labels, “The field of exhibit labeling is vast and ever-changing; new developments, technologies, ideas, strategies and insights are continually increasing, and expanding the horizon of exhibit labeling in new and exciting ways.”35 I tried to keep this in mind during my practicum. I tried to use best practices as guides, but I also used intuition to add

34 Ibid., http://somewereneighbors.ushmm.org/##/exhibitions/neighbors/un1825/video.
my own personal touches here and there. Hopefully, this resulted in an exhibit that is not a carbon copy of other exhibits.

**III. WEEKLY REPORTS**

As I mentioned before, my practicum occurred in “fits and starts.” I had hoped to have consistent work times every day, but that turned out to be impossible. The grief of losing a close family member and the attendant responsibilities (I was named the administrator of my father’s estate) precluded a consistent work schedule for the practicum, and necessitated requests for course extensions. This turned out to be a very valuable lesson. I learned that large history projects are probably best done in collaboration with others, as illness or family tragedies can hit anyone at anytime. These life hurdles can be cleared more easily with teamwork than in isolation.

**Week One through Week Four: October 7-November 3**

Weeks one through four consisted of completing some initial course assignments and laying the basic groundwork for my practicum project. I reviewed some WPA literature, consulted with Dr. Millbrooke, Mr. Barry, and Elizabeth Novara of the University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) Archives about my planned exhibit, and began organizing my thoughts. With respect to the latter I created a table in a Word document that listed Maryland’s 24 jurisdictions. In this table I began to list the types of projects that I might have for each jurisdiction. For example, roads, bridges, or dams for one county, and sidewalks, water lines, or sewing projects for another county. The lists were based on (a) photographs I had acquired from the UMCP Archives in 2011 and (b) UMCP’s online finding aid for their WPA collection. These lists of potential photographs/projects were important because in order to display a wide

variety of projects in my exhibit I would need many alternative selections. In other words, if I
chose a bridge for one county, that would remove bridges as a potential selection for all the other
counties.

During weeks one through four I also started preparing a webpage for my exhibit, on a
personal website that I have managed for the previous three years. My website has garnered
some national attention, and has led to paid work, speaking engagements, and many email
inquiries about the WPA.37

Week Five: November 4-10

In week five I settled on a name for my exhibit: Hope, Labor, and a Lasting Legacy: A
Photo Exhibit of the WPA in Maryland, 1935-1943. Ultimately, my exhibit would have
photographs ranging from 1935 to 1941, but I decided to keep the dates “1935-1943” in the
name of my exhibit because I want the exhibit to highlight the totality of the WPA’s work in
Maryland. In other words, the exhibit is more than just 24 historic photographs; it is a
representation of the WPA’s work in Maryland during its entire existence.

I chose the word “hope,” because job opportunities in the WPA gave many workers hope
that useful work was still a part of their future—that they were not being completely discarded
by society. I chose the word “labor” because that was a fundamental part of the WPA—the raw
labor of men and women—and also because my exhibit is designed for Mr. Barry’s prospective
labor museum. I chose the words “lasting legacy” for the same reason I included five modern
day photographs in my exhibit—to make sure the exhibit visitor understood that WPA projects
still serve us today. These words also reflect themes running throughout WPA literature and
resources.

During week five I also started posting some photographs on my website. These were photographs that I had obtained from a UMCP Archives visit in 2011. Ultimately, I would use 13 photographs from my 2011 visit and 11 newly selected photographs obtained from a second visit (detailed below). I also began selecting the five WPA posters and the five present-day photographs to include in my exhibit. The poster images would come from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division and the present-day photographs would come from my own photograph collection, taken during my many “WPA travels” across Maryland.

I also assembled a list of quotes about the WPA, from notable figures like Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. My initial thought was to have a quote for each photograph, but as I began adding the quotes I decided that it would be monotonous to do so. I ended up including quotes from notable figures in only about a third of the historic photographs.

Lastly, I began reviewing literature on labels, starting with Deborah Perry’s *What Makes Learning Fun? Principles for the Design of Intrinsically Motivating Museum Exhibits*. Week five was one of the most productive weeks during my practicum experience.

**Week Six through Week Nine: November 11-December 8**

I did very little work during weeks six through nine. My father passed away on November 15, which caused much grief. I also became administrator of his estate. These events necessitated my two requests for course extensions.

During this time frame I did a small amount of the following: Reviewed more literature on labels; corresponded with Ms. Novara regarding my upcoming visit to the UMCP Archives; continued assembling quotes about the WPA.
Week Ten: December 9-15

In week ten I was able to begin to get back into the “rhythm” of my work. I started reviewing more online exhibits and I began planning for a trip to the UMCP Archives to search for more historic photographs. The latter consisted of reviewing the UMCP finding aid for its WPA collection, and determining which photograph boxes I would need during my visit. UMCP Archives has about 63 boxes of WPA photographs—containing thousands of photos—so it was important to narrow my research as much as possible ahead of time. By identifying potential photographs before my visit, I was able to limit the number of boxes that I had to go through when I was physically at the archives. Ultimately, I believe I was able to narrow my research down to about two-thirds of the total number of boxes. That is still a large number of boxes to go through, but weeding out about 20 boxes turned out to be a good pre-visit accomplishment, avoiding perhaps two to three hours of research time at the archives.

