Alfred Edgar Smith, Federal Works Progress Administration. Negro Project Workers 1936: Annual Report. January 1937.

Cover shows masculinist image of a black male mechanic levering some kind of machinery with hi muscular arms and upper body.

Concentrated in unskilled work

Educational program (literacy, other adult education classes) beneficial for blacks

Each State has provided opportunity for literacy classes, adult education, and nursery schools. Some have provided opportunities for workers’ education, education of the blind, and health education. (NPW, 1936, 4)

Negro women in addition to large scale participation in sewing projects, and considerable participation in beautification (light manual labor) projects, have engaged in book binding, home demonstration various types of char work, domestic service training, and in all white collar projects. (NPW, 1936, 4)

Negro women were the “problem children” of 1936. Because of socioeconomic conditions a disproportionately large number of Negro women are heads of families, especially in the South. These same women are largely untrained and have experienced great difficulty in securing assignments. They have been employed in large numbers on sewing projects, and in some States on beautification projects, but apparently this employment has not been sufficient. Late year reductions made the problem more acute. (NPW, 1936, 8)

Beautification projects (light manual labor) have been used in some southern States to absorb those women unable to sew, or to do other types of available work. The use of Negro and white women on these projects requiring some use of shovels and hoes has caused a great deal of controversy. Not generally known to exist this practice is given wide and explosive publicity when discovered by roving reporters, as recently in the Birmingham area of Alabama. (NPW, 1936, 8)

Recent reductions have intensified problems resulting from what amounts to forcing Negro women into domestic service at starvation wages. State officials point to continuous demands of white housewives that the supply of domestics be replenished by Works Progress Administration and Public Welfare reductions. The domestics point out that they are forced to accept jobs paying as low as two dollars and fifty cents ($2.50) per week and that inasmuch as they are in many instances heads of families and the only employable member, this means that a family of eight or ten in forced to subsist on about twelve dollars ($12.00) per month. This is less than one-half of what they previously received as WPA workers, Domestic workers are frankly told they must accept proffered employment or be stricken forever from all relief rolls. (NPW, 1936, 9)

Reemployment in private industry was largely a problem of finding employment for Negroes, aliens not fully naturalized, and aged or otherwise handicapped persons. White men under forty were the easiest to place. Negroes and persons with other handicaps, the hardest. (NPW, 1936, 10)

Example of Gary, Indiana:

A typical example of this problem as it exists in industrial centers. The State Employment Service states that it is almost impossible to fill job requests with Negroes. The Works Progress Administrator states that the Negroes form a virtually “stranded population”, and that employment opportunities are very limited. Private industry contributes to this state of affairs, as for example: An Auto Salvage Company in Delaware recently discharged fifteen of their laborers, stating that they were doing so as a means of raising the wages of the laborers retained. All the workers discharged were Negroes, those retained whites. (NPW, 1936, 11)

Negro women with dependent children, removed from the rolls because eligible for some form of Social Security, have found aid very slow in materializing. (NPW, 1936, 11)

Interesting Facts about the Negro and the WPA

FERA:

On the rolls of the FERA, the Negro was present in disproportionately high numbers, A tenth of the population of the United States, he was a sixth of the unemployment relief population, and during the peak relief load over one fourth of all Negroes were on the relief rolls.

This disproportion was mainly in the urban relief rolls. Negroes were more nearly proportionately represented in rural relief rolls, and were slightly under-represented among transients. (IFNWPA, 1936, 2)

Smith goes on to discuss what the WPA is doing, how it is maintaining morale and preserving “the family… as an effective unit in the economic and social structure.” (IFNWPA, 1936, 3)

Discusses black wpa workers’ contributions to construction projects of benefit to the nation, then says,

Negroes also have served as administrative and supervisory employees throughout the Works Progress Administration, in both the “segregated: and the “non-segregated” sense. The Federal government has set a example in this respect, employing Negroes in many white-collar capacities, clerical and above; and the States for the most part have followed suit in appointing workers to the higher brackets. (IFNWPA, 1936, 6)