Week Eleven: December 16-22

This week was spent making final preparations for my trip to the UMCP Archives, which is about a four hour drive from my house. I also continued my review of literature and online exhibits.

The big event this week, perhaps even the big event for the entire practicum experience, was my research day at UMCP Archives. Because I had performed research at the UMCP Archives before, and because Ms. Novara had pulled the boxes I needed beforehand, the research went very smoothly. But it was still very time-consuming—five and a half hours to go through about 40 boxes, searching for 11 photographs. It was challenging to get all the work done before the Archives closed, and I ended up skipping lunch and feeling very weary. It was also challenging to get 11 good photographs. The photographs had to be fairly clear (some photos in
the collection are blurry), they had to have identification cards (most do), and they had to be different from one another. Recall that one of the main goals of my exhibit was to show a variety of projects. I did not want to display, for example, 24 road projects. Such a selection might be well and fine for an exhibit on WPA roadwork, but my exhibit is about geographic and project-type diversity. Still, as I was going through the photographs, I realized I would have to make some concessions.

Some jurisdictions in Maryland are well represented in the UMCP Archives’ WPA photograph collection and some are not. For example, there are hundreds of photographs showing the WPA in Allegany County, but only a handful showing the WPA in Calvert County. Indeed, I was only able to find one good photograph for the WPA in Calvert County—a “farm-to-market” road project. Because of this and other variables, I actually ended up with two specific road project examples in my exhibit—one for Calvert County and one for Frederick County. I handled this by creating two distinguishable exhibit labels for these photographs. One label discusses farm-to-market road projects, and the other discusses WPA roadwork more generally (farm-to-market roads were a subset of the WPA’s overall roadwork accomplishments).

I really wanted twenty-four highly unique projects, but I had to settle for “almost.” But instead of fretting about it I decided to be a little more flexible in my exhibit. I decided that, in addition to geographic and project-type diversity, I could also show worker variety. In my photograph for Howard County I have a disabled worker, and in my photograph for Kent County I have a black worker working alongside white workers. Both of these photographs are from road projects too, but the exhibit labels focus on the workers themselves not on the nature of the project. I truly believe that my exhibit is a little richer with the added aspect of showing worker
diversity. My completed exhibit shows work in every Maryland jurisdiction, on a wide variety of projects, employing different types of workers – white workers, black workers, white and black workers together, female workers, male workers, and a disabled worker.

In reflecting on my modification to the photograph selection strategy (and the resulting exhibit theme alteration), I think it is beneficial for public historians to have some flexibility in their exhibit design plans. Many obstacles can arise during the design phase, and a flexible design strategy will handle obstacles with greater efficiency than a rigid design strategy.

Ultimately, this was my favorite week during the practicum. Looking for WPA materials is just something I very much enjoy. Because the WPA is not over-researched, and because it is not well-known or understood, I feel like I am making new discoveries every time I go to the National Archives or the UMCP Archives. The exuberant child inside me comes out and I just think, “I need to let the world know about this!” So, this was a productive and enjoyable week.

Week Twelve: December 23-29

During my visit to the UMCP Archives I took pictures of the photographs I wanted to use for my exhibit, since UMCP Archives does not allow patrons to use scanners. Fortunately, Ms. Novara had previously informed me that she would make high-resolution scans of my selected photographs, including the ones I had obtained a few years earlier. So, this week I created a Word document table, put all 24 photographs in the table, typed in the exact archive location of the photographs (e.g., “series 5.3, box 20, folder 7”) and emailed the table to Ms. Novara. This allowed her to easily find, pull, and scan the photographs.

I think my experience at UMCP Archives highlights why it is so important to treat archival workers (and all workers for that matter) with respect and patience: Their help is essential to research and projects that require archival materials. I have worked and corresponded
with Ms. Novara before and I have always been respectful of her decisions, whether they suited my preferences or not. Treating others with kindness and understanding will pay large dividends in one’s historical research.

During week twelve I also performed more work on the exhibit webpage and began looking a little more thoroughly into the exhibit label literature. I started reading Beverly Serrell’s *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, one of the most cited works on exhibit labels.

**Week Thirteen: December 30-January 5**

I did not accomplish very much this week. I looked at a few books that make heavy use of historical photographs, especially Betty Rivard’s *New Deal Photographs of West Virginia*. I wanted to get a feel for how exhibit labels are written in other mediums (i.e., not the Internet). *New Deal Photograph of West Virginia* has intermittent sections of text dispersed amongst many pages of photographs. Noteworthy to me are the picture captions/labels. They are, for the most part, very brief and technical (e.g., “Washing a prize bull at the dairy farm. Part of Eleanor project. Red House, West Virginia. Ben Shahn. 1937. LC-USF33-006345-M5”38). I do not particularly like this minimalist style of exhibit labels, but I see their utility. For someone who might only have a passing interest in the New Deal, lengthy exhibit labels could be a turn-off. *New Deal Photographs of West Virginia* could easily serve a coffee table book, where the casual reader could quickly flip through to see some interesting photographs, while the more interested reader could always refer back to the heavier text sections if they so desired. Still, when I see a photograph I usually prefer at least three to four descriptive sentences (excluding the technical information about the photograph).

Week Fourteen: January 6-12

Week fourteen was an extremely productive work week. I reviewed a few more online exhibits, but I spent the majority of my time writing exhibit labels. In fact, I would estimate that I finished 75% of my exhibit label work this week. I still had much label literature to review, but I wanted to get the “nuts and bolts” of the labels written, and then refine them as I progressed through the literature. In hindsight I think this strategy worked very well for me, but it could certainly be argued that one should complete more of the literature before beginning to write exhibit labels.

Recall that a major theme of my exhibit is volume and variety, and that I wanted to highlight the geographic and project-type diversity of the WPA’s work in Maryland. Hence, I created this general framework for my labels: location; description of the scene in the photograph; year of the photograph; photograph credit. To this general framework, I then tried to add one or more interesting descriptive statements, usually a quote from a notable figure and/or a sentence tying the work shown in the photograph to the larger national accomplishments of the WPA. Here is an example:

Harford County--WPA workers building new quarters for non-commissioned officers at Aberdeen Proving Grounds, 1939. Across the United States, WPA workers completed thousands of national defense projects, and many of these projects would later prove critical to the war effort. In 1942, President Roosevelt wrote "(The WPA) has added to the national wealth, has repaired the wastage of depression and has strengthened the country to bear the burden of war." *Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.*

Again, this is just the general framework I used. Each photograph ultimately had its own “personality” and thus my labels varied where I thought it was appropriate. My intuition about what I thought viewers might find interesting also played a role in writing the labels.
Weeks Fifteen and Sixteen: January 13-26

I finished the rough draft of my exhibit during these two weeks (including the final selections of the WPA posters and the present-day photographs), completed a few course assignments, and began a more intense review of the exhibit label literature. At this point it was quite clear that I would be requesting one, and possibly two, 30-day extensions. My father’s passing had created many more responsibilities for me, estate management being just one. I simply could not devote the amount of time necessary to complete the exhibit and the final course papers.

Extension Period 1: January 27-February 25

During my first course extension I immersed myself in exhibit label literature and requested several articles via interlibrary loan. I also intensely examined the five online exhibits I noted above. What I discovered is that there is no standard way of labeling exhibits, but there are definitely methods that seem to be superior to other methods. As I noted before, there seems to be near-unanimous agreement that labels should be crafted to suit an 8th grade reading level, or thereabouts. Also, exhibit labels under 100 words are more likely to be read.

After getting a firm grasp on the label literature, I set about completing my exhibit. Ms. Novara sent me the high-resolution scans of my selected photographs, so I replaced the poorer quality photographs that were in my rough draft exhibit with the better images. Next, I refined all my exhibit labels, making them clear, straightforward, and (hopefully) interesting. Finally, I set about making my online exhibit as visually-friendly as I could. And here is where a major, but not insurmountable, challenge occurred.

My rough draft exhibit was a vertically scrolling exhibit, but for my final product I wanted to have a left-to-right slideshow. I believe left-to-right scrolling is a little easier on the
eyes for most people—especially for 34 images. My website vendor, GoDaddy, offers three slideshow formats under my service plan. Unfortunately all three formats are very limited with respect to caption length and offer little or no options with respect to font color, size, and style. And, as fate would have it, my exhibit labels were much too long for the space provided in any of the slideshow formats.

As with the challenge I faced in selecting photographs, I began to think of ways to address the slideshow limitations. I decided to write very short labels for the slideshow and to keep the vertical scrolling exhibit underneath the slideshow. Hence, the viewer can choose to view my exhibit in either a left-to-right slideshow format or vertical scrolling format. Also, the viewer can refer to the vertical scrolling exhibit for longer exhibit labels. This is not what I truly wanted, but given time and resource limitations it was an acceptable solution.

Another job I completed during the first course extension period was a reference document. This document contains all the exhibit images and labels, and has footnoted references for all images, statistics, information, and quotes. This document can be viewed or downloaded at http://www.wpatoday.org/uploads/Exhibit_References.pdf. The exhibit reference document is one way to show the viewer that my historical research methods were sound and reliable, and that the information in the exhibit labels is accurate.

I also completed my exhibit description during this first extension period. It can be found at http://www.wpatoday.org/Online_Exhibit.php, directly underneath the exhibit title.

Additionally, I added descriptive labels between the historic photographs and the present-day photographs, and between the present-day photographs and the WPA poster images. Furthermore I added a label at the end of the exhibit, asking the exhibit viewer if they felt a new WPA would be a worthwhile endeavor. I added these labels after reviewing the exhibit literature. Labels that
explain transitions and labels that ask questions were recommended by some researchers and commentators.

Finishing the online exhibit—the introduction/description, the reference document, the images, the labels, the slideshow—was extraordinarily time consuming. But it was also very rewarding. Though the possibility for improvement may exist, I could finally say “the exhibit is completed.”

Unfortunately, as productive as this extension period was, I was not able to complete my two final papers. A second extension was needed.

Extension Period 2: February 26-March 27

This entire extension period was devoted to completing my Critical Reflection Paper and Project Report.