Negro workers . . have . . . refused to leave the relief rolls for “starvation wages” in rural areas, and in domestic and personal service. Investigation into these refusals has shown most of them to be fully justified. Administrator Hopkins recently commented vigorously: “If a farmer can’t get hands, he should state his case to his own local Works Progress Administration officials, because they have already been instructed that nobody is to have a Works Progress Administration job who has refused private employment at a fair wage. You can be equally sure that we are not going to kick anybody out of these low-paid jobs just so some bird can get a lot of cheap labor. And that goes not only for the farmer, but for any private employer.” (IFNWPA, 1936, 7)

[U]nskilled Negro women . . . have furnished a problem which the administration has tried hard to solve. Sewing rooms have been utilized to the point of saturation. The use of unskilled women on manual labor projects, even at the type of labor they work at ordinarily, has been a matter of much debate, (IFNWPA, 1936, 9)

The special problem of the Negro unemployable was solved for the administration when practically all unemployables were removed to state and municipally supported relief. Negro unemployables, being a much larger proportion of Negroes on relief than was true of any other racial element, suffered some hardship in this transfer because of the lack of local facilities for their care. (IFNWPA, 1936, 9)

The Negro Theater Project, housed in the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem, alone employs 232 theatrical workers; these talented show-people do everything for themselves, from designing and building stage sets to making their own costumes. Their version of “Macbeth” was one of last season’s outstanding hits. It ran for ten weeks in Harlem, spent two more weeks on Broadway, and finally went on a nation-wide tour. (IFNWPA, 1936, 9)

Fifteen other Negro theatre projects, modeled after this one, have been et up in various sections of the country. (IFNWPA, 1936, 10)

Conclusion to the document, titled, “WPA’S EFFECT UPON THE NEGRO”

Though far from perfect and by no means ideal, the Works Progress Administration has clearly done so much for the Negro, both directly and indirectly and in terms of tangible and intangible benefits, that its accomplishments call for serious thought and carefully considered comparison wit the various current proposals of those who criticize it.

The Negro has been and in being enabled by the Works Progress Administration to hold up his head in the self-respect that emanates from earning daily bread by doing a useful task. Despite unfavorable comments about some of the work that Is being carried on—comments made, for the most part, by persons who have not even tried to understand *why* things are as they are, there is hardly a Negro community in America that does not bear the mark of improvement as a result of work-relief activities; and the results of the program, in increased health, educational, library, and recreational facilities, have added immeasurably to the race’s – and to the nation’s – wealth. (IFNWPA, 1936, 15)

The Negro and the WPA – typescript initialed by “AES” and with handwritten edits.

Women constituted a special problem in the administration of the WPA program. In the early stages of its development, almost all he persons employed were men, but as its scope broadened recognition was given to the fact that manu of the heads of families on the relief rolls were women . This was particularly true among Negroes.

Under the direction of the Women’s and Professional Division, projects were started to fit their abilities.

Over 100,000 colored women were employed during the last year in WPA sewing rooms, making garments for needy families; in schools, preparing and serving noon-day lunches to undernourished children; in homes, providing temporary free assistance in housework and the care of children to needy mothers; in community centers, playgrounds and parks, supervising leisure-time activities; and on a variety of white-collar projects ranging from clerical work to the fine arts.

(N&WPA, 5)

About 75 colored teachers were employed to carry on the household training program sponsored by the Women’s and Professional Division. This program aimed to bring household service out of its depressed and haphazard status and to put it on the same professionl basis as other work in the industrial field. It provided training for 3,437 girls during the year

In “practice homes” . . . the students learned by actually doing the work that would later be required of them. After completing the course, the majority were placed in jobs paying a higher wage than they would have earned had they not entered school. (N&WPA, 6)

Seattle theater group ran all black production of “IT Can’t Happen Here,” simultaneous with its production in other cities. ((N&WPA, 7)

Importance of literacy and nursery classes run by and for the benefit of black Americans – give jobs to black teachers and provide essential education for others

ERA Act of 1937 –

Previously, in several communities, workers – particularly Negro workers – had been discharged from WPA jobs to take private employment that paid lower wages, or required longer hours, or involved intolerable working conditions. This is now prohibited by act of Congress [The ERA Act of 1937 ] ((N&WPA, 9-10)