IV. CRITICAL REFLECTIONS: ACHIEVING OBJECTIVES

Despite the challenges faced during the course, I am very satisfied with my online exhibit and the experiential learning that occurred during the practicum.

Objective One: Applying Lessons and Principles

My primary objective was to utilize lessons and principles learned in the APU history program to create an exhibit that was accurate and well-documented. With respect to accuracy, I utilized the lessons and principles learned in the APU course that influenced me the most, “Historical Research Methods” (HIST 500). I found this course inspiring because it laid out very specific methods that historians can use to increase accuracy and reliability (e.g., comparing sources, the importance of primary sources, evaluating both primary and secondary sources, and distinguishing between scholarship and propaganda).
My exhibit is based largely on two primary sources—the U.S. Government’s 1946 publication, *Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-43*, and photographs taken by the WPA that are held at the UMCP Archives. The former provided most of the core information for the exhibit labels, and the latter provided most of the images. I then enhanced the exhibit—both textually and visually—with various other items, for example, a quote from Ronald Reagan’s autobiography and images from the Library of Congress’s WPA poster collection. I wanted to create a foundation with reliable primary sources, and then build outward from there.

In addition to paying close attention to the sources I was using, it was exceedingly important to me to provide references for every quote, every statistic, every image, etc. Hence, a reference document is available on the exhibit’s webpage. Though the reference document was labor intensive, it is my belief that the viewer should be able to verify every aspect of the exhibit (a belief reinforced by my studies at APU). For example, if a viewer finds it difficult to believe that Ronald Reagan would offer praise for a big government, New Deal program, he/she can find the source and verify. If a viewer doubted the originality of a particular historic photograph, he/she can find the exact archival location.

I believe that I achieved my objective of applying lessons and principles learned in the APU history program to a public history project. And my practicum affirms the value of good historical research methodology. By utilizing research methods discussed in the “Historical Research Methods” course, and described in texts such as *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* and *The Information-Literate Historian: A Guide to Research for History Students*, I have created an exhibit with a level of accuracy and reliability than I can

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be very confident of. This experience will surely influence future history projects I engage in—both in terms of careful research and careful documentation of sources.

Howell and Prevenier tell us that history, “In its most basic sense,” is story-telling.\textsuperscript{40} They then proceed to provide a research framework (not a research “handbook”) for budding historians. In reflecting on my practicum, I think my experience affirms a central theme in their book: Good story-telling, based on sound research methods, is good history. I believe I was successful in telling a good story of the WPA in Maryland, using sound research methods, and thus produced good history.

**Objective Two: Provide Useful and Interesting Information to the Public**

It is difficult to determine exactly how successful I was in creating a useful and interesting exhibit for the public. There was not enough time in the practicum to create and implement a feedback survey. Ultimately, I used a mixture of intuition and best practices to create the exhibit, so perhaps only time will tell whether that was good enough or if more work is needed.

With respect to intuition, I selected all photographs and images based on what I thought would be interesting to the viewer. There was no scientific process involved. I once heard an artist say something along the lines of, “You have to make music you like, and then hopefully others will like it too.” Outside of trying to find photographs that emphasized labor, I selected photographs that “caught my eye”—photographs that I liked. Hopefully others will like them too.

With respect to best practices, I tried to take all recommendations and research findings regarding exhibit labels into account. For example, Perry recommends minimizing “concept

\textsuperscript{40} Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 1.
density” in exhibit labels, noting “research has shown that the density and complexity of
information contained within a piece of text also has a significant impact on the ease with which
a reader can make sense of it.” Hence, I tried to limit my exhibit labels to one topic and/or one
concept.

The practicum provided a good experience in how research and literature can aid a
history project. In reflection, I believe it is key is to look at research and literature as helping
hands, not as oppressive fists ready to smash the designer’s creativity.

Objective Three: Enhance Resume

From the beginning, I looked at my practicum project as a way to enhance my resume.
Certainly it is obvious that, in the digital age, displaying one’s web design skills can be a plus.
Benson and Klein write, “Like Wilmington (North Carolina), many other cities have greatly
enhanced communication regarding the value of historic preservation through the use of
electronic media and the Internet…Creative ideas using these media are open opportunities for
the (Historic Preservation Professional) who chooses a public-sector position.” I also had a more
specific goal: To enhance my resume regarding my WPA credentials.

Over the past several years, I have researched the WPA extensively, joined the project
team at the Living New Deal mapping project, performed some paid work at the National
Archives (researching WPA and New Deal history), and more. I also serve on the board of the
National New Deal Preservation Association. If I ever become a regularly-paid historian, there
is a good chance it will be with a New Deal-related organization. So, it was very important and

41 Perry, What Makes Learning Fun?, 122-123.
42 “Project Members,” The Living New Deal, accessed March 25, 2014,
http://livingnewdeal.berkeley.edu/about/project-team/.
http://www.newdeallegacy.org/board.html.
valuable for me to create an online exhibit in my research interest-area. In today’s terrible job market, specialization in a subject area that has not been over-researched might be helpful.

I am satisfied with my practicum experience with respect to this objective. This is another “feather in my cap,” and I believe my exhibit has the potential to garner broader appreciation for my WPA work and my overall skills.

V. CRITICAL REFLECTIONS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

My practicum was both successful and challenging, and I believe the experience could provide useful ideas for the future practice of public history.

Recommendation One: Thoroughly Document Sources

In designing an exhibit, I believe it is important to document all sources and to have those sources readily available for the viewer. I have noticed that many articles and exhibits on the Internet are lacking good documentation (or any documentation at all). Yet, documentation is vital for those viewing your work. For example, if I write “GDP rose dramatically during the New Deal,” but fail to note that the claim is based on information from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, how valuable or reliable is that claim?

In the National Archives’ exhibit a “New Deal for the Arts,” there is good documentation of the images, but not for the textual information. For example, the exhibit reports: “The Milwaukee Handcraft Project began in 1935 as an experiment aimed at employing workers who were considered unemployable because of age or disability. The project soon became a thriving business, employing up to 900 workers who made rugs, draperies, furniture, wall hangings, and toys . . .”44 But there is no footnote and no exhibit reference document. And though I happen to trust the National Archives to put forth reliable information, how can I be 100% certain of their

information? Additionally, if I was a researcher looking for source material to assist in a history project related to the subject matter of this National Archives’ exhibit, I would be left empty-handed.

I would recommend that when a curator or designer creates an exhibit—either online or physical—they also create an accompanying reference document.

Recommendation Two: Explain Why an Exhibit is Useful to Know, Ask Questions, Be Bold

I believe historians are fairly good at providing the public with interesting information. Further, I believe most (or all) history is useful. However, I do not think historians routinely do a good job of explaining why it is useful to know about a particular piece of history. Perhaps this is due to a fear of appearing too biased or political. But I think our sometimes-obsession with appearing dispassionate and objective, and the resulting fear of offering judgment, opens the door to non-professionals who are only too happy to describe history in a way that suits their agenda or political views. To put it another way, a void of judgment by professionals will be filled with judgments by non-professionals – non-professionals who have failed to thoroughly examine the historical record and who will, knowingly or unknowingly, deceive the public.

Jonathan Gorman writes: “Why are historians so well placed to make moral judgments? There seems to be two important bases: emotional distance, and hindsight knowledge of consequences later to the situation being judged. Historians should not turn away from this privileged position.”45 I agree with Gorman, and I would recommend that historians not shy away from judgments or advocacy when designing exhibits and when explaining why a piece of history is useful to know, as long as such judgments and advocacy are based upon a thorough evaluation of reliable evidence, are backed by meticulous documentation of sources, and allow for alternative judgments or interpretation.

When I first “completed” my exhibit, I did not have any questions for the viewer. But after reflecting on the label literature and where I wanted my exhibit to go, I decided to go ahead and ask a question: “Should there be a new WPA? What do you think?” I then offer some quotes from former high-level federal officials (Ray LaHood and Robert Reich) and point out that a new WPA would help modernize America’s infrastructure but also cost a lot of money. This is a fairly tame and subtle approach to explaining why the history of the WPA is useful to know.

I believe exhibit designers can ask even more provocative questions and/or create exhibits that advocate a certain position, again, as long as such provocation or advocacy is based on sound research and does not “bully” the viewer into thinking exactly as the designer does. I saw a good example of this in the online exhibit “Some Were Neighbors.” An image of a sign is displayed that reads “No Admittance for Jews,” and the exhibit designers ask, “Who was the graphic artist who designed this sign? Who printed and distributed it? What were their roles in the Holocaust?”

In sum, my recommendation here is that exhibit designers and public historians be bold and provocative in explaining why a certain piece of history is useful to know, without abandoning good research methodology and without being belligerent.

VI. MOVING FORWARD

In the spirit of experiential learning, and thinking about my practicum objectives and career goals, I plan on doing a number of things post-practicum. With respect to marketing my exhibit, I plan on reaching out to my connections to see if anyone has any leads for potential venues. I believe my practicum mentor, Mr. Barry, will have several leads (he is well-connected in the Maryland history community). I will also reach out to Maryland museums, libraries, and

historical organizations. Presentations may also offer an opportunity for a wider audience. On April 21, 2014, Mr. Barry is having me as a guest speaker for a class he is teaching on 1930s America.

Improving my exhibit post-practicum is always a possibility, and there are several things I might do. First accessibility is important. For example, Ambrose and Paine advise using “large lettering on labels” for exhibit viewers with less than perfect vision.47 Currently, I am not happy with the size of lettering on my slideshow, but the options offered on the slideshow software are limited. So, whether my exhibit remains in the digital realm or transforms into a physical exhibit, I need to be aware of letter size. Improving my web design skills is another way I might improve the exhibit. The “Some Were Neighbors” exhibit is extremely impressive in its use of visuals and submenus. I am not currently at that skill level. Finally, I might enhance my exhibit by examining literature on the current best practices of online exhibits. Like the label literature, such work might offer valuable information.

A final thing I would like to do post-practicum is create more slideshow exhibits. This practicum was my first attempt. For my next slideshow, I would like to do an exhibit on the New Deal in Dare County, North Carolina. I was invited to Manteo, North Carolina (on Roanoke Island) in 2013 to speak to the Dare County School Board about the value of preserving a WPA-built gym. While there, I took photographs and collected information about Dare County’s rich New Deal history. I will probably create this slideshow very soon, as I will be revisiting Manteo this coming May and would like to show it to the friends I made there. Eventually, I would like to turn some of the vertical scrolling exhibits on my website into side-scrolling slideshows. However, I want to find better slideshow software before doing this too extensively.