The ERA Act of 1937 also provides that preference in WPA employment shall be given first to American Citizens in need o relief, and next to aliens who had declared their intention to become citizens prior to the passage of the Act. Although this has worked some hardship upon West Indian Negroes in Harlem and elsewhere, it has made jobs available for manu colored American citizens who previously could not be given them (N&WPA, 10)

The effect of the work-relief program on the Negroes of America is reflected in the editorial comment in the Negro press. One paper says:

“In our opinion the WPA has served and is serving a very useful purpose and should be continued. Perhaps its greatest sservice to us has been the exploding of the pet false theory of emplyers that a mixed group cannon and will not work together. On hundreds of projects colored and white workers have labored side by side in perfect harmony and so obtained a better understanding of each other. We are grateful to President Roosevelt for his ision in providing this opportunity—never again can an employer hdehis prejudice behind his employee’s back by telling a colored applicant, “I would gladly hire you but my staff will not stand for it.”

“Asvters and taxpayers Negroes throughout the country must unite in urging a continuance of the Works Progress Administration program until private industry makes up its mind to follow the government’s splendid example and hire workers without any discrimination as to race, class, creed, or color.” (N&WPA, 13)

A Harlem newspaper reads:

Harlem needs the WPA. Our natural talents in music, drama and art are in sore need of professional development. Only the cultural program of the WPA can do this. (N&WPA, 14)

Quotes a third paper:

A return of WPA workers to private industry would immediately deprive these thousands of colored workers not only of their jobs but of their opportunities as well. Private industry will not employ these colored men and women as executives, architects, writers, artists, clerks, social directors, stenographers, and all the many other positions in which the Works Progress Administration has used them and found them capable . . . The government must be urged to continue the colored citizens in PA jobs until the bulk of private industry has recognized their ability, laid down its racial antipathy, and is prepared to accept Negro workers on the basis of ability alone and five them the positions for which they have fitted themselves. (N&WPA, 14-15)

The Rural Negro on the Works Program

White heads of households employed on the Works Program reported smaller average earnings than did whites employed in private industry, but Negroes employed on the Works Program reported earnings greater tan those received by Negroes employed in private industry.(RNWP, 1)

Discusses a major study conducted in sample counties of Montana, SD, WI, IA, WV, NC, and GA (only NC and GA broked down findings between whites and Negroes)

Before the survey was started social service research workers of the WPA had discovered that an examination of the family and personal characteristics of the Negroes on relief rolls disclosed striking differences from those of whites. For one thing, they had found that the hardships of Negroes arose, in part, from family and marital difficulties, with broken families and the resultant psychological and economic handicaps more numerous in the relief and non-relief populations, especially widowed Negro women.

A rather striking fact brought out by a relief census of October 1933 was that of all Negroes on relief under the age of 45, the majority were females. (RNWP, 2)

Formal education of the Negroes on relief was quite limited…. Relatively half as many Negroes as whites had obtained eight or more years of education in school. (RNWP, 2-3)

White workers did not remain on the relief rolls as long as Negroes before they got jobs in private industry. (RNWP, 3)

Former relief cases now in private employment –

Domestic service provided the principal nonagricultural employment in all states outside the South. (RNWP, 5)

Average earnings of former relief cases: In North Carolia Negroes received less than half as much as the $35 average for whites. So few Negroes in the Georgia sample were employed in private industry in Dec 1935 that no comparisons could be made between Negroes and whites. (RNWP, 6)

Cites the research report:

“North Carolina and Georgia, as usual, presented a different picture from the othr states, owing to the large numbers of broken families and women heads of households amon both Negroes and whites in the Cotton Souh. (RNWP, 8)

in NC and GA, there was a race-based wage differential between whites and blacks

As the security wage rates were the same for whites and Negores for the same grade of work, these differences in earnings are related to the greater proportions of whites employed at skilled occupations which commanded higher wage rates. (RNWP, 9)

WPA and the Negro

MASCULINIZING EFFECTS OF WPA WORK FOR BLACK MEN WHO NOW GET TO CLAIM PURCHASE ON THE IDEAL OF THE VIRILE WORKER-HERO

James A. Ross, “What WPA Means to the Negro Worker in New York State,”

At present in New York State you will find members of our group building roads with pick and shovel, deepening, repairing and assisting in building sewers, laying out streets, doing painting, carpentry work, bricklaying, and all kinds of skilled and unskilled labor in places where a member would not think of asking for employment before. (WPA&N, Ross, 1)

There are no frowns cast upon the man who carries a dinner pail or the man who toils at hard labor hereafter, for the depression has changed this and the men responsible for the organization of the WPA beyond question deserve the plaudits of all. (WPA&N, Ross, 2)

“Sewing Units Have Proven of Untold Value in Stabilizing Negro Economic Life”

Many of the group have been trained, many have been giving the training in cutting, sewing, and making all kinds of garments for children, men, and women. This has made It possible for them to apply for a position in shirt factories, women’s and men’s wear factories, because they have had the experience which is necessary in asking for a position, thus opening up a new avenue of employment that the race has not been accustomed to securing in many places. (WPA&N, 2)

Next page discusses Sewing unit #3 of the Niagara Community Center of Niagara Falls, with an “entirely colored staff.”

BLACK FORGOTTEN MAN STORY:

G. Victor Cools, “Negro Job Relief and the WPA,”

One of the male workers with a family of five came to me after he had been on the WPA payroll for three weeks, and thanked me for having given him an opportunity to work for an honest living. “Now I can look my children straight in the eyes. I’ve regained my self-respect. Relief is all right to keep one from starving,” he continued, “but, well – it takes something from you. Sitting around and waiting for your case worker to bring you a check, and the kids in the house find that you contribute nothing toward their support, very soon they begin to lose respect for you. It’s different now. I’m the breadwinner of the house and everybody respects me.” (5)

This is a very simple story. It is typical of what one hears every day from WPA workers. . . . In addition to the fact that the WPA has enabled distressed colored persons on relief rolls to regain their self-respect, it has also furnished administrative and semi-administrative opportunities to a large number who, under normal conditions, would hav been deprived of such opportunities. “ ((WPA&N, Cools, 5, 10)

“WPA Big Benefit, Supervisor Asserts”

As for the Negro, the WPA has unlocked the door of opportunity whih has so long resisted his efforts. He is now considered for whatever position that he may be prepared to fill, due to the wise policies of the Works Progress Administration.” (WPA&N, 12)

AE Smith, Fed Works Progress Administration, *Negro Project Workers: 1937 Annual Report,* January 1938

Statistics shw wide discrepancies in the practices of individual Southern States, Negroes seem to be getting less than a proportionate share of WPA employment in AK and MS; something near a proportionate share in LA, OK, TX, and VA; with FL, GA, and SC very near the first category.

Negro workers were employed in nearly every capacity, although concentrated in unskilled occupations. They found white collar employment easiest to secure in education and recreation; experienced greatest difficulty in securing adequate skilled, supervisory, and some types of clerical work.

Negro Administrative Workers have gained little in number.

Seasonal Employment of WPA workers in private industry has been largely employment of Negro WPA workers in the cotton and cane fields of the South and at harvesting and processing in the berry and nut regions. Investigation of vociferous charges by large land owners that the agricultural labor supply had been destroyed by WPA, proved them without basis. … Some abuse resulted from the release of Negro workers who had n previous experience in agricultural work, and who found it impossible to earn even a bare subsistence in the fields. Considerable complaint and unrest arose from the practice of abolishing whole Negro projects, male and female, so that the workers must accept seasonal employment, which white WPA workers continued at their WPA employment. The policy of Federal ad State WPA officials in dealing with this matter has been directed toward insurance that workers would not suffer unduly. But it appears, possibly of necessity, to have been vacillating and of the “muddling thru” variety.

Example of the OK WPA:

“On August 27th I went into the Cedars Community again and found that there was considerable dissention being aroused by the fact that the relief clients were refusing to pick cotton. The community is located in the Arkansas River bottom and there is an abundant cotton crop which is in full picking flower at this time and I feel perfectly justified in suspending this poorly supervised project as these women are perfectly able to do this kind of work and there is plenty of work to do.”

Followed by:

Negro women workers continued in their role as “problem children.” Sewing room tests early in the year displaced many of them from the rolls or relegated them to manual labor projects. Later-year tightening of sponsor contribution requirements resulted in closing still more sewing rooms.

Half-time Employment practices for Negro women have persisted in some Southern States u spite of official frowns by the federal WPA.