47 Timothy Ambrose and Crispin Paine, Museums Basics, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 23
VII. CONCLUSION

According to Kolb, “Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience.” It is not the outcome, but the continuing process of learning and adapting that is essential. From both this perspective and an outcomes-based perspective, I am very satisfied with my practicum experience. The online exhibit I created was a great experience that I can reflect on, learn from, and continue to learn from. Certainly, the experiential learning process was occurring during the practicum. For example, I created my exhibit labels by intuition, then evaluated the label literature, then reflected on the labels I had written, and then modified (or refined) the labels based on the literature. And, in the future, I may adjust the labels based on feedback and reflection.

I learned several things during the practicum experience. First and foremost, I learned that tragedies in life do not wait for convenient times—they simply occur. The loss of a loved one can delay or even completely obliterate a goal. Second, I learned that compromising with one’s self is not necessarily a bad thing. When I began my practicum, I wanted to create an exhibit with 24 historic photographs showing 24 different types of WPA projects. Time constraints and photograph limitations (e.g., small collections for some Maryland counties) forced me to reconsider. I ended up with four photographs of road projects, but was able to distinguish between them by focusing on different aspects of the projects/photographs. Being flexible with one’s self can lower stress and perhaps make for an even more dynamic project. Third, I learned just how important research methods and proper documentation are to me. The accuracy of my work and the confidence others have in my research is a top priority for me.

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People are free, of course, to disagree with my interpretations, but I want my sources and research methodology to be beyond reproach as much as possible.

I am very satisfied with my practicum experience. I believe that my online exhibit has strong potential to transform into a physical exhibit at Mr. Barry’s prospective museum. I am also hopeful that it will be displayed at other websites and physical venues—I have only just begun to market it. I also believe the practicum project will be helpful in future job searches, and in improving both my past and future work. In sum, I think it was a good practicum project, and will become more useful as time goes on.
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http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1097&context=historyfacpub


University of Maryland Libraries. Special Collections. Work Projects Administration in Maryland records.


APPENDIX: Exhibit Images and Labels

Below are the final exhibit images and labels for my practicum project. An exhibit description and an exhibit reference document can be found at http://www.wpatoday.org/Online_Exhibit.php.

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Above: Allegany County--WPA workers constructing a football stadium at Fort Hill High School in Cumberland, 1936. During that same year, at the dedication of a WPA-improved stadium in Louisiana, Harry Hopkins, head of the WPA, stated: "The things they have actually accomplished all over America should be an inspiration to every reasonable person and an everlasting answer to all the grievous insults that have been heaped on the heads of the unemployed." Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.
Above: Anne Arundel County--The WPA repaired and modernized infrastructure all across America. Here, WPA workers are installing a water main in West Annapolis, 1938. In Maryland, the WPA installed 124 miles of new water lines. Maryland’s top WPA administrator—Francis H. Dryden—once said, “If the depression that began in 1929 can be compared with a dark cloud, then the work done under WPA is its silver lining. For the major projects undertaken in Maryland and other States have been of a kind to be of lasting value to the communities involved.” Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.

Above: Baltimore City--WPA workers helped construct several airports in Maryland, including Baltimore Municipal Airport, shown here in 1941. Baltimore Municipal Airport served both commercial and military purposes, but closed in 1960, after a long struggle with unstable ground. The location of the airport, which extended partially into Baltimore County, is now home to the Dundalk Marine Terminal. Across the country, the WPA built or improved over 900 landing fields. Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.
Above: Baltimore County--WPA workers lifting a flagpole at Baltimore National Cemetery in Catonsville, 1937. The flag pole still stands today. The WPA created the cemetery, a final resting place for our soldiers and veterans, out of property called Cloud Capped Estate, which at one time was partly owned by Charles Carroll of Carrollton, a Maryland signer of the Declaration of Independence. Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.

Above: Calvert County--A man holding a WPA work sign, on a farm-to-market road project in Calvert County, circa 1936-1937. Roadwork was the bread & butter of the WPA, and WPA workers created or improved over 1,300 miles of road in Maryland. A "farm-to-market" road was a special type of project, "...which increased the farmers' opportunities to market their goods and made it possible for the inhabitants of rural areas to take advantage of cultural and educational opportunities in neighboring cities.” Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.
Above: Caroline County--WPA laborers engaged in over 8,000 park projects across the country, at the federal, state, county, and municipal levels. Here, WPA workers are creating a lake at Chamber’s Park in Federalsburg, 1938. President Ronald Reagan once said of the WPA’s work: “Now, a lot of people remember it as boondoggles…raking leaves...Maybe in some places it was…But I can take you to our town and show you things, like a river front that I used to hike through once that was a swamp and is now a beautiful park-like place built by WPA.” Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.

Above: Carroll County--WPA laborers worked on 165 athletic field and playground projects in Maryland, and over 18,000 such projects across the country. In this undated photograph, WPA laborers are quarrying stones to create a masonry wall for an athletic field in Westminster. Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.
Above: Cecil County--WPA workers constructing a fire lookout tower in Pleasant Valley, circa 1935-1936. Like the Civilian Conservation Corps, WPA workers performed fire suppression work across the nation. Among their many initiatives, they constructed over 6,000 miles of firebreaks and directly fought forest fires. The WPA responded to other natural disasters by restoring utilities, participating in rescue operations, strengthening levees, performing post-disaster clean-up, and more. *Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.*

Above: Charles County--Two WPA workers on a sewer project at Indian Head, circa 1936-1937. While not the most glamorous work, waste disposal projects improved sanitation across America. In Maryland, the WPA constructed 185 miles of new storm and sewer lines and built over 13,000 sanitary privies (more commonly known as “outhouses”). The WPA also built several waste disposal plants in Maryland. *Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.*
Above: Dorchester County--WPA workers built piers, jetties, wharves, breakwaters, retaining walls, and also rip-rapped shoreline. In this picture, WPA workers gather for a group photo in front of a pile-driver, while on a bulkhead project at Hooper’s Island, 1938. Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.

Above: Frederick County--These men are working on a farm-to-market road in Frederick County, 1937. The WPA created or improved 650,000 miles of highways, roads, and streets across America. That's enough roadwork to go around the Earth 26 times. In 1943, prominent social worker Joanna C. Colcord wrote: “Never before in the history of the human race has a public works program, whose principal object was the mitigation of need due to unemployment, reached the magnitude of the Work Projects Administration. This is true, however you measure it--by persons employed, money expended, or volume of results.” Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.
Above: Garrett County--WPA workers provided much-needed help to libraries across the country. They built and improved libraries, helped operate them, repaired books, translated books into Braille, and even delivered books and magazines to rural areas by horseback. In this photo, WPA workers are repairing books at a library in Oakland, 1938. Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.

Above: Harford County--WPA workers building new quarters for non-commissioned officers at Aberdeen Proving Grounds, 1939. Across the United States, WPA workers completed thousands of national defense projects, and many of these projects would later prove critical to the war effort. In 1942, President Roosevelt wrote "(The WPA) has added to the national wealth, has repaired the wastage of depression and has strengthened the country to bear the burden of war." Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.
Above: Howard County--The identification card for this photograph reads, “One of the WPA workers who, unfortunately, is handicapped by having only one arm.” The photo was taken at a road construction project in Ellicott City, 1937. The WPA made efforts to provide jobless disabled workers with employment opportunities that were within their range of capabilities. Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.

Above: Kent County--Because of local prejudices that existed in various parts of the country, it was not always possible to integrate workers on every WPA project. However, President Roosevelt’s intention was stated in a 1935 Executive Order, declaring that workers “qualified by training and experience to be assigned to work projects shall not be discriminated against on any grounds whatsoever.” In the photo above, we see an integrated WPA work project in Chestertown, 1936. Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.
Above: **Montgomery County**--The WPA helped build this agronomy building for the University of Maryland, in Fairland, 1940 (agronomy is the science of soils, plants, and crops). By constructing research buildings, WPA workers helped facilitate scientific research and discovery. The WPA played a significant role in the creation of Patuxent Research Refuge in Anne Arundel and Prince George’s Counties where, in subsequent decades, it was discovered that the insecticide DDT thinned the shells of bird eggs (including the Bald Eagle). *Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.*

Above: **Prince George's County**--Across the country, WPA workers engaged in 124,000 bridge and viaduct projects. In Maryland, they worked on 237 bridge projects, including this one on Townshend-Grimes Corner Road, 1936. In his autobiography, Ronald Reagan wrote: "The WPA
was one of the most productive elements of FDR's alphabet soup of agencies because it put people to work building roads, bridges, and other projects...it gave men and women a chance to make some money along with the satisfaction of knowing they earned it."

Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.

Above: Queen Anne's County--WPA workers built, repaired, and improved schools all across the country, engaging in 408 such projects in Maryland. In this photo, WPA workers are building an African American school in Centreville, 1936. Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.

Above: Somerset County--In this photograph we see WPA workers from Crisfield planting oysters in the Chesapeake Bay, 1936. The WPA planted over 8 million bushels of oysters in various parts of the country and also performed other environmental work, including tree planting, sealing old mines, and building fish hatcheries. Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.
Above: St. Mary's County--Sometimes the labor of WPA workers did not fit neatly into a project-type category. Sometimes they had to perform odd jobs, or jobs incidental to larger projects. Here, WPA workers are moving a caretaker’s cottage as part of a larger project to improve infrastructure near a seminary in St. Mary’s City, 1936. Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.

Above: Talbot County--There were many job opportunities for women in the WPA. They could work as nurses, housekeeping aides, nursery school teachers, food workers, artists, actors, librarians, researchers, and much more. In this undated photograph, we see two women on a WPA sewing room project in Talbot County, making garments for children. WPA sewing room projects produced over 380 million items of clothing for low-income Americans. To aid national defense, WPA sewing room workers made or repaired items such as canteen covers and blankets. Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.
Above: Washington County--WPA workers engaged in a variety of historic preservation projects. They recorded the oral histories of former slaves, indexed art & historic buildings, erected or repaired historic monuments & markers, and more. This photograph shows WPA workers in Hagerstown making preparations for the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Antietam, 1937. Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.

Above: Wicomico County--Still in use today, the Johnson’s Pond Dam, near Salisbury, was built by WPA workers circa 1936-1937. In 1943, a researcher for the Russell Sage Foundation wrote: “Considered as a single unit, the total volume of WPA employment, during the first six years of its history, is sufficient to stagger even a wild imagination. By contrast, the estimated number of man-years required to build the pyramids of Egypt--which have long been symbolic of gigantic undertakings--seems small.” Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.
Above: Worcester County--WPA workers removing debris from the Pocomoke River, near Snow Hill, 1937. Not everyone thought the WPA was a good program. In 1944, one letter-writer to the Baltimore Sun offered an opinion that was shared by many: “We had a WPA, and what did we gain by it? Millions of jobs made for the people, not many of them necessary…” Others felt different. A woman whose father was hired into the WPA stated: “…my father immediately got employed in this WPA. This was a godsend. This was the greatest thing. It meant food, you know. Survival, just survival.” Image courtesy of the University of Maryland College Park Archives.

Many of the projects from the New Deal era still benefit us today.

The Living New Deal mapping project out of the University of California, Berkeley, has mapped over 5,000 still-existing New Deal sites, structures, and works of art across the country, many of them WPA (http://livingnewdeal.berkeley.edu/). And there is much more to map.

The next five photos are a small sample of the still-existing WPA projects in Maryland.
Above: The WPA’s Lasting Legacy--The Williamsport Town Hall in Washington County, one of over 2,000 WPA public building projects in Maryland (this number includes new constructions, repairs, and improvements). The WPA helped construct this beautiful building in 1939. Photo by Brent McKee, 2011.

Above: The WPA’s Lasting Legacy--WPA workers built this Little Orleans bridge ( Allegany County) in 1938, and it still serves us today. It sports an interesting design, allowing the creek to flow through it, and flood waters to flow over it. Photo by Brent Mckee, 2014.
Above: The WPA’s Lasting Legacy--Winter Quarters Cabin, in Pocomoke City (Worcester County), can be used for conferences, business meetings, wedding receptions, and other gatherings. It was built by WPA workers in 1940. Photo by Brent McKee, 2012.

Above: The WPA’s Lasting Legacy--Still offering the town of Keedysville (Washington County) recreation, picnic, and cookout opportunities, Taylor Park was built by WPA laborers in 1940. It was one of 64 Maryland parks created or improved by the WPA. Photo by Brent McKee, 2013.
Above: The WPA’s Lasting Legacy--Many of the schools that the WPA built, repaired, or improved, still provide locations for the education of our youth. This is Fairlead Academy I, in Lexington Park (St. Mary’s County), a school that helps prepare students for High School. Originally called “Great Mills School,” it was built by WPA workers in 1936. Photo by Brent McKee, 2011.

The WPA’s work in Maryland was part of a larger national effort by New Deal policymakers to assist, promote, and encourage American workers during the Great Depression.

The following five posters, created by WPA artists, highlight some of these New Deal efforts.
Above: WPA Posters Promoted Workplace Safety--WPA artists created about 2,000 posters, and quite a few promoted workplace safety. This poster was created by WPA artist Nathan Sherman, in Pennsylvania, 1936. *Image courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.*

Above: WPA Posters Challenged Perceptions--The WPA tried to change the negative perception that many Americans had towards the jobless. This poster, created between 1936 and 1938 in New York City, by artist Richard Halls, advertised “An Exhibition of Selected Skills of the Unemployed.” *Image courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.*
Above: WPA Posters Highlighted Training Opportunities for Workers--Many WPA posters highlighted education and training opportunities for American workers—opportunities that were offered by the WPA or by other organizations. This poster was created in New York City, between 1941 and 1943, by an unknown artist. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Above: WPA Posters Promoted the Trades--Ohio WPA artist Peter Radin made this poster in 1937. It was one of several that encouraged Americans to consider pursuing careers in the trades. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.
Above: WPA Posters Promoted Career Opportunities for Women—Another poster by Ohio WPA artist Peter Radin, made in 1938. This one promotes a wide variety of occupations for women: Millinery (work related to women’s hats), dress maker, factory worker, sales lady, child care, housewife (which would probably not be considered an “occupation” today), and hotel maid. A similar poster by Radin added the occupations of cook, nursemaid, teacher, dietician, lunch room worker, waitress, and nurse. *Image courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.*

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**Should there be a new WPA? What do you think?**

On February 4, 2014, former U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood said, "The country is in a disaster when it comes to infrastructure. Bridges are falling down, roads are crumbling. We need a big, bold vision in Washington."

On February 7, 2014, former U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich wrote, "We need a new WPA to rebuild the nation's crumbling infrastructure..."

A new WPA (if based on the original WPA) would hire unemployed Americans to help modernize our infrastructure. It would also require a large outlay of federal money to assist local governments in funding WPA-style works projects. What do you think? Should America create a new WPA, or pursue other policy options?

Thank you for visiting "Hope, Labor, and a Lasting Legacy: A Photo Exhibit of the WPA in Maryland, 1935-1943." Please remember the workers of the WPA